

Address given by Michael Clayson at the centenary Service of Commemoration

What can I tell you about George Carter West?

He was born in Dawlish in 1877 and died in Flanders in 1917.
In between he had left the ancient country of Britain
and travelled to the world's newest democracy, Australia
where he made his home.

He was a Butcher by trade,
But had served in the British forces as a soldier in the Hussars
before emigrating.
Unmarried, with his father named as next of kin
and according to a fellow soldier,
Gunner Higgins, he was "about 5ft 6 and rather grey".

So what caused a son of Dawlish to leave for Australia?

The start of the 20th century saw Britain at the zenith of its imperial power.
Her flag flew over 24% of the world surface and 412 million people,
But the signs of decline had begun, with productivity falling behind Germany and the US.
Above all, Britain remained a class ridden society.
Great riches were enjoyed by the ruling elite
whilst the living standards of farm workers and artisans had begun to fall behind others
such as the Dutch,
although still somewhat better than the French peasantry.

Australia shone as a beacon of hope,
a new confident nation that asserted its right to self rule in 1901,
and offered a fresh start to a young man, who may have hungered for new opportunities.
It was legally defined by the Privy Council in 1898 as
"Terra Nullius" - a land empty of people,
conveniently ignoring the fact of Aboriginal inhabitants
and laying vast swathes of land open for settlement.

The opening of the Suez canal and the development of steam ships
had cut the journey down to just 35 days, and
At some point George Carter West became one of those brave young men that cut their ties
with home and family and settled in the new city of Brisbane.

Australia was now self governing, but cherished a close relationship with Britain.
When war broke out, the Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher, said Australia would
"rally to the Mother Country ... to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling"

Australia was true to this promise.
During World War I over 421,000 Australians served in the military,
with 331,000 serving overseas.
Over 60,000 Australians lost their lives and 137,000 were wounded.
As a percentage of forces committed, this equalled a casualty rate of almost 65 per cent,
one of the highest rates amongst the British Empire forces.

We know that George Carter West signed up on 14th December 1914.
As a former member of the Hussars, he would have been a very welcome addition to the force.

He had left Europe in hope of a new exciting life;
He embarked on the return journey on 29th June 1915,
and one can only too readily imagine the trepidation that an experienced soldier would have
felt about entering a theatre of war.

The Australian Imperial Force was initially deployed in Egypt
to defend the Suez Canal against the Turks,
and prepare for eventual service on the Western Front.

Along with other Anzac forces, he was involved in the ill-fated Dardenelles campaign.
This was bitter hard fighting, and George impressed his senior officers as he was
promoted to Corporal on 11th September 1915.

His joy at promotion was to be short lived as just 8 days later
he was wounded at Beauchops Hill,
and taken to hospital in Alexandria.

After recovery he rejoined his comrades and sailed to France.

His service on the Western Front as part of the 2nd Division of the Anzac force
soon involved him in the Battle of the Somme,
and some of the questionable decisions of the commanding officers.

The second division was called to relieve their comrades of the 1st Division, who had suffered
major casualties under heavy German bombardment at Pozieres.

Two days after taking over the line, the 2nd Division was thrown into a hastily planned attack
that resulted in further casualties, when the Germans spotted the Australians forming up and
once again subjected them to the weight of their artillery and machine guns.

Another attack was launched on 4 August which, although it met with success, resulted again
in such heavy casualties—almost 7,000—that the division was relieved the next day.

Small wonder then that
The Australian official historian Charles Bean wrote that Pozières ridge
"is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth."

His final service records show him serving in the 5th Infantry as a Batman to Captain Christie at
the Brigade Headquarters at Bullecourt.

This strange term derives from the old English word "Bat" for a pack saddle,
and included duties such as driving and running messages,
but also less pleasant tasks such as digging out foxholes for the officer, allowing him to
concentrate on other duties.

The commune of Bullecourt in the Pas de Calais was the scene of two major engagements.
The first and second battles of Bullecourt were part of the wider Battle of Arras that spread
from Vimy Ridge in the North West to Bullecourt in the South East.

Arras was a kind of triumph in that it achieved the biggest break through since the onset of
trench warfare, but ultimately the conditions returned to stale mate
at a cost of 158,000 allied casualties.

On 15th April 1917 George Carter West was killed when the Brigade Headquarters suffered a direct hit.

He does not have an identified grave, and is one of the 11,000 Australians "Known only to God" who are honoured at the Villers-Bretonneux memorial.

Another poignant memorial is the village school, which was rebuilt after the war with donations raised by Australian children, and above every blackboard is the inscription *N'oublions jamais l'Australie*" (Let us never forget Australia).

Today we keep our own promise that
"We will remember them".

We remember George Carter West
Born in Dawlish, but travelled to Australia, Egypt and France
and died in service of his King and Country.

I began this tribute by asking

What can I tell you about George Carter West?

I will close by quoting his comrade Gunner Higgins,
who said

" He was about the gamest man I ever saw and the best NCO in the Battery.
All the boys will tell you that".