

Anzac Spirit – Harry Brimage (Service Number -5)



Figure 1: Harry Brimage, 26 years of age.

The news of war was delivered through every wireless, newspaper, and shop window around Australia on August 4, 1914. Prime Minister Joseph Cook's pledge of 20,000 men to Mother England saw queues at enlistment stations, with many feeling a sense of pride and dignity.¹ World War One (WW1) presented unforgettable and devastating scenes that many young men would never be able to unsee.² However, it also saw men display acts of courage and demonstrate the capabilities of the human spirit during times of extraordinary circumstances which came to be known as the 'Anzac spirit'. With this came a bravery like no other, that unfortunately saw not all rewarded, but many who paid the ultimate cost with their lives. Harry Brimage from Beachport, South Australia was one of these men (Figure 1). At the wars end, 60,000 Anzacs would not return home with their battalions, but remain in war graves scattered throughout Gallipoli and France.³

Brimage's story begins in the small coastal town of Beachport, South Australia. The son of Thomas Brimage and Anna Wilson, he was born in Adelaide

on February 24, 1889. After completing his schooling, Brimage learnt a trade and began working as a carpenter with Timothy Poole, a stone mason, and a building contractor,

in Port MacDonnell and around the district of Millicent. It is believed this is how he met his fiancé, Elvina Daisy Skeer, of Hatherleigh, Mr Poole's granddaughter. When Poole moved his business to Naracoorte, Brimage decided to go out on his own as a carpenter. Brimage was well known and respected throughout the local districts for his quality craftsmanship and service to the local Cricket Club. When news of the war arrived in Beachport, Brimage sold his business in order to join the war effort. Prior to war, Brimage had served three years with the Australian Naval Reserve at Largs Bay and felt a sense of duty to again serve his country.

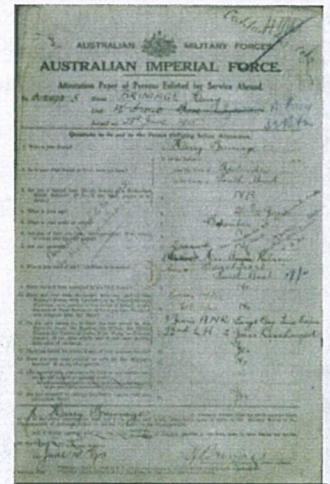


Figure 2: Brimage's enlistment paper.



Figure 3: Tel-el-kebir, Egypt.

Brimage enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) at Keswick, South Australia on June 25, 1915 at age 26 and 5 months. He was assigned as a Private to the 32nd Infantry Battalion (Figure 2). Brimage boarded the *HMAT Geelong* (A2) and travelled to Suez, Egypt for further military training on November 18, 1915.⁴ A month later the 32nd Battalion moved to Tel-el-kebir camp which is located on the edge of the Egyptian Desert (Figure 3). The training camp consisted of the AIF and 40,000 other soldiers who camped in a tent

¹ ABC News. 2020. *Australian Reaction To The Outbreak Of World War I*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-04/world-war-i-australian-reaction-to-outbreak-of-conflict/5603588?nw=0>> [Accessed 20 May 2020].

² History.com. 2020. [online] Available at: <<https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/world-war-i-history>> [Accessed 20 May 2020].

³ Mougel, N., 2020. [online] Centre-robert-schuman.org. Available at: <<http://www.centre-robert-schuman.org/userfiles/files/REPERES%20%E2%80%93%20module%201-1-1%20-%20explanatory%20notes%20%E2%80%93%20World%20War%20I%20casualties%20%E2%80%93%20EN.pdf>> [Accessed 16 May 2020].

⁴ National Archives Of Australia. 2020. [online] Available at: <http://file:///D:/ANZAC%20SPIRIT/NAA_ItemNumber3124143.pdf> [Accessed 22 May 2020].

city that went for six miles.⁵ The Anzac soldiers geared up for trainings that would often span 8 hours a day, 6 days a week, wearing full kits with heavy packs during drills. Some men died from pneumonia due to the desert wind and little advice was coming from the battlefields on tactics that would best upskill them for the new form of modern trench warfare that they would face once they arrived.⁶ Brimage spent three months in Egypt and during his training he was awarded for his good order and military discipline. Unfortunately, from Brimage tidiness was his downfall, he had the award reprimanded due to not cleaning his tent thoroughly enough. Brimage was deployed to the Western Front in France, on June 17, 1916.

The Western Front was a series of trenches that stretched 440 miles across France and Belgium, one of the most significant battle grounds during WW1.⁷ Treacherous conditions greeted Anzac soldiers whose aim was to push back German forces. Germany had already invaded Belgium and North-Eastern France and had their sights set on occupying French borders.⁸ After their withdrawal from the Gallipoli Campaign, the Anzacs were redirected to France to fight on the Western Front, where war presented many new challenging conditions. Trench warfare was the most common form of fighting. Trenches created a living environment for soldiers but were harsh and extremely dangerous, they were not only under the attack of gun shells and other weapons but lice and rats that caused health risks.⁹ Often the trenches would be filled with water and when it was raining wounded men could drown in the mud. The battlefield was lacking vegetation due to poisonous gas and it was stirred up by gun shells, trenches looked like the surface of the moon¹⁰. This is not something even a rural like Brimage, who was used to the rough and tumble of the countryside and the bitter south eastern wind (that was always blowing a bit harder on the coast), could have ever been prepared for. War on the Front Lines was overwhelming, men lived outside for days and even weeks, with limited shelter and food. Winters brought a bitter chill along with rain, wind, and snow, temperatures reaching sub zero. When seasons changed, the summers brought unbearable sweltering heat and sun. Soldiers were met with never-ending thick mud and the endless noise of artillery and machine guns¹¹.



Figure 4: Tanks at The Battle of Flers

Once at war, Brimage found himself relocated to the Western Front, France during June 1916. The treacherous conditions saw him wounded by a bomb only a few months into his service during the Battle of Fromelles on July 19. Brimage was evacuated to the 25th General Hospital for treatment and recovery, he re-joined his unit nine weeks later. The Battle of Fromelles is still referred to as the “most tragic 24-hours in Australian military history” and was a major

⁵ Hammatt, C., Galwey, M., Gandolfi, K., Dohnt, C., Altschwager, M. and Gandolfi, P., n.d. *Honouring Our Fallen*. Millicent: South East Family History Group, p.29.

⁶ Veterans SA. 2020. *Great War Training Camps*. [online] Available at: <<https://veteranssa.sa.gov.au/story/great-war-training-camps/>> [Accessed 18 May 2020].

⁷ Anzacportal.dva.gov.au. 2020. *Australians On The Western Front 1916 To 1918 | Anzac Portal*. [online] Available at: <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/western-front>> [Accessed 21 May 2020].

⁸ Awm.gov.au. 2020. *First World War 1914–18 | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war>> [Accessed 14 May 2020].

⁹ Awm.gov.au. 2020. *Trench Warfare - Hell On Earth | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/trenchwarfare>> [Accessed 19 May 2020].

¹⁰ Ncpedia.org. 2020. *WWI: Life On The Western Front | Ncpedia*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.ncpedia.org/wwi-life-western-front>> [Accessed 12 May 2020].

¹¹ Wilcox, V., 2020. *Combat And The Soldier's Experience In World War One*. [online] The British Library. Available at: <<https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/combat-and-soldiers-experiences>> [Accessed 19 May 2020].

battle South Australia troops fought in, almost 4000 Anzacs lost their lives.¹² The soldiers who had been previously withdrawn were recalled back to the Somme, the battalion was tasked with capturing the village of Flers, situated south of Pozieres, and aided with new tank weaponry (Figure 4). Once again undeterred from the slaughter that was witnessed at Fromelles and the new battlefield that appeared 'as a sea of mud', Brimage's battalion pushed through the exhaustion to complete a series of frontal attacks.¹³ Brimage must have been recognised for his leadership since he was quickly promoted to Sergeant Major for a company, and corporal within the battalion. Brimage's battalion were involved in several 'futile and costly attacks' around Flers on November 6, 1916. During the early hours of the morning, Anzac troops advanced toward German Trenches north of Gueudecourt in the pelting rain. The mud prevented the Anzacs from keeping up with the artillery's creeping barrage, the German machine gunners found their attacks easy targets.¹⁴ When

a party under Brimage's charge and the 14th Field company engineers had been ordered to go Brimage took charge. He led the parties before returning for two soldiers who had been stuck in the Gueudecourt mud in "No Man's Land" under the enemy's heavy fire. Amongst the chaos and fright, he found himself struck by the enemy. Brimage was awarded the Military Medal for conspicuous actions under enemy's fire¹⁵ (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Brimage's war medals.

Brimage was admitted to the 38th casualty clearing station due to gunshot wounds to his foot and scalp, received while fighting in

France (Figure 6). He sadly passed away later that day due to his wounds (Figure 7). Brimage was one of 60,000 soldiers to enlist and fight on the Western Front where 46,000 of these men were killed and 11,000 of them still have unknown graves. The battlefields of France are where so many soldiers now lay at rest.

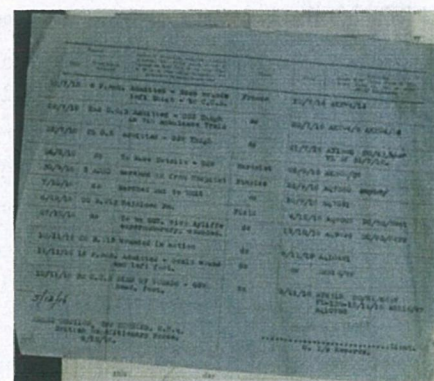


Figure 6: Brimage's service forms

The carpenter from the small town of Beachport showed tremendous bravery and courage during his service. The treacherous conditions that were presented to him never slowed him down nor deterred him. Brimage will always be remembered for his kind heart and heroic actions. His service and community spirit will live on amongst his hometown. Brimage travelled over 15,000km and fought in multiple battles along the Western Front where he was unfortunately shot. Brimage paid the ultimate sacrifice and though he never made it home he will always be remembered in his local community.

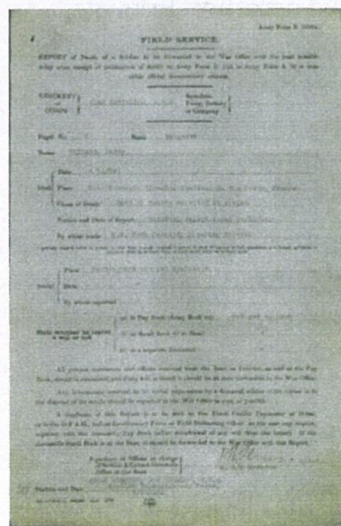


Figure 7: Brimage's report of death

¹² Awm.gov.au. 2020. *Battle Of Fromelles | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/fromelles>> [Accessed 21 May 2020].

¹³ Kearney, R. and Cleary, S., 2018. *Valour & Violets*. Mile End: Wakefield Press, pp.209.

¹⁴ Kearney, R. and Cleary, S., 2018. *Valour & Violets*. Mile End: Wakefield Press, pp.209, 210.

¹⁵ Vwma.org.au. 2020. *Harry BRIMAGE MM*. [online] Available at: <<https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/77907>> [Accessed 8 May 2020].

Part B – Perseverance and Mateship

“Anzac is not merely about loss. It is about courage, and endurance, and duty, and love of the country, and mateship, and good humor, and the survival and sense of self-worth and decency in the face of dreadful odds”- Sir William Deane, Governor-General of Australia on Anzac Day 1999.

Anzac Spirit is made up of four characteristics: bravery, perseverance, mateship and resourcefulness. The characteristics Brimage demonstrated whilst fighting on the Western Front was perseverance and mateship. Perseverance means to continue doing something despite the difficulty and keep going to the end. Mateship during World War One (WW1) was men showing unconditional support towards each other during the toughest conditions.

The conditions during WW1 were unrelenting and unforgettable but Brimage’s determination to serve his country saw him overcome these experiences despite the injuries obtained. He was kindhearted and liked to help his battalion wherever and whenever he could. Brimage showed these extraordinary qualities even before war broke out when he had been part of the Navy for three years before signing up for WW1 despite the challenging and harsh conditions.

The young men fought in the battles across the Western Front could have never prepared for what was ahead of them. Brimage showed perseverance after travelling to the Western Front and partaking in The Battle of Fromelles. While fighting at the Battle of Fromelles he was injured. He spent nine weeks recovering at the 25th General Hospital where he was treated for his injured. He valiantly marched back onto the battleground on October 4, 1916 to continue fighting on a battlefield that no training could have prepared him for and faced another round even after the onslaught that was Fromelles.

Brimage trained and fought alongside his battalion for 357 days and had developed comradeship like no other amongst his battalion who had become not just friends, but family. The relationship between soldiers was unbreakable, they shared experiences in the face of death and created friendships like no other. Brimage was willing to risk his life for his mate. Brimage demonstrated this on the night of November 5, 1916 at the Battle of Flers at the Somme. He had been put in charge of a party. Brimage led the party away but soon returned to rescue two men who had been stuck in the Gueudecourt mud in No Man’s Land but was wounded in the process. Brimage managed to get them to away from the commotion but was shot during his kind and heroic act. Brimage’s calmness in carrying out his work had a significant impact on his men and received the Military Medal for his actions. The fact the he and his battalion continuously preserved amongst a relentless enemy and dreadful conditions, provides evidence of both traits. How do you front another roll call? Another battle? Another man down? His perseverance and willingness to put his life before other shows mateship and courage working hand in hand.

Stories like this and the people who pass them on are what keeps the Anzac Spirit alive throughout Australia. Brimage represents these characteristics through his extraordinary stories and values. Mateship and perseverance are only two of many characteristics that Brimage displayed during his service and he will forever be remembered for them.

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