



## **Winter On The Western Front 100 Years Ago**

As we enjoy the warm summer weather of Sydney, spare a thought for many of the men listed on the WW1 Honor Roll of the Sydney Flying Squadron and the Sydney Sailing Club who manned the trenches on the Western Front during the most severe winter in 40 years.

Early snows brought the Battle of the Somme to an end on 18 November 1916. With the arrival of winter, large scale offensive operations ceased and both the Allies and the Central Powers dug in to await the arrival of spring.

The 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Australian Divisions were garrisoned on the line east of Flers in the Somme Valley. The conditions here were the worst encountered by the AIF throughout the war. Unusually heavy autumn rains had deluged the shell cratered battlefield and turned it into an almost impassable quagmire. Private Edward Lynch described the desolate landscape:

*"We live in a world of Somme mud. We sleep in it, work in it, fight in it, wade in it and many of us die in it. We see it, feel it, eat it and curse it, but we can't escape it, not even by dying."*

Meanwhile, the 3rd Australian Division, after training in England, arrived in France on 21 November 1916 and went into a comparatively quiet section of the front line in the north of the country near Armentières.

The Battle of the Somme was followed by eight weeks of continuous rain, sleet and snow. While most troops were withdrawn to the rear areas for rest and re-fitting, those soldiers serving on the front line (although frequently rotated) suffered greatly. The trenches provided no protection from the bitter winter. Abnormally low temperatures, especially at night, froze their clothes and blankets. Frequently men were buried in trench collapses caused by mud slides. In addition, they had to endure body lice and swarms of trench rats.

The situation improved marginally in mid-January 1917, when four weeks of sub-zero temperatures and clearer skies froze the ground solid bringing some respite from the muddy trenches.

During the winter of 1916-17, the extreme weather and the unsanitary condition of the trenches claimed substantially more casualties than the fighting. Trench foot, caused by prolonged standing in cold and dirty water, afflicted thousands of troops. Respiratory diseases, rheumatism and frost-bite were also common.

Of the 109 Honor Roll members who have been identified, 35 were stationed on the Western Front during this time. Fifteen of these men (42%) suffered health problems which were serious enough for them to be admitted to hospital:

Harold Joseph BOWTELL	Trench foot	1st Southern General Hospital, Birmingham then invalided home
Charles James BURTON MM	Trench foot	2nd Southern General hospital, Bristol
Francis COURTNEY	Scabies	1st Australian Dermatological Hospital, Bulford
Walter JACOBS	Bronchitis	Hospital unspecified

Owen Patrick MARTIN	Bronchitis	1st London General Hospital, Camberwell
William Ernest MAY CdeG	Unspecified	Hospital unspecified
William Henry PEARCE	Boils	No 3 General Hospital, Étretat
Richard Henry REYNOLDS	Trench foot	No 1 NZ Stationary Hospital, Amiens
William RITCHIE	Myalgia	2nd Southern General Hospital, Bristol
Jesse Enoch RUSSELL	Trench foot	Royal Victoria Hospital, Netley
Harold Cornwell SIPPEL	Myalgia	No 5 General Hospital, Rouen
Edward Lawrence H. SPALDING	Influenza	No 1 General Hospital, Étretat
Thomas STENNING	Tear of the anterior cruciate ligament of the knee and a septic right toe	3rd London General Hospital
Charles Ernest THOMPSON	Myalgia and Influenza	1st London General Hospital, Camberwell
Leslie Arthur WOODWARD	Influenza	Hospital unspecified



Charles James BURTON MM



William Ernest MAY CdeG



Harold Cornwell SIPPEL