

## Corporal 2366 David Duncan, 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion/4<sup>th</sup> MG Battalion

*Contributed by Ron Morcom, Peakhurst, grandson of David Duncan.*

### Arrival in Australia

**David Baird ('Dave') Duncan** was 19 years old when he left Scotland bound for Melbourne, Victoria. At the time of the British 1911 Census, David was 16 years old and still at school. According to his AIF enlistment papers, David started an apprenticeship as an electrical engineer after finishing school, and trained at Anderson & Boyes, in Motherwell, Scotland for two years. This would have made him around 18 or 19 years old when he completed his training. (This would have been around the time his parents Archibald and Margaret Duncan moved to Montrose.)

From the Unassisted Migrants Records, it appears Dave left the UK on 5 May, 1914, aboard the steamship *Makarini* from London's Tilbury Docks.

After a voyage of around 41 days the *Makarini* arrived in Melbourne on 14 June, 1914. A 'Mr D Duncan' is shown as a third class passenger with contract ticket No. 338. He listed his profession as 'farm student', despite spending the previous two years as an apprentice in electrical engineering. David's last place of permanent residence was 'Scotland'. He later listed his occupation as orchardist on his AIF attestation papers, despite there being no evidence he had previously worked on an orchard at Dalmahoy.



The SS *Makarini* [left] was allotted solely to the emigration traffic, being fitted with temporary berths for the voyage southbound and then 'gutted' to enable cargo to be loaded for the return voyage. On the voyage departing 5 May, 1914, there were 588 new settlers, including 212 'Lads'. (The *Makarini* was later used as a troopship in WWI, and was mined and sunk 15 miles west of Dunkirk in January 1917.)

These 212 'Lads' were youths seeking work in Australia and were a response to the Australian Immigration Bureau taking applications in advance from farmers. On arrival the Lads were made available to farmers who paid them 10 shillings per week plus keep. It is probable Dave Duncan was one of the Lads as

he listed himself as a farm student.

Dave appears to have been picked by an orchardist in the Narre Warren area where there were many fruit orchards at the time. A 'D Duncan' is listed on the Narre Warren war memorial as a person from the area who served in WWI. There were only three D Duncans who enlisted in the AIF from Victoria, and the one from Narre Warren was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, and was the son of Archibald Duncan of 12 John Street, Montrose, Scotland (later moved to 10 Union Place, Montrose).

David Duncan would not have imagined it at the time, but within a year he would be heading back to Europe, via the Middle East.

### Enlistment

Dave spent about 11 months in Victoria before he enlisted in the AIF on 10 May, 1915, at the age of 20 years and seven months. His physical characteristics were recorded as: 5'7" tall; weight 10st 7lb; sallow complexion with hazel eyes and brown hair. He was Church of England faith.

After initial training in Melbourne, David was appointed as Private 2366 to the 7<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements to the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion (later known as 'Jacka's Mob') on 28 May, 1915, and embarked for Egypt on RMS *Persia* on 10 August 1915.

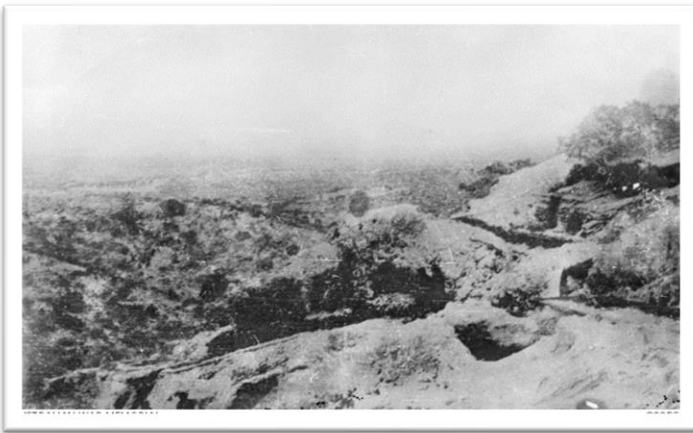
### Service at Gallipoli

Dave Duncan marched into the Intermediate Base, Cairo, and marched out to his unit at Zeitoun on 9 October, 1915. He was taken on strength of the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Mudros on 23 October, 1915, when the battalion was resting from service in the Gallipoli trenches.

The 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion returned to Anzac on 1 November, 1915 (this was Dave Duncan's 21<sup>st</sup> birthday) when they sailed from Imbros on board HMS *Osmanieh*. The men disembarked at North Beach with 7 officers and 406 other ranks.

They marched to the front line and took over Durrant's Post from the 28<sup>th</sup> Battalion on 3 November. It seems this sector of the line was fairly quiet during this period and work was begun to prepare for the planned evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula.

From mid November to the end of the month the Australians experienced heavy rain and a snowfall, and the weather was turning cold. The men withstood the bleak conditions fairly well but there were several cases of frostbite. In this period, the battalion dug 11 tunnels of about 315 feet (in total) and by 7 December they had reached 500 feet.



**Left:** The photo at left shows Durrant's Post after a snow storm in December 1915. AWM C00565.

On 6 December, 1915, the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion's bivouac area was inspected by Generals Birdwood, Godley, Russell and Monash.

The battalion remained at Durrant's Post until it left Gallipoli on 18 December, 1915. The men embarked from Williams' Pier to board HMS *Hazel*, and sailed to Mudros at midnight.

The battalion remained at Mudros East until 27 December, when it sailed to Alexandria aboard HMT *Cardiganshire*.

### Retraining and rest in Egypt

HMT *Cardiganshire* arrived in Alexandria, Egypt, on 1 January, 1916, from Mudros. On arrival the Australian battalions moved to Tel-el-Kebir, around 70 miles from Cairo, where a new camp had been built to house those returning from Gallipoli and the large numbers of reinforcements from Australia.

**Right:** A view of Tel-el-Kebir Camp, 1916. From: [www.don'tforgetthediggers.com.au](http://www.don'tforgetthediggers.com.au).



On 22 January, at Ismailia, David was found guilty of being absent without leave from Moascar Camp two days earlier, and was given 14 days in the defaulter's compound and docked two days pay.

While in Egypt the 14<sup>th</sup> Battalion was split to provide experienced soldiers for the new 4<sup>th</sup> Division being formed. Dave was transferred to the 46<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade on 3 March, 1916. He had a spell in hospital at Serapeum when sick with gastro-enteritis/dysentery in May 1916.

### To the Western Front

On 7 June, 1916, the 46<sup>th</sup> Battalion embarked at Alexandria on HT *Huntsbill* and disembarked at Marseilles, France, on 14 June. From Marseilles, the unit travelled for 60 hours by steam train to Calais, then to the rail junction at Hazebrouck in the staging area behind the Front.

Dave's stay in the 46<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion was brief, and after some settling in at the staging area he was sent to a machine gun school at Camiers for training from 4 July to 6 August, 1916. On the completion of his training, David was taken on strength of the 12<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company of the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 4<sup>th</sup> Division, on 13 August.

The machine gun company was equipped with Vickers heavy machine guns, served by a crew of three and mounted on a tripod. They were capable of firing ranges out to 3 000 yards. Their role was to provide flanking fire across a defensive front, often covering the barbed wire or other obstacles which forced the enemy to attack through their line of fire with devastating results. Machine guns were often the lynchpin of defensive positions and thus the object of enemy attempts to neutralise them as a prelude to attack, by mortar, artillery fire and even raids.

In an attack the Vickers were sited to provide indirect 'plunging fire' into enemy positions in depth, and often at long range, to prevent enemy reinforcements reaching the objective of their attack or to disrupt attempts of the enemy to withdraw. Some machine-gun teams would also be assigned to follow the assaulting troops and to establish themselves in order to provide defensive fire across the front of the 'limit of exploitation' of the attack and as prevention against counter-attack.

The 12<sup>th</sup> MG Company was formed from the four machine gun sections previously in each brigade, and they bore the same number as the brigade to which they were attached. So the 12<sup>th</sup> MG Company was attached to the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade, and supported the infantry battalions in that brigade, namely the 45<sup>th</sup>, 46<sup>th</sup>, 47<sup>th</sup> and 48<sup>th</sup> Battalions. They were also 'loaned' on occasions to support NZ and British attacks.

The soldiers rotated through the front line, support and reserve trenches, regardless of the conditions, and when they first arrived in France it was summer, but by the winter months of 1916/17 the fighting was taking place in the coldest winter in over 40 years.

Heavy snow fell, the ground froze, and bitterly cold winds lashed the battlefields. In 'Backs to the Wall' [George Mitchell], the conditions in one rest camp were described as follows:

*The crowded huts had no chimneys, the windows did not open and any discovered crack was stuffed with paper. Men massed around the braziers. Hoar-frost would form on the backs of the great coats of those men who were not immediately against the brazier. Men slept in pairs to get the greatest benefits from the pooled blankets. In the morning it was useless to try to drink from the water bottle that had been a pillow. The water inside was always frozen.*

### **The Somme – 20 August 1916 to 17 May 1917**

After arriving in France the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was initially posted to the 'Nursery sector' near Armentieres, where they could be introduced to trench warfare in a relatively quiet area. However, their stay in Armentieres was brief and they soon accompanied the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF Divisions to the Somme sector to support the British offensive.

The Somme Campaign started on 1 July, 1916, after a bombardment of seven days. British and French armies attacked 20 miles east of Amiens with the aim of rolling back the German line. The 12<sup>th</sup> MG Coy relieved the 2<sup>nd</sup> MG Coy in the front line in August 1916 and arrived in time to fight off a German counter-attack.

They were rotated in and out of the front line during this period and moved to different battle fronts in the Somme region during this time. The significant battles the 4<sup>th</sup> Division participated in during this period, and those the 12<sup>th</sup> Machine Company were involved in are summarised below:

#### **Poizieres**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Division (including the 12<sup>th</sup> MG Coy) relieved the 2<sup>nd</sup> Division on the Poizieres Heights front in August, where it repulsed heavy German counter-attacks, culminating in assaults on the infamous Mouquet Farm (referred to as 'Moo Cow' farm by the Australians). After a short period in reserve, it again served in the Mouquet Farm sector in September 1916.

#### **Flers/Courcelette**

After a short period in reserve and resting, they moved back to the line and were in action at Flers/Courcelette. This action supported a major British Offensive, and was to have a significant impact on the Duncan family. At the time Dave Duncan was in and out of the front line at Flers, his younger brother **Ronald Duncan** was in action with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Scottish Rifles (Cameronians) at Le Transloy, about 8 km from Flers. Additionally, a cousin, **Thomas Black Duncan**, was in command of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Trench Mortar unit at Gueudecourt, where it was supporting the British attack.

The 12<sup>th</sup> MG Coy war diaries reveal they had been in the front line for most of October 1916 but were relieved on the night of 22 October and were in reserve on the 23<sup>rd</sup>.

The map of the battlefield [right] shows the close proximity of Flers (Dave Duncan), Gueudecourt (Thomas Black Duncan) and Le Transloy (Ronald Duncan).

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Scottish Rifles came up to the line on 23 October to push through the attack and capture Zenith Trench. An extract from the Cameronians' war diary states:

*When daylight came on the 23 October 1916, there was a thick fog, and the attack was postponed until 2.30 pm. By 1.30 pm, the fog had cleared, and the weather showed considerable improvement, and the attack went in as planned. On the right, 23<sup>rd</sup> Brigade were successful, for their assaulting battalions, 2<sup>nd</sup> Scottish Rifles (Cameronians) and 2<sup>nd</sup> Middlesex followed the creeping barrage, took their allotted sections of Zenith trench, and started to consolidate some 150 yards beyond it.*



Private Ronald Duncan was killed in action in this attack at the age of 18 years. He is remembered on the British memorial at Thiepval on Pier & Face 4D. This memorial commemorates those soldiers with no known grave who died on the Somme battlefields between July 1915 and 30 March, 1918. The memorial was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. Ronald Duncan is also commemorated at the Ratho War Memorial.



**Far left:** The Ratho War Memorial, Scotland. Ronald Duncan is named on the bottom left of the memorial.  
**Left:** The Thiepval British War Memorial.

### **Bullecourt**

April 1917 saw the 12<sup>th</sup> MG Coy participating in the First Battle of Bullecourt where it played a vital part in the unsuccessful assault on the Hindenburg Line. This action was notable for the number of Australian troops (nearly 1 200) that were captured by the Germans.

### **Flanders (Ypres/leper) Front – June 1917 to Nov 1917**

At the beginning of June 1917, the company was moved to the Flanders Front and were billeted at Penzance Lines near Neuve Eglise. They proceeded with training preparing for the attack on Messines, set for 7 June. The Third Battle of Ypres saw the 12<sup>th</sup> MG Coy in three battles.

#### **Messines**

The 12<sup>th</sup> MG Coy moved to the front line for the attack on 7 June and stayed until 12 June, when they were relieved. After this, they spent the rest of the month training. The attack at Messines was highly successful but still incurred 2 700 Australian casualties.

#### **Polygon Wood**

The 4<sup>th</sup> Division were tasked with capturing the northern part of Polygon Wood and the high ground beyond it. The heavy machine gunners of the 12<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company, with their machine gun barrage, lent support to the infantry attack on 26 September, 1917.

#### **Passchendaele**

The 12<sup>th</sup> MG Coy was assigned to support the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade attack and capture of Keiberg Ridge. They gained their objective but were eventually forced back. The brigade had 1 000 casualties.

**Right:** 12<sup>th</sup> MG Coy position at Anzac Ridge near Ypres in 1917. Dave Duncan is not in the picture but would have rotated into these or similar machine-gun emplacements in similar muddy and cold conditions. AWM E00905.



### **Back from leave and a return to the Somme Front – Nov 1917 to July 1918**

After the fighting at Passchendaele ended, Dave Duncan went on leave to the UK from 5 to 21 November, 1917. It is not known whether he visited his family residing in Montrose, Scotland, at this time, but it is likely that he took the opportunity.

On his return from leave, Dave was promoted to temporary corporal on 5 February, 1918, and was confirmed as a corporal on 11 May. During this period the designation of his unit was changed from the 12<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company to 4<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion. The MG Battalions were formed when the three brigade

machine gun companies were consolidated into a single divisional machine gun battalion, equipped with 16 Vickers machine guns.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Division was transferred back to the Somme region in this period and participated in the following battles.

#### **Albert to Dernancourt, River Ancre**

The Australian 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Divisions were ordered to Amiens to bolster the retreating British 5<sup>th</sup> Army. The Battle of Dernancourt involved the Australian 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Brigades on the railway embankment and cutting around Dernancourt, just south of Albert. The under strength Australian brigades faced four German Divisions, totalling about 25 000 men.

Situated on the western side of the Ancre River valley, the Australians formed a defensive line at the railway embankment, from which they held back German attacks. The Australian 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion soon found itself outflanked by Germans to its rear. The 48<sup>th</sup> was ordered to hold at all costs, but by midday was facing annihilation so the senior officer ordered a withdrawal. Much like the action at First Bullecourt the previous year, the Australian battalion withdrew successfully and in order. This action cost the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> Brigades 1 100 casualties

#### **Villers-Bretonneux**

In spring of 1918 the 4<sup>th</sup> MG Battalion was serving in the Villers-Bretonneux sector and was involved in the defence of Amiens in April. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division concluded its participation in the 100 day campaign in action at Le Hamel, east of Amiens and the Hindenburg Line. They advanced to the town of Bellenglise on the St Quentin Canal, the site chosen for the 4<sup>th</sup> Division AIF memorial.

Dave missed some of the advance along the Somme Valley, as on 9 July, 1918, he was detached from his unit and sent to the Corps Signal School. He didn't miss any action though, as his detachment was after the Battle of Hamel (4 July) and he returned to his unit on 3 August, five days before the Battle of Amiens commenced. The divisional commander congratulated David on 11 July for his satisfactory report at Signals School. When Dave returned to the 4<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Battalion it was as a signals corporal.

Between 30 August and 14 October, 1918, David was detached to the Army Signals School, probably as an instructor. He went on UK leave from 25 October to 15 November, so was likely to have been in England for the Armistice celebrations.

#### **Return to Australia**

David was struck off strength of his unit on 9 January, 1919, to commence his return to Australia as '1915 personnel'. He left Havre for Sutton Veny on 15 January, and moved camp to Codford on 7 February. David was returned to Australia on the *Warwickshire*, leaving England on 5 April, 1919. He did not take the option of requesting discharge in the UK.

Corporal Duncan arrived in Melbourne on 28 May, 1919, and was discharged from the AIF on 20 July. He was eligible for the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal. He was residing at Leeds Road, Doncaster, and was working as an orchardist in 1919. (The Doncaster area towards Templestowe was a significant fruit growing area which reached its peak around 1920. The orchards in the district covered around 7 000 acres. The depression in 1929-30 brought an end to the prosperous years and many orchardists lost their properties due to being unable to meet repayments on their loans.)

At some point while living and working in Doncaster, David met Constance Victoria Furneaux, and the couple married at her parents' home at 36 Severn Street, Box Hill, on 14 May, 1921.

#### **World War Two service**

Dave Duncan enlisted again in the Second World War, and served in the Australian Army Medical Corps from 1 July, 1940, to 26 November, 1943. He enlisted at the age of 45 years and eight months. Dave was discharged after 3 years service at the age of 49 years because of his age and medical unfitness. He applied for a war pension in 1944.

David was denied the WWII Defence Medal for service in Darwin, even though he was given temporary authority to wear the ribbon. He marched into the Northern Territory on 29 November, 1941, and marched out on 5 May, 1942, after five months and seven days service. The qualifying period for the medal was six months, so he was 23 days short.

Dave was denied the medal despite the fact he was present for many of the bombing raids on Darwin. The bombing of Darwin on 19 February, 1942, was the largest single attack ever mounted by a foreign power on Australia. Darwin was bombed on at least 13 more occasions before Dave left the Northern Territory.

David Duncan passed away on 18 February, 1967, and was buried in the Springvale Cemetery.