

## A TRIBUTE TO PRIVATE ARTHUR LESLIE PHILBEY (1897-1917) ON THE CENTENARY OF HIS DEATH IN FLANDERS

*A century ago, Private Arthur Leslie Philbey of the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Australian Imperial Forces (AIF) was killed in action in Flanders, Belgium. Arthur was a great uncle, brother to our grandfather John Henry Philbey and the brother in law of our grandmother, Violet Ellie Philbey nee Tobitt (1888-1933). We have written this piece to mark the centenary of the death of a young soldier in a distant and alien land.*



Arthur Leslie Philbey was born on 23 August 1897 at Wiltunga, South Australia, the ninth child of Joseph Henry Philbey (1860-1945) and Sarah Jane Philbey nee Boss (1857-1932). He studied at Pine Flat School from 22 September 1903 until 27 September 1911. For two years, Arthur helped his elder brother, John (Jack) Henry Philbey (1886-1945), to develop his farm near Spalding and to build the homestead. He returned to Bute to work as a farmer. Arthur was “diligent attendant” at the Wiltunga Methodist Church and “just getting into the harness as Sunday-school secretary”. Arthur was reportedly popular in the district for his “fine manly qualities”.

Private Arthur Leslie Philbey, circa 1916

When the first recruiting train went through Bute, Arthur was one of the first to volunteer for service in the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Imperial Force (AIF). He enlisted in Kadina on 3 April 1916. He was then 18 years 7 months, was 5’9” tall and weighed 147 lbs. His complexion was described as “fair” and his physical development judged to be good. He gave his occupation as a farmer, his religion as Methodist and his next of kin as his father, Joseph Henry Philbey. He was single.

On the attestation papers which he completed, Arthur pledged to “well and truly serve our Sovereign Lord the King in the Australian Imperial Force from 3.4.16 until the end of the War, and a further period of up to four months thereafter unless sooner lawfully discharged, dismissed or removed therefrom.” As it happened, Arthur was untimely “removed”, well before the War’s end.

Arthur joined A Company at the Second Depot on 27 April 1916 in the Adelaide suburb of Mitcham, where he did his basic training. Together with Philip Lawrence Cock, a neighbour, Arthur was farewelled at the Pine Forest Chapel on 30 May 1916. (Private Cock served with Arthur on the Western Front and returned to Australia in March 1919.)

Notwithstanding his apparent piety, Arthur had a larrikin side and an endearing sense of humour. He confessed in a letter to his brothers in June 1916 to breaking leave regulations in Adelaide “to do a line with Avoca (Ingster)”, whom he described as “a

real little plum". For this transgression, he was fined ten "bob" and docked five days' pay ("...so that don't pay, do it?")

Arthur embarked on the troopship *HMAT Seang Bee* on 12 July 1916 and disembarked at Plymouth (England) on 9 September 1916. He and his cohort were then attached to the 12<sup>th</sup> Training Battalion near Codford. From the camp on 16 October 1916, Arthur wrote: "I had my fortune told in London and the old girl told me I was going to come through all right, but I was going to be wounded."



Private Arthur Leslie Philbey, circa 1916-17

On 20 November 1916 Arthur boarded the troopship *SS Victoria* at Folkestone, crossed the English Channel and, after enduring a bad bout of seasickness ("I don't think I was ever so bad in all my life..."), landed at Etaples (France) the following day.

Arthur was assigned as part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Reinforcement to the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade, 4<sup>th</sup> Division. The battalion was raised on 16 March 1916 in the process of reorganising and expanding the AIF. It absorbed Gallipoli veterans from the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion and reinforcements, mainly from South Australia and Western Australia. (The battalion was known as the "Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orleans" because it was "made of Leanes" -- its first commanding officer was Lieutenant-Colonel Raymond Leane, and his brothers and relatives were members of the battalion.)

The 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion had been severely mauled in the Battle of Pozieres in the first half of August 1916. It also sustained heavy losses in the Battle of Bullecourt in May 1917, the Battle of Messines Ridge (Belgium) in June 1917 and the Battle of Passchendaele in October of the same year, three major battles in which Arthur fought. By the end of the Great War, the battalion's Roll of Honour listed 843 of its members killed in action, or died of wounds or other causes. For a new recruit such as Arthur, joining this unit would guarantee that he would be in the thick of things.

Before he could join his unit, however, Arthur contracted a severe case of mumps and was twice hospitalised in Camiers. On 23 January 1917 he finally reported to the 48<sup>th</sup>, which was then billeted in Brazentin after a stint manning the front line in the Flers sector of the Somme. Arthur joined when the battalion was on "fatigues", undertaking road and railway work, as well as training. The winter of 1916-1917 happened to be the coldest in 40 years. According to the battalion war diary, the huts were "clean and convenient", but cold owing to insufficient coal to heat the stoves. "Australians", the diary commented, "are not used to such cold conditions." Arthur was no exception.

The battalion was engaged in the Battle of Bullecourt (France) in April 1917 and Messines Ridge (Belgium) in June 1917. In early October, it was deployed to the Ypres Salient (Belgium) for the Passchendaele phase of the Third Ypres Offensive.

Arthur served as a machine gunner, one of the most dangerous jobs on the Western Front, which generally incurred a short life expectancy. He was involved in much heavy fighting, which he downplayed in his letters to home as “a box with old fritz” and “some very good fun”. At some point he suffered a light shrapnel wound to a leg, which did not require evacuation to the rear.

Arthur experienced all of the hardships of the front – the intense cold, mud, lice (“thoroughbreds”), lack of sleep and bad tobacco (“cocky chaff”). One after the other his mates were killed or wounded. Nevertheless, he tried to be cheerful and reassuring in his letters, giving little hint of the hardships and the dreadful odds. Shortage of cash for leave seemed to be his main worry. Letters from home (particularly from Avoca, his “little plum” who wrote “as regular as clockwork”) brought some solace, and parcels some physical comforts, including much appreciated good tobacco and warm knitted socks.

We know from Arthur’s letters that he met his brother-in-law, Harold Hedley Tobitt (who was serving with the 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF) at least once on the Western Front. Arthur’s impression from this encounter was favourable. The 48<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> were operating in the same battlefields around the same times, so the two would have often been only a few hundred metres away from each other in 1917. Sadly, Harold was killed on Westhoek Ridge near Ypres on 24 September 1917 in the Battle of Polygon Wood, which immediately preceded Arthur’s last battle, and died only a short distance away from where Arthur fell three weeks later.

On 12 October 1917 the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion was ordered to take and hold a section of the Passchendaele Ridge between Zonnebeke and Passchendaele villages. The battalion advanced from its jumping off point on Westhoek Ridge behind an artillery barrage. It was required to advance to the “red line” on a front which stretched south of the Ypres-Roules railway line, in coordination with other units on its flanks. The battalion succeeded in moving 300-400 yards toward its objective over broken and muddy ground, capturing some enemy positions and taking prisoners (three officers and 200 other ranks). However, the forces on the northern side of the railway had failed to get into position in time to keep pace with the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion’s advance, leaving the battalion’s left flank exposed to intense enfilading machine gun and rifle fire. As the operation developed, the battalion’s position became increasingly untenable; enemy fire was effective, casualties were mounting, and fierce counterattacks were underway. The battalion was ordered to withdraw to its original jumping off point. In the desperate retreat, with the enemy hot on its heels, the battalion sustained further heavy casualties and was forced to abandon the wounded who were stretcher cases.

Of the 621 officers and men of the 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion who had taken part in the battle over two days, 370 were killed, wounded or missing. Private Arthur Leslie Philbey (Regimental No. 1970) was one those lost that day. He was just over 20 years old. As a 48<sup>th</sup> Battalion chaplain ruefully noted afterward: “And they had gained not one yard of ground in return for their sacrifice.”

Passchendaele village was eventually captured in November by Canadian forces, after the allies had suffered further heavy losses in the continuing offensive. Even that victory was little consolation; in the German counter-offensive (“Ludendorf’s Last Offensive”) which began on 16 March 1918 and almost turned the tide of the war, Passchendaele, Messines, and other major allied gains on the Western Front were overrun in three days.

A month later, the family received news of Arthur’s death. On 17 November 1917, his surviving family placed a notice in The Advertiser announcing Arthur’s death “in France”. It said poignantly,

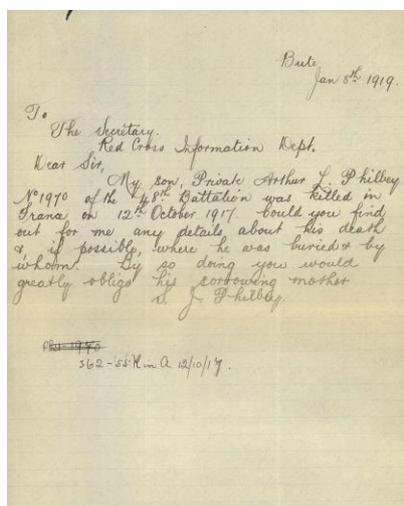
*My brave hero you are missed, but not forgotten,  
And we know you are not lost.*

A memorial service for the fallen soldier was held at the Wiltunga Church.

Arthur’s body has no known grave. Not happy with the lack of information provided by the Defence Department, in January 1919 his sorrowing mother, Sarah Jane, wrote to the Red Cross Society South Australian Division in an attempt to find out details of his death and where he was buried. The Red Cross duly made enquiries in, but to no avail.

However, some light was shed on Arthur’s last moments by a comrade. In a 1919 letter to Arthur’s mother, his mate William Baverstock, who described himself as Arthur’s best friend and was with him in the fatal engagement, recalled that Arthur was killed by a gunshot wound to the head and did not suffer. Baverstock added that, under heavy pressure from the enemy, his comrades were forced to move on quickly, leaving the body behind. (Lance Corporal Baverstock returned to Australia in April 1919.)

The army did manage to scrape together and return a few of Arthur’s humble possessions to his family. The AIF Kit Store (London) inventory of 7 January 1918 listed them as: “2 Tobacco Pouches, 7 Coins, Purse, Wallet, 2 Mark Notes, 3 Buttons, 2 Badges, Letter”. (Needless to say, items of value or use would have been recycled among his practical and pragmatic comrades.)



Sarah Jane Philbey’s letter to the Red Cross

In June 1922 his father, Joseph Henry, received from the Defence Department one British War Medal, One Victory Medal and one Memorial Scroll. The family would have also received the Commemorative Medallion, but we have no record of its receipt or whereabouts.

Arthur's family and friends grieved deeply for many years, never really overcoming the loss. Every year, on the anniversary of Arthur's death, the family would place an *in memoriam* notice in the "Heroes of the Great War column of a major newspaper (the last we could locate appeared in *The Chronicle* on 15 October 1936). Succeeding generations of Philbeys from South Australia have named their children after Arthur Leslie to honour his memory.

Arthur's name was chiselled on the Menin Gate Memorial in Ypres (Panel 7-17-23-25-27-29-31), along with 6,000 other AIF soldiers missing in Belgium. (In 1997, just before the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his death, we visited the Menin Gate Memorial and found his name there.) Arthur's name was inscribed on war memorials in Bute and Spalding, and appears on the headstone of his parent's grave in Bute cemetery.



Menin Gate Memorial, Ypres, Belgium 1997

Arthur's name appears on Panel No. 146 of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) Roll of Honour in Canberra. His name is scheduled to be projected on the AWM Hall of Memory on Monday 30 October 2017 at 12.53 am, Wednesday 3 January 2018 at 2.43 am, Tuesday 6 March 2018 at 5.04 am, and on Thursday 26 April 2018 at 12.25am.



48<sup>th</sup> Battalion, Role of Honour, Australian War Memorial, Canberra 2017

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Canberra  
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