

The Story of Private Leslie McCallum

20.11.1899 – 1.10.1988



Image – McCallum family collection

**“Gallipoli was a defeat and Mont St Quentin an unlikely victory but  
Mont St Quentin has never lodged in the nation’s consciousness”**

**L. Carlyon, *The Great War* (2006)**

## Leslie McCallum and his Military Service

Leslie McCallum was born on 20 November 1899, the third son of five children born to John and Isabella McCallum of Goulburn, New South Wales. He was working as a shop assistant in Goulburn when he voluntarily enlisted on 28 July 1917. Enlistments had been running at about 2 000 a month but in May that year nearly 5 000 young men volunteered in the wake of the alarming German offensive, which had brought about the lowering of the age limit for Australian recruits in April 1917. Even the height restrictions were eased from five feet six inches to five feet two inches.

However, this was still well below the number needed to keep the Australian divisions at full fighting strength. Because the Australian divisions suffered severe losses they had to be reinforced regularly.

The enlistment form did not ask for a date of birth, merely an age so it appears Leslie enlisted after the age restrictions were lowered. This allowed many more young and enthusiastic volunteers to sign up. It could be that he wanted to follow in the footsteps of his older brother, Archibald, who had already enlisted and who was awarded the Military Medal on 20 November 1917; coincidentally the date of Leslie's 18th birthday. His mother Isabella gave her consent to his enlistment and the form, held by the National Archives of Australia in Leslie's personnel dossier, records that he was 18 years and six months. His father is recorded as being deceased.

Leslie's regimental number was 7167 and his service is reported as from 16 August 1917. He named his mother Mrs Isabella McCallum of Emerson Street, Goulburn, as his next of kin and stated that he had served four years previously in the senior cadets. However, it is not known where he had served with the senior cadets. The officer who enlisted him was Lieutenant R. J. Emerson. Leslie enlisted for the duration of the war as well as a further four months. After embarkation he was paid five pounds per day, of which three pounds was paid to his mother in Australia. As was customary for new recruits he made a Will, left in the possession of the Military Authorities in Liverpool, Sydney.



A panoramic view of Liverpool Army Camp, c. 1914-18 (Image: Australian War Memorial, H18455)

He moved to Liverpool and later to the Sydney showground camp for training. He was attached to the 21/17 Battalion, i.e., the 21st group of reinforcements for the 17th Battalion. The 17th Battalion was originally raised in March 1915 in Liverpool, NSW, and formed part of the 5th Brigade which was, in turn, assigned to the 2nd Division.

During World War I, the 2nd Division consisted of the 17th, 18th, 19th and 20th Battalions. Each division had its own field artillery, trench mortar battery, machine gun battalion, engineer battalion,

pioneer battalion, signals, medical, veterinary and ordnance units, pay section, mounted troops, cyclist company, supply column and ammunition park.

The early recruits of the 17th Battalion had left Australia in May 1915 before landing at Anzac Cove on 20 August 1915, participating in the attack on Hill 60 before evacuating the peninsula in December that year. In 1916, the battalion took part in its first major action since Gallipoli at Pozieres in France, serving in the line between July and August. In 1917, after a harsh winter, the 17th fought several major battles along the Western Front as the German Army withdrew back towards the Hindenburg Line: Lagnicourt (1 March-30 April) and second Bullecourt (3-4 May) in France, and Menin Road (20-22 September) and Poelcappelle (9-10 October) in Belgium.



HMAT Euripides at Cape Town (Image: Discovering Anzacs, 113543)

Leslie embarked as a private at Sydney on the HMAT Euripides (HMAT 14) on 31 October 1917 with 21/17th Battalion. The battalion disembarked at Devonport in England on 26 December 1917. Leslie once said he spent Christmas Day 1917 in Southampton. He was posted to the 5th Training Battalion at Fovant on the Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, England, where he trained for three months. According to letters sent from the camp, soldiers were often given disembarkation leave and were free to walk into the nearby city of Salisbury.

On 31 March 1918, Leslie transferred to France from Fovant via Dover and was stationed at the No. 1 Overflow Camp before being marched out to join the 17th at Beaumaris. Australian troops had to be put through an extensive course of training in German methods before they could be sent to the front line. They were placed in specially built trenches into which gas was projected, subjected to a hail of reeking shells and initiated into the use of flame projectiles.

Leslie was wounded in action at Camiers with a gunshot wound to his right eye on 16 May 1918, admitted to the L of C (Lines of Communication) Hospital and discharged to the base unit on 31 May 1918. He rejoined his battalion on 15 June 1918 and his mother was advised of his injury by a form letter on 31 May 1918 issued from Melbourne.

The 17th Battalion took part in the Allied Hundred Days Offensive that eventually brought about an end to the war. During this time, they were involved in the Battles of Amiens and Mont St Quentin before participating in the attack on the Beaufort Line at Montbrehain in October, which was the battalion's last contribution to the war. The 17th were training off the line when the armistice was

declared on 11 November 1918. It was disbanded in April 1919 while at Montigny-le-Tilleul, Belgium, on account of its losses and most of its personnel were transferred to the 20th Battalion.

Leslie was invalided to England on 15 January 1919 and repatriated to Australia on what appears to have been the maiden voyage of the HMT SS *Mahia* on 4 June 1919. He disembarked at Sydney on 20 July and was discharged from the AIF on 17 August, retaining the rank of private and awarded the British War Medal (No. 77610), the Victory Medal (No. 73919), and the Returned from Active Service Badge (No. C9464).

In 1998, the 80th anniversary of the end of the war, the French Government awarded the Legion of Honour to the remaining Australian veterans who had served in France during World War I. Sadly, Leslie was not amongst them as he had passed away on 1 October 1988 at the War Veterans Home at Narrabeen.



After returning home, Les (seated right, front row) became a lifesaver with, we understand, Narrabeen SLSC (Image: McCallum family collection)



Les picnicking at Bradley's Head with Adeline Warren c. 1934. They married at St John's, Balmain, 16 July 1938 (Image: McCallum family collection)

## Taking Mont St Quentin

2nd Division was ordered to take Mont St Quentin in August 1918. 5th Brigade's battalions were greatly depleted from being on the fighting line for close to five months: one had been reduced to about 300 men from an original force of 1000; the others each had fewer than 400. These men, tired and worn and without the protection of tanks, were supposed to capture one of the toughest fortresses on the Western Front.

It was a tremendous task. The heights of Mont St Quentin overlooked Peronne two miles away. This position was not only the key to the district of the upper Somme but also formed a strong bastion at the hinge of the river line and the highlands east of Bapaume. But Lieutenant General Sir John Monash was all about boldness and, as the Allies were winning the Hundred Days Offensive thus far, wanted to sustain the rhythm of victory.

On the night of 30 August, the 2nd Division, including Leslie's 17th Battalion, crossed the Somme River. At 5am the next morning they attacked, soon realising they had taken the Germans by complete surprise. Many enemy troops surrendered or fled. Mont St Quentin was captured by 7am and Peronne early the next day. The Australians took more prisoners than the total of their attacking force.

However, not long afterwards, the remaining Germans regrouped, counter-attacked, and took the summit back from the Australians. 1 September saw fierce hand-to-hand fighting and, though the Australians eventually succeeded in retaking Mont St Quentin and Peronne by 3 September, it came at a cost of 3000 more casualties. Monash, the commander of the Australian Corps, described it as the finest single feat of the war.



The summit of Mont St Quentin five minutes after its recapture, 1 September 1918.  
(Image: Australian War Memorial, E03106)

Today there is an impressive memorial statue on the hilltop at Mont St Quentin, commemorating the 2nd Division's achievements. Originally unveiled in 1925, it depicted an Australian soldier about to bayonet a German eagle. After being removed by the German occupying army in World War II, a new memorial was erected in 1971: a standing Australian soldier in his slouch hat, looking down.

In his book *The Great War*, Les Carlyon writes as follows:

Monash wasn't the hero of Mont St Quentin and he was gracious enough to admit it. This battle belonged to the soldiers rather than generals, corporals and privates who did astonishing things that are not easily explained. Monash's army was getting better as it wasted away. Mont St Quentin brought another 3000 casualties: battalions of 300 became battalions of 200. Yet the spirit of these men was extraordinary. Why it is so is not altogether clear. Logic would say that a few hundred men should not have taken a fortress like Mont St Quentin from a crack Prussian division. But they did. Mont St Quentin was probably the finest thing Australians did in the Great War.



The new Mont St Quentin memorial (Image: Department of Veterans' Affairs)



This photo, showing Leslie seated in the centre of the front row, was on a postcard he sent to his mother on 31 August 1918 from 'somewhere in France'. It is assumed he is with five of the eight officers and another soldier who descended from Mont St Quentin early on that day after the attack. It also seems they must have been given a change of clothes. The Australian uniform van irregularly followed the troops and clothes were issued on a needs basis. (Image: McCallum family collection)

## Sources

Paper prepared after thorough research by Leslie's younger son Ken; Leslie McCallum personnel dossier, National Archives of Australia; *A New History of Australia*, ed. Frank Crowley (Melbourne, 1976); *World War I 1914-1918: A Pictured History*, ed. Sir John Hammerton (London, 1920); L. Carlyon, *The Great War* (Sydney, 2006); J. King, *Western Front Diaries* (London, 2015); R. Petersen, *Facing the Foe* (Sydney, 2006); 17th Australian Infantry Battalion, Australian War Memorial collection; Mont St Quentin and Péronne: Australian Victories, Australian War Memorial exhibitions.