

# A Soldier of the Great War

## Private Willie Mayfield Dilger 3130

### 47th Battalion Infantry



Willie Mayfield Dilger's name is located at panel 143 in the Commemorative Area at the Australian War Memorial.

#### Also at Villers Bretonneux France

CANN H.H.	JOHNSON E.
CASSIDY H.	JOHNSON W.
CASSIDY J.	LAMBERT A.
CHAPMAN E.	LANG S.R.
CLAPTON F.J.	LEVINGE G.H.
CONLEY H.A.	LUKE A.
COOK P.	MCCORMACK T.
CORBETT H.	MCCURRY G.B.
CORBETT V.	MCDOWELL J.
COUGHLAN L.B.	MCGREGOR W.
COXON E.E.	MCINTOSH D.
CRONK G.H.	MCKAY R.
CROWE E.	MCLENNAN R.D.
CURTIS F.	MARSHALL G.
CUTLER R.W.	MARTIN E.H.
DADD O.W.	MARTIN R.
SERVED AS	MILNE W.
TURNER W.	MOORE J.
DAVIDSON J.R.	MORLEY J.H.
DAVIES F.J.	MURPHY J.
DILGER W.M.	PACKER C.
DONOVAN T.	PEACOCK G.E.
DOODY W.	PETHERBRIDGE P.

Willie Mayfield Dilger remembered at Villers Bretonneux.

Service Number: 3130

Rank: Private

Unit: 47th Battalion (Infantry)

Service: Australian Army

Conflict: First World War, 1914-1918

Date of death: 05 April 1918

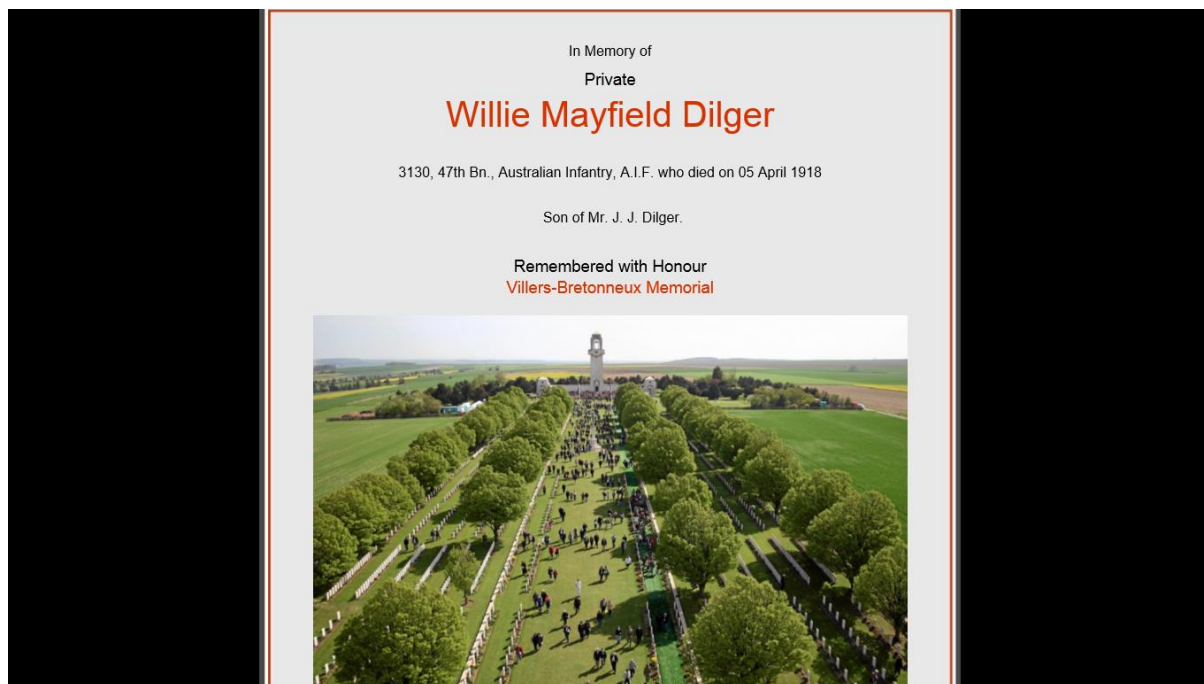
Place of death: France

Place of association: Childers, Australia

Cemetery or memorial details: Villers-Bretonneux Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, Villers-Bretonneux Area, France

Source: AWM145 Roll of Honour cards, 1914-1918 War, Army





**Willie Mayfield Dilger was 22 years and 6 months when he enlisted in the army on the 18<sup>th</sup> February 1916. He was a farmer from Isis Line near Childers and his father Joh James Dilger attested to his age and enlistment.**

**He joined the 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion as part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements. He joined a reserve company and trained and readied for deployment.**

**Finally on the 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1916 he departed Sydney on the “ A64 Demosthenes”. He disembarked at Plymouth on the 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1917.**

**He was stationed at Codford. Reinforcements were only given basic training in Australia. Training was completed in training units in England. These were located in the Salisbury Plains area.**

**After training and preparation he proceeded to France via Folkstone on the 9<sup>th</sup> June 1917. He proceeded to Belgium and arrived around the 23<sup>rd</sup> June where he joined the front line forces. He was thrown into trenches and took part in the cleanup operations after the battle of Messines ridge.**

**The battle of Messines fought on 7 June 1917 was the first large-scale action involving Australian troops in Belgium and it also marked the entry of the 3rd Division into a major battle. Messines was an important success for the British Army leading up to the beginning of the Third Battle of Ypres several weeks later.**

**At 3.10 am on 7 June 1917 nineteen powerful mines exploded under the German trenches along the Wytshaete – Messines ridge. Heavily supported by great volumes of artillery fire the British troops, commanded by General Sir Herbert Plumer, surged forward to capture the enemy positions. The 3rd Australian Division under Major-General John Monash, entering battle for the first time, was anxious to prove itself worthy of the reputation of the other veteran Australian divisions. It made a very successful attack alongside the New Zealand Division just south of the**

Messines village. The other Australian division involved, the 4th, under Major-General William Holmes, made a follow-up attack later in the day. Although some fighting continued, the result was virtually decided by the end of the first evening with the ridge being taken and enemy counter-attacks repulsed.

Source. Australian War Memorial <http://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2007/04/11/battle-of-messines/>

During early July they were in dugouts and tunnels around Hill 63. The fighting here and shelling was constant and many died from shell bursts. They were relieved by a New Zealand Battalion on the 18<sup>th</sup> July and were billeted near Doulieu.

General Plummer inspected them on the 28<sup>th</sup> July .

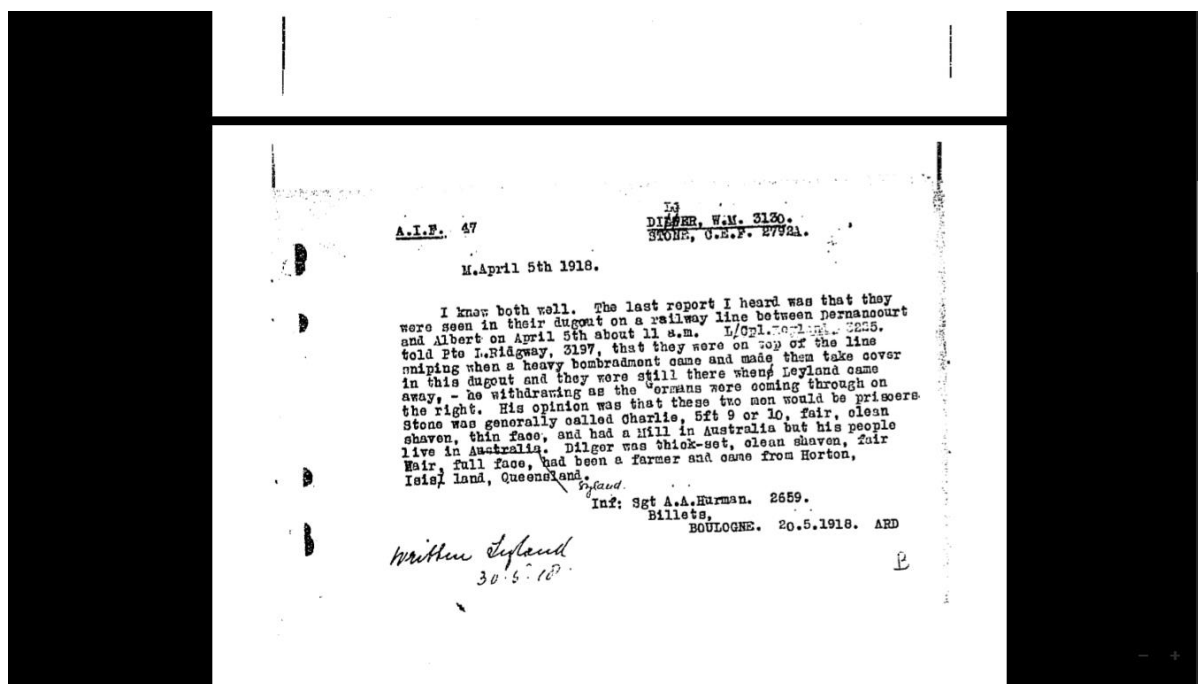
In August they moved to east of Wytschaete with shell fire continuing and engaging the enemy on numerous occasions even being able to capture a large German gun emplacement. Here they were dug in fighting constantly with many men killed with shell bursts from the German lines. Finally ending August with a movement to Aldershot Camp for resting.

September was to see heavy fighting again along the front lines with the 12<sup>th</sup> Brigade moving from the Ypres area to Westhoek Ridge , Zonnebeke and Passchendale Ridge.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> September Willie was wounded with severe gunshot chest wounds received. This was probably during the battle of the Menin Road and Passchendale

He was removed to a general hospital in Boulogne. He was to recover here .

There are reports of him being killed at this time but it appears that this information was incorrect . 3 other Dilgers were present on the Western Front.



He was to appear on lists as missing in action. At the end of March he was finally to return to duty but this time he was to take part in battles in and around Villers Bretonneux. The 47<sup>th</sup> Battalion was broken up and soldiers redeployed .

After returning from hospital Willie was to take part in action around Dernancourt east of Villers Bretonneux where new offensives were being planned.

Willie suffered a fatal gunshot wound after withdrawing from a sniping position atop the railway embankment due to heavy artillery bombardment and was killed at the junction of emu and dolly trenches, just as the German 50th Division came through on mass under the railway underpass with a 77mm gun.

Willie's body suffered a direct hit from the 77mm gun and was unidentifiable.

It is reported that he was killed on the road between Albert and Dernancourt on the 5<sup>th</sup> April 1918. His body was not recovered it appears. Trenches and bomb craters were often bombed time and time again burying soldiers leaving them to lie at rest.

It is very likely that Willie may lie in the grave of an unknown Australian Lance Corporal in row 10G of the Dernancourt Cemetery and extension.



**Is Willie one of these 47<sup>th</sup> Infantry battalion remnants after they were broken up ?**

*In 1918, the 12<sup>th</sup> brigade was one of three that was selected to disband one of its battalions in order to provide reinforcements to other units in the Australian Corps and it was at this time that the 47th Battalion was disbanded .The 12th Brigade's remaining battalions continued to fight after this, taking part in the final Allied offensive of the war, the Hundred Days Offensive, which was launched around Amiens in August and followed by a series of advances as the Allies broke through the Hindenburg Line.*

# 47th Battalion

The 47th Battalion was raised in Egypt on 24 February 1916 as part of the "doubling" of the AIF. Approximately half of its new recruits were Gallipoli veterans from the 15th Battalion, and the other half, fresh reinforcements from Australia. Reflecting the composition of the 15th, the new battalion was composed mostly of men recruited in Queensland and Tasmania. The new battalion was incorporated into the 12th Brigade of the Australian Division.

Arriving in France on 9 June 1916, the 47th entered the trenches of the Western Front for the first time on 3 July. It participated in its first major battle at Pozières. Initially, the battalion provided working parties during the 2nd Division's attack on 4 August, and then, with its own division, defended the ground that had been captured. The 47th endured two stints in the heavily-contested trenches of Pozières, as well as a period in reserve.

After Pozières, the battalion spent the period up until March 1917 alternating between duty in the trenches and training and rest behind the lines. On 11 April it took part in the attack mounted against the heavily defended village of Bullecourt - part of the formidable Hindenburg Line to which the Germans had retreated during February and March. Devoid of surprise, and dependent upon the support of unreliable tanks, the attack failed. Later in the year, the focus of the AIF's operations switched to the Ypres sector in Belgium where the 47th took part in the battles of Messines and Passchendaele.

The 47th rotated in and out of the front line throughout the winter of 1917-18. In the spring of 1918, it played a role in turning the great German Spring Offensive by defeating attacks around Dernancourt during the last days of March and the first days of April 1918. One of the battalion's actions at Dernancourt is depicted in a diorama at the Australian War Memorial. For his valorous actions at Dernancourt Sergeant Stanley MacDougall was awarded the Victoria Cross.

The defeat of the German offensive had come at a cost though. Due to heavy casualties and a lack of reinforcements from Australia, three brigades were directed to disband one of their battalions to reinforce the other three. The 12th Brigade was one of these, and on 31 May 1918 the 47th Battalion was disbanded.

## Colour Patch



Willie's Battalion was to see some of the worst battles of the Western Front and he was ultimately to give his life at Dernancourt in April 1918.

His memory now rests at the Australian Memorial at Villers Bretonneux.

## The Battle of Dernancourt

*With these words Charles Bean, Australia's Official War Historian, described the battlefield of Dernancourt on the morning of the 5th of April, 1918, strewn with the bodies of the Australian dead. It was the final tragic chapter in the story of the 47th Australian Infantry Battalion in the First World War.*

*The 47th Battalion fought in some of the First World War's bloodiest battles. From their first calamitous experience of war under the terrible shell fire of Pozieres, to the costly and futile attacks on Mouquet Farm and the frigid winters on the Somme they suffered through the fighting on the Western Front in 1916. In April of 1917 they were trapped and almost surrounded at 1st Bullecourt. A mere eight weeks later, they 'hopped the bags' at Messines where they lost over half their number. In October they fought and died by the score in the mud of Passchendaele.*

*One of the shortest lived and most battle hardened of the 1st Australian Imperial Force's battalions, the 47th was formed in Egypt in 1916 and disbanded two years later having suffered one of the highest casualty rates of any Australian unit. Their story is remarkable for many reasons. Dogged by command and discipline troubles and bled white by the desperate attrition battles of 1916 and 1917, they fought on against a determined and skilful enemy in battles where the fortunes of war seemed stacked against them at every turn.*

*Not only did they have the misfortune to be called into some of the A.I.F.'s most costly campaigns, chance often found them in the worst places within those battles. **Finally, at the Battle of Dernancourt they fought in the 4th Division's titanic struggle to save Amiens from the great German offensive of 1918. It was at Dernancourt that the 47th Battalion found itself squarely in the path of the heaviest attack ever faced by Australians in this or any war. Fatally weakened by their losses, and under a cloud after the formal inquiry into the battle, the 47th Battalion was broken up. For the Queenslanders and Tasmanians of the 47th Battalion, disbandment meant not only the loss of their battalion, but disgrace and heartbreak as well. Worse still, it meant the ties of comradeship and the bond to their fallen mates were severed at one stroke. In their own bitter words, they were 'thrown away'.***

*Though their story is one of almost unrelieved tragedy, it is also story of remarkable courage, endurance and heroism. It is the story of the 1st A.I.F. itself – punished, beaten, sometimes reviled for their indiscipline, they fought on - fewer, leaner and harder - until final victory was won. And at its end, in an extraordinary gesture of mateship, the remnants of the 47th Battalion reunited. Having been scattered to other units after their disbandment, the survivors gathered in Belgium for one last photo*



<http://regimental-books.com.au/battle-scarred-the-47th-battalion-in-the-first-world-war-1st-edition-p-1062.html>



Dernancourt and the Dernancourt railway bridge where Private Dilger may have made his last stand against a massive gun attack.



There are some who think that Private Dilger may lie in the Dernancourt Cemetery.



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6/4/18. (4) APPENDIX 24  
Front line Companies reported no shelling and no attack. Our artillery replied at 7.15 and continued intermittently. Our lines were then down but were restored and touch was gained with all Companies. This continued until 9.45 when an S.O.S. was seen N of ABBOTT on 48th's left flank - my front line Companies still reporting no infantry action but being heavily shelled by mine-sweepers, and were in touch with flanks. Support Companies had been heavily mauled and each had lost 75% of their strengths, so I reinforced them with 1 platoon from reserve of 48th.  
At 10.30 barrage lifted and ceased on my front whilst machine gun fire broke out there and my forward lines went "out". Visibility was very poor and runners sent forward were killed and became casualties. It appears at 9.30 our lines were drenched with fire but remained fast and at 10.30 enemy infantry started, drove of men appearing through mist, endeavouring to gain our lines, but our Lewis gun and rifle fire, rifle sections of 1 leader to 4 firers, proved a successful barrier and the German dead increased. Enemy rifles, machine guns, and Lewis guns in their possession were utilised and kept them back, doing tremendous execution. My left flank only had a slight attack which was easily repulsed, the brunt of the attack being borne on my centre and right and right Brigade's sector. This defence continued until 1 p.m. and it is estimated that 1 platoon post had over 400 dead in front of it, succeeding waves of enemy climbing over the parapet of dead. Meanwhile on Railway crossing two 77% Field guns were brought up and fired at our trenches at 350 yards, but our snipers picked the gunners off.  
While this line was being held a party of enemy had entered line of right Brigade and proceeding under cover of mist and valley and cemetery on E 30 a succeeded in surprising my support line, but were beaten off temporarily. This was at 11.30 and I immediately ordered a defensive flank to be formed facing S in E 13 d, sending Lieut. Robinson in charge as all officers of C Company in supports were then casualties. This Company was supported by C Company 48th under Captain ADAMS. At noon I received a lamp message from front line saying their line was intact still as far S as the Battalion boundary, and enemy being resisted but over our line on right. I then made a personal reconnaissance and saw people on my right coming over hill in E 18 d and a gap of nearly 1000 yards between my right flank and theirs and informed Brigade at once of the menace. Casualties in support line very heavy on account of shelling and majority of Lewis guns out of action there on account of shell fire and mud, so pushed forward all my Battalion Headquarters staff with 3 Lewis guns and plenty of S.A.A. to prevent at all costs any intrusion in gap. They remained there until 48th came up in afternoon under Lieut. A. SMITH.  
At 1 p.m. visibility was better and front line seeing enemy behind them decided to withdraw on my order and did so along Railway line to old Compound in E 15 c and then moved up the slope to prevent enemy getting the high ground. This movement was ably conducted by Captain YOUNG and Captain BROWN, Lieut. REID and Sgt. BROWN going out and covering the movement and advising Headquarters. This was successfully accomplished by 2 p.m., 48th right flank moving with them until at 3 p.m. we were on high ground across E 8 central to E 13 a. 49th Battalion at this stage appeared to the E and orders were issued for a local counter attack in conjunction with the forward movement of 49th. This Battalion was moving towards BUIRE, when Sgt. BROWN went out and restored their direction.  
The 48th in meantime had conformed their line to general movement and all were in position for counter attack at 3.15. 48th on left, 47th in centre, 49th joining on to 49th. Moved off to line magnificently and in perfect order, but when going over the ridge a enemy machine gun storm caught the line inflicting great casualties, when the line charged with the bayonet and the enemy went before it, but machine gun fire necessitated a halt, and at 3.45 at about 150 yards short (i.e. S) of our old support lines where they dug in at dusk. The general line then

