

3466A Private John Wick



John Wick was born in Bridge Street, Kirkwall on 24th September 1884. His parents, John Wick and Ann Wick (née Foubister), were both born in Deerness, where they married in 1874 and their first son, James, was born. Father John was a merchant service seaman, but was diagnosed with pulmonary fibrosis soon after the family moved to Kirkwall and he started work as a warehouseman in the harbour. John's sister Anne was born in 1882 in Bridge Street, where sadly their father died of enteritis on 13th September 1891.

After completing his schooling at Kirkwall Burgh School, John worked as a cook, probably at sea in the merchant service. John left Scotland to start a new life in Australia, aged 22. He worked there most of ten years as a labourer in Brisbane, New South Wales. However, when John enrolled in the Australian Imperial Force on 21st October 1916, he did so in Hughenden in Queensland.

John completed just over a week of basic training in 11th Depot Battalion, before left for Sydney. He embarked there on Transport A72 *Beltana* on 25th November and sailed for the UK as part of 8th Reinforcement Draft for the 4th Australian Pioneer Battalion. John disembarked at Devonport (Plymouth) on 29th January 1917 and travelled to Lark Hill on Salisbury Plain, where 4th Pioneer Training Battalion was in camp. Pioneer Battalions were equipped and trained as conventional infantry (on rare occasion used in that role), but were intended to provide the divisional engineers with a force of labourers and craftsmen for making trenches, strong points, roads and railways.

John spent four months training in England before left Folkestone for France on 9th May. After a week at the Australian 4th Division Base Depot at Etaples, near Boulogne, John joined 4th Pioneer Battalion on 16th May. It left Albert in the Somme battlefield by train that day to travel north to Caestre, then marched to billets in the village of Vieux Berquin, 3½ miles SE of Hasbrouck and about 4 miles from the Belgian border. The Battalion continued a period of rest and training there.

4th Pioneers spent the last week of May working on new roads, under the New Zealand Division engineers. The unit lost one man killed and four wounded to shell fire, while two others crushed fingers during their work. The Battalion built a new trench in June through marshy ground, having to build up a parapet more than half its height, losing 66 casualties (19 dead), mostly to shell fire.

July was a fairly quiet month for 4th Battalion, which lost 2 killed and 14 wounded, but in the last week A Company moving north to Kemmel Hill in Flanders as the Anzacs took over a major role in the Third Battle of Ypres (now known as the Battle of Passchendaele). The rest of 4th Pioneer Battalion followed to work in that area in August, when shell fire accounted for most of its 9 dead and 18 wounded casualties. The Battalion spent most of September resting and training, but it moved in the last week to work on roads forward from Westhoek and lost 9 dead and 51 wounded. While the Battalion worked to build a road from Westhoek to Zonnebeke in October, a German plane bombed its HQ on the 2nd, killing two senior officers and wounding a lieutenant. Shell fire killed 9 other ranks, wounded 3 more fatally, also an officer and 68 other ranks seriously.

The Canadians had relieved the exhausted Australians to carry forward the advance and capture the ruins of Passchendaele village, so 4th Pioneer Battalion was pulled back from the front and spent November resting and training, with no casualties. The Battalion returned to the Somme area in December, when worked on salvaging (mostly German) equipment near Peronne. 31 men were struck off strength after failed medical examinations, but the remainder were able to celebrate a good Christmas, thanks to a £100 comfort fund generously provided by the city of Melbourne.

On 5th January 1918, 4th Pioneer Battalion received an order that it was to travel north to Bailleul, which it reached a week later after a poorly organised train journey. After making good its camp at Godezonne Farm, the Pioneer Battalion started work on improving communication trenches in the reserve lines. As this work progressed in the winter months, it became increasingly obvious, even to ordinary soldiers like John, that the Allies faced a difficult time in the spring of 1918.

America had joined the Allies in spring 1917 and was building up a large Army, but only a handful of American divisions had reached France. The French and British had been forced to send troops to Italy, after it suffered a disastrous defeat at Caporetto in October 1917. While the last BEF offensive of that year at Cambrai had started with an encouraging advance led by large numbers of tanks, a surprise German counter-offensive had recovered most of the lost ground. It had been possible because Russia had pulled out of the war in disarray, freeing up large numbers of German divisions to transfer to the Western Front. For the first time since the Australians had arrived on the Western Front in the summer of 1916, the BEF and the French had moved onto the strategic defensive. They expected to be struck in the spring of 1918 by major German attacks, intended to win the war before American troops arrived in great numbers on the Western Front.

On 12th January 4th Australian Division took over the northern sector of the Australian Corps front in Flanders, at Hill 60 and Hollebeke. 4th Pioneers worked to improve the defences, including communication trenches, strong points and wiring, also on the roads and light railways. Casualties were light, one man wounded on 31st January and three killed on 16th February. At the end of February 4th Pioneers handed over to 1st Pioneers, as 1st Australian Division was about to take over the sector, but the Battalion split into parties for work in various parts of the Corps rear area.

4th Pioneer Battalion was up to strength and was able to release some men for leave in the UK. John Wick was granted leave on 15th March and took the opportunity to undertake the long journey to Orkney to visit his family. While he was home there, the Germans launched Operation "Michael", against British Fifth Army and the right wing of Third Army. The attacks broke through most of the front of Fifth Army and it fell back across the old Somme battlefield.

John left his family, who must have been anxious about his return to the front. He wrote a letter on 1st April on YMCA notepaper to his mother, saying he had arrived back in Calais the evening before. He knew then that his Division had "moved on" from Flanders, so when he rejoined 4th Pioneer Battalion on the 3rd it was in camp near Dernancourt, about 2 miles WSW of Albert. The German advance had been slowed, but they captured Albert on 26th March and had not yet been stopped. 4th Battalion War Diary for the 29th noted ominously "5 Batterys of 60 pounders moved into the vicinity of the Camp which is not a good thing, when enemy start searching for guns".

A hurricane German artillery bombardment in the early morning of 5th April, that killed John Wick and two other soldiers of 4th Pioneer Battalion and wounded 27 more, was intended to destroy most of the 60-pounder guns near the camp. The dogged defence that day and on those following by 4th Australian Division, assisted by some of the Pioneers fighting for the first time as infantry, did stop the German advance in that vital sector, but there was to be much more heavy fighting before the Allies moved on to the offensive that August.

John Wick is buried in Grave VIII.F.25 in Warloy-Baillon Communal Cemetery, near Dernancourt in the Somme district of France. John is remembered on both the Deerness and Kirkwall War Memorials in his native Orkney, as well as on the Australian National Memorial in Canberra.