

Woodend Star, 1919: Article by Richard Casey

Although comparatively little is known about the work of this section in the war, even among members of the A.I.F., it was a section that played a most important part in the organisation of our Army. As has often been said, our pilots are truly the "eyes" of the army, and in the same way the wireless men may be dubbed the "ears," forming, as they do, the connecting link between the men in the air, and our army in the field. The stations of the section were scattered over the whole of the Australian corps front, attached principally to the various artillery units, and only the enemy himself would be able to bear full testimony to the efficient manner in which the work was carried out.

The duties of the men called for efficiency, skill and endurance of the highest degree, working, as they did, under all kinds of conditions, and at all times putting into practice the principles of one of the very latest discoveries of modern science, and through this agency collecting and distributing in the right quarters the huge mass of valuable intelligence that the Flying men were constantly transmitting, and doing it in a manner that could only, and did, call for the highest commendation from all who were in the position to best judge.

The majority of the Section were recruited from the postal and railway telegraph services of Australia, and a few men who had had experience at sea as qualified wireless operators on various transports sailing between Australia and England. The most outstanding feature was, perhaps, the extreme youthfulness of the majority of the men, many being mere boys, not yet out of their teens.

After several months training in England, the first draft of about thirty operators arrived in France in July, 1917. This was quickly followed by a second draft of about the same number. These pioneers were immediately posted to the artillery units on the Australian front, and, as no Australian Flying Squadron was working on this particular sector, at this time, they came under the control of the R.A.F.

The first engagement they took part in was in the Ypres salient in September, 1917, and it was here that the first casualties took place. Right through the heavy fighting of the following three months the men were in action continually with the Australian Field Batteries, in what was possibly the biggest artillery battle of the war, and eventually, when winter made further fighting impracticable, we find that the original section had dwindled to about one half of its strength, the remainder being "hors de combat," either killed, wounded or gassed.

When the Australian Corps pulled out, at last, from the salient, at the end of 1917, weary and sore, but still full of fight, and took over the Messines sector, the section found that it was at last to come under the control of the Australian Flying Corps. No. 8 Squadron, having about this time moved from the Arras front to Bailleul, took control, and this unit directed the section until the armistice.

In the early part of the winter of 1917-1918, all the casualties were made good, and the men changed about until only Australian Operators were with the Australian artillery units. A large number of Imperial artillery stations, on the Australian Sector, became manned by men from the R.A.F., so that, early in the New Year, the section was again up to its original strength, in Australians, and taking into account the "Tommies," the total strength was about 150 operators. The only event of real importance that any men were engaged in during the winter was the Cambrai "stunt" towards the end of the year, when the operators with the Australian heavies were in action. Others also moved into that sector, with the 4th Australian

Division, during the latter stages of that phase of war. The rest of the men had a comparatively cosy time, during the early part of 1918- the discomforts of a European winter in the field being their worst hardship.

The complete section took part in the dash for the Somme, after the Hun offensive of March 21st, 1918, and it also took part in the subsequent heavy fighting of the next few weeks, between Villers Brettoneux and Albert; and as to be expected casualties were heavy, but the work done contributed in no small degree towards the success of the efforts which finally prevented the Hun from taking Amiens, and stopping his seemingly victorious rush South. Before the operations in the Somme district had develop very far, several of the men were recalled to the Bailleul sector, with the 1st Division, and took part in the subsequent fighting on this part of the front. These men were separated from the main section for several months, rejoining it when the 1st Division moved South, about August, 1918.

During the spring and the summer months some very solid work was put in, as the year wore on, and the days grew longer, the weather made it possible for more flying to be done, and as long as an aeroplane could fly, just as long did the men have to sit on watch at their instruments. Day after day, and month after month, their hours were from 3 a.m. till 10 p.m. and only those who have had experience of the work know how tedious it is. It was at this period that the high efficiency of the section was best demonstrated. As time went on, and more reliance came to be placed on aerial observation, so the work of the operator increased, and only an excellent organisation by a most efficient H.Q. staff combined with the efforts of the N.C.O.'s and men on the stations, who in all cases, displayed a praiseworthy interest in their work, as well as a remarkable sense of initiative, in cases of difficulty was it possible to carry on.

It is not the ghist of this article to go into elaborate statistics of the work done in the field; volumes of figures could be compiled, but after all figures are nothing to the man who has not the opportunity, nor, very likely, the inclination, to enquire if they are authentic; but, nevertheless one of two incidents of note may be, possible, and help to demonstrate the class of work done by the section.

On 20th of September, 1917. While the attack in the region of Polygon Wood was in progress, the Huns were seen by airmen, to be massing on two occasions in preparation for counter-attacks. The first was at 7 a.m., and the second about noon. Each time an urgent call was sent down, and the exact locations given; both these calls were received by every station on the sector, and the targets were immediately engaged by all available artillery. The result was that each time a dangerous counter-attack was completely repulsed by artillery action alone. Much the same thing happened near Dernancourt on April 4th, 1918. On this occasion the enemy attack was delayed for some hours, and eventually ended in failure. Again in Bailleul, our airmen observed forty German heavy transport lorries. An urgent call was sent down, and received by every station on the sector, with the result that thirty five were blown out, the remaining five escaping along a small lane. After the Hamel stunt in July, 1918, several new stations were added to the front, in preparation for the final effort to break the Hun resistance, and on the opening day of the great offensive August 8th, 1918, the section had approximately one hundred stations in action, manned by over 200 N.C.O.'s and men, of whom about one-half were Australians.

The events of the next few months up till November 11th, when a badly beaten enemy only too eagerly signed an armistice, which gave him respite from the victorious troops of the Allies, who were harassing him unmercifully, are now a matter of history, and are likely to remain unequalled for many generations to come. But it is sufficient to say that, during this

period, Australia's army played a part which was second to none, and the boys of the Flying Corps Wireless did their bit with the rest. During these strenuous months they were called upon by their officers to make efforts, which at times tended to verge on the brink of impossibility, but be it to their everlasting credit, no matter what they were asked to do, they never failed. It is safe to say that at this time no body of men in France were with a greater degree of esteem and admiration by their officers, they themselves having given an excellent example and showed an unequalled devotion to duty.

All through the great advance the work was most laborious, as can be imagined would be the case with an advancing army. How often the various stations were erected and dismantled in one day only the men themselves really know, but in many cases, this process was reported six times between dawn and dark. Sometimes a battery would only stay in a position for a couple of hours, but no matter how short a stay, "Sparks" had to get his station into action, and find out what the men in the air had to say.

When at last the fighting ceased, we again find the strength of our section greatly depleted, and the survivors were only too pleased to take advantage of the following few weeks of rest. During the advance of the Australian army into Belgium at the end of 1918, the men rendered valuable services in manning ground stations in use between various units, and in some cases they did duty on ordinary telegraph lines as telegraphists.

February, 1919, saw the end of the sections as a working unit. During this month all the stations were dismantled, and the men again collected together. Most of the "Tommies" had by then been demobilised, and the Australians from then on have been standing by waiting repatriation to Australia. The total strength at this period was seventy five operators.

So ends the war record of a small but very efficient section of Australia's army. The survivors all have the satisfaction of being able to look back on a task well done, and if they have any regrets they are for the mates they have left behind, buried in the fields of war-scarred France and Belgium, where in years to come, the little white crosses so carefully erected over each individual grave will stand as an everlasting memorial to a body of men who proved that they were willing to work and die in the cause of freedom.