

Hubert Francis Charles

Rank/Service number: Private 6987

Place of birth: Burnie, Tasmania

Religion: Roman Catholic

Date of enlistment: 13th October 1916

Age at embarkment: 26

Fate: Returned to Australia



Hubert Francis Charles was born on the North West coast of Tasmania, on 10 August 1891. He grew up in Oonah, with several siblings. At the time of the outbreak of war in 1914, Hubert was unmarried and working as a farm labourer.

Two years later, at the age of 25, Hubert enlisted in the war effort. In the years since the beginning of war, countless soldiers had returned home, many with permanent disfigurement and trauma. As a result, Hubert would have known on some level what war was, and the damage it could create, unlike those who signed up in 1914. Despite this, he still enlisted, becoming part of the 12th Battalion, 23rd reinforcement. The bravery required to enlist while understanding the risks would have served him well once he reached the Western Front.

Hubert's service during the war is relatively unknown. He left no diaries or letters, nor did he ever speak of his experiences to his family. As a result, it is impossible to definitively outline his movements in war. The Tasmanian War Index describes the positioning of the 12th Battalion in detail, and combined with Hubert's army service records, a rough idea of his location can be collated.

Hubert left Melbourne on the HMAT A34 Persic on 22 December 1916, alongside many other Tasmanians. He spent two months onboard, with just a brief stop at Cape Town, South Africa in February 1917. The ships used to transport soldiers were often converted from meat and wool carrier ships, "hurriedly fitted with mess tables and hammocks, until their lower decks looked like huge crowded barrack rooms" (Charles Bean, 1941). With cramped and boring conditions, soldiers would have looked forward to disembarking the ship, not fully understanding the horrors that awaited them.



Figure 1: HMAT Persic

After two months at sea, Hubert and the 23rd reinforcement, alongside several other battalions, eagerly disembarked the Persic in Devonport, England. From here, the soldiers were taken to training camps across the country, including Durrington Camp. Figure 2: Durrington - Durrington and Lark Hill Camps, Salisbury Plain postcard c1914

It was several months of training and a short stint in hospital with mumps before Hubert finally made it to the frontline in France, nearly a year after he enlisted.

Hubert arrived on the Western Front on 21 October 1917, and spent the following 387 days fighting across France and Belgium. The main fighting Hubert was part of occurred at Hill 60 in March 1918, Meteren in April 1918, and Jeancourt in September 1918.

Hubert was part of C Company of the 12th Battalion, which was predominately behind the front lines, acting as reserve or lookout. Backline work was nevertheless hard and dangerous; stray shells often fell while the men were working, and medical assistance was not always readily available in quieter areas. The battalion was often used as manual labour to improve trenches (which flooded frequently), repair communication wires, and act as reserves for other battalions.

On 19 April 1918, the 12th Battalion relieved a French regiment opposite the village of Meteren. Before arriving at Meteren, soldiers had been briefed at headquarters. They were provided with an interpreter which allowed the exchange of maps and information “The French commander was most particular to explain the whole of his sector, drawing a number of plans to clear up points not clear on our maps” (Tasmania’s War Index).



Figure 3: Ruins of Meteren. 19 July 1918

However, whilst in the field, there was no interpreter. This made it almost impossible for the 12th to communicate with the French regiment. One company commander from the 12th reported that he was “Absolutely tickled to death; he [French commander] can’t speak English, I can’t speak French, so there you are. I know as much now as when I started. Everything O.K.”. Despite the lack of information, the 12th worked to reinforce and improve trenches whilst experiencing heavy sniping. When Meteren came under German attack, the 12th were ready, having already set up positions to make the village impenetrable. Australian casualties were low, whilst numerous German prisoners and machine guns were captured. This was one of the bigger battles Hubert fought in. At the end of the war Méteren was nothing but a field of ruins, even the roads were obliterated. Occupied by the British for much of the war, the village fell into German hands on 9 April 1918 during the fierce fighting of the Battle of the Lys but was retaken by the Allies on 19 July.

Hubert’s war service, while undoubtedly courageous, was relatively uneventful. His army records portray him as a well behaved soldier, with no disciplinary records of being absent without leave, or causing trouble. He passed relatively under the radar.

Following the signing of the Armistice in 1918, battalions were disbanded, and Australian soldiers started to head home. However, repatriating hundreds of thousands of men back to Australia would take time. General Monash enforced that soldiers should return in the order they came: those who had served the longest would

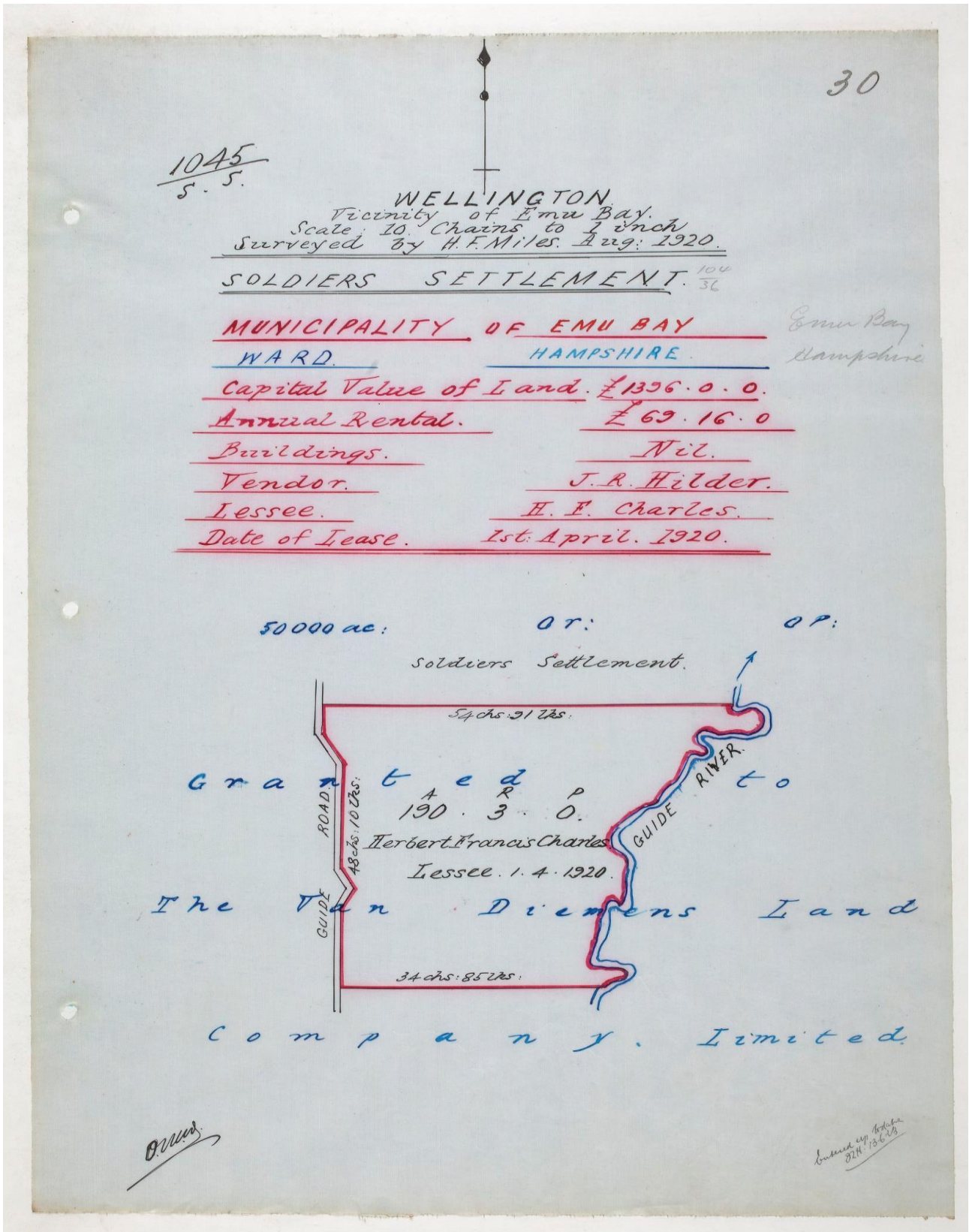
go home first. Those who were not immediately leaving for home were given leave, and either found apprenticeships, returned to the front to assist the cleanup, or went travelling. The AIF created an educational system, which incorporated a “range of education and lecture programs to train personnel in peacetime occupation skills” (Australian War Memorial). This program was very popular, however not detailed in army records. Limited repatriation records are held by the National Archives of Australia, however this does not cover Tasmanians. Hubert was given leave from his battalion in December 1918, however due to a lack of records, it is impossible to determine how he spent the following year. Whatever he did for a year wasn’t enticing enough to stay abroad forever as some soldiers did. Hubert eventually found his way home to Tasmania, disembarked the *Euripides* in October 1919, and was discharged from the army on the 15th December that year. Although the war was over, the years of travelling and fighting had an impact on Hubert, in both positive and negative ways.

Upon his return from war, Hubert applied for a Soldier Settlement Grant. These grants were administered by the State Government, to ensure returning soldiers had a home and source of income, in recognition of the sacrifices they had made. Hubert was granted a block in West Ridgley, in the north of the state, which allowed him to have his own land to do as he wished. Coming from a background as a labourer, without the war Hubert may have never been able to afford to have his own land. The war had taken much from him, but it did grant him land and a place to work. Following this, Hubert married Amy Huett in 1930, and together had seven children, all of whom were raised on the block in West Ridgley.



Hubert & Amy (Huett) Charles with Sarah Huett & John (Jack) Coppin

Another lingering impact of the war was the difficulties Hubert faced in gaining his war pension. His enlistment papers recorded him as Herbert, rather than Hubert, a simple clerical error. However, this meant all his army records are under the wrong name. On his return from war, he was refused his pension several times, as he was listed as Herbert, but all his other identification listed him as Hubert. This meant money was tight in the years following the war, as Hubert and his new family never got the pension he deserved.



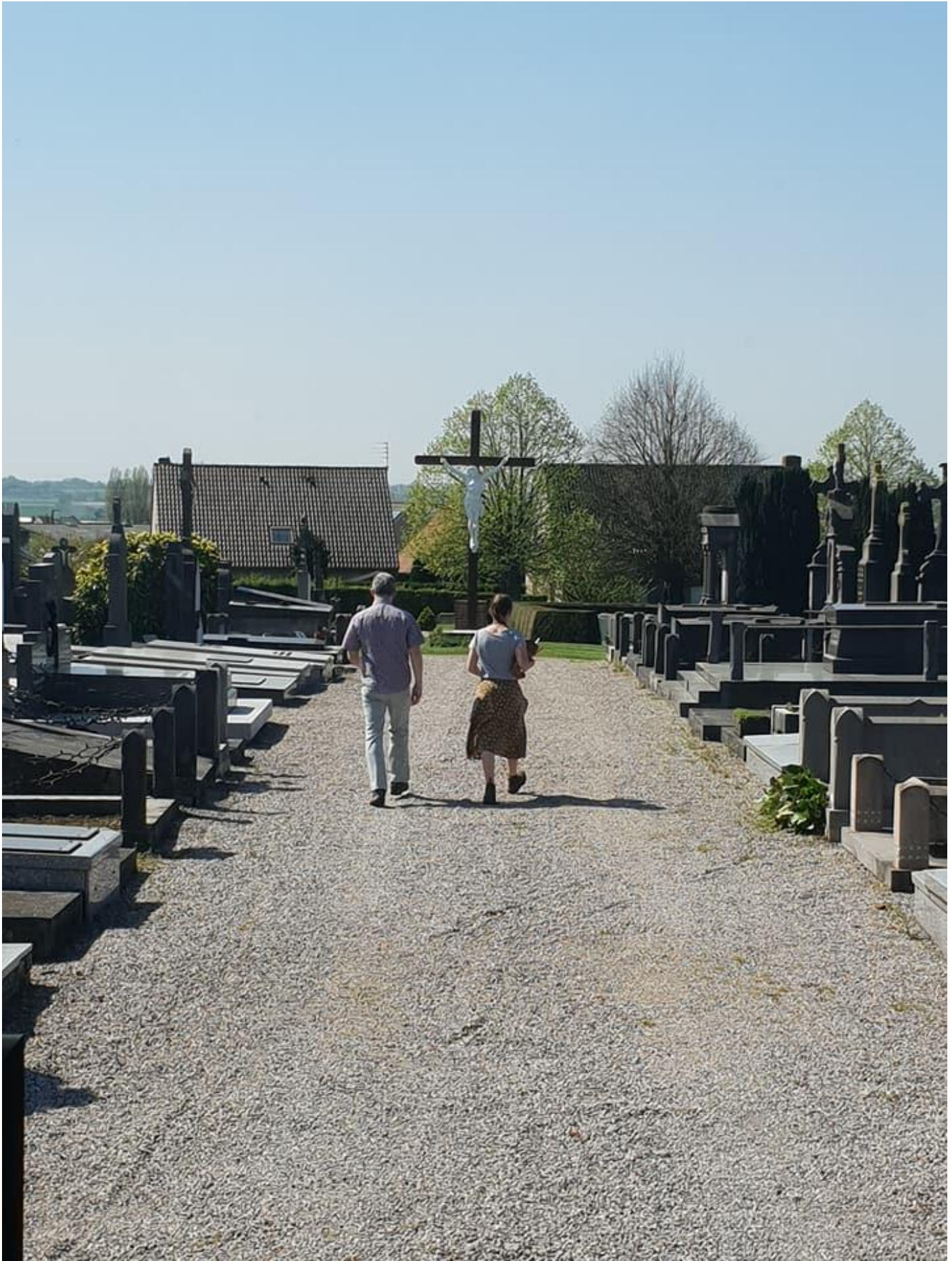


The most well-known stories of WWI are those soldiers who are highly decorated and acclaimed, but Hubert represents the majority of soldiers, of whom returned home with scars in the place of medals. It is his life that stands as a reminder to look for the unnoticed and forgotten stories. Of those soldiers who may not have won a medal or died at the front, but still signed their name to go fight on the other side of the world, which is more than many people would ever do.

By Macy Charles









JOURNEY TO WAR



22/12/16
Hubert departs Melbourne
on the A34 Persic

3/3/17
Hubert arrives in England
and begins training

10/11/17
Hubert is taken on strength
by the 12th Battalion in
France

25/1/18
12th Battalion rested.
Enjoyed a belated
Xmas dinner

24/12/17
Hubert faces his first
real fighting at
Messines, France

12/3/18
Brief fighting at Hill 60,
Hubert experiences
gassing for the first time

March 1918
Germans advance into
French farming land, leaving
12th Battalion with fresh
meat and milk



19/4/18
12th Battalion relieves
a French regiment in
Méteren

June 1918
12th Battalion rested
following an outbreak
of Spanish Influenza



15/12/18
Hubert placed on leave
following the armistice,
however he did not
return to Australia until
September 1919

23/9/18
Last official battle for
the 12th Battalion
takes place at
St Quentin Canal

18/9/18
Successful battle at
Jeancourt with many
German machine guns
captured