

1842 Bombardier Lindsay Ernest Barrett
101 Howitzer Battery

Artillery is a vital component to any infantry attack. Failure of the guns to achieve and neutralise their targets, will cost their infantry cousins dearly and to a Gunner, that is inexcusable.....

Lindsay Barrett was a young grazier from Frances, South Australia. He was born on the Binnum Estate on the 18th of July 1897 (1). A bright young lad and a hard worker, he was destined to carve a better life out for himself and his family. He had a strong ally and mentor in his half-brother and mate, George Hamstone. The pair had plans for land and cattle of their own and whilst still contributing to providing financial support to their family, they saved every spare penny to go towards their future (2).

With the onset of war, Lindsay was keen to enlist, as he knew that a steady income from his Army pay was more than he'd make on the land and the extra money could make things a lot easier on the home front. He allotted three shillings a day from his pay to George (3), so as to look after the family and whatever was left over, would go into their kitty.

Following his enlistment on the 11th of January 1916, 21 year old Lindsay was allocated to the 13th Reinforcements of the 3rd Light Horse Regiment (1). The 3rd was a mixed lot of horsemen from South Australia and Tasmania and the regiment was in desperate need of reinforcements, following their losses at Gallipoli.

Arriving in the staging camps of Egypt, Lindsay found himself in stirring times. The AIF was growing and new units were being formed for action on the battlefields of France and Belgium. Volunteers were being called for to fill positions in the Pioneers, the Machine Gunners and even the newly formed Cyclist Battalion. But the one that appealed to Lindsay the most was the Artillery, to which he transferred on the 15th of May 1916 (1).

Lindsay was initially posted to the Artillery Details, which was encamped at the old Egyptian battlefields of Tel el Kibir. In late May 1916, Lindsay and his Gunner mates broke camp and entrained for the nearby port of Alexandria. Boarding the darkened troopship 'Corsican'(1), they prepared to run the U Boat threat across the Mediterranean. It was only after they cast off, they learnt that they were not bound for France, instead they were headed England, where specialist artillery training awaited.

Lindsay and his mates were introduced to the new 4.5 inch howitzers. Unlike their field gun counterparts, the howitzers can fire their deadly projectiles both at high and low angles of elevation. This enabled a howitzer battery to engage targets which may be sheltering behind the relative safety of hills, villages and other features. This added a dynamic dimension, to artillery warfare on the battlefield. The Gunners looked at the howitzers with awe and respect and couldn't wait until they could pit themselves against the might of the German Army.

As their training progressed 1916 gave way to 1917 and in March the best of the Gunner trainees were sent to the 116th Howitzer Battery, which was preparing to deploy to France. Lindsay was one of those chosen to fill the ranks (1).

On arrival to the battlefield, Lindsay was again reposted. This time to the 101st Howitzer Battery, which was part of the 1st Field Artillery Brigade (FAB) (4). 1 FAB was a veteran artillery formation, having formed and deployed in 1914. They served with distinction at Gallipoli and had given a great account of themselves in France but the enemy had taken their toll on the ranks of the brigade and now they were in desperate need of rest, refitting and most of all reinforcements. However, the rest and refit would have to wait, as the infantry were about to make their first assault against the seemingly impregnable 'Hindenburg Line', a string of heavily fortified villages, redoubts and pillboxes, occupying key terrain and protected by belt upon belt of barbed wire in some places up to hundreds of metres in depth.

The Brigade's - 1st, 2nd and 3rd Field Battery's moved into the line near Vaux Lagnicourt, whilst the 101st Howitzer Battery deployed to the hotbed of the Noreuil Valley. 1 FAB were in-depth as their sister formation, the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade (2 FAB) were deployed to their front. The other batteries were scattered on a narrow frontage which saw the guns dangerously forward, whilst the infantry and machine gunners of the 1st Australian Division were busily digging in on the forward lines but unfortunately scattered far too thinly across a 12,000 yard front.

This was to be Lindsay Barrett's first exposure to combat. He felt confident in his training and he knew he could depend on his mates around him. But this was the German Army he now faced. Before him were seasoned troops with years of combat experience behind them. Only a fool would not feel some form of trepidation as to what may lie ahead and Lindsay was no fool.

On the 11th of April the main attack was launched by the Diggers of the 4th Australian Division, between the fortified villages of Queant and Bullecourt. Although they fought valiantly they were crippled in the assault by the lack of bombs, ammunition and the failure of the supporting tanks to reach the objectives. Inaccurate reports were reaching the divisional artillery headquarters and the one group commander, ordered the guns to suspend firing. Without fire support the Germans soon took the upper hand. The Diggers were forced to withdraw leaving behind hundreds of dead, wounded and stranded troops, who were stuck within the seemingly impenetrable maze of belt after belt of intact enemy barbed wire. The only fire support came from 101 Howitzer Battery when it's Battery Commander, Major J.C. Selmes, went against orders and covered the withdrawal with lifesaving fire.

With the major allied assault beaten, the enemy turned it's attentions towards the nearby areas around the village of Lagnicourt and the Noreuil Valley. It was here that the Hun felt they could counter strike, deliver a savage blow and then roll the allied flank.

The 1st Division's scattered defence, across such a broad frontage, left severe gaps within the line. Additionally their positions were under direct observation from the entrenched enemy occupying a significant component of the Hindenburg Line. On the 15th of April, the enemy launched its attack. Catching the infantry unawares the enemy were able to breach the forward positions and strike deep into the Australian support lines. The infantry were forced to retire, so as to try and reform and prepare for counter attack of their own. But the guns were now vulnerable and the detachments of the 1st and 2nd Field Artillery Brigades were also forced to withdraw, temporarily abandoning their beloved guns (5). But not before they carried off the breach blocks and dial sights (6), thus making them unusable to the enemy. Only the 101st Howitzer Battery remained intact and held onto their guns, with the enemy a scant 400 yards to their front. Major Selmes was able to secure a half

infantry company to provide protection to the battery, thus allowing him to keep firing in order to break up the German attack (7).

Lindsay and his mates kept up, a steady volume of fire onto the depth positions of the advancing enemy. The gunners needed to be mindful, not to fire directly upon the unmanned Australian guns. Shortly, they would be needed to be back in action, once the infantry counterattack could secure them back into allied hands.

The enemy troops marvelled at their prize of overrunning the artillery positions and started rattling through the gunner's kit, looking for food, valuables and souvenirs. This gave our infantry enough time to reorganise themselves and prepare to hit back and retrieve the guns.

The Australian infantry quickly reorganised themselves, they advanced with a hasty, yet savage counter attack, hell bent on recapturing the guns and driving the enemy back. With tenacity, the Diggers started to get the upper hand and pushed forward along the valley floor. The Australian machine gunners were able to seize the higher ground and bring their remaining Vickers guns to bear on the retiring enemy forces. The infantry cleared through the gun positions and reclaimed possession of the guns. The gunners quickly brought them back into action and started to also engage the fleeing enemy (8).

As the battle petered out and the firing subsided, Lindsay was able to take stock on what he'd just experienced. The smouldering cartridge cases were piled high alongside the guns and a low distasteful cloud of cordite hovered low over the battery. The horses and limbers of the Divisional Ammunition Column raced onto the position, delivering a fresh supply of ammunition lest the Germans may be foolish enough to try and seize the guns again. He knew that he'd given a good account for himself but there was work to be done, then he could rest.

In mid-July 1917, the 101st Howitzer Battery were redeployed to Belgium and were locked in a savage action, in the defence of the strategic town of Ypres. The battery was tactically attached to the 73rd Heavy Artillery Group, who were engaged in deadly counter battery (CB) operations. CB was basically artillery duelling between the opposing sides. As battery's engaged in support of an attack or defensive action, specially selected opposing battery's would rain fire down upon them, intent of destroying the guns, ammunition and detachments, thus denying the frontline troops of their much needed fire support. To be on the receiving end of a concentrated artillery barrage by heavy calibre guns was indescribable. Lindsay was engaged in manning his gun as it fired in support of the infantry when suddenly he heard the shrill screaming of incoming rounds from Counter Battery fire. The earth erupted around him, blazing hot steel splinters from the exploding rounds, slashed through men, horses, stores and equipment with a savage ferocity.

Lindsay screamed as a red hot splinter slammed into his leg. Jamming his thumb into the wound to try and stem the flow of blood, he crawled towards the corner of the gun pit in a vain attempt to seek shelter. As the enemy fire subsided and shifted to a new target, the call went out across the 101st gun position - 'Stretcher Bearers – Stretcher Bearers'.

Lindsay's wound was serious enough to warrant hospitalisation (1) and the luxury of a three week break from the carnage of front line life.

In October the battery was in action along the infamous feature dubbed ANZAC Ridge. Lindsay was temporarily promoted to Bombardier on the 23rd of October (1) and took over as second in command of Number 5 Gun. On the morning of the 26th of October the battery was firing in support of our attacking infantry. The enemy counter battery fire was extremely heavy but the Aussie gunners, stuck to the task and continued to fire in support of their infantry mates.

Suddenly an enemy round exploded between Numbers 5 and Number 6 guns, killing or wounding both of detachments, except for Lindsay who was unscathed. Realising that the loss of the two guns firepower would cause a serious gap in the barrage, Lindsay took to continuing to lay, load and fire his gun singlehanded. For the next 10-15 minutes and under extremely heavy fire from enemy artillery, Lindsay did the work of an entire detachment but his efforts kept the effects of the rolling barrage generally intact. As new information was relayed to the remaining guns, so as to cover the lack of fire, Lindsay was ordered to tend to his wounded mates.

For his actions that day, Lindsay Barrett was recommended for the Victoria Cross (9). As the recommendation progressed through the chain of command, it was relegated to the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Lindsay remained with the battery through the winter of 1917-1918 and fought through the savage German onslaught of early 1918, following the collapse of Russia. He was also on hand when nearly 200 officers, NCO's and men who'd enlisted in 1914, were sent on six months furlough back to Australia. This gutted the Brigade but the younger men like Lindsay, were more than ready to accept the responsibilities of both rank and position. By late October 1918, the Battery was taken out of the line for a well-earned rest. It had been in almost constant action for the past 15 months straight. But the break came too late for Lindsay, as during a heavy enemy counter battery bombardment earlier in the month, he was heavily gassed (1).

He was invalided to England for specialist treatment to counter the severe effects of the Mustard Gas but for Lindsay, the war was over. In the first two weeks of November, he enjoyed leave in London and the surrounding districts, and then on the 11th of November at 1100 hours, the country erupted with the unbelievable news – Armistice.

In the lead up to Christmas 1918, Lindsay boarded the troopship bound for home. The authorities felt that the full exposure of another European Winter, could be deadly for him given his condition and he arrived back in Australia on Valentine's Day, 1919. The returning soldiers received the thanks and welcome of the people at large with stirring speeches, cakes, cups of tea and handshakes. Lindsay looked at the small engraved gold fob, which was given to him by the townsfolk as a mark of respect. As the local parliamentarian waffled on and on the words did not reach Lindsay's ears, instead he thought of his mates, lying beneath the cold, stark earth of France and Belgium. It was only then he snapped back into reality realising that he'd clutched the fob so tightly, that he almost drew blood. Then he turned and silently walked into the darkness and headed for home.

After a mere six weeks leave, he was medically discharged from the AIF, still suffering the effects of gas, the shrapnel and other unseen wounds. Returning to life on the land was not a smooth transition for Lindsay. He missed the war and the closeness of mates, the knife edge excitement and most of all, the thrill of danger. He confided in his mate George but he too was restless and yearning to see the world and so later in life, he simply walked away from the farm and family and was never heard of again (2).

Lindsay felt that perhaps married life would provide him with a purpose and a reason to settle. He wooed a young lass Vera and the pair soon became a couple, marrying in August 1927 (10). One child, soon led to two and two to three. But Lindsay was still not happy. He tried a number of jobs but nothing seemed to satisfy him. He yearned for the rugged bush life, which was not for the family.

The South Australian Rail Network was expanding and Lindsay saw an opportunity to supply timber for the sleepers. This was an ideal solution for Lindsay. The long periods in the bush, felling and shaping timber, coupled with the closeness and 'devil may care' attitude of hard working men in the camps, was refreshing. When required, he made visits home to see Vera and the kids, in nearby Bordertown. These home visits also added to the expansion of the Barrett family, which was soon approaching double figures.

With the onset of the Second World War, Lindsay now 48 years old, again offered his services to his country, enlisting in the militia in June 1942 (11). He was posted to the 4th Australian Garrison Battalion and detached to the Loveday Internment Camp. The main roles of the prisoners was the growing of opium poppies, used for making morphine and other duties and work on nearby farms and properties.

Lindsay was still able to get home on a regular basis with child number 11, a fine young boy Daryel born in June 1945.

Lindsay's Second World War service ended on the 16th of November 1945, after serving 1247 days of effective service. Lindsay again had trouble settling and following the end of the war. Long periods away, combined with the challenges of providing for such a large family finally led to the inevitable break down in Barrett marriage.

Lindsay drifted further and further away from his family and visits became scarcer and scarcer. The children grew, matured and married, carving out their own lives and ambitions. Eventually Lindsay remarried, this time to a lady by the name of May and they resided in Murray Bridge in relative peace for their remaining years (2).

But the Barrett family was not yet finished with war. Daryel, the youngest of the brood, was now 21 and selected for National Service as an infantryman, where he served a tour of duty in Vietnam in 1966-67 with the 5th Battalion, The Royal Australian Regiment (12). He was a good soldier, just like his father was a good soldier and had felt the sting of battle. Returning home, Daryel thought long and hard about making peace with his father – basically as one combat veteran to another. But unfortunately, time ran out before they could meet, as Lindsay passed away on the 18th of September 1967 and today he lays at rest in Murray Bridge Cemetery (9).

One overriding mystery that haunted the Barrett family for over 30 years was the whereabouts of Lindsay's medals, including his coveted DCM. Daryel's wife Julia and their daughter were enthralled with researching the family history but even after 12 years of painstaking research, they could still not uncover the location of the medals. Unfortunately, Daryel Barrett passed away with the mystery of the medals still unanswered (2).

Then suddenly, out of the blue, a British auction house made contact with the Barrett's, indicating that Lindsay's medals and gold fob, were coming up for auction and would they be interested in

bidding for the items. It was like a dream come true for the family but they had to face the stark reality, that a number of hard core collectors were also showing interest in the group. On the day of auction Daryel's widow Julia, their two children and their families primed themselves to make their bids, via the phone hook up to England. The issue was always in doubt and the spirited bidding was fierce but ultimately, it came down to the final two bids and then finally the successful bid (2).

Lindsay's medals are now safe and whereabouts established.

Major (rtd) Darryl Kelly

Notes

1. National Achieves of Australia: B2445, WW1 Service Records, 1842 SGT L.E. Barrett
2. Interview with the Barrett Family
3. AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Rolls, 3rd Light Horse Regiment, 1914-1918 War
4. War Service Record of the First Australian Field Artillery Brigade 1914-1919
5. Defence of the gun position by the gunners was hampered by the fact that the equipment establishment of the day, only allowed 10 rifles per battery. Most of these rifles were located in the wagon lines, as opposed to the gun line.
6. The Gunners, A History of Australian Artillery, David Horner, Allen & Unwin 1995, Page 143
7. AWM 4- Australian Imperial Force, Unit War Diaries, 1914-18 War, Item Number 13/29/29. Headquarters 1st Australian Artillery Brigade, April 1917
8. By mid-afternoon 31 of the 42 guns temporarily captured by the Germans, were back in in Australian hands and in action. Seven guns had been destroyed by enemy artillery fire.
9. AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914-1918 War, 1842 SGT L.E. Barrett
10. Genealogy South Australia - Births, Deaths and Marriages
11. National Achieves of Australia: B884, WW2 Service Records, S1729 PTE L.E. Barrett
12. Department of Veterans Affairs, Nominal Roll of Vietnam Veterans – 4717870 D.L. Barrett