

The Life and Times of Claud Castleton VC **compiled by Christopher J. Brooks, B.Sc.**

with kind acknowledgements to:

*Suffolk Record Office at Lowestoft Library re: Morton Road School Logbook,
Mary Hunt and Paul McDonough of Christians Together in Lowestoft & District
for records and research from the Australian War Memorial,
Julie Durrant of Ormiston Denes Academy for research paper supplied,
Mary Naylor, a distant relation for genealogical information supplied,
G. A. Michael Sims for copy of 1911 census certificate of Claud's family,
and various contributors of WWI websites on Egypt, Gallipoli and the Somme.*

Claud Charles Castleton was born on 12th April 1893 at 5 Morton Road, Kirkley, South Lowestoft at a time when South Lowestoft was rapidly expanding due to the success of the fishing industry of the town. Soon after his birth, a new school for Kirkley was proposed to be built at Morton Road and he duly entered the infants class, a year after its opening, on 25th October 1897.

Claud's father was Thomas Charles Castleton (1867-1944), a bricklayer / builder by trade, who lived in Carlton Colville in 1881. Claud's mother was Edith Lucy Castleton (nee Payne) (1868-1923) born at Bishops Stortford, Herts. Thomas and Edith married on 4th September 1887 at Christ Church, Lowestoft, living at first at 62 Whapload Road before moving to 5 Morton Road by 1891. They had moved to Rose Cottage, 18 Wilson Road by 1901 and Thomas died at his next home 20 Rochester Road in 1944.

Claud had an elder brother, Frank William Castleton, who was a law clerk living at home according to the 1911 census, and who later became Town Clerk of Folkestone in Kent. Frank married Lily Elizabeth Shanks (1886-1930) in 1919 at Depwade, Norfolk and they had a daughter, Dorothy Helen Elizabeth Castleton, born in 1925, living at 7 West View, Canterbury Road, Folkestone. There are many branches of the Castleton family tree and any living relative today would have to trace back their ancestry to any brother or cousin of Thomas Castleton, Claud's father or further back to the father of Thomas.

Claud obtained a scholarship from Morton Road School to the Municipal Secondary School at Yarmouth Road, Lowestoft, 2nd August 1905 and five years later qualified by gaining third class honours in the Senior Cambridge local examination. He became a Student Teacher back at Morton Road on 1st September 1910, where he served for a year as log book references indicate, followed by a year teaching at London Road School. During his time at Morton Road, he taught groups of children, was inspected in Arithmetic, won the Student Teacher handicap race in a schools' swimming gala at South Lowestoft sea water baths and accompanied children to the launching of the Pakefield Lifeboat 'The James Leath' at Pakefield Cliffs and to Lowestoft harbour for the fun and festivities held there for the coronation of King George Fifth.

In 1912, at the age of 19, Claud emigrated to Australia and three years later wrote back to his old school and a press report stated: Always fond of the open air, a keen nature student, it is no wonder that he sought later on the free life of Australasia in the orchards of Tasmania, the uplands of New South Wales, the sugar plantations of Queensland, and the wilds of New Guinea. He wrote to his old Head Master Mr John Munnings:- "You will see that I am a machine gunner in the Australian Forces, I was for some time in New Guinea prospecting for gold, but when war broke out I joined the forces formed there for the defence of the Wireless Station. I was in command of an outpost of Native Police until the German warships in these waters having been accounted for, I came down to Sydney to join the Forces there."

Claud enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force Infantry taking the oath on 10th March 1915 at Liverpool, Sydney, NSW in the presence of an attesting officer and receiving his identity number 1352.

The oath declared:

I, ... Claud Charles Castleton ... swear that I will well and truly serve our Sovereign Lord the King in the Australian Imperial Force from ... 10 – 3 – 16 ... until the end of the War, and a further period of four months thereafter unless sooner lawfully discharged, dismissed, or removed therefrom; and that I will resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's peace to be kept and maintained; and that I will in all matters appertaining to my service, faithfully discharge my duty according to law.

SO HELP ME GOD

(Sgd) ... C. Castleton ...
Signature of Person Enlisted

After some initial training in New South Wales, Claud was sent to Egypt in June 1915 embarking on HMT Act 40 'Ceramic' for Egypt via the Suez Canal. Upon arrival at Alexandria, Claud had another short period of training, probably at Tel-el-Kabir Camp used in 1915-1916 for Australian troops and located about 40km east of Ismailia. During the Gallipoli landings and the Sinai and Palestine Campaign of the First World War, Tel-el-Kebir was a training centre for the First Australian Imperial Force reinforcements, No 2 Australian Stationary Hospital, and also a site of a large prisoner of war camp. Some 40,000 Australians camped in a small tent city at Tel-el-Kebir of six miles in length. A military railway was eventually constructed to take troops from the camp to their vessels in Alexandria and elsewhere for embarkation to Gallipoli landings.

Claud eventually proceeded by ship to Gallipoli, landing at Anzac Cove 16th August 1915 with the 18th Battalion and took part in the attack on Hill 60 on 22nd August 1915. The Battle of Hill 60, conducted by Anzac commander William Birdwood, was designed to support General Henry de Beauvoir de Lisle's far larger attack at Scimitar Hill on the same day in what comprised the final British attack against the Turks of the Ottoman Empire at Gallipoli. Both attacks were intended as a last-ditch Allied attempt to break northwards out of the difficult restricted beachhead at Anzac Cove and link up with the Allied force sited at Suvla Bay. Hill 60 - named, as was often the case with such features during the war, after its height in metres (although referred to as Kaiajik Aghyl by the Turks) - was the sole prominent feature sited between Anzac Cove and Suvla Bay. Its possession was therefore a stated Allied aim and its capture would provide for safer communications between the two Allied sectors.

Unfortunately Birdwood's available force was much diminished - due to dysentery, exhaustion and battle casualties - and he could only muster some 3,000 troops for deployment under Cox. As was the case during an earlier attempt to capture the Sari Bair ridge from Anzac Cove on 6th August, reconnaissance proved highly problematic owing to the effectiveness of Turkish sniping. Nevertheless Cox attacked the hill's western slopes across a shallow valley on the evening of 21 August without notable gain, meanwhile suffering heavy casualties from Turkish flank machine gun fire. Renewed attacks the following morning in which Claud Castleton participated similarly failed.

At dawn on the 22nd August, though inexperienced, 18th Battalion was led through the dark to Damakjelic Bair for an attack on a vital communication trench on Hill 60. The attack was to be made by the infantry with hand grenades and bayonet only. When it was revealed the battalion had no bombs they were told to 'do the best that was possible without them'. At 5.00 am the battalion charged the 150 yards to the enemy trench, taking it with little resistance, but any respite was short-lived. Enemy counter-attacks soon came, and were resisted by using bombs found abandoned by the Turks in the newly won trench. This, however, gained only enough time to tear sandbags from the parapet to build defensive barricades. Ultimately the attack on Hill 60 failed though a tenuous corridor had been opened between the troops at Anzac and Suvla Bay.

Of the 750 troops of the 18th Battalion involved on the 22nd August there were over 380 casualties, half of them killed. Claud Castleton survived the attack but was evacuated with dysentery by the Hospital Ship HMT 'Nevaska' from Anzac Cove on 15th September to Alexandria. After treatment at No 1 Auxiliary Hospital Heliopolis admitted on 19th September, he went to No 4 Auxiliary Hospital Abbassia on 27th September and transferred to Helowan NZ and A. Convalescent Hospital in the canal zone from where he was discharged for duty on 22nd October.

Claud was taken to Alexandria from where he embarked for Gallipoli once more on HMT 'Royal George' on 8th November. He was promoted to Corporal by the C.O. 18th battalion on 1st January 1916 and despite having reported for duty for Gallipoli on 8th December, he never made it to Gallipoli a second time and was instead placed on the supernumerary list at the staging post of Mudros base, Lemnos, Greece because Gallipoli was by then being evacuated of Allied troops.

The Gallipoli campaign had failed to end Turkish participation in the war and Allied troops were finally evacuated by January 1916 after suffering 214,000 losses. The stated aims of the Allied expedition in Gallipoli was for the purpose of gaining control of the Dardanelles and Bosphorus straits, capturing Constantinople and opening a Black Sea supply route to Russia but were never realised and a humiliating retreat and evacuation took place.

Following the evacuation of Gallipoli in December 1915 and January 1916, the Anzac forces were soon transferred from Lemnos to Egypt as this was the only place where they could be properly refitted, rested and reorganised for duty on the western front, and by which time many of the reinforcements, including the 5th/22nd were now waiting for them. A new site had been chosen for them in Egypt at Tel-el-Kabir, 30 miles due west of the central part of the Suez Canal and a few miles east of the eastern edge of the lowlands of the Nile delta. The location was strategic not just for the encampment of a large reserve to protect the Canal, but to provide a vast training area and reservoir of troops to be provided for other theatres such as Europe. A secondary benefit was that a distance of 70 miles from Cairo it would remove the problem of indiscipline faced when the troops were based much closer at the original Mena Camp of 1914, plus it protected the soldiers from the known dangers of Cairo.

At first the troops arriving at Tel-el-Kabir would have to sleep under their transport wagons or water-proof sheets, but were soon housed in a spacious tented camp. The 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions were located here, whereas the Australian and New Zealand Division were located at Moascar near Ismailia and the canal. Every day two per cent in each unit were given two days leave in Cairo. Overstaying of leave was fairly common, but an acceptance by the men to take the fine or punishment and the officers knowing their men's willingness to fight had not been affected meant that this situation was pretty much tolerated. Claud stayed on at Mudros till embarking for Alexandria on 9th January and was transferred to Ismailia desert hospital 28th January 1916 with Malaria. On February 17th 1916 Claud was discharged once more for duty from Ismailia hospital to become temporary Sergeant at Mount Kembla camp and taken on strength at Moascar YMCA Isolation Camp on 8th March. This camp served to eliminate the rapid spread of contagious diseases such as measles etc that could decimate subsequent life in the trenches.

Claud proceeded to join the B.E.F. at Alexandria on 17th March 1916, disembarking at Marseilles from there 23rd March 1916. On 16th June 1916 Claud Castleton was promoted to Sergeant in France when he transferred to the 5th Australian Machine-Gun Company, 5th Brigade, 2nd Division. Australian troops from Egypt were transported by train northwards across France towards the western front and, held at staging posts were eventually placed into position in the trenches, many of which were on the low lying slopes of the Somme valley with the German trenches having been dug beforehand on the higher ground with deep tunnels unbeknown to the Allied Command cut into the chalk for listening positions under the British lines. For Claud however, the slopes probably never seemed as steep as the battleground at Gallipoli on Hill 60 though the flatter no-man's land between the trenches was exceedingly dangerous.

On 20th July, as part of the Fifth Brigade, Fifth Machine Gun Company were moved to Warloy-Baillon, west of Pozieres, in preparation for an assault on Pozieres heights by the Australian 2nd Division. The turn of the Australian Force came in the Battle of Pozieres Ridge, a lesser attack of the Somme offensive, from 23rd July to 7th August, where British and Australian troops fought the Germans for control of the Ridge, a place of strategic importance. Apart from the capture of Pozieres village by the 1st Australian Division of the Reserve Army, the only British success of the allied fiasco of 22nd/23rd July, the rest were a series of separate attacks hampered by poor communications, supply failures and bad weather. German artillery bombardments and counter attacks began on 23rd July and continued till 7th August. The fighting ended with the Reserve Army taking the plateau north and

east of the village, overlooking the fortified village of Thiepval to the rear but Claud did not survive to see this objective accomplished.

Poizieres, though successfully taken at great cost by the 1st division on 23rd July, was under constant bombardment and observation by the Germans who were still in control of a commanding position on the ridge overlooking the town. 5th Brigade moved to the front line, relieving 3rd Brigade on the 25th July. With the stark reality of trench-life to live through Castleton and his comrades could only wait and prepare themselves for their part of the Somme assault that was to come. Late on the evening of 27th July, the 5th Brigade was moved forward in an ill-planned and ultimately futile assault on the Old German trenches 1 and 2 between the Bapaume Road and Munster Alley. Preparations were made in full view of the Germans who constantly lit the area with flares, doubling their efforts as allied units moved into position. This was accompanied by an escalating heavy artillery bombardment and withering machine gun fire. Even before the jump-off time of 12:15am on the morning of the 28th July was reached it was clear that the assault had failed. The fire from the enemy positions kept the allied units pinned down, unable to proceed or withdraw.

Shortly before dawn on 28th July the German bombardment eased enough for the units to withdraw but the wounded, unable to move, were left lying in shell holes in no-man's land. Seeing and hearing this, and of his own volition, Claud Castleton bravely crawled back out into no-man's land on two separate occasions to bring back wounded men to the relative safety of the trench. When he went out a third time to bring back another one of his wounded comrades, he was himself hit in the back by enemy fire and died instantly. His body was recovered and respectfully buried nearby behind the lines by comrades in his brigade. Initially recorded as being buried 'between Poizieres and Bazentin-le-Grand-petit, 4 and 3 quarter miles N.E. of Albert', Claud's remains were later re-interred in plot 4 Row L, Grave 43 of the Poizieres British Cemetery at Ovillers-la-Boiselle.

The recommendation for the award of VC reads:

"For conspicuous gallantry and bravery on the night of the 28/7/16 N.E. of Poizieres when the infantry made an attack on the German Trench.

During the attack on the enemy trench the infantry were temporarily driven back owing to intense machine gun fire. Many wounded were left lying in shell holes in No Man's Land.

Whilst No Man's Land was still under intense M.G. and shrapnel fire, Sgt. Castleton went out and twice brought in wounded men on his back; a third time he went out and was bringing back his third wounded man when he was hit in the back and killed instantly."

Claud Castleton's V.C. citation in the London Gazette, No 29765 dated 26th September 1916 reads: "For most conspicuous bravery. During an attack on the enemy's trenches, the infantry was temporarily driven back by the intense machine gun fire opened by the enemy. Many wounded men were left in "No Man's Land" lying in shell holes. Serjt. Castleton went out twice in face of this intense fire and each time brought in a wounded man on his back. He went out a third time and was bringing in another wounded man when he was himself hit in the back and killed instantly.

He set a splendid example of courage and self-sacrifice."

Following the issue of the Gazette with this news a local article was penned including these eye-witness words from a previous letter from the trenches to his parents by a former comrade in arms:

..."We were helping to hold a first line of trenches when our infantrymen made an attack on the enemy. As may be expected, we had some casualties. Claud, knowing some of our wounded men to be out in "No Man's Land", could not resist going to their assistance. Amidst shrapnel and heavy machine gun fire, rifle fire, and gas, he leaped out, and had rescued two wounded men, and was in the act of bringing in the third, when, to our sorrow, he was hit by either rifle or machine-gun fire. First-aid men went to his assistance immediately, but could do no good: he had done his last. We gave him a decent burial behind our front line, erecting a small cross with his name, number etc over his grave. His name will stand for ever amongst the officers and men of his company, and also with the infantrymen and officers to whom we were attached. His name is being mentioned by all, for not only is it on this

occasion that we have found him a leader, but at Gallipoli, after losing an officer and sergeant, we looked to Claud as our leader, and from then, up to the time of his death, we were ready to follow him anywhere, having confidence in him as a leader of true British spirit, and we know how difficult it will be for a man of his ability to be replaced. You have the deepest sympathy of all the boys of our section."

His Victoria Cross was awarded posthumously to his father by King George Fifth at Buckingham Palace on 29th November 1916 and was proudly taken back to his old school at Morton Road the next day for all pupils to see and admire as an entry in the school log book confirms. The medal was kept by the family for many years until it was ultimately given in 1988 for display in the National Collection at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra where Castleton Crescent is named in his honour.

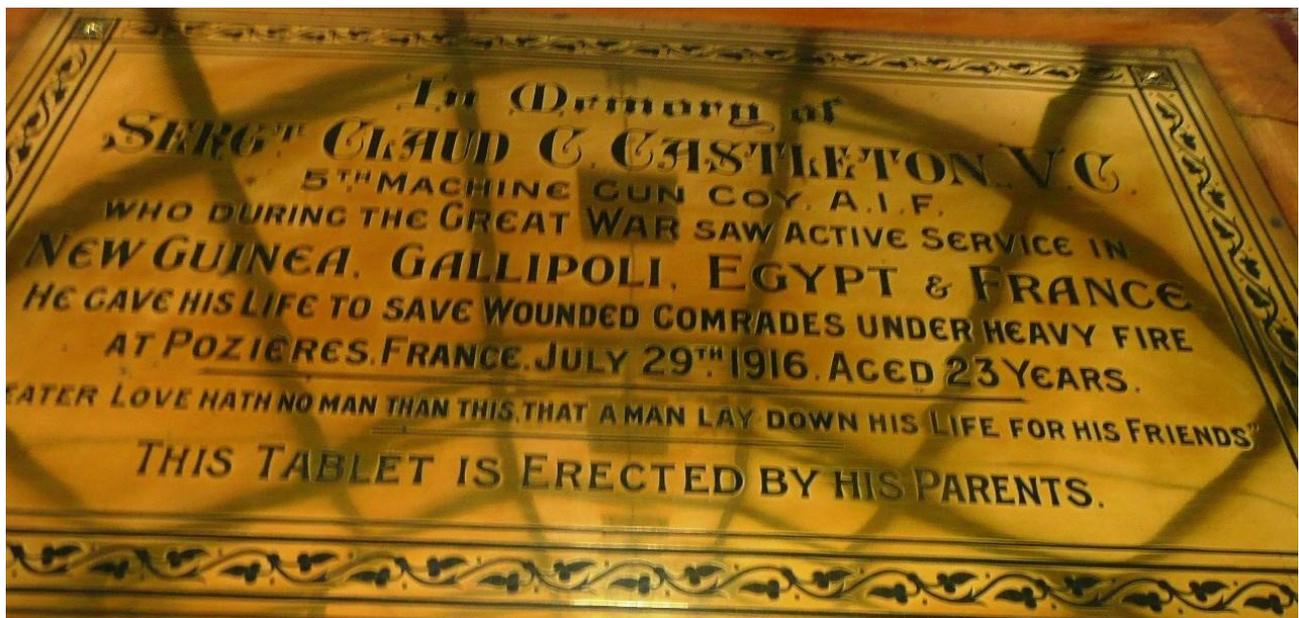
While Lowestoft Borough authorities decided not to proceed with a separate memorial to the town's first V.C. hero and to wait until after the war to honour all the town's heroes with a fitting public memorial, Claud's parents had a fine bronze tablet inscribed to his memory. Being members of the Congregational Church known as South Cliff, Morton Road, they had it installed and dedicated in that building. The plaque remains there today, though the building is now the church of St. Nicholas in the Lowestoft Catholic Parish of Our Lady Star of the Sea and the memorial will be featured in the centenary commemoration service being planned there at 7 pm on the 29th July 2016.

There appears to be a discrepancy in the interpretation of the date of death that does not fit with the attack details given. It appears from records of the ill-fated attack that Claud actually died in the twilight around dawn on the 28th July but the wording of the recommendation stated the night (not the early hours of the morning) of the 28th July. However, we shall honour him according to official Australian interpretation of the 29th July as this is the date given in records of the Graves Registration Units (Exhumation) at Pozieres British Cemetery and on his gravestone, and of the date given to his parents and on the tablet they had commissioned.

The tablet's inscription reads:

In Memory of
SERGT. CLAUD C. CASTLETON, V.C.
5th MACHINE GUN COY, A.I.F.
WHO DURING THE GREAT WAR SAW ACTIVE SERVICE IN
NEW GUINEA, GALLIPOLI, EGYPT & FRANCE
HE GAVE HIS LIFE TO SAVE WOUNDED COMRADES UNDER HEAVY FIRE
AT POZIERES, FRANCE, JULY 29TH 1916, AGED 23 YEARS.

"GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN THAN THIS, THAT A MAN LAY DOWN HIS LIFE FOR HIS FRIENDS"
THIS TABLET IS ERECTED BY HIS PARENTS



Records show that Claud's only surviving effects were a bible and three handkerchiefs which were returned from the AIF Kit Store to his father Thomas who acknowledged receipt of them on April 25th 1917. In May 1917 Claud's parents Thomas and Edith made a war pensions claim, the result of the claim being they were assessed as having adequate means and £10 each had received was a present. This was later amended on January 18th 1918 when each parent was granted a war pension of 5 shillings per fortnight back-dated to 30th July 1916 by F. Savage, the Deputy Commissioner of Pensions at Australia House, Strand, London W. C. 2.