

THE 2ND TUNNELLING COMPANY IN THE AFFAIR AT NIEUPOORT

The story of the 1st Division and the tunnellers is a short one. The sandbagged trenches had given little protection from the bombardment, and the infantry losses had been very severe; the Germans easily overran the position. The Australians and attached working parties in the tunnels were fairly secure, except where tunnels were broken in by *minenwerfer* shells; indeed, for some of these the first evidence of the attack was the non-arrival of reliefs to dig them out. Recognising then that they were cut off, Lieutenant **W. M. Mortensen** and Corporal **M. G. Dunn** with a dozen men in one of the tunnels barricaded the gallery and held out until dawn next morning, when the exhaustion of the air and its pollution by German smoke-bombs thrown from the sap-head forced them to surrender. In one of the tunnelled communication trenches, which served as headquarters of the left battalion, a number of British officers and men under Captain Smith of the 2nd Bn. King's Royal Rifles offered some resistance to Germans who penetrated thither, Sapper **C. G. McGlinchey** playing a leading part. Another tunneller, Sapper **P. Minogue** fought the Germans with his rifle until wounded through thigh, abdomen, and ankle.

It was largely the survivors of this party who escaped across the river. As some could not swim, two Australians, Sappers **T. F. Burke**



A sandbagged trench leading to the entrance of a tunnel (background, left). During June and July 1917 the 2nd Australian Tunnelling Company, attached to the 1st British Division, were engaged in constructing the defensive works in the Nieuport area. Note a group of unidentified soldiers standing outside the entrance to the tunnel.

had been destroyed and most of the infantrymen decided to surrender, but the four Australians and two of their British comrades asked the others to give them ten minutes start before putting up the white flag. Though they were bombed by the Germans and Birrell was wounded, the six reached the river, but Germans followed them and, having no weapons, they were captured. Of 50 tunnellers beyond the river, only Lieutenant **E. P. Hargraves** and the three men already mentioned escaped.

The company lost only one man killed; 4 officers and 3 others were wounded. 1 officer and 41 others were missing - a few of these were wounded.

Official History of WW1, C.E.W. Bean, pp 963-964

Our research has identified some of the Tunnellers who were captured at Nieuport on

M.M. and **J. Coade M.M.**, KIA 9 April 18., obtained a rope. Burke swam across with it and Coade remained to hold it taut while the non-swimmers escaped, and then followed them [McGlinchey, trying to escape at 1 a.m., ran into Germans and was captured]. Of necessity the wounded were left; but when a party of Germans was seen working round the river bank, and it was explained to those in shelter that it was a case of swim or be captured, an Australian, Sapper **J. O'Connell D.C.M.**, who lay there bandaged after fighting with bombs and being wounded and burnt with a *flammenwerfer*, to the surprise of everyone, stood up. He made his way across part of a broken bridge, and then swam across. As he climbed out he heard a British soldier in the water calling for help. He at once swam out again, brought the man in, and then fainted. Sergeant **F. Birrell** and three other Australians, Sappers **J. O'Neill**, **T. O'Neill**, and **L. G. Hinds**, and a British working party, trapped by the falling in of a tunnel, dug themselves out by next morning only to find Germans in their rear. Their rifles



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Back Row L – R: Spr Scotland; Cpl Bertenshaw; unidentified; Spr A.R. Walker; unidentified; 1395 Spr T.A. Walker; unidentified; Spr J. Fleming; unidentified (behind, head only); 4086 Spr T.A. Treeby; Spr R. Fleming (behind Connell); unidentified; Major Mulligan (right top with cane)
Front L – R: Spr Eckersly; unidentified; Spr Healy; Spr V. Schepenski; Spr G. Watson; unidentified; unidentified; 618 Spr

10-Jul-17. The Red Cross section of the AWM website contains some interesting insights into their period in captivity.

Brief details of those we have identified are:

		Returned to England		
478	Sgt	ANGUS, Charles Henry	8-Dec-18	
492	Spr	BIRRELL, Frederick	8-Dec-18	
515	Spr	COCHRANE, Donald James	23-Dec-18	
543	Cpl	DUNN, Martin George	8-Dec-18	
578	Spr	HALFPENNY, Joseph Leonard	9-Dec-18	
629	Spr	LEWIS, John Henry		
647	Spr	MATHESON, Archibald John	23-Dec-18	
652	Spr	MORTESON, Andrew	30-Dec-18	brother 4405 H. Morteson, 3ATC
715	Spr	THRING, Frederick Davey	23-Dec-18	
790	Spr	MINSLOW, James Ambrose	30-Dec-18	
1407	Spr	BELL, James Foster	30-Dec-18	
2830	Spr	McGLINCHEY, Charles Garfield		
3988	Spr	MINOGUE, Patrick	20-Jan-18	wounded in abdomen
4011	Spr	BAXTER, John Henry		
4013	Spr	FINCH, Michael Henry	30-Dec-18	
4083	Spr	CRITTENDEN, William Alexander	23-Dec-18	
4108	Spr	MORTON, Howard Francis	30-Dec-18	
4138	2/Cpl	WILLIAMS, Henry Albert Turngrove	31-Dec-18	
4139	Spr	DAVEY, Frederick Clarke	30-Dec-18	
4764	Spr	HINDS, Lyle Gordon	23-Dec-18	
4778	Spr	MIDDAP, John Kevin	23-Dec-18	brother 4777 J H Middap, 2ATC
3491A	Spr	BROWN, Frederick	30-Dec-18	
5167	Cpl	NEILSEN, Clair Christian	Died while POW 16-Nov-18	
5281	Spr	BERRY, Cyril		
5347	Spr	HERRICK, Joseph Michael	30-Dec-18	
5392	Spr	O'NEILL, John	30-Dec-18	brother 5393 T O'Neil, 2ATC
5393	Spr	O'NEILL, Thomas	30-Dec-18	brother 5392 J O'Neill, 2ATC
5347	Spr	WIEDMER, John	19-Jan-19	
5640	Spr	VOISEY, Edward	23-Dec-18	
5745	Spr	GREEN, Tom	23-Dec-18	
	Lt	MORTENSEN, Walter Mayfield	02-Jan-18	
6851	Spr	WITHERS, Alfred John	23-Dec-18	

The men were held in POW camps at Limburg, Dulman, Hammelburg, Lechfield, Bayrenth, Munster, Hemelin, Friedrichsfeld, Sagan, Munchenburg, Karlsruhe and Augustabad.

Also known to be involved in the Nieuport Affair were:

	2/Lt	HARGREAVES, Ernest Phillip		
2442	Spr	COADE, John	MM	KIA 9-Apr-18
2432	Spr	O'CONNELL, James	DCM (recommended VC)	
747	Spr	BOURKE, James William		

5401 Spr *PARTRIDGE, Lancelot Wilfred Peyton*

2441 Spr BURKE, Thomas Francis



Nieuport-Bains, 13 November 1917 - Two unidentified members of the 2nd Australian Tunnelling Company fitting up bunks in the tunnels under the dunes near the Belgian coast. The unit was at the time attached to British troops operating in this sector.



November 1917 - Two unidentified members of the 2nd Australian Tunnelling Company working by candlelight on a tunnel. A few months earlier the company, attached to the 1st British Division defending the area, was engaged in constructing defensive works in the Nieuport-Bains sector.