

Alexis Harry Victor Anderson in France 1918



On the 21st of March 1918 Germany commenced the Spring Offensive. The collapse of Russia, because of the revolution, had allowed Germany to shift troops from the Eastern to the Western Front. In the Western Front they now out-numbered the Allies. They saw this as their last chance to secure Europe. The Americans had just entered the war and the Germans hoped to strike a decisive blow before significant U.S. forces arrived.

A new form of warfare was used. Previous attacks had been characterised by a long artillery bombardment then a massed assault. In the Spring Offensive the artillery bombardment was only brief before the enemy lines were infiltrated by crack troops, subsequently nick named "stormtroopers". They targeted selected weak points such as command and logistics areas but avoided points of serious resistance. The strong points of resistance were then isolated and dealt with later by the main force following on. German success relied greatly on the element of surprise.

Vic embarked on the ship Maunganui on the 21st of November 1917 and arrived in Liverpool on the 7th of January 1918. His Battalion was stationed at Sling camp before leaving for France on the 23rd or 24th of March 1918, two days after the Spring Offensive started. They left by boat from Folkstone in England. He was part of the 30th reinforcement draft and with the 2nd Otago Battalion of the New Zealand Division. He was not allowed to say in his letters where he was, but he indicated that "some say France some say Belgium, not far from either". He would have been in Abeele, a town where one side of the main street is in France and the other in Belgium. This was the staging point for newly arrived New Zealand troops in France at that time.

On the 4th of April he was in a dugout with Bill Arthur from Amberley, Fred Clarke from Tinwald and Mick Foster from Linwood.

The Germans were advancing rapidly at this time in what is known as the Battle of the Lys. On the 10th of April they overwhelmed battle worn British and Portuguese forces and took the village of Estaires.

About that time Vic reported that they had moved. First a four-mile march, then a light rail trip and another four-mile walk with full packs. He was sleeping in a tent that night.

The war history reports that on the 12th April, Vic's Battalion was rushed at very short notice from Abeele to the village of Meteren, close to Estaires. They travelled partly by busses and partly by forced marches. The roads were very crowded with refugees. At Meteren they established positions behind and at the sides of the village and awaited the German advance.



British gas casualties at Estaires.

On the 16th April the Germans attacked Meteren. The British and some New Zealand defenders to the left of the village had withdrawn overnight. Vic's group was also to withdraw but not given the message till daybreak. By then they were under attack. The Germans had found undefended part and were able to pour straight through, turn and surround Vic's group. Vic's group defended valiantly till they ran out of ammunition and had to concede to demands to surrender. Three platoons, about 210 men were taken prisoner on that day, 16th April 1918.

The prisoners were marched to Steenwerck, about 9 km away and then a similar distance to Estaires. This was the town the Germans had taken only a few days earlier.

Their eventual destination was the infamous Fort McDonald on the outskirts of Lille. This place was described as the "black hole of Lille" and had "dungeons". Prisoners were not well treated. It was said that the Germans used this camp to "soften up" the prisoners before sending them to work. Vic was there until the middle of June 1918.

After this he was sent to the towns of Haubourdin, Loos, and Santes and worked in ammunition dumps unloading shells from trains. These towns were all close to the front line.

There were only two brief communications from Vic at this time. They were both sent from Kriegsgefangenensendung, Stammlager, Friedrichsfeld. Kriegsgefangenensendung is translated as "prisoner of war", Stammlager, means "main camp" and Friedrichsfeld is a village near Mannheim in Germany. He was not actually there but apparently this address had to be put on correspondence from prisoners even though they were located at other prisoner of war camps and places in the vicinity.

In mid-August 1918 Vic was shifted back from Santes to Loos with other prisoners. He was reported as "run down" and suffering from recurrent boils. He was soon sent to a prisoner of war hospital in Tournai in Belgium about 30 kilometres away.

In late September 1918 another prisoner returning from the hospital to work at Loos reported that Vic was a "bed case".

On the 30th of October 1918 Vic was shifted 150 Kms from the hospital at Tournai to another prisoner of war field hospital at Tienen near Liege, but still in German occupied Belgium.

He died there the next day at 10.30 PM, 31st October 1918. The hospital note said the cause of death was "tubercle of the lung".

He was buried at Robermont Cemetery in Liege, some 50 kilometres away.



Official History of the Otago Regiment, N.Z.E.F. in the Great War 1914-1918

The New Zealand Division 1916 - 1919: A Popular History based on Official Records
Col. H. Stewart Whitcombe and Tombs Limited, 1921