

Arthur William Houstoun Lang, ANMEF, RANBT, 4th FAB

Angus Lang, Sydney, NSW

Arthur William Houstoun Lang (Bill) was born in Sydney on 1st January 1894, Sydney. He was the second of three children to Scottish emigrant William Lang and his wife Florence (nee Woodham). The family lived in Mosman and Bill attended Fort St. Boys High, Sydney from 1906 until 1910. His mother died shortly after his 16th birthday and he commenced three years compulsory military service with the Royal Australian Naval Reserve (O) and the Royal Australian Naval Brigade.

Upon the outbreak of the war Bill's records show he was assigned to "Shore Service" at the Naval Depot Sydney until 15th August 1914. The following day he enlisted in the Australian Naval and Military Expedition Force (ANMEF) and was recorded as being 5'6" tall with fair hair and blue eyes and listed as part of Reserve "C". Two days later the ANMEF left the Naval Depot at Rushcutters Bay for Garden Is. and embarked on the steamer HMAS Berrima (ex P&O Company), sailing out of Sydney on 19th August en route to Rabaul via Brisbane and Port Moresby "for operations against the German New Guinea colonies. Troops were landed at Herbertshöhe and Rabaul on 11 and 12 September respectively, and on the New Guinea mainland on 24 September ... taking possession of German New Guinea and the neighbouring islands of the Bismarck Archipelago in October 1914." AWM website

The ANMEF returned to Australia in January 1915 and Bill was discharged in March, "engagement expired – Very good character and satisfactory ability". On 11th March he enlisted as No 72 in the Royal Australian Naval Bridging Train (RANBT), which had been formed in February, as an Able Bodied Driver. His personal description states his religion as C of E and occupation as Clerk with knowledge of both riding and driving horses and slight German language. His last employer was Fuhrmann Troost & Co P/L, Sydney (in liquidation). He was absent from early morning parade on 31st April and awarded three days extra duty (drill). On 12th May, Bill and forty-four other ratings and Lt. L.S.Bracegirdle arrived from Sydney at the RANBT camp in the Melbourne Domain Gardens.



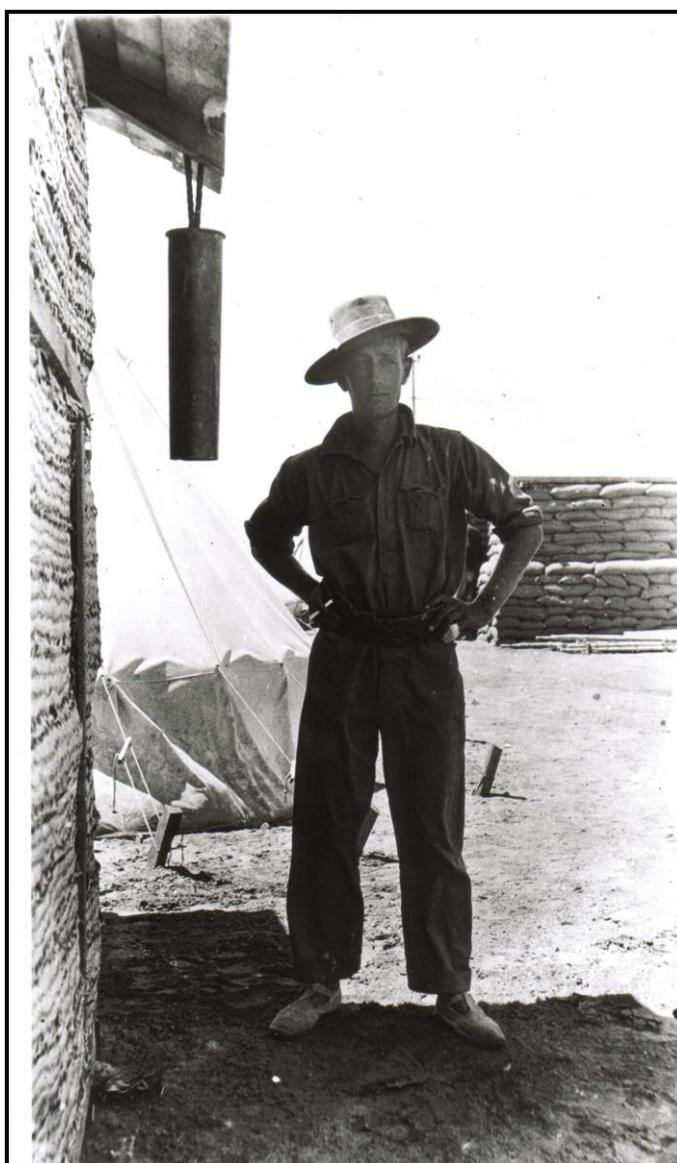
"1/6/1915 - Members of 1st RANBT who have served in New Guinea"
Bill Lang standing on far left

A detailed account of the role of the RANBT from 1915 -1917 can be found in Part Two of First In, Last Out The Navy at Gallipoli Frame, TR and Swinden, GJ 1990. The Bridging Train continued its training in Melbourne over the next weeks in preparation for its departure overseas. Training was often difficult due to a shortage of both equipment and horses and a lack of skill, as sailors and horses became acquainted with each other. The RANBT paraded through the streets of Melbourne on 29th May, broke camp at the Domain on 3rd June and sailed out of Port Phillip Bay aboard the troopship *Port Macquarie* on 4th June. The ship sailed via Colombo, Bombay, Port Suez, Port Said and Mudros, finally arriving in Imbros on 21st July. Conditions on board had been far from ideal for the men and the over 400 horses due to rough seas, cramped conditions and the heat of the tropics. The horses were offloaded in Bombay but not before many had died.

According to the RANBT War Diary, the Bridging Train arrived at Suvla Bay on 8th August and "*landed ... under shrapnel fire on beach*". Bill served with the unit at Gallipoli until the evacuation in December. The Bridging Train went into camp at Mudros and Bill was absent from early morning parade on New Year's Eve, earning three days extra duty. Whilst at Mudros, a pay dispute led to a "mutiny" by some of the men whereby they refused to go on parade on the 13th January. The 189 men, including Bill, were placed under arrest and it was not until some three weeks later that the situation was resolved and the charges dropped. In the meantime the unit had moved to Ismailia and spent the next year of the war working on the Suez Canal.

A Mosman reunion of sorts occurred on 11th February 1916 at Suez when WJA Allsop (No.6777 8th Aust Field Amb.) recorded in his diary that the "*Naval Bridging Train arrived.... Surprise in evening when Bill Lang and Beech (close family friend No.7975 Neville Beech or his brother No.3 George Beech) from Brighton called on me.*"

They may have crossed paths again on 12th March as WJA Allsop records that he visited "*Ismailia and met Bill who was working within 100 yards of where I had to go.*" At the time Bill Lang was stationed at Ismailia.



Photograph of Bill Lang in Egypt circa 1916 - 17 developed from negative found among personal papers.

In April 1916 Bill was promoted to Leading Seaman and in March 1917, with the news the Bridging Train was to be disbanded, he transferred to the AIF along with other members of the RANBT, joining the artillery with the rank of Bombardier. From the details camp at Moascar, where he spent a week in hospital, they moved to Alexandria and sailed as 'Unallotted Artillery' aboard *HMT Saxon* to Marseilles and on to England arriving at the Artillery School at Larkhill on 5th June. After four months training, Bill was granted leave though apparently not enough as he overstayed his leave by four days and was severely reprimanded and forfeited five days pay. On the 1st October he was certified as a Gun Layer for the 4.5" Howitzer and proceeded to Southampton and France arriving at Rouelles on 5th October.



On 7th December Bill was transferred to 104th Howitzer Battery, 4thFAB, which was camped at Saily at rest, training and reorganising after four months in the line on the Ypres front. The 4 FAB was comprised of the 10th, 11th and 12th Batteries, each with six 18 lb guns and the 104th Howitzer Battery with six 4.5" Howitzers. The 104th Howitzer Battery strength was – 6 officers, 177 other ranks, 36 riders, 50 horses, 86 mules (10th, 11th and 12th Batteries each had 121 horses, no mules), and 6 bicycles.

The Brigade continued training and playing inter-Brigade football matches throughout December until returning to action in the Ploegsteert Sector, Messines on the 21st December. Christmas Day in the cold and snow of Belgium must have seemed a world away from the deserts of Egypt. The 4FAB War Diary records:

"No special programme of shooting was carried out & as regards the front, Xmas Day was no different from other days. In the Brigade arrangements were made for an extra good dinner for the men. Money was obtained from Canteen profits & poultry, pigs etc. were purchased. This was by far the best Xmas spent since the Bde left Australia in 1915."

The Brigade maintained a programme of harassing fire and shooting at observed movement and centres of activity in the area until the end of January.

The 104th was back in action in the Messines area throughout March as the German Spring Offensive commenced and Bill would have had his first experience with Mustard gas. The War Diary of the RMO 4FAB records:

"Gas used evidently Mustard gas with Phosgene... Gas remained in dense form for nearly 24 hours...word received from 10th Battery that a number of personnel were suffering from bad headaches, tongues black, birds dying in neighbourhood, also worms found dead around shell

holes... evidently it was lingering round shell holes in the vicinity ... Officers quarters at 104th Bty are some depth below ground, 3 exits to same, but ventilation is poor and atmosphere is damp... There seems no practical solution to the ventilation problem so officers advised to remain above ground in the sun as much as possible."

In April the 2 Div moved to the Somme and the 104th moved to the wagon lines at Baizeux and the gun pits at Labieville. From the gun pits at Ribemont, the 4FAB contributed to the barrage that accompanied the 6th Infantry Bde assault on Ville-sur-Ancre on 19th May, where the 104th laid down part of the smoke screen. July saw the batteries move to the gun pits at Villers Brettoneux in readiness for the Battle of Amiens of 8th August.

The 104th contributed to the massive artillery barrage that marked the beginning of the Big Push as a fellow member of the 104th, Gunner FG Anderson (10230) recalls:

"In the early hours of this morning we were at our posts, ready, and whilst awaiting zero time, the silence that fell along the whole front was indeed wonderful, rather uncanny as a matter of fact, giving one the impression that something terrible was to happen - then at 4.20 whistles blew and like clockwork thousands of guns opened fire hammering the German lines. The effect of the lighting along the whole front as the guns fired was a sight never to be forgotten, the noise was just a deafening roar, a barrage that had not been witnessed on any part of the front during the whole of the war, such as this was. What a tremendous shock the Germans must have received and let me say also what courage they had to stand up to the bombardment, for they retaliated, though feebly in comparison with our barrage. For several hours our guns fired incessantly ... we realised the result of the attack when in silence we advanced for miles, the enemy being in full retreat, having left guns, wagons, ammunition, in fact everything behind him. Only a few hours ago we were firing over Villers Brettoneux and had now passed through this village in silence. We marched on to 5.9 Gully...we were passing through country now with hardly a shell hole to be seen anywhere, quite different to where we came from."

Over the next weeks as the infantry advanced, so too did the artillery and the battery was in action at 5.9 Gully, Harbonnieres, Framerville, Vauxvillers and Cappy. On 30th August the 104th arrived at the gun pits at the Somme River where the advance had stalled. As Bean notes:

"...the 2nd Division could not cross the Somme at Clery owing to the presence of Germans immediately east of the village ... Many Germans were then in that area and the fact that all parties of Australians crossing the valley behind Clery were heavily shelled - as were the riverside road and all rear slopes - indicated that they had observers looking down that valley"

"...the pause in the infantry's attack was less noticeable because of the aggression of the supporting guns. The 5th Infantry Brigade had been given the 4th Brigade AFA, and, Feuilleres bridge having been repaired sufficiently for guns to cross, about 3pm the 11th and 12th Batteries did so and took position on the riverside west of Clery, being attached to the 17th and 20th Battalions. South of the river the 10th and 104th Batteries of the same brigade were pushed into a dip on the high ground in the Somme angle. The observers of all four had a splendid view; if the German shell-fire along the riverside, especially at Clery, was this day memorable, still more so, say the infantry's records, was the sight of the Germans harried from spur to spur and trench to trench by British shells." Bean C.E.W Vol VI p801 - 808

Gunner Anderson recorded in his diary that: *"It was here that we met Fritz again. There was no doubt a good kick left in the Germans as things became very lively there."*

The following day, 31st August, the Brigade provided artillery support to the infantry attacking Mont St Quentin.

"On the night of the 30th/31st, at a conference, targets in the form of concentrations lifting eastward at the rate of 100 yards each minute and a half were allotted to the Group by the CRA in support of a further advance by the 5th A.I. Brigade to take MONT. ST. QUENTIN, zero hour being fixed at 5.30am. ... 11th and 12th Batteries were again instructed to maintain close liaison with the Northern Infantry Battalions, moving forward if necessary." 4FAB War Diary

"The attack would start at 5am. The artillery would not attempt a creeping barrage but would bombard a line of obviously important positions well ahead of the troops, lifting its fire after half an hour to a second line (the summit, Bapaume Road, and Uber Alles Trench) and half an hour later

to a third, beyond the objective; there the bombardment would remain for half an hour to protect consolidation." Bean C.E.W Vol VI p809

"At 5, as the dark sky began to lighten, the barrage fell nearly a mile ahead. It was a great bombardment, five brigades of field artillery concentrating their fire on a 2,500 yards' arc at Gottlieb Trench low on the Mount while four brigades of heavies pounded the summit and targets on the flanks ... The density was roughly a field-gun to every 25 yards of the line first barraged, and about half that in the later stages ... The field artillery brigades supporting the 5th Aust Infantry Brigade were (from north to south): 4th AFA Bde (Lt-Col CA Callaghan) ... The rate of fire throughout was 2 rounds per gun per minute for field-guns and 1 for howitzers."

"The 20th Battalion, which knew that numbers of the enemy were in the area between itself and the barrage ... saw, across the valley, dawn breaking behind the Mount and against it the fumes and dull flashes of big shell bursts." Bean C.E.W Vol VI p810 - 811

"Throughout the morning of the 31st harassing fire and area shoots were placed on targets causing trouble to our attacking infantry. Information was then received that the capture of MONT ST.QUENTIN had not been completed and the 6th A.I.Brigade would move through the 5th A.I.Brigade at 6am on the morning of the 1st." 4FAB War Diary

Later in the day the 104th were directed to proceed across the river and move their guns to Clery.
"At 9.15 the 2nd Division had advised Gen Hobbs to send part of the (14th) brigade by the Buscourt bridge, and the whole was now directed thither. It crossed between 2.30 and 6. After it came the last two batteries of the 4th AFA Brigade (10th and 104th Batteries)" Bean C.E.W Vol VI p822

"...the 10th and 104th Batteries were moved across the River and instructed to take up positions in that vicinity." 4FAB War Diary

"... as the 14th and 7th Brigades approached Clery word came from their reconnoitring officers that the ground beyond the bend was crowded with troops ... The triangular flat was under German machine-gun fire. Most of the 14th Brigade and half the 7th now squeezed themselves among the others under the steep banks of the knoll and the river. Beside them barked batteries of the 4th AFA Brigade. Prisoners and wounded streamed through. Cookers steamed with the evening meal. Geysers spouted from the pounded marshes." Bean C.E.W Vol VI p823

Gunner Anderson describes this harrowing experience in his diary:

"After leaving Somme River we came to the village of Clery, by name only then, as one could see no sign of a building anywhere, just a mass of wreckage. Whilst passing through this village we had the liveliest time experienced in the war. We rode through at the gallop, shells and shrapnel bursting continuously, our horses were just as scared as we were, an awful ordeal it was and the one place I will always remember. It took some manoeuvring to get through as the road was blocked with debris, men, horses, guns and wagons strewn everywhere. Shells were bursting almost at our feet and how lucky we were to get through that dreadful barrage, an experience which I never want to go through again"

That night, as the Brigade was still in action east of Clery, preparations were made for the barrage next morning:

"The CRA, at a conference, allotted the Group targets in the form of Group concentrations in support of the attack by the 6th A.I.Brigade at 6am on the morning of the 1st in the process of passing through the 5th A.I.Brigade to take MONT ST.QUENTIN." 4FAB War Diary

"The present position of the front being obscure, the artillery would, as on the 31st, merely lay a heavy bombardment on important targets ahead of the attack, lifting after half an hour to a line of farther targets and half an hour later to still more distant ones ... The 6th Brigade would be supported by the 2nd Div Artillery...the rates of fire, were for the 2nd Div's attack the same as on Aug 31... the bombardments would begin at 5.30, the 2nd Div's lasting till 7 am and the 5th's till 8.30." Bean C.E.W Vol VI p832

On the 1st September the battle continued:

"Progress was made by the Infantry up to a certain point by 10am but the capture of MONT ST. QUENTIN was not complete. Intermittent fire was then placed by the Group on the village and Mount from 10am to 1pm, the Heavies also assisting.

Between 1pm and 1.30pm, intense fire was brought to bear on the objective and our infantry moved forward and captured same between 1.30pm and 2pm.

*A considerable amount of ammunition was expended throughout the afternoon in assisting our infantry in straightening out the various portions of the line; protective fire in the form of area shoots "*4FAB War Diary

Bean states:

"Mont St. Quentin had now been firmly captured ... the artillery moving up to the western slope of Clery ridge was so worn out with continuous firing, changing position, or ammunition carrying, that sleeping men fell from the limbers as they drove." Bean C.E.W Vol VI p845

"Monash had asked a great deal from his tired troops. He now intended to pause for a day while he advanced more guns, and then to put the 7th Brigade through on Mont St Quentin... The 2nd Australian Division would form a flank for (the 74th Div, III Corps) and the 5th Division would complete the capture of its former objective, Peronne and the hills east and south of it."

"Not enough guns were yet forward to provide a thick barrage, but the batteries, as before, would shell important targets ahead, lifting to farther ones at stated times. Each battery shot along its own 'lane' ... the artillery supporting the attacks was the same as on Sep 1..." Bean C.E.W Vol VI p854 – 856

*"Instructions were received to attend a conference at 7th A.I. Brigade Headquarters, this Brigade being instructed to pass through the 6th A.I. Brigade at 5.30am on the morning of the 2nd and occupy a line along the high ground from MONT. ST. QUENTIN ... The targets for the Group for this operation were allotted by the CRA at a conference and the 4th Aust. F.A. Brigade were instructed to move forward as the situation cleared on the left in close support of the left flank of the attacking Infantry Brigade. "*4FAB War Diary

On 2nd September the 104th moved from Clery to the gun pits at Mont St Quentin, remaining there until late on the 4th when the Brigade withdrew to the billeting area around Cappy. The 4FAB then spent a week resting and cleaning, repairing and polishing equipment. A sports day was held before the Brigade marched out to the wagon lines at Buire Wood.

On 13th September, as new battery positions were being established, Bill was wounded when a shell exploded very close by, killing his horse. He received severe shrapnel wounds to his left foot, left wrist and right forearm and was treated by 1st Aust. Field Ambulance at Buire and evacuated. He was admitted to 6 General Hospital at Rouen and then invalided to England. He remained in hospital until mid December and was granted leave over Christmas and New Year. Bill returned to Australia in January 1919 aboard *HMAT Delta* and was admitted to the ship's hospital en route with influenza and pneumonia. He survived the flu and arrived back in Australia in March and was discharged from the AIF in July 1919 having spent five years travelling the world in the service of his country.

After the War, Bill returned to the UK in 1924 and undertook a course at Leeds University in textiles and wool. He met his future wife on the return voyage to Australia and then worked as a wool buyer purchasing wool for firms in France, Belgium and Europe.

Like most, Bill rarely spoke of his experiences at war though he refused to ever fire a gun again. He was troubled by his wounds throughout his life, the wound to his right forearm severed the ulnar nerve and he had a habit of rubbing the little finger and palm of his right hand with his left hand. However he was troubled most by the influenza that left him with recurring and chronic bronchitis and he was prone to chest infections and developed emphysema. In 1968 Bill suffered a stroke, was hospitalised and developed bronchopneumonia and died on 25th November at the age of 74.