

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

Lieutenant Samuel Raymond THURNHILL, MC

(1890-1916)

Raymond Thurnhill joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on 14 September 1914 in Perth, Western Australia, as a gunner (3328) and reinforcement for the 3rd Field Artillery Brigade (3rd FAB). He sailed for Alexandria on HMAT A30 "Borda" on 22 December and rejoined 3rd FAB, after a short stint in the 1st Australian Division Ammunition Column, on 28 February 1915.

Thurnhill was born in Manchester, England, in 1890, and migrated to Western Australia two years before enlisting to become a farmer in a partnership of three on a farm called "Pendle" at Doodenanning. He was 24 years old, single, weighed 67 kilograms, was 176 centimeters tall, Church of England, and had no previous military service. His Next of Kin was his father who resided in Penwortham, Preston, England.

He joined the Mediterranean Expeditionary Force (MEF) on 4 April 1915 but there is no record of when he landed at Anzac Cove. However, he was a gun number in 7th Battery, 3rd FAB, and was wounded while so serving on 11 August. Assuming he went ashore with 7th Battery, he would have landed on 26 or 27 April serving on the guns using direct fire to break up Turkish attacks with some Turks falling as close as 20 meters from the muzzles. The other possibility is that he landed with 8th Battery (commanded by Major Bessell-Browne) a few days later and would have had the same experience.

After being wounded by shellfire in the left ear he was evacuated to Malta for treatment and convalescence before returning to Egypt on 20 January 1916, after the evacuation of Gallipoli, to rejoin 3rd FAB.

He disembarked Marseilles on 28 March 1916 and entrained for the Western Front. Meanwhile, on 4 March, he had been transferred to the 2nd Brigade Ammunition Column and promoted 2nd Lieutenant on 12 March. Thereafter, it was back to the guns with 6th Battery, 2nd FAB (commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Bessell-Browne), on 15 May and he was promoted to Lieutenant on 13 June. At this time the 1st Australian Division, of which his unit was part, occupied a quiet sector of the front line around Armentieres learning the skills of trench warfare.

After the Somme Offensive faltered, Thurnhill accompanied his unit as it moved south to take over front line positions on the southern outskirts of Pozieres on the night of 19/20 July in preparation for launching an attack on the town in the early hours of 23 July. As part of this attack, Thurnhill was ordered to take a gun forward to within 200 meters of the front line and, after the barrage lifted from its initial line at 0030 hours, engage targets down the main street of the town (the Albert-Bapaume Road) by direct fire, parallel to the line of attack, to disrupt movement back and forth and any visible barricades and defensive positions.

The gun occupied an exposed position because the right flank of British division on the Australian left flank was further back. To conceal their movement, all vehicles and harnesses were muffled, the horse teams were released before cresting dead ground on the road to Pozieres, and the gun and ammunition wagon were then manhandled into their final positions. The wagon was placed to the left of the gun to shield it from machine gun and rifle fire from that exposed direction.

When the barrage lifted from its initial line of fire, the crew engaged targets up and down the street with all 115 rounds in about 15-20 minutes without drawing any counterfire. They then manhandled the gun back beyond the crest, removed

the sights and breech block and pushed the gun into a shell crater for later recovery, and rejoined their battery that was still firing superimposed on the fire plan for the attack.

The Commanding Officer 2nd FAB recorded that Thurnhills' enterprise stood out 'as a main feature of the action of the Brigade during this operation' and provided a separate report on 'the gallant action of Lieut S.R. Thurnhill and his detachment'. Thurnhill was later awarded a Military Cross for his leadership of this foray. The citation read:

'For conspicuous gallantry in action. He brought his gun into action close in rear of our first line, and during the attack fired 115 rounds, demolished barricades etc. He showed great determination.'

Thurnhill continued to serve with 6th Battery and learnt of his award a month before he was killed in action by shell fire on 6 November 1916 as the Somme Offensive (1 July – 18 November) was drawing to a close. He is buried at McCormick's Post Cemetery, near Flers.

In 2021, Lieutenant Thurnhill and a contemporary, Corporal Matt, were selected to be portrayed in a painting commissioned for the 150th Anniversary of Australian Artillery.



Second lieutenant Raymond Thurnhill, 1916