‘Fortune, … is powerful in all things, especially in war…’

Patrick Plunkett was a fortunate man. His timely enlistment during World War I triggered a series of significant events that changed his life for the better. Regardless of the dangers he would later face on the battlefield, enlistment offered Patrick an escape from a troubled personal life, and early treatment for a serious illness. Convalescence delayed overseas deployment, so Patrick missed key battles with high casualty rates. Patrick’s unit, formed during his convalescence, proved a good match for his civilian skills. Avoiding serious injury, Patrick returned home a local hero, unaffected by his chequered service record. But with his time in the AIF over, Patrick’s luck faltered. With his personal life again in disarray, Patrick enlisted at the outbreak of World War II, hoping that luck would smile upon him once more. Here follows the story of Patrick Plunkett and his timely good fortune.

Born on 7 January 1884, Patrick Francis Plunkett grew up in Queenstown Victoria. Initially eschewing his Irish father’s gold-mining occupation, Patrick moved away from his family to work as a ‘railway employé’ in Molesworth. With bouts of alcohol-fuelled belligerence labelling Patrick ‘a nuisance to the town’, he moved to Walhalla to find gold.
Like many men, although the right age, Patrick was in no hurry to join up when war was first declared. Indeed, approximately two thirds of Australian men aged 18 to 44 never enlisted. Yet on 18 September 1915, Patrick joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). At 31 years 9 months, Patrick was much older than the national average of 24.25 years. Despite enlistment numbers being at their peak, advanced age and run-ins with the law suggest that avoiding gaol rather than patriotic fervour was Patrick’s motivation.

Private Plunkett Service Number 2422 had two medical examinations. The first found no ‘defect calculated to unfit him for the duties of a soldier’, but the second diagnosed venereal disease. Timely detection saved Patrick’s life.

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6 ‘News and Notes’, Yea Chronicle, 13 November 1913, p. 3.
9 Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 1.
12 Ernest Scott, The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume XI: Australia During the War.
13 Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 3.
14 Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 3.
Immediately, Patrick began treatment at Langwarrin VD Hospital.¹⁵ The hospital’s location somewhat mollified the moral sensibilities of an Australian public fearful of contagion, but patients frequently escaped from the abysmal conditions, causing further public outcry.¹⁶ However, substantial changes including modern facilities and payment in return for cooperation had improved conditions for many patients, boosting patient morale and reducing breakouts.¹⁷ Patrick’s timely arrival saw him benefit from the changes.

Patrick’s situation was typical of many Australian soldiers. ‘The social and “moral” aspects of the problem of “wastage” from venereal disease … are an essential part … of the war.’¹⁸ Popular opinion suggested that the AIF had higher rates of venereal disease than other armed forces, and measures were introduced to reduce infection rates.¹⁹ Success at Langwarrin, too, did much to ameliorate the situation; almost 85% of the 7,242 soldiers treated at Langwarrin later served overseas, Patrick among them.²⁰

![ADMISSIONS AND DISCHARGES TO LANGWARRIN V.D. HOSPITAL INCLUDING MEN RETURNED TO AUSTRALIA FOR TREATMENT](image)

Treatment Outcomes, Langwarrin VD Hospital, 1915-1919.²¹

¹⁵ Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 4.
After nearly eight months at Langwarrin, Patrick commenced training at Seymour.\textsuperscript{22} The 2\textsuperscript{nd} Australian Pioneer Battalion was formed in March 1916.\textsuperscript{23} Although trained as infantrymen to support other troops, the Pioneers provided the labour force necessary to create and maintain the physical infrastructure including trenches, huts, roads, rail and walkways, so other units could function effectively.\textsuperscript{24} As such, the work of the Pioneers eminently suited Patrick’s railway and mining background.\textsuperscript{25} The timely formation of Patrick’s battalion during his medical treatment worked in his favour.

In July and August 1916 as part of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Australian Division, the Pioneers engaged in intense fighting at Pozières and Mouquet Farm in the Somme Valley.\textsuperscript{26} Casualties were severe. Pozières Ridge, noted historian CEW Bean, was ‘more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth’.\textsuperscript{27} Now cleared for duty, Patrick was destined to arrive too late join his unit in these fierce battles.

Private Patrick Francis Plunkett sailed off to war on board HMAT A32 Themistocles on 28 July 1916 alongside 151 other members of his battalion.\textsuperscript{28} With a maximum speed of 15 knots, the 11, 231-ton vessel docked in Plymouth England six weeks later.\textsuperscript{29} While Patrick waited at Perham to join his unit at the front, his rebellious nature resurfaced and he was punished for returning late to barracks.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{22} Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 4.
\textsuperscript{25} Ancestry, Electoral Record for Patrick Francis Plunkett, 1913.; Ancestry, Electoral Record for Patrick Francis Plunkett, 1914.
\textsuperscript{26} 2\textsuperscript{nd} Australian Pioneer Battalion Unit Diary, AWM4 14/14/5, July 1916, pp. 2-3.; 2\textsuperscript{nd} Australian Pioneer Battalion Unit Diary, AWM4 14/14/6, August 1916, pp. 2-5; The Long, Long Trail: The British Army in the Great War of 1914-1918, ‘2\textsuperscript{nd} Australian Division’, \url{http://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/order-of-battle-of-divisions/2nd-australian-division/}, Accessed 29 April 2017.
\textsuperscript{30} Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 9.
Proudly wearing his battalion’s colour patch, Patrick left England on 2 November for the 2nd Divisional Base Camp at Étaples, France. The ‘largest of its kind ever established overseas’, the camp was a temporary home for up to 100,000 soldiers.

In late November 1916, Patrick marched out to join his battalion along the Longueval-Bernafay Road. Here, the Pioneers were performing the ‘back-breaking’ work that varied by location and focus according to need. By February 1917, the Pioneers were constructing a ‘Deconville Tramway … past Dead Mule Corner’, and a ‘Duck-board track to Little Wood’. Two months later, they were practising for an “attack on (the) Hindenberg Line”.

In May, as his battalion moved to ‘Gordon Camp near Contalmaison’, Patrick suffered a perforated eardrum from a shell explosion. Upon his return from Camiers hospital, Patrick was charged with drunkenness and forfeited a day’s pay. Like many frontline soldiers, Patrick sought solace in alcohol, despite attempts back home to have rations of this ‘molten fire’ stopped. Other soldiers found comfort through drawing, sometimes on official records, while people back home wrote poetry.

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32 Australian War Memorial, ‘Colour patch: 2 Australian Pioneer Battalion, AIF’; Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 9.
34 Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 9.; 2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion Unit Diary, AWM4 14/14/7, p. 3.
35 2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion Unit Diary, AWM4 14/14/9, February 1917, p. 4.
36 2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion Unit Diary, AWM4 14/14/11, April 1917, p. 2.
37 2nd Australian Pioneer Battalion Unit Diary, AWM4 14/14/12, May 1917, p. 4.; Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 9.
38 Service Record of Patrick Francis Plunkett, p. 10.
Patrick’s Division moved on, engaging in action at Bullecourt and Third Ypres. At Nieppe, Patrick spent a week in hospital with impetigo. On return to his unit, Patrick was found guilty of drunkenness and forfeited 28 days pay. Following the Pioneers engagement in the lead-up to the Hundred Days campaign, Patrick’s war was over.

In July 1919, Victorian newspapers announced Patrick’s return to Australia on board HMAT Mahia, and he settled back home with his family. Although ineligible for the 1914-15 Star, Patrick was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, a combination affectionately monikered ‘Mutt and Jeff’. Patrick’s name appeared on local honour boards, ‘significant embodiments of national culture’ indicating a shift in commemorating conflicts.
War did not change Patrick’s character. After his discharge from the AIF, he lived much as before, mining for gold and continuing his run-ins with the law.\textsuperscript{50} Despite moving back home, Patrick’s relationship with his family remained fraught; Patrick was overlooked as executor of his father’s will, the honour falling on the shoulders of Patrick’s younger brother.\textsuperscript{51}

Patrick married in 1926 at age 46 but with no offspring born of the union, he and his wife later lived apart.\textsuperscript{52} With gold harder to find and his nest egg stolen, the announcement of war proved fortunate for Patrick yet again.\textsuperscript{53} He enlisted in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} AIF, this time to earn a living. Too old for overseas deployment, Private Plunkett Service Number V6871 served as a member of the Citizen Military Force at the Melbourne Recruitment Reception Depot.\textsuperscript{54} Two months after the Allied victory, Patrick died from an undisclosed illness and was interred in Queenstown cemetery.\textsuperscript{55} No headstone marks his grave.

\textsuperscript{49} Sandra Kerkvliet, \textit{Honour Board}.
\textsuperscript{50} ‘Dogs Worry Sheep’, \textit{Advertiser}, 1 November 1929, p. 2.
\textsuperscript{51} Will of Patrick Plunkett, died 27 September 1923, Public Record Office Victoria, Series VPRS 7591/P0003, Unit 694, Item 105/903.
In summation, enlistment in World War I was lucky for Patrick Plunkett. He avoided gaol, and he was given timely treatment by the AIF for venereal disease. His convalescence delayed overseas deployment, so he missed key battles with high casualty rates. Patrick’s unit, formed during his convalescence, better suited his civilian skills. Despite minor injuries and bouts of drunkenness during active service, Patrick was feted on returning home, but upon discharge from the AIF his luck faltered. An unfulfilling civilian life led Patrick to enlist at the outbreak of World War II to earn an income. Hopefully, Patrick Plunkett’s second service record shows that he found timely good fortune once more.
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