

PERSONAL RECORDS

64/20  
War of 1914-18

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15th Battalion A.I.F.

Narrative of experiences at Quinn's Post  
on 29th May 1915

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I was a soldier (sergeant) of the 15th Battalion A.I.F. and I saw a good deal of service on the Peninsula, including a long period on the famous Quinn's Post which was looked on as the deadliest position there.

Of course you want only some personal experiences. I was a first class rifle shot, but I did no professional sniping. On the other hand we came under fire from Turkish snipers all the time, and if you put so much as your hand up they were sure to get it for they were deadly shots for whom we had a wholesome respect.

Like many others I got some good shots off, but one dared not look over the parapet. We did not know where the Turkish shots came from.

One day things were very anxious, the Turks in front were attacking constantly, and I noticed from where I was, in a slight depression on the side of a hill, that many of our men who were creeping round the right were dropping, always about the same place, and I could see where the Turkish sniper could be.

A man who was with me said he must be close in front of us. He very cautiously raised his head about six inches and was killed instantly.

I noticed dust about six feet in front of me so I watched. The sniper was so close I could have touched him so I just had to wait, and when the next man of ours dropped I pop-shot the sniper on the top of his head.

He wore a tight khaki skull cap. He was a very brave man.

Turkish soldiers had blown up our forward trench that morning (May 29, 1915) and had occupied our bomb-proof shelter, and an hour after the events just described we moved up to the bomb shelter entrance.

We had dropped into the wide open trench at the entrance. I had five men with me.

Then Lieut. Little with four men joined us, and he took over and decided to charge.

One of his men crept up to look in and got a severe head wound.

I was against charging because I knew the capacity of Turkish soldiers, but Little was brave and reckless. However, he listened a little to me, and asked me for my two remaining hand grenades (I had been bomb throwing) and he lit the fuse of one and threw it in the curve of the right angled bomb entrance.

Then he lit the other, and for some reason delayed throwing it. We knew what to expect, and dropped to the bottom of the trench. The bomb exploded and tore his arm off and destroyed his eyes.

It also wounded two of his men. The remaining men took Little and the two others away. They all walked - I don't know how.

This left me with five men, shaken but not knocked out. My equipment was torn off my back.

We sat there a long time, and nothing happened. Finally one of my chaps said, "I'll have a peep".

I said, "Keep back," but he crept closer.

Then he bowed his head when his mate lifted his head. Blood came from his mouth. He was dead; shot through the chest.

His friend was so mad it was hard to restrain him.

Then suddenly a rifle shot came from the shelter, hit the curving wall and ricocheted out amongst us, and put a terrible gash in one man's inner thigh near the groin. He bled furiously.

I tried every way to stop the blood, and just then a Turkish soldier popped his rifle round, exposing himself, and fired at a few feet range.

Miraculously he hit no one, but we all seized our rifles and fired, and hit nothing.

When I looked round the wounded man had gone, I know not where, leaving a trail of blood. I never saw him again.

That left me with three men. We just sat and waited.

Then an officer of ours crept up from somewhere in the rear, and asked me above the din of battle (which had been deafening all the time) what we were doing there.

I told him there were an unknown number of Turks in the bomb-proof shelter.

He said, "Well, don't sit there; charge with the bayonet and get them out".

I said, "You're senior to me, you lead and we'll follow".

He said something to the effect that he had more to do than doing other peoples work, and we saw HIM no more.

I knew well the enemy I had to deal with. They were amongst the most courageous and best fighting men of the world.

I didn't want to kill them, and I did not want them, to kill us.

I thought that impatient, impulsive foolhardiness had cost too many of our men as it was.

I knew the Turks must make a move or come out in the end if we waited long enough.

So I ordered my men to keep their rifles on the entrance and not to shut their eyes.

Well, we waited a long time, then all at once a cleaning rod came round the corner with a piece of dirty white rag on it, and we sprang alert.

One of my men said, "As soon as he puts his head round, I'll drop him".

I said, "No, you fool, you'll do nothing of the sort".

He said, "He shot my mate and he dies".

I said, "There may be more than one in there and if you shoot no more will come out, and not only that, if any man who surrenders is shot I'll see that the man who does it gets a nasty wound, and I'll report him. I won't have it". He quietened down.

I called out the only two or three Turkish words I knew and soon, looking very haggard and frightened, the soldier came out and seized my hand and clung to it.

Then another came out, and another, until there were seventeen -- one with an arm gone and two more badly wounded.

I was deciding what to do with them, when one of our officers materialised out of nowhere and with great authority took charge.

"You men stay here, and I'll take these prisoners back to headquarters, and that's an order," he said.

I said, "We have been here nine hours since 3 a.m. These men have had a long run, and as they are our prisoners, we are entitled to take them in and ensure their safety".

He said, "You stay here, give me your names, and you will get all the credit, and I will have you all in to report on the capture".

And that was that.

We never heard another word of it.

We enquired at 15th Battalion Headquarters, and the Colonel said he knew nothing about it, and that all prisoners had been accounted for. (By the way, the majority of the 15th were Queenslanders including the colonel, and he heavily leaned to Queenslanders and was jealous of Tasmanians, or so it always appeared to us).

Later on after the war I read the account given by Lieut. - that he delivered the prisoners, and that he had captured them, and he was alone when he got them.

He took all credit.

#### THE SINGER

A few days before the events of the foregoing narrative, it was midnight and the moon had set or had not risen, I am not sure now, Conditions were clear, and quiet for Gallipoli. We had just come in from about eight hours digging. We were tired.

Gallipoli was a sad place for us, and just at that time it seemed weirdly unreal. The everlasting smell of the dead hung over the place. The acrid smell of cordite drifted across, and nostalgia seemed to rise up in our throats as it never did before. We sat down, just done out.

Then it came, from the enemy held hills, rather to our left. It was a voice, someone singing.

I don't know if the words were Turkish or German: I think it was German. But the voice was pure and beautiful beyond imaging. It was a clear haunting tenor; so clear and penetrating that it encompassed the whole battlefield.

We listened entranced. Even the intermittent rifle fire seemed to die out, for it was really a very quiet night for Gallipoli, and but for that voice, almost a silence reigned.

Then the song ended.

I don't know who the singer was, and I will never know, but he cast a spell over that anguished spot, and left nothing but a beautiful and enduring memory.

It had touched the very souls of those thousands of brave fellows, many of whom would never see their native lands again.

Many a rough and uncouth exterior, perhaps, dirty and unlovely to look at, but genuine and true as gold, was that night touched as surely, as no singer had touched his audience before.

It may have been the time. It may have been the place. I don't know, but no one spoke. There was nothing to say.



THE SNIPER

I recall one night in Quinn's, just before dawn, when we always roused every man in case of a sudden enemy attack.

We were used to them - the sudden rush out of the night - hundreds of black figures and terrifying bayonets rushing towards you, and you were at hand grips with a highly trained enemy, brave and held in fear and respect by our men of Anzac as no others ever were.

I take off my hat to my comrades of Anzac that we were never shaken out of our position for all those months we were there, while the casualties on both sides mounted terribly.

However that night our sappers had nearly finished their work of extending our front line trench to our right so it would lap somewhat in front of what we called Courtney's Post, held by our 14th Battalion.

As the first trace of dawn was faint in the East and we knew the fear of a pre-dawn attack was past, I walked along to talk to the sappers.

They had passed the head of a small gully that ran down towards the Turkish position, and they told me that they had looked into spots where the enemy could be seen.

These Turks apparently had long been used to thinking they were in a perfectly safe place, immune from our fire.

"We didn't shoot, we thought we would let you fellows know before the enemy got alarmed," the sappers told us. They then moved out as no digging was allowed after daylight.

Before they went they said, "Don't show yourself because we have lost two men by sniper fire at night, and it came from that scrubby rise on the right".

It was still too dark to see so I had a look down where I could see the light of what seemed to be a fire, then I saw a Turk rise up before the faint firelight. He was a big man, and about 100 yards away.

Daylight was getting faintly better, and the temptation was too much, and I aimed at his broad back, and took a careful sight.

That man had no chance for I was a certain and sure shot.

When I pressed that trigger he was a dead man, but I did not press it at once. For some reason I paused. He stretched himself; then he seemed to hold his hands out to the fire; then he lit a cigarette. It all seemed so natural.

All at once I thought, "That man has a wife, a mother, and perhaps someone who prays for him as my beloved people are now praying for me. His life is before him, and I can destroy him".

I never had it happen before nor since, but I just could not kill that man.

I watched and he stepped down from my sight for ever. My chance was gone, or was it? I was glad.

I turned and walked back to my men, and I said, "You can see right into the enemy camp along there. I saw one walking about, but he stepped down before I could shoot".

One chap jumped up. He said, "It's getting light now and it will be a funny thing if I don't get one".

I said, "Now you listen to me. The sappers say Turkish snipers are no more than 50 yards away, and you know what that means. You have no head cover nor loopholes yet, and if they see you, and they will, you're a dead man".

He said, "The bullet's not yet made to get me".

He had his sniper's "mark". Some had one thing and some had another, according to their taste. His was a leather belt with slots cut all round in which he had slipped cartridges about two inches apart. He was a clever and dead-shot sniper, and I did not really fear for him.

About 10 minutes later, I saw some men coming along the trench dragging something with two straps attached. I had a look: it was the young sniper, stone dead, shot right through the head.

He still had the belt round his waist, with the rifle cartridges in it.

I cursed myself. Somehow I felt that I was responsible for his death. I don't know - it was the fortune of war, and no one can do anything to avert what will be - or sometimes I think so.

MADE IN AUSTRALIA

BOND  
BANKING

EXPLANATION OF SOME MEN AND OFFICERS

It has been said by several historians that no one had ever come forward to say that he had seen Major Quinn killed. I know of three who did.

One was Corporal Harold French from Tonganah in North-East Tasmania; Harold Thurley, also from Tongarah (both now dead), a man I did not know, and myself.

The murderous charge over the top in which so many men lost their lives needlessly would never have been ordered if Major Quinn had had his way.

I was at the very head of the 15th Battalion men when we reached the top at the time when the Turks had full possession of the Post just before dawn.

When we arrived Major Quinn and (I think) Lt-Col. McSharry were near the top. Major Quinn asked me if I was in charge of the section, and he told me to keep close to him.

I asked him what was doing, and he said, "It is thought that we will have to charge over the top".

I said I did not think we could get over.

Then he and McSharry talked. I could not hear for the roar of battle, but they both seemed doubtful about it all and, I thought, reluctant. Then someone else came up, and neither of them seemed too pleased.

Quinn came to me and told me there would have to be a charge. I asked if the men could take their greatcoats off. He said, "Yes, yes, do that, Sergeant. I'll wait while you get the order passed down the line".

He asked me twice if all were ready and I told him, "Yes". He put his whistle to his lips twice, then he blew it, and turned quickly as if to run straight up the left side of the communication trench. He had not taken two steps when he spun right round and dropped.

The chap next to me, I don't know who he was, grabbed my arm, and said "He's killed", but the charge was on and it never stopped until it seemed to me that they were all down.

When Little was wounded, or rather a few minutes before, a Sergeant Simon who was with him, had a piece of skull taken off the top of his head when he looked round into the bomb-proof shelter. Someone said a bayonet did it, I don't know, but he kept on with blood streaming down his face.

When Little was so badly wounded I had a look at Simon's head and he had quite a large piece of his brain exposed.

I lost several of my men that day, but the three who were with me at the last were, Harold Thurley, Corporal Mulholland of the 16th Battalion and Tom Kepler, now at 48 Passfield St, West Brunswick. (Harold French had retired wounded).

M

Much of the account of the above engagement in the Official History by C.E.W. Bean is not right and quite misleading as to fact. I don't for a moment blame the historian.

It is quite impossible for any writer of history to have first-hand knowledge. He must depend on others, and he goes to officers and commanders who I know promote themselves by giving "eye-witness" accounts of things and happenings they never saw.

We had some wonderful officers, brave to recklessness, but so many of them were killed, like Lts. Hinman and Armstrong of Tasmania and Major Quinn.

We had Jack Corrigan, Wes Goninon and many I take my hat off to, including Major B. Sampson and one of my men who rose from private to lieutenant and was killed in 1918.

General Sir William Birdwood was a familiar visitor in our trenches, and I have seen him there when things were pretty thick. On the other hand, while other officers were often with us, I never once saw our own colonel, nor do I know anyone who said he saw him.

I hope I have not given the impression that I was fearless and matter-of-factly unconcerned. I was not, and I don't think anyone was.

The morning of the 29th as we lined up, I felt even worse than I had ever done. In fact I felt terrible.

The greatest fear I had was that fear would conquer me, and take charge.

As it grew light that morning so that I could see the faces round me, I was uplifted when I saw the haggard looks. Even Major Quinn was the same. But as usual when you are right in it all that feeling leaves you and you feel no more until it is over.