



Joseph Stanley Verco

Better known as 'Stan'

2020 Premiers ANZAC Spirit School Prize

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"At first the situation on the island seemed hopeless. What could be achieved under such dire circumstances?" -Sister Rachael Pratt, Lemnos, 1915

Part A

Joseph Stanley Verco, affectionately known as 'Stan' was born on the 5th November 1889 and was the youngest of ten children. He grew up in North Adelaide with his father, William and mother, Elizabeth and his grandparents who emigrated from England in 1840 (VWMA, n.d.). Sadly, when Stan was two his father died from influenza at the age of only 49 years.

Stanley was educated at Prince Alfred College and excelled both academically and athletically. Although he initially failed his first year at the University of Adelaide, he later went on to top the medical course (see figure 1 for photo) for each subsequent year of his study. In 1914 he undertook his resident medical officer training at the then Adelaide Hospital (Red Cross Memorial, n.d.). On the 25th August 1914, Stan was appointed the rank of provisional captain for the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC).



Figure 1: 1913 Graduating Medical class, from University of Adelaide. Joseph Stanley VERCO (furthest on right) - nephew of Sir Joseph Cooke; grandfather of Joe, Chris, William and Rose. **Standing : Walter John Westcott Close, Laurance Llewelin Davey, Frederick Neill Le Messurier, John Christian Mayo, Harry Carew Nott, Sydney Ernest Holder and Joseph Stanley Verco Seated : Reginald Blockley Lucas, Harold John Penny and Harold Powell... (Close, Le Messurier, Mayo, Nott, Holder, Lucas, Penny and Powell also served) Sourced by Julianne T Ryan, courtesy of University of Adelaide

In 1914 Stan voluntarily enlisted with the Army and was assigned to the Keswick Barracks in South Australia. Before World War One Stan served 18 months as a Cadet with the 50th Australian Medical Corps (AMC), Fort Largs (SA) eventually becoming a commanding officer (VWMA, n.d.). Stan's willingness to voluntarily enlist at a young age depicts the very spirit he went on to display throughout the war. According to Australian Defence Force (ADF) documents "*Stan was single and 24 years of age when he enlisted and he was allocated service number S2675*" (Army – World War I: 1914–18 |, 2014). This was typical of that generation at the time.

On December 5th, 1914 Stan sailed to Alexandria, Greece on the HMAT Kyarra A55 (see figure 2). Stan's position at the time was a medical practitioner and surgeon for the army. He rose through the ranks progressing from Captain to Major and finally Lieutenant Colonel (VWMA, n.d.). On the 23rd of January 1915, Stan's unit travelled to Maadi, Egypt (VWMA, n.d.). Whilst the unit was there, he lovingly provided much needed medical support during the first Turkish attack on the Suez Canal. Stan at times risked his life to save many others and his patients wounds were horrific to witness and treat. One would expect this to have had a profound emotional impact on his mental wellbeing. The images no doubt remained with him for the rest of his life as this is a common post traumatic effect on many war veterans (Medicine in the aftermath of war, 2015). Stan's excellent conduct was held in high regard by the General Officer Commanding, acknowledging his great courage, mateship and love for others above self: the very qualities we still associate with the ANZAC spirit that has been commemorated for over a century. Stan even took it upon himself to "*teach untrained 'medics' basic clinical procedures he had learned from his first year as a doctor, this was greatly appreciated by 'beginners'*", such as his friend and colleague Leonard Lindon (Leonard, 1971).

Figure 2: Joseph embarked from Melbourne, Victoria on board HMAT Kyarra A55 as a Captain with the 1st Australian Stationary Hospital (AAMC). Courtesy of Julianne T Ryan.



To better understand what it would have been like for Stan, one must consider the enormity of the war. Approximately 416,809 Australians courageously served in World War One (Memorial, n.d.). Tragically it resulted in 20 million deaths worldwide and a further 21 million people injured horrifically, not to mention the additional lives missing in action and presumed dead (Smith, J, n.d.). Joseph Stanley Verco was one of many exceptional South Australians to experience this war firsthand through his service in the Australian Army Medical Corps. Stan endured harsh conditions that were devastating and beyond anything we can imagine. He witnessed many agonising deaths, rotting bodies with nauseating stench, the sight of blood and human remains everywhere. *“It smelt like a slaughter house in the cleanest parts in others it’s impossible to describe the smell, bodies were stacked up in heaps as people tried not to step on their faces as a sign of respect”* – Lieutenant Margetts page 103 The ANZACS book (Peter, 2010). Throughout the many hours of battle Stan would have heard people screaming and crying amidst the deafening explosions (Red Cross Memorial, n.d.). The constant, never ending reminder of the impact of war confronted him every day of his working life, and there was no definite end in sight to bring any kind of hope and reassurance. It takes a person of incredible qualities and moral stature to endure such things and come out so unscathed. The fact that Stan went on after the war to live a very productive life is nothing short of miraculous.

Many men and women just like Stan spent years fighting for the protection of humanity, regardless of the countries they came from. Stan upheld each person’s value and fought for the freedom of Australia as a nation. He was willing to endure trenches, heavy rainfall, freezing conditions, resulting in a large amount becoming ill with dysentery and typhoid. Stan, like his fellow medical comrades had to care for those suffering from a range of diseases, as well as those suffering from war related injuries. As a result of the influx of disease, he contracted dysentery whilst working with the Australian General Hospital in the Greek port of Lemnos in 1915 resulting in his evacuation to London (VWMA, n.d.). After a short recovery he began his service again with the 6 Australian Auxiliary Hospital (AAH). Poor health and illness was common for Stan and others as a result of the rough seas and a lack of hygiene (Naval warfare of World War I, n.d.) yet he remained steadfast in his duty, sometimes carrying the dead upon donkeys to their place of burial. Inadequate nutrition was a major problem and Stan was often served cold tacky beef with stale biscuits (Smith J and Showalter, E, 2020). He endured these conditions on a day to day basis.

The Aquitania (see figure3) was the ship Stan spent most of his time serving on. Weapons such as the machine gun caused unprecedented damage to soldiers’ bodies. Dr Julie Anderson said, *“This presented new challenges to doctors on both sides in the conflict, as they sought to save patients’ lives and limit the harm to their bodies”* (Anderson, 2014). New types of treatment, organisation and medical technologies were rapidly developed to reduce the number of deaths; however, this still was not enough as there was a lack of resources and too few doctors and nurses to treat the casualties so they could return to battle (Bergan, 2014). A quote from Matron Wilson who served as a medic in Lemnos in August 1915 sates, *“Things here are just too awful for words.... We found only a bare piece of ground with wounded men in pain, still in filthy, bloodstained clothes, lying amid stones and thistles. As we lacked tents, beds or medicines, we could do little for our patients”* (King, 2014). In spite of this, Stan persevered always wanting to help others and guarantee his country freedom.

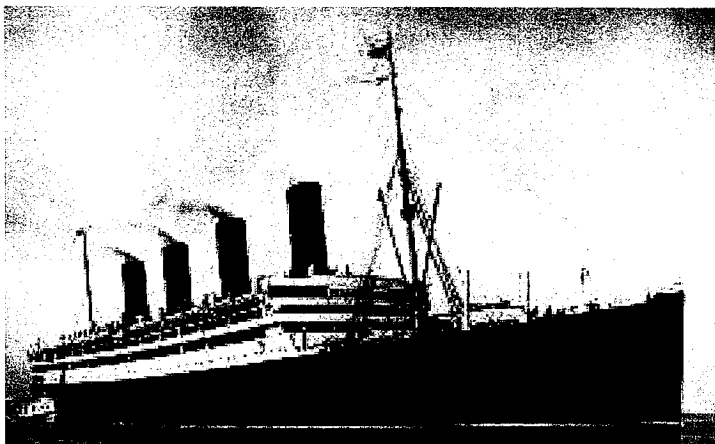


Figure 3: 5th March 1915-picture of the Aquitania ship that Stan spent many hours serving on.

Source: VWMA, n.d.

Stan was honoured to serve in WW1 with the Australian General Hospital although it left him with some sad memories too. His many photographs, including those with his fellow soldiers of the General Hospital (see figure 4), and group images of all the Commanding Officers Stan served with would bring back memories both fond and sorrowful.

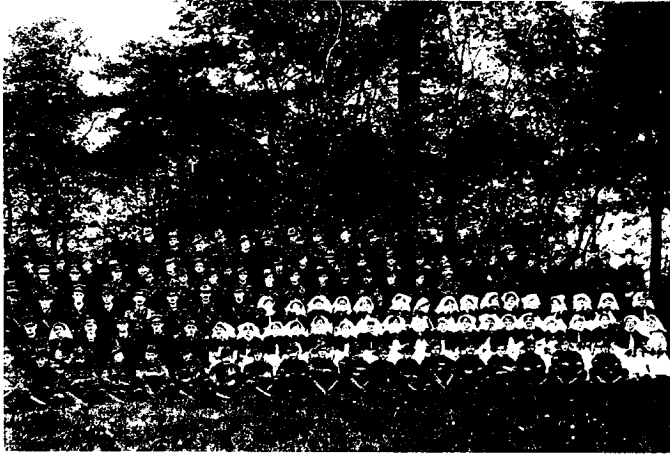


Figure 4: 23 September 1918 - Group portrait of the STAFF of the 1st Australian General Hospital

Source: VWMA, n.d.

Red Cross records indicate that Stan served as a major in the 1 Australian Auxiliary Hospital (AAH) Harefield, May 1916 (Red Cross Memorial, n.d.). A year later in May 1917 Stan married an Australian woman, Dorothy Elise Willis, who was serving as a member of the Voluntary Aid Detachment in London. Their first child was born later that year. Eventually, in October 1918 Stan and his family were evacuated from France. Later returning in 1919 to South Australia aboard the Miltiades (see figure 5).



Figure 5: 21/12/1918 Major Verco returned to Australia on board Miltiades, ex England (at own expense). 5/2/1919 disembarked into Australia. Courtesy of Julianne T Ryan.

Source: VWMA, n.d.

It was during his military service in Lemnos, Greece (see figure 6 and 7) that Stan first started to use portable radiology equipment (VWMA, n.d.). This equipment was also used on the battlefields of Gallipoli where Stan also travelled with the Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces in 1915 (memorial, n.d.). It was the beginning of his life-long interest in radiology. He became passionate about the need for such diagnostic technology for all people even those in the public health system. In 1919 he became the surgeon registrar at the Adelaide Children's Hospital and by 1920 he was appointed as an honorary radiologist to the hospital, followed by private practice in radiology and radiotherapy in 1924. "He interrupted his work for military service during World War Two and was appointed head of

x-ray services for the Australian Army" (Leonard, 1971). Not one to rest on his laurels, Stan travelled overseas to further his skills resulting in his appointment to the Royal Adelaide Hospital and visiting radiologist to the Department of Repatriation. "He was also a founding member of the Australasian Association of Radiologist and was at the forefront of developing mass miniature chest radiography which he utilised in mobile units" (Leonard, 1971). This resulted in compulsory x-ray examinations being readily available to anyone and contributed to the early detection of pulmonary tuberculosis.

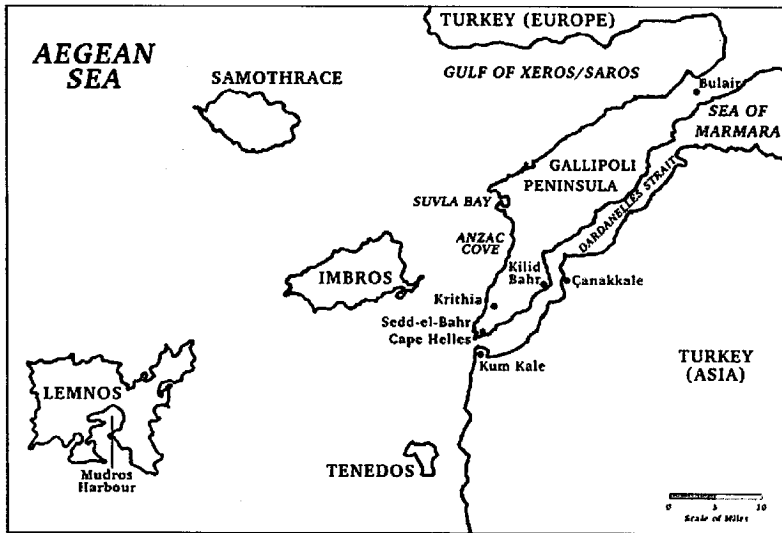


Figure 6: Map showing Mudros and Lemnos, places Stan spent many hours serving.

Source: Susanburnett.me.uk, n.d.

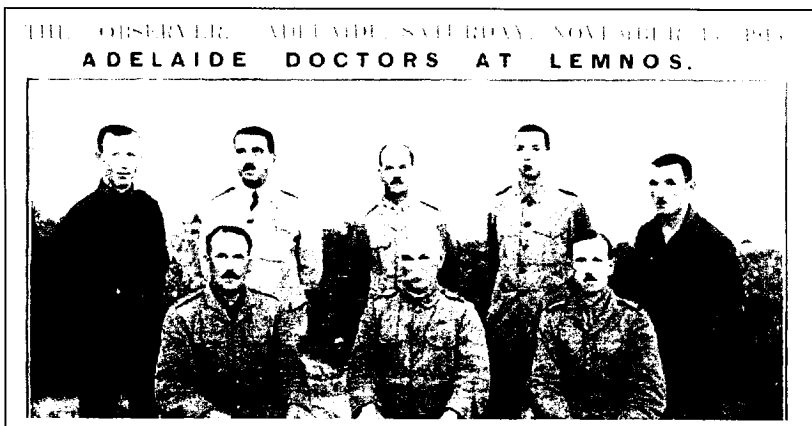


Figure 7: 13 November 1915 - Adelaide Doctors in Lemnos. (Captain Joseph Stanley Verco 'standing' - 2nd from right)

Sourced by Julianne T Ryan, courtesy of The Observer newspaper.

Stan worked tirelessly in his rooms at the Royal Adelaide Hospital on North Terrace, until one month before his death. He was honoured to receive the following medals: 1914/15 Service Star, British Empire War Medal and the Victory medal for his outstanding military contributions (see figure 8). Stan died of natural causes on the 26th July 1971, aged 81 years, leaving a medical legacy that resulted in ten generations of the family practicing surgery in South Australia. Hence the name Verco has become synonymous with our public health system in this state. But his colleague's best remember him for "his kindness, wisdom and friendliness and his tireless efforts in always seeking to improve the care of patients" (Leonard, 1971).

Total word count excluding in text referencing is 1482 words

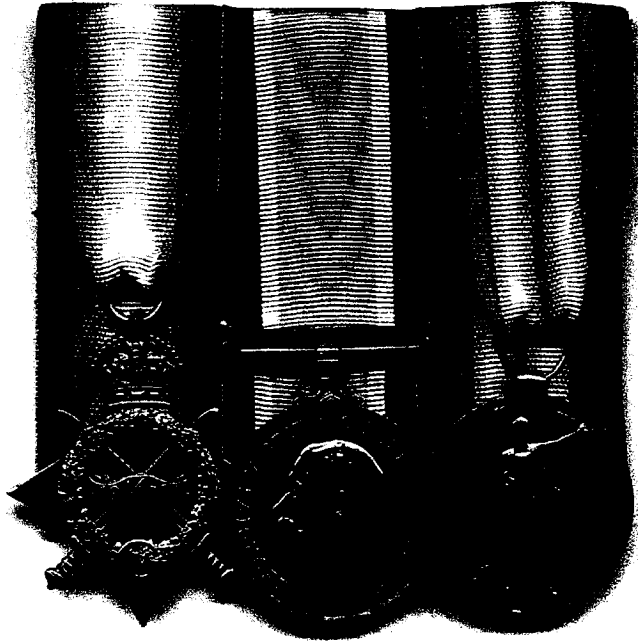


Figure 8: L-R 1914/15 Star, British Empire War Medal, Victory Medal
VWM Image

Source: VWMA, n.d.

Part B

Being a cadet and then commanding officer at such a young age with the 50th AMC shows how much potential Stan had. To be appointed to such responsibility so young demonstrates his qualities and attributes which epitomise the ANZAC spirit. His perseverance and resourcefulness really stand out in the accounts of his military and post war life. For instance, when Stan was diagnosed with dysentery while serving in Lemnos, he did not give up but continued to serve others as soon as he was able, even though he would have had agonising pain at times. Never did it cross his mind that he would not continue to care for others because he knew how vital his position was to the military effort and the lives of others (Memorial, n.d.). Such dedication and commitment were probably fine-tuned in his earlier cadet days and were reflected through his many hours of medical service. This tenacity was also demonstrated when he once again served in the Second World War, though one could argue he had already done 'his bit' the first-time round. Stan would never rest on his laurels and despite going through such traumatic events he continued to put his own feelings aside, like so many other war veterans, in order to get on with a productive life. This shows great civic mindedness as one can see from the contributions Stan made to medicine post war.

Whilst caring for the wounded and dying Stan would often perform surgeries with inadequate supplies requiring him to be creative and resourceful, as best he could be. His *"resourcefulness was especially shown when he used sticks to make makeshift splints and stretchers, and he even resorted to doing transfusions on the battlefield"* (Bell, 2018). This resourcefulness continued long after he served as his knowledge learnt from the war about portable x-ray machines resulted in him implementing them in public hospitals. Such ingenuity paved the way for improvements in Radiology and diagnostic procedures in the treatment of Tuberculosis.

Reflecting on the qualities of the ANZAC spirit, Joseph Stanley Verco is a fine example of perseverance and resourcefulness. Like all those who served, Stan showed great courage in the face of seemingly impossible tasks. Like many, when he first set sail for Greece in 1915, he would have had *"some kind of innocent excitement"* (Rees, 2014) not truly grasping the magnitude or the duration of the war that would ensue. No one could have possibly imagined the isolation, loneliness and homesickness. To endure such emotional stresses coupled with the physical trauma and still come out relatively unscathed would have required a great deal of positive mental attitude. Stan clearly demonstrated his ability to do so, a strength that remained with him throughout life.

total word count is 469 words

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