

## Alexander Steele Biography (Part A)



*Figure 1: A photograph of Alexander Steele*

one of them, Alexander Steele, who lived a life reflecting the ANZAC Spirit and died as one of the many lost heroes of this conflict.

The murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria catapulted the world into years filled with slaughter, horror and mayhem. The "Great War" brought unprecedented horrors upon all those involved; the battlefield a grave for many. War was declared between Serbia and Austria-Hungary, which soon spiralled into a worldwide tragedy as alliances came into play. Over 60 million combatants were involved, the battlefield dominated by almost futuristic and fatal weapons such as machine guns, gas and tanks, which lead to the horrors of trench warfare. Australia especially was trying to prove itself as a newly established nation and joined the operation at the Dardanelles; a mission to free the channel to have access to Constantinople. However, this operation, lasting between 1915-1916, was quite unsuccessful and resulted in the death of 44,000 men of the Allied powers, more than 8700 were Australian (New Zealand History, 2014). Out of the many forgotten, out of the many dead, here is the story of

Alexander Steele was born in Mt Gambier, South Australia on 20<sup>th</sup> August 1888, to Dugald Steele and Elizabeth Burton (Clark, 1990) (Figure 1). Dugald Steele had an occupation as a painter, and with 6 children, 4 boys and 2 girls, it would have been an exhausting job to support the family. Alexander, or Alex, had previously worked for a bootmaker, by the name of Beevor, who had been a part of the local volunteer corps, while he attended Mt Gambier Grammar School (Trove, 1917). It was under his influence that Alex found his desire to follow a military career. While training to become a commissioned officer as a cadet, Alex displayed ability and success in Albury Camp (Trove, 1917). Alex had started his military career as a bugler (someone who uses the bugle, a brass instrument, to send signals or orders) in F Company, S.A.I.R at the age of 16 (Trove, 1917). Then he was transferred to the S.A.I.F (Small Independent Action Force) at the age of 18, and soon reached the role of sergeant (Trove, 1917). In August 1910, Alex was appointed to the Administrative and Instructional Staff of the Permanent Military Forces and sent to Gawler, where he was appointed to staff sergeant major in January the next year (Clark, 1990). He was then posted at the Royal Military College, Duntroon in infantry and musketry and there he remained until travelling to Queensland to meet a friend

to join the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Alex enlisted in the AIF's 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion on the 25<sup>th</sup> of August, 1914, at the age of 26, expressing his capability and courage for enlisting in the army at such a young age and being prepared to fight for his country (Clark, 1990). He was one of the first permanent officers to provide his services overseas, as his regimental number was 41 (Lock C.B.L, 1936, *The Fighting 10<sup>th</sup>*, Webb & Son, Adelaide). Alex embarked with the machine-gun section in September as the Staff Sergeant Major, at Brisbane on the ship HMAT A5 "Omrah", feeling excited to go on an adventure, unbeknownst to the horrors of war (NAA, pg 9) (Figure 2). Being part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, consisting of the 9<sup>th</sup>, 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> Battalions, he was one of the first to land on Gallipoli on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915, at 4:00 am and promoted to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant a few days later (Australian War Memorial, n.d.).



**Figure 2:** An photograph of soldiers leaving on the HMAT A5 "Omrah"

Two months later he received the D.C.M (Distinguished Conduct Medal) and mentioned in dispatches for manning and maintaining a machine gun on an operation near Gaba Tepe between the 25<sup>th</sup> and the 29<sup>th</sup> of April while the rest of his Section had been wounded or killed (NAA, pg 21). It was this event that really captured his courage and endurance, which is something not many people can muster in the face of the fear Alex must have felt when he had to carry on by himself. Later, on the 5<sup>th</sup> of May, Alex received a wound in his forearm from an expanding bullet and had to be taken to Egypt for hospitalization (Clark, 1990). From there, he embarked on the "Saturnia" for the Dardanelles and was later promoted to Lieutenant on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August (NAA, pg 21). Then in November, he was granted the temporary rank of a Captain, however went back to the hospital because of his old wrist wound and re-joined the Unit a month later at Lemnos (NAA, pg 10).



**Figure 3:** An image of the DSO

Alex was then transferred to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade Headquarters, as the Brigade's machine-gun officer, 1916. He was then promoted to a full captain on the 20<sup>th</sup> of February, then transferred to the Machine Gun Company as the commanding officer (NAA, pg 21). According to the Australian Dictionary of Biography, 1990, by Chris Clark, Alex's services were considered 'conspicuous and consistent' for displaying 'marked resourcefulness and leadership' during the battle of Somme, which was regarded as a gruesome and costly battle. He was promoted to Major in October and awarded the D.S.O (the Distinguished Service Order) (Figure 3). From there, Alex, having his leadership and other qualities known, was given temporary command of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, in April, for the absence of Lieutenant Colonel Jacob and was then transferred to the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion as second in command, 3 months later (NAA, pg 26-27).

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October, the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion joined in on the operation of Broodseinde Ridge (Australian War Memorial, n.d.) (Figure 4). It was the third operation by the British of the Ypres offensive. There were quite a few troops involved with this large-scale operation, all 12 divisions, including that of I and II ANZAC. They had a set goal of going approximately 1,500 meters deep into the land. The attack began on 4<sup>th</sup> October 1917, before dawn (Australian War Memorial, n.d.). The plan was that the advance would follow a massive artillery bombardment; with a



*Figure 4: The battlefield of Broodseinde Ridge*

creeping barrage leading the troops and protecting them while they secured their positions. However, the Australian troops already lost a seventh of their troops when they were shelled heavily before the attack. Furthermore, when they did attack, they were confronted by the Germans, who had mounted their attack on the same day. The Australian assault force quickly pushed through and they gained all their objectives along the ridge. However, German pillboxes were a problem. Once the Germans had withdrawn past them, they played their role, an incredibly effective defence that caused the Australian assault force to lose 6,500 troops (Australian War Memorial, n.d.). Alex was temporarily commanding the unit when they were heavily fired, and it was in the midst of the flying bullets, Alexander took his final breath. He was one of the many killed in action on the 7<sup>th</sup> of October, 1917, at 29 years old, a young age for a man with his entire life ahead of him. His body was never found, and the only evidence that he had died was his blood-soaked tunic (Clark, 1990).

The news of his death reached his family a week or so later. His sister, Marian Steele, was the only one home on Monday to receive the devastating information of his death, as the rest of them had been at Millicent, South Australia (Trove, 1917). Alex had also been engaged to be married, and although the woman was unnamed, the poor soul would have mourned the loss of her lover, as she and his family never got to see him one last time. To make matters worse, Alex's younger brother, Private Allan Steele, was lying ill in a hospital in England, also from the war front (Trove, 1917).

The word ANZAC was a title for the Australian and New Zealand soldiers who had participated in the war. However, it was the stories of every individual, the qualities they displayed, their achievements during the war, that came together to form the ANZAC Spirit, a spirit that can be found in every soldier, back then and even today. Alex was one of the few that displayed many of the qualities present in the Spirit, from the moment he arrived on that ship to when he took his final breath. Like so many other soldiers, Alex demonstrated bravery and courage by going to war for his country. He showed endurance and mateship, by continuing to fight for his section and not letting their sacrifices be in vain. Told by the people around him, he seemed

to be a humorous man, always full of confidence and energy, and demonstrating leadership and resourcefulness if the need be. It was these qualities that caused Alex to rapidly climb up the ranks, and would have continued to rise if not for this unfortunate circumstance that had befallen him.

Alexander Steele was never given a proper grave, as his body was never found, and was referred to as one of the many "Known unto God", those gone without a trace. Instead, he is commemorated, along with 55,000 Commonwealth soldiers, at the Menin Gate Memorial (Australian War Memorial, n.d.). Even though his body was gone, his spirit remains, a spirit to remember, a spirit that shall serve as a role model as the ANZAC Spirit for generations to come and, a spirit that can now finally rest.

1472 words

## Bibliography

### Web Sites:

1917 'MAJOR ALEX. STEELE KILLED.', *Border Watch (Mount Gambier, SA: 1861 - 1954)*, 23 October, p. 2. , [ONLINE] Available at: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article77669797> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Australian War Memorial n.d., *Battle of Broodseinde Ridge*, [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E84313> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Clark, C 1990, *Steele, Alexander (1888–1917)*, [ONLINE] Available at: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/steele-alexander-8637> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

History.Com 2009, *World War I*, [ONLINE], <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/world-war-i-history> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Lock, CBL 1936, *The Fighting 10th*, Webb & Son, Adelaide, [ONLINE] Available at: [https://rslvwm.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/106/file/54\\_STEELE\\_Alexander.pdf](https://rslvwm.s3.amazonaws.com/documents/106/file/54_STEELE_Alexander.pdf) [Accessed 2 April 2021].

McGibbon, I 2019, *The Gallipoli campaign*, Ministry for Culture and Heritage, [ONLINE] Available at: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-gallipoli-campaign/further-info> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Nation Archives of Australia n.d., *NAA: B2455, STEELE ALEXANDER*, [ONLINE] Available at: <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=8089245> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Virtual War Memorial n.d., *STEELE, Alexander*, [ONLINE] Available at: <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/325315> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

### Images:

Figure 1: *Major A Steele. Observer (Adelaide) Saturday 3 November 1917* 1917, Photograph, Virtual War Memorial Australia [ONLINE] Available at: <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/325315> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Figure 2: *HMAT Omrah (A5), with the 9th Battalion aboard, lying at Pinkenbar on the day of embarkation.* 1914, Photograph, Australian War Memorial, [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C02481> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Figure 3: *Major A Steele. Observer (Adelaide) Saturday 3 November 1917* 1917, Photograph, Virtual War Memorial Australia, [ONLINE] Available at: <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/325315> [Accessed 2 April 2021].

Figure 4: *Relief Arrives - after the battle for Broodseinde Ridge, Ypres Section, Belgium* 1917, Photograph, HALsaysSorry, [ONLINE] Available at: [https://www.reddit.com/r/wwi/comments/74pfqg/october\\_6\\_1917\\_relief\\_arrives\\_after\\_the\\_battle/](https://www.reddit.com/r/wwi/comments/74pfqg/october_6_1917_relief_arrives_after_the_battle/) [Accessed 2 April 2021].