

## Herb Thomas and George Holland

### Their early lives and Military Service

A short essay by their grandson, Stephen R Thomas

Herbert William Thomas (556) was born on 17 Sep 1889 in Footscray, Victoria, Australia (Gamon St Footscray as the fourth child of Edward John Thomas and Ellen Colwell).

He studied at the Hyde St State School in Footscray and later found employment with his brother Stan (born 27<sup>th</sup> March 1887) with the Telegraph section of the Railways at Spencer Street. He and Stan were valued members of the Footscray Rowing Club, Herb enjoying success as a member of the "*Footscray Eight*". Herb with brother Stan (Stanley George Thomas 555) enlisted at Footscray on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1914. As part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion left from Melbourne on board the Transport A20 *Hororata* in October 1914. Also on board was a young George Holland (544) with his brother Vern (788), both had joined at Footscray a few days prior to the Thomas boys.

George William Frederick Holland (544) was born on the 5<sup>th</sup> January 1897 in Marong, Victoria, Australia as the second child of William Henry Vernon Holland and Amy Louisa Vernon. He had two siblings, namely: Vernon (born January 1891), and Henry Roy (born 1905). George went to school at Marong, and afterwards to the Central School, Bendigo, where he gained the Old Boys' Scholarship which entitled him to a three years' course at the Continuation School, Bendigo. At the end of that term, he received an appointment in the Curator's office, Melbourne, after which he was transferred to the Treasury Office, from where he enlisted in the 7th Battalion of the 2nd Infantry Brigade, on the 19<sup>th</sup> August 1914 at Footscray. George was living in Footscray with his older Brother Vernon (788) who was also schooled in Marong and was later employed as an agent of the Citizens' Life Insurance Company. He was a valued member of the Marong Rifle Club. Vernon enlisted at Footscray the day before George on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August, he would also serve with the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

Herb was about 1.75 mts tall, weighing around 75 kgs with brown hair and grey eyes, Stan slightly taller at 1.80 mts with similar colouring. Both had been promoted to Lance Corporal on the 7<sup>th</sup> of November 1914. George was about 1.8 mts tall, weighing around 66kgs with dark brown hair and grey eyes. Vern was about the same height but weighed a little more at 80kgs, he had similar hair and eye colour to George.

George would be posted to E Company with Herb (556) and Stan Thomas (555) and Vern was posted to G Company. As part of the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion they embarked from Melbourne, Victoria, on board the Transport A20 *Hororata* on the 19<sup>th</sup> of October 1914. After a stop in Ceylon and spending some time in Egypt (Cairo and Ismailia) both for further training and as a response to the Turkish threat to Suez, they travelled by train to Alexandria on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, and then boarded the ship (*Galeka*) arriving at Lemnos on the 11<sup>th</sup>. At 10:30am on the 24<sup>th</sup> of April the *Galeka* left Mudros Harbor and with the rest of the fleet steamed towards Gallipoli.

The Australians began the landing at 4:30am on the 25<sup>th</sup>, the Boats to land the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion not forthcoming the Captain of the *Galeka* steamed closer to shore to land the troops with the ship's boats. Turkish shrapnel was bursting over the ship as the men entered the boats, the 1500-yard trip to the shore proved deadly for many and those *lucky* enough to make it advanced under heavy fire up the beach and over the first ridge.

Herb and Stan were together at this stage and presumed unscathed, they advanced to a point forward of the lone pine ridge (an area that remained in Turkish hands or a no-mans land for the duration), where Herb was shot in the right arm, he reported that Stan temporarily dressed his wound and continued his advance. The Australians found themselves isolated and were instructed to fall back to form a defensive line, Herb made his way to the beach and was evacuated to Cairo for treatment. Stans friend Gordon Henderson reported they were well advanced when Stan after receiving a wound

to the head he was “*hit in the stomach by a shell which killed him*”. Stan was officially reported wounded, missing in action” and much to the distress of his family it would be more than a year until he was declared “killed in action”.

In the confusion of the landing both George and Vern had apparently survived unscathed, worryingly for his family, George was reported missing but later found to be with another unit. He reported that a bullet had hit his left breast pocket, passing through his pay book and bible before hitting ammunition and deflecting away.

His wound treated; Herb returned to his unit on the 6<sup>th</sup> June 1915 newly promoted to Sergeant of a *Bomber* section. On return Herb was given Stans Identification disc and paybook that were handed in after the 24-hour Armistice in May to bury the dead, it is presumed he was buried by the Turkish. He mailed these items home to his father.

With little time to reorganize it was decided that the 2nd Brigade would be sent Cape Helles for an attack on Krithia, and on the 6<sup>th</sup> of May they embarked on the *Folkstone*, an old trawler, for the two-hour trip to V beach. After landing they camped for two days and on the 8<sup>th</sup> were ordered to move up and commenced an attack on Krithia at 5:30pm under *murderous* fire. It was reported some men held shovels in front of their faces to ward off enemy fire. Vernon did not survive the attack, there is no record of the circumstances, but his name is recorded on the Helles Memorial. George and Herb were more fortunate and two weeks later, with other surviving sevenths boarded the minesweeper *Reindeer* and then the *Ionian* for the return to Anzac on the morning of the 17<sup>th</sup> of May.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of August in the fighting for Lone Pine Herb was again wounded, this time a gunshot wound to his left shoulder, the official history states, “*that the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion bombers went into Lone Pine at 6pm on the 7<sup>th</sup> of August, and in the heavy fighting of that night the next day almost all had been killed or wounded*”. On the 9<sup>th</sup> of August George’s luck ran out when he too received a gunshot wound to his right arm at Lone Pine. He was despatched to Alexandria, then Cairo for treatment, he would not return to Gallipoli.

Herb was shipped back to Cairo for treatment and recovery, returning to the Battalion, which was resting at Mudros, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of November. The battalion returned to Gallipoli on 25<sup>th</sup> November. The decision being made to withdraw all troops from the Peninsula, two Australians (Bill Scurry and Alf Lawrence) had invented an automatic system of firing rifles at intervals (water dripping from one jam tin to another) to deceive the Turks whilst the last troops left. At 3am on the 20<sup>th</sup> of December with the last few Australians ready to depart Scully and Lawrence were ordered to “pour your water”. They had set up 50 rifles along 400 metres of firing lines to fire sporadically over the next 45 Mins and on completion, they later reported, they returned to the darkened HQ to find Herb Thomas and the men waiting for them. They were among the last evacuated at 3:15am.

The battalion spent Christmas on Lemnos before embarking for Alexandria on the 4<sup>th</sup> of January and then rail to Tel-el-Kebir, 70 miles from Cairo. It was here that George returned to the Battalion, his return delayed by a bout of influenza, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of February he was promoted to Corporal. The battalion was receiving reinforcements as only 4 officers and 268 other ranks survived from their original strength of 35 Officers and 1211 ORs. By early February the battalion was camped on the Suez Canal as part of the defence of same, and on March the second they were told to prepare to leave for France and at 6am on the 26<sup>th</sup> of March they departed Alexandria aboard the *Megantic*.

Herb and George arrived with the Battalion at Marseilles on the 31<sup>st</sup> of March and within 2 hours were aboard a train heading for the Western Front. There they were billeted in farmhouses at the village of La Creche near the Belgium Border. After Familiarization training and some leave, they moved to the front line on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April. They were relieved in June and after time in reserve they entrained to the Somme at the beginning of July 1916.

The Battalion entered the battle for Pozieres on the 21<sup>st</sup> July immediately taking heavy casualties. On

the 25<sup>th</sup> of July newly promoted to Sergeant, George received gunshot wound to his chin and upper lip and was shipped to England for treatment. Herb survived initial fighting at Pozieres but the Battalion had lost 35% of its strength before being withdrawn, however on return to the front near Ypres his luck ran out. During a disastrous frontal attack to try and take strong point *against a hail of bullets* one platoon of C Company with Herbs Bombers succeeded in getting into the strong post but were later driven back, Herb receiving a severe gunshot wound to his right arm on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1917 and was shipped to England on the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Both men spent Christmas in England, Herb returning to France on the 16<sup>th</sup> of January and re-joining his unit on the 26<sup>th</sup>. George after further illness and time with a training Battalion would not return until the 25<sup>th</sup> of June. Meanwhile the battalion had wintered on the front near Bullecourt and on the 22 April as part of a raiding party on a German post Herb was again wounded, a gunshot wound to his left hand. He again returned to England.

By September the battalion was involved in the fighting around Ypres and on the 21<sup>st</sup> George was in the thick of it when again wounded this time shrapnel to his back and left arm. For this action he was awarded the Military Medal (MM), the citation reads:

*During the operations near Polygon de Zillebeke east of Ypres on 20/22<sup>nd</sup> September 1917 Sgt Holland rendered invaluable service to his Company by his courage and his coolness. On the C.S.M becoming a casualty this NCO took over the duties and materially assisted in constructing Strong Points and Maintaining supplies. He was wounded whilst making an important Reconnaissance.*

George was sent back to England to recover and after stint with a training battalion he re-joined the Seventh on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February 1918. Herb after treatment was also employed in a training capacity until his return to France and his Unit on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1918.

The battalion was to spend much of this time occupying the forward trenches near Amiens and was part of the Hundred Day Offensive including several major actions, culminating in the Armistice. The battalion sustained considerable casualties, Herb, however, seems to have come through unscathed. George having accidentally dislocated his elbow on the 3<sup>rd</sup> May, was sent back in England, returning on the 16 August.

In Mid-September 1918 It was decided to offer the remaining Gallipoli Veterans Australian Furlough, sadly only 13 men from the 7<sup>th</sup> were eligible for this leave. Amongst them was Herb Thomas and George Holland.

The battalion had suffered 1068 men killed and 2076 wounded from an original strength of 1023 men, receiving around 2800 reinforcements.

Herb and George embarked from Taranto aboard HS K.A. Hind for Australia on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 1918 and arrived at Melbourne on 24<sup>th</sup> November.<sup>1</sup>

The 13 “originals” remained close friends throughout their lives, often gathering with wives and children, my parents were among those children.

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgements to A,Dean, E.W, Gutteridge and R Austin