

## ANZAC SPIRIT AWARD

Ryan Schwarz



*Sergeant William Faint in his dress Uniform  
after his final promotion*

William Faint was born on 27<sup>th</sup> December, 1895, in New Hindmarsh (a sub-division of what is now the suburb of Hindmarsh<sup>1</sup>) in the Colony of South Australia. He was the youngest son of Thomas Faint and Sarah Alice (*nee* Nicholson), both of whom had migrated from the United Kingdom to Adelaide in 1888. William grew up at his parents' home at 37 Jervois Avenue, New Hindmarsh. William had seven siblings: three sisters and three brothers. His brothers Peter and Frank also served in the A.I.F (Australian Imperial Force); Frank was taken prisoner by the Germans<sup>2</sup>. Both of William's brothers returned to Australia at war's end.

William loved his family dearly. Later, amidst the hell that William experienced at Gallipoli, he would fondly recall them. At nights, as he crawled along Turkish lines to cut barbed wire, he imagined his family sitting around the fireplace, especially his mother and brothers Frank and Peter.<sup>3</sup> William attended Hindmarsh Public School and also served two years as a Senior Cadet from the age of 16. After finishing school, he continued to serve in the Militia in the 76 Infantry (the Hindmarsh Division). Before the war, William worked in the Locomotive Running Department at Mile End as an engine cleaner.<sup>4</sup>

On the 19<sup>th</sup> August 1914, William made the choice that he could do more for his country than cleaning train engines and so made the trip to Morphettville, along with 13 others from the Locomotive Running Department, to enlist. He was almost 19 years old at the time; his enlistment papers describe him as 5'9" (175 cm) tall and 168lbs (76kgs), and "composed of a young face"<sup>5</sup>. He was posted to the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, C Company, and was given the regimental number 355. On 20<sup>th</sup> October, 1914, William embarked on HMAT (His Majesty Australian Transport) *Ascanius*, and headed to Egypt reaching there in early December.

In April 1915, the ANZACs and other Allied troops were given the task of assaulting the Gallipoli peninsula. Russia had been struggling on the Eastern Front; the British Admiralty devised a strategy to not only provide much-needed military supplies to their beleaguered ally, but to defeat Germany's newest ally, the Ottoman Empire, as well. The plan necessitated a naval assault on the Turkish forces at the southern end of the Dardanelles Straits. This campaign, which began in February 1915, failed in its objectives. So, a full-scale land invasion

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Marsden, "A Short History of Hindmarsh", p.19

<sup>2</sup> Red Cross File No 1030609J, correspondence, pp.12-13

<sup>3</sup> Faint, p.10

<sup>4</sup> NAA: B2455, FAINT W, p.20

<sup>5</sup> NAA: B2455, FAINT W, p.8

of the Gallipoli peninsula was planned. This invasion, launched on 25<sup>th</sup> April 1915, would ultimately prove unsuccessful.

William departed Egypt with B and C Company for Gallipoli on board the destroyer *Foxhound*. He was amongst the first companies to storm ANZAC Cove in the early hours of 25<sup>th</sup> April, 1915. William was the last to leave his row boat. He later wrote about his dramatic arrival:

*“It was 10 minutes to four in the morning. I was in the last boat to near the shore. I saw the landing. Four machine guns opened fire...I had to jump in to the water up to my waist. The weight of my pack pulled me down. I scrambled ashore. I fell a few times as bullets hit stones and flew all around me. We scrambled up the hill with bayonets fixed....for the next two hours. It was hard work.”*<sup>6</sup>

The battalion suffered nearly 50% casualties in the first few days immediately after the landing.<sup>7</sup>

After being in the trenches for three weeks, William received a shrapnel wound in the cheek.<sup>8</sup> He departed Gallipoli on the hospital ship *Gascone* on 18<sup>th</sup> May and arrived in Alexandria two days later. While William recovered in hospital the Turks launched their largest counter-attack on the ANZAC beachhead. The Turks mustered 42,000 troops against 17,000 ANZACs. The Turkish offensive was a disaster. William returned to Ari Burnu on 25<sup>th</sup> June where he remained until 7<sup>th</sup> August. He was once again wounded with shrapnel, this time during the Battle of Lone Pine. This battle had been originally conceived as a diversionary attack along a relatively quiet sector of the Turkish defences so that 20,000 British troops could safely land at Suvla Bay<sup>9</sup>. The battle instead developed into one of the most ferocious hand-to-hand battles of the campaign. After his dispatch from Gallipoli, William disembarked at Cairo on 11<sup>th</sup> August; he was discharged from hospital on the 29<sup>th</sup> and eventually re-joined his battalion on 25<sup>th</sup> October. William remained at Gallipoli until the end of 1915, gaining promotion to Lance Corporal on 6<sup>th</sup> December, just two weeks before the evacuation of Allied forces from the peninsula. William departed from ANZAC Cove on 29<sup>th</sup> December aboard the *Seang Bee* and returned to Alexandria with the rest of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion<sup>10</sup>.

Whilst in Egypt, William was charged for committing a serious indiscretion. According to his war service records, it was initially thought serious enough for him to face court martial proceedings; however, these were dropped and William was demoted to Private and served 11 days in detention instead.<sup>11</sup> Still, having served his punishment, William was promoted to full Corporal on 1<sup>st</sup> March, 1916. Soon afterward, the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion was despatched to France where they would take part in bitter trench warfare on the Western Front from 1916 through to the end of 1918. Within six weeks of his arrival, however, William contracted pneumonia and was admitted to hospital at Ballieul on 18<sup>th</sup> April. He was discharged two weeks later and re-joined his unit.

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<sup>6</sup> Faint, pp.2-3

<sup>7</sup> Virtual War Memorial, 10<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion, <https://vwma.org.au/explore/units/1>

<sup>8</sup> NAA: B2455, FAINT W, p.7

<sup>9</sup> Grant, The Battle of Lone Pine

<sup>10</sup> NAA: B2455, FAINT W, p.8

<sup>11</sup> NAA: B2455, FAINT W, pp.45-47

On 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916, 80 battalions of the British and French armies went ‘over the top’ and attacked the Germans in the Somme Valley. They advanced into heavy machine-gun fire. A week-long artillery bombardment had inflicted little damage on the Germans’ defences, so on the first day of the offensive, British forces suffered 60,000 casualties with 20,000 dead<sup>12</sup>. This was a shocking military disaster for the British. Australia’s worst campaign would soon follow with the Battle of Pozières. Pozières would also be where the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion would first see action on the Western Front. The battle began on 23<sup>rd</sup> July. The battalion was tasked with securing the village of Pozières, a heavily fortified German position at the highest point of the battlefield. Following a gruelling 10-day battle and the relentless pounding of German artillery, the Australian forces, including the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion, held their ground.

In the midst of the bloody Battle of Pozières, on 1<sup>st</sup> August, that William was appointed Lance Sergeant. Just days later, the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion was committed to capturing Mouquet Farm near Pozières. The British wanted to capture the ridge beyond Pozières to create a gap in the German lines. They believed that by capturing Mouquet Farm it would further destabilise the Germans. The five weeks of fighting at Pozières and Mouquet farm led to over 23,000 Australian casualties, of whom 5000 were killed.<sup>13</sup> As historian Charles Bean wrote, “*Pozières is more deeply sewn with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth.*”<sup>14</sup> In October 1916, William was promoted to Sergeant as the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion moved to fight at Ypres, Belgium.

In March 1917, William was transferred to England to act as an instructor to the Third Training Battalion. He was placed on permanent staff at Larkhill from the 22<sup>nd</sup> March until the 21<sup>st</sup> April, whereupon he moved to Chelsea before being attached to the 67<sup>th</sup> Battalion.<sup>15</sup> It was during this time that William met Miss A. Allen, who would eventually become his fiancée.<sup>16</sup>

On the 5<sup>th</sup> October, William returned to Flanders Field in Belgium as the Third Battle of Ypres got underway. He served at Passchendaele until that campaign ground to a halt. In February 1918 he was sent back to England as an instructor once more. In April he attained a highly sought-after assignment in the Paris Guard. He re-joined the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion from the 20<sup>th</sup> July as the final push against Germany was undertaken. William took part in indisputable acts of courage that would lead to him being awarded a Military Medal and later a Bar.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Nelson, B., “Fromelles and Pozieres: ‘In Australia they will be proud of this’”

<sup>13</sup> Larkins, S., *Pozieres / Mouquet Farm, the Somme Valley, France*, Virtual War Memorial

<sup>14</sup> Nelson, B., “Fromelles and Pozieres: ‘In Australia they will be proud of this’”

<sup>15</sup> NAA: B2455, FAINT W, pp.47-48

<sup>16</sup> <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/146282>

<sup>17</sup> NAA: B2455, FAINT W., pp.35-36

At around 9am on the morning of 11<sup>th</sup> August, 1918, William died in the Battle of Lihons. Reports from his men state that he was shot down by a machine gun soon after 'going over', hit multiple times in the head and body.<sup>18</sup> William was just shy of his twenty-third birthday. He was buried with 12 other men in a grave near an old German casualty station and his body was never recovered. William's name is inscribed on the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, France. He left behind his grieving parents, siblings, fiancée and a grateful nation.



A 10th Battalion trench near Crepy Wood during the battle of Lihons

Lest we forget Sergeant William Faint.

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<sup>18</sup> Statement, Red Cross File No 1030609J, 3509 Pte C.N. HALL, B Cy, 10th Bn, 27 November 1918, p.4

Sergeant William Faint was described by his peers as one of the finest soldiers in his battalion. It was not by chance, as he consistently showed indisputable courage and unwavering mateship. William signed up for the war just a fortnight after it was declared. It appears that he was very patriotic and eager to 'do his bit' for King, Country and Empire. William's two near-death experiences at Gallipoli did not deter him from stepping into the line of fire for future engagements. On the Western Front, he displayed further incredible acts of courage.

On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1918, William earned the Military Medal (MM), a medal awarded to soldiers of the British and Commonwealth armies for "acts of gallantry and devotion to duty under fire"<sup>19</sup>. In his citation recommending William for the Military Medal, his Commanding Officer, Captain Gordon Campbell, praised his bravery: '

*On the morning of 23rd July, 1918, near Merris, Sgt. Faint located an enemy post while in charge of a small patrol. Carefully working his way to the rear of the post, Sgt. Faint rushed the post and captured 8 unwounded prisoners and 1 machine gun. [He] has always set a splendid example in active operations by his bravery and determination."*<sup>20</sup>

A week later, Captain Campbell again recommended William, this time for a bar to be added to his Military Medal:

*"In the attack on Merris on night 29/30<sup>th</sup> July 1918, Sgt. Faint took out a patrol of 5 men in front of our newly established position and captured 17 prisoners and a machine gun, besides killing a number of the enemy with bombs. Later during the same day, he was on patrol with 2 men and captured another enemy post, getting 5 prisoners and a machine gun. He showed great gallantry throughout the whole operation and set a fine example to the remainder of the platoon."*<sup>21</sup> The capture of Merris was described as a "beautifully neat piece of work."<sup>22</sup>

These actions took place in the time where 'peaceful penetrations' were operational on the Western Front. Small groups of Australians would take out German outposts without mounting major attacks, this took incredible skill, great courage and confidence. It was the kind of task that William excelled at. When William died in action at Crépy Wood near Lihons on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1918, Captain Campbell reported that William and his brigade had gained the ground they had fought for.<sup>23</sup> When William's fiancée was notified that her beloved future husband had been killed, she wrote: *"The only consolation that he died bravely, and I think by the sounds he was well liked... I don't think it's possible for me to forget him."*<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> [https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/wwone\\_soldiers/medals](https://guides.slv.vic.gov.au/wwone_soldiers/medals)

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C253804>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C253804>

<sup>22</sup> A History of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion 1914-1918, p.61

<sup>23</sup> Red Cross papers, Sgt. William Faint, p.11

<sup>24</sup> Red Cross papers, Sgt. William Faint, p.16

Bravery aside, William was also very considerate. When he was serving at Gallipoli, he received a pair of socks. It was very common for men to receive home-made gifts from strangers in 'Comfort Packs', but it was not so common for the soldier to write a letter back. However, that is precisely what William did. In a kind gesture, he wrote to the woman who made the socks, Miss Doris LeLievre, from Renmark: *"Dear Friend, just to let you know your pair of socks have reached my hands... Coming into this trip I was short of socks and I got a pair, so you know they reached an Adelaide boy...this leaves me in the best of health"*.<sup>25</sup> It is clear William took the time to recognise the small acts of kindness that took place in such dire circumstances.



*Sergeant William Faint's final collection of war medals*

William Faint's incredible but largely untold story of service in the First World War is inspiring and is worthy of being recounted. He left his home and his family in the prime of his life to give whatever assistance he could for the cause of freedom. He fought courageously and paid the ultimate sacrifice for us all.

*"We have through what you boys have done, a history of our own"*<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Renmark Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record, 16 Dec 191, p.4

<sup>26</sup> We're all Australian Now, Banjo Paterson