

Percy Frederick Sherman
1894–1915
– His life remembered –

In 1931, Corporal C.M. Geddes, late of the 3rd Battalion, Australian Infantry Forces (AIF), wrote a reflection piece published in the Sydney Morning Herald. It was entitled 'A day of days: One of the AIF's greatest – 19 May [1915]'. These are his words:

Many of our gallant men fell that day. Just two who were near me I would like to mention – Private Sherman, a lad of 19 from Moruya district and Lieutenant Street of Sydney. Should this be read by their relative, I should like them to know that all near me spoke of their great work that morning ... It has often struck me when thinking of the glory of Anzac Day, which we celebrate in Australia each year, that too few Australians know of that other great day. May 19 is indeed one of Australia's greatest days.¹

Private Sherman, the "lad of 19 from Moruya district", was Percy Frederick Sherman.

Percy was born at Braidwood, New South Wales (NSW), on 7th September 1894.² He was the eldest son of Frederick Sherman and Emma Martha Tomkins – they were married at St Columba Presbyterian Church, Woollahra, NSW, in 1892,³ before moving to the Southern Tablelands⁴ and later, the Southern Highlands of NSW.⁵

Percy's father, Frederick 'Sheerman', was born at Whitway, near Burghclere, Hampshire, England, in 1864.⁶ Frederick's father, Robert Sheerman, was a blacksmith.⁷ Their forebears, John and Frances West, established a charity in 1721 in England to provide pensions and scholarships, which exists to this day.⁸ Frederick's mother, Harriet Sheerman nee Palmer, was from a farming family also located at Burghclere.⁹ Frederick came to Australia as an artisan assisted immigrant in 1884.¹⁰ Around this time, he dropped an 'e' in his surname and Sheerman became Sherman. Frederick was a baker,¹¹ JP,¹² grazier¹³ and a businessperson, with bakeries at Braidwood and Moss Vale,¹⁴ and a horse-drawn carriage run from Moss Vale to Marulan, NSW.¹⁵

Percy's mother, Emma Martha Sherman nee Tomkins, was born at Yea, Victoria, Australia, in 1870.¹⁶ The Tomkins family was originally from Yorkshire, England – they moved to Ireland to supply horses for the British army.¹⁷ Emma's father, John Moffatt Tomkins, was born at Wexford, Ireland, and when he was five years old he sailed to Australia with his parents James Tomkins and Elizabeth Tomkins nee Moffatt, and two siblings, arriving at Port Phillip Bay, Victoria, in 1840.¹⁸ The family continued agricultural pursuits at Preston and Mansfield – in horses and refining the Hereford breed of cattle^{19,20} – and won first prize for a cow and calf at the inaugural Port Phillip Show.²¹ Emma's mother, Elizabeth Lowry Tomkins nee Henry, was born at Down, Ireland.²² She emigrated to Australia with her family when she was four years old, arriving in 1842.^{23,24} Elizabeth was the daughter of Mary Carswell and Robert Henry, JP – Robert served in the King's Life Guard²⁵ – they were formerly of Henry Hill, County Down, Ireland, and later of Kardinia Cattle Station, Victoria, Australia.²⁶ Emma's family moved to the Maitland district, NSW,²⁷ in the 1880s.

Percy had seven siblings, all of whom were born at Braidwood except his youngest sister, Gwen Rose, who was born at Moss Vale, NSW, in 1910.²⁸ William, who was born four years after Percy in 1898, died in infancy.²⁹

Percy's parents, Frederick and Emma, farewelled their children one by one as they left home. First to leave home was their eldest child, Annie Winifred (Nancy), and later their second daughter, Alice Harriet (Pet), to pursue careers in nursing. Nancy worked as a theatre sister until her marriage in 1923,³⁰ when she was 29 years old, and Pet worked as a children's nurse until her marriage in 1926,³¹ when she was 30.

Percy, their eldest son, was next to leave home. Before joining the AIF, Percy attended school at Braidwood.³² He worked for three years as a blacksmith, following generations of blacksmiths in his paternal Sheerman family line at Burghclere, England. Percy was employed by Richard Leonard Whitfield at Braidwood.³³ Within that time, over two years, Percy was a trainee in the Citizen Forces D-Company 43rd Infantry, Goulburn, under the Universal Training Regulations.³⁴ He played football³⁵ and

was a member of the local bicycle club.³⁶ The district newspaper described Percy as a smart, respectable young man and well-liked in the community.³⁷

In 1914, on 27th August, Percy was enlisted for service abroad at Kensington, NSW³⁸ – he joined on 21st August at the Regimental Office in Goulburn.³⁹ Percy's service number was 969,⁴⁰ falling within the first 1,000 recruits. He was one of the first of his district's volunteers to enlist.⁴¹ His enlistment details describe him as 20 years old [he was still 19], fair complexion, blue eyes and fair hair. Percy was declared fit for service by medical officer J.W.B. Bean, and assigned to the D Company, 3rd Battalion, 1st Infantry Brigade, Australian Imperial Force.⁴²

Percy left Sydney on HMAT Euripides on 20th October 1914.⁴³ A fellow traveller, Private Aus. Gould, described their departure from Australia – “All the Australian and New Zealand troopships left Albany together. It is a grand sight to see all the ships ploughing their way along. There are 37 ships altogether. That is not counting the eight cruisers as escorts.”⁴⁴ After travelling via Colombo and Aden,⁴⁵ during their passage through the Red Sea, a wireless message advised that the British Government had decided that the Australian Imperial Force, along with the New Zealanders, should disembark at Egypt “for the defence of the country and for training. They were to go into camp at once near Cairo and ... to go to the front from Egypt”.⁴⁶

The Australian and New Zealand troops (Anzacs) on board HMAT Euripides disembarked at Alexandria on 3rd December 1914, after being on board for seven weeks and two days;⁴⁷ an influenza epidemic at the Great Australian Bight; a rowdy day's sport crossing the equator;⁴⁸ and mass food poisoning at Port Said.⁴⁹ According to Private Henry Elliott, also of D Company, 3rd Battalion, they travelled by train to Cairo and then on to a desert location at Mena, where they set up camp, initially in the open. It was half a mile from the Great Pyramids – donkeys roamed through the camp of over 20,000 troops. Soon within the camp were “large mess rooms, writing rooms, fruit and stationery stalls, YMCA buildings, picture shows, stadiums, and swimming baths ... plenty of work, plenty to eat, not much money, and plenty of leave”.⁵⁰ Training was eight hours a day, six days a week.⁵¹

When Percy and his fellow Anzacs left camp at Mena, they did not know their destination. After censorship was lifted, their objective was revealed – an attack on the Dardanelles.⁵² The Anzacs anchored at the Greek Island of Lemnos from 12th April 1915 – they waited there for almost two weeks before proceeding to Gallipoli.⁵³

The harsh conditions of the Gallipoli landing at Anzac Cove on 25th April 1915 involved negotiating “barbed wire entanglements on the beach”,⁵⁴ and a “wild scramble up the precipitous, shell-swept cliffs”,⁵⁵ evading tree-camouflaged snipers and enduring an indescribable roar of heavy fire.⁵⁶ For Percy and most of the Anzacs, it was their first experience of military combat.⁵⁷ In Corporal Geddes' words, written on 5th May:

*It fairly makes one tremble with pride to hear of the magnificent gallantry of our boys ... that day. To look now at the cliffs and hills they scaled in the face of a withering fire from concealed enemies only makes one wonder if any such feats were ever performed by mortal man before ... you would doubt that it was humanly possible.*⁵⁸

According to a newspaper article published in 1926 – this is where the Anzacs were “creating a military reputation for the Commonwealth”.⁵⁹ It was a grim introduction to the days that followed.

Percy, alongside his fellow Anzacs, dug trenches continuously for three weeks to provide protection,⁶⁰ before a major Turkish attack occurred on 19th May. Their objective was to drive the Anzacs into the sea and retake the beach.⁶¹ The Anzacs numbered 17,000.⁶² The Turks outnumbered them with 42,000 soldiers. The attack was planned for 3:30 a.m. The Anzacs knew they were coming and waited in the pitch dark.⁶³

Early on the morning of the 19th May, the Turks responded to their long bugle call by coming out of their trenches.⁶⁴ The Turkish attacked in waves along the entire Anzac position⁶⁵ – they were repelled and the attack failed by noon.^{66,67} In the words of official war correspondent Charles Bean, “So decisive had been the repulse that not until the closing phase of the campaign was the notion of a further general assault in this zone ever again entertained by the enemy”.⁶⁸

About 3,000 Turks were killed that day and 160 Anzacs.⁶⁹ In a letter home written during active service, John Malone wrote, "Poor Percy Sherman was killed alongside of me".⁷⁰

On that day, 19th May, three weeks into the campaign at Gallipoli, Private Percy Sherman, a signaller, was killed in action. He was 20 years old. Percy was buried the same day at Walker Ridge Road, Gallipoli, by chaplain Captain McKenzie⁷¹ who wrote in his diary at the time, "I thought so much of the of the many sad hearts in Aust. when they know of their losses".⁷² Percy is commemorated at The Nek Cemetery, Gallipoli, Special Memorial #4.⁷³ Percy's name appears in the 44th casualty list under 'Heroes of the Dardanelles'.⁷⁴ In his statement of active service, Percy received special mention for acts of conspicuous gallantry or valuable services.⁷⁵

An unofficial truce began the following day – which became official on 24 May – to bury the dead and attend to the wounded. It was the only officially sanctioned ceasefire during the First World War.⁷⁶ Charles Bean credits that time as a sobering turning point in the Anzac's attitude towards the Turk – their "unseen enemy" became real. In his words, "After the terrible punishment inflicted upon the brave but futile assaults, all bitterness faded".⁷⁷

In 1915, three months after his brother Percy's death, Edgar Robert Sherman made the decision to leave home and go to war. He was enlisted at Goulburn, NSW, on 21st August 1915⁷⁸ – exactly the same day a year after Percy joined – his service number was 1942.⁷⁹ Edgar was first assigned to the 6th Light Horse Regiment (13th Reinforcements) and later 106th Howitzer Battery, France. Edgar's war service included roles as gunner, driver and shoe smith (farrier). Edgar died of wounds from a bomb,⁸⁰ received in action on 30th September 1917 – he was 22 years old. Edgar is buried at The Huts cemetery, Dickebusch, three miles south-west of Ypres, West Flanders, Belgium.⁸¹

In 1922, it was youngest son Frank's turn to leave home. He was one of the first intake of pupils at the newly established Yanco Agricultural High School in Leeton Shire, NSW, approximately 450 kilometres from home. By then, his older brother, Sydney Albert, was preparing for a career in mental health.⁸² Frank's youngest sister, Gwen Rose, three years his junior, remained at home.

Not two weeks after the school opened, Frank's life was cut short on Saturday 4th March 1922⁸³ in a fatal drowning accident in the Murrumbidgee River.^{84,85} Frank was 14 years old.⁸⁶

Three brothers left home, never to return. Percy, Edgar and Frank are memorialised on their parent's headstone beneath the Bhutan cypress trees at Christ Church Anglican Church graveyard in Bong Bong near Moss Vale, NSW. Their parents, Frederick and Emma Sherman, died within two weeks of each other in 1946.⁸⁷

From the time that he joined, Percy served in the AIF for 272 days. In a letter to the Minister of Defence dated 11th July 1915, Percy's eldest sister, Nurse Sherman (Annie Winifred Lewis), requested information about the death of her brother. At the close of the letter she wrote, "All we had we gave for the country".⁸⁸

Descendants of the Sherman family
hold the memories of their lost sons close to their hearts,
each generation passing the treasured stories of their lives to the next.

We will remember them.

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- ⁸⁵ "The drowning fatality at Yanco Agricultural High School," *Narrandera Argus and Riverina Advertiser*, March 10, 1922, 2, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/119949642>
- ⁸⁶ "Birth record of Frank Daniel Sherman, 22165/1907," NSW Government: Births, deaths and marriages, 2025, <https://familyhistory.bdm.nsw.gov.au>
- ⁸⁷ "Memorial of Sherman family, Christ Church Anglican Church, Bong Bong (Moss Vale) graveyard," [located close to the church] – In loving memory of Emma M. Sherman, passed away 6 Nov 1946 and Frederick Sherman passed away 26 Oct 1946, at rest. Also their sons - Percy F. Sherman killed in action Gallipoli 19 May 1915, Edgar R. Sherman died of wounds France 30 Sep 1917, Frank D. Sherman accidentally drowned Yanco 4 March 1922.
- ⁸⁸ Annie Winifred Sherman, "Correspondence from Nurse Sherman of Molong Hospital, Forbes Street, Sydney, to the Minister for Defence," July 11, 1915, 9 of 43 documents, <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=8082407>