

Captain Cedric Holroyd Permezel

Rod Martin

Cedric Permezel was extremely keen to do his duty in 1914. He volunteered for the military forces within fifteen minutes of the news of the outbreak of war reaching Australia. The twenty-two year-old then applied for an officer's commission in the AIF on 14 August 1914. He had been a member of 58 Infantry (militia) Battalion ('The Essendon Rifles') for more than three years before the war, rising to the rank of captain, and he was awarded the same rank in the AIF's 7 Battalion – commanded by his former civilian CO, Lieutenant-Colonel Harold 'Pompey' Elliott.

Along with the rest of the Battalion, Cedric trained at Broadmeadows between August and October of that year, all of them expecting initially to be sent to the war in Europe as soon as they were ready. That day duly came on 18 October when A20 HMAT *Hororata* departed from Port Melbourne. It would appear, however, that Cedric remained behind and then transferred to the first reinforcements of 7 Battalion early in November. He may have stayed behind to train those new recruits – one of whom was his younger brother, Eric – or he may have specifically asked to be with the first reinforcements as he knew that his brother was joining up. Whatever the case, he sailed with those reinforcements on A32 HMAT *Themistocles* on 22 December, joining the initial party in Egypt the next month. Their target was to be Gallipoli, not the Western Front as most had assumed.

While the rest of 7 Battalion trained in the sands of Egypt and misbehaved in the back streets of Cairo, Cedric was assigned as second in command to accompany a party of 900 British-born imperial reservists as they returned to Britain to be assigned. When he returned to Egypt, he was attached to headquarters for a while, and was involved in organizing reinforcements as they arrived from Australia. We are unsure if Cedric was involved in the initial attack at Gallipoli on 25 April. He may have remained in Egypt with other reinforcements, rather than sailing with those for 7 Battalion. 'Pompey's' troop lost eighteen officers in the initial attack and approximately 400 other men. Reinforcements were needed desperately. Once they arrived on the beach, however, they may have had some difficulty in finding 7 Battalion.



Supply base, Anzac Cove, 26 April 1915

(AWM G00915)

Its target on landing was supposed to be Hill 971; a vital spot of high land on the main ridge of the peninsula, whence moves further east towards the Dardanelles Straits could be planned and carried out. However, the Anzac forces were put ashore in the wrong place. Instead of finding an open plain in front of them, they met very different country, described by Ross McMullin as rugged ridges and ravines covered by obstructive, waist-high undergrowth. While under constant fire, the soldiers had to scramble for cover and attempt to make their way up those ridges and ravines towards the first line of Turkish trenches. Casualties were very high and the men were scattered over a large area. ‘Pompey’ Elliott then struggled to establish what he called a rendezvous and gather the men together. It took several days before the survivors were able to regroup. By 30 April, Elliott’s command had lost more men than any other battalion.

Whatever day he had left for Gallipoli, Cedric had certainly arrived by the start of May and joined his compatriots. Despite the large losses of men, Cedric and the remainder of the battalion were sent south as part of 2 Brigade to Cape Helles on 5 May to assist the British in their attempts to capture the village of Krythia. As a result of several incompetently planned and executed attacks, the brigade lost one-third of its men. No significant territory was captured.

The further depleted battalion returned to Anzac Cove (as it was now called) on 17 May and resumed its defence of the beachhead. In early July, the men relieved 8 Battalion in the front-line trenches up on the ridges and moved into a new position at Steele’s Post, above Monash Valley, on 8 July.



Steele’s Post, showing dugouts on the lower slope
(AWM A00745)

Steele's Post overlooked an important enemy machine gun nest, known as German Officers' Trench. It was only fifty metres away and could sweep a large section of the ridge with devastating fire. The Anzacs had been attempting to tunnel into the ridge and mine the trench, with some success. By the time 7 Battalion arrived, two mines had been successfully exploded – but the nest was still there. The Turks were concerned that the Anzacs would capture it, and began a countering bombardment of the post just as Elliott's men moved into position. They also did some of their own tunnelling to counteract the Allied efforts and, on 8 July, they broke into the Australian tunnels. McMullin tells us that Elliott quickly sent in a party led by Cedric and another officer to drive the Turks out. After they departed, he became concerned that he had sent the men into an unknown situation (neither they nor he had ever been in the tunnels) that could be disastrous. He rushed into them himself with just two men in tow. At that time he did not know that Cedric's group was yet to enter the area. He and the two men came under fire from the Turks, and the two soldiers ran back, convinced that Elliott had been killed. Now on his own, Elliott was moving forward carefully when he heard a noise behind him. He thought it might be Cedric's party, so he whispered, "Is that you, Permezel?" There was no answer – because Cedric and his fellow-officer, having been informed by the retreating soldiers that Elliott was dead, suspected a Turkish trap. Cedric was actually leading a small party with the purpose of recovering the lieutenant-colonel's body. Eventually Cedric asked the whisperer to identify himself by a nickname. This Elliott was able to do ('Bob Elliott') as he and Cedric knew each other well from their days together in the Essendon Rifles. Once reunited, they moved forwards again, and Cedric organized a chain of men to pass sandbags into the tunnel to build a barricade. Cedric urged 'Pompey' to let him put up the barrier, but Elliott refused and quickly constructed it himself.



Steele's Post, May 1915, showing dugouts on the seaward side. Turkish snipers occupied the opposite ridge. (AWM G 00942)

Three days later, 7 Battalion was ordered to participate in a feint to keep Turkish troops in the area while a major attack took place at Cape Helles. The men were to initiate a bomb assault at a spot called Dyer's Crater. This led to a Turkish counter-attack and long-range shellfire, which then persisted for several days. Elliott wrote to his wife that the battalion's trenches were "hell upon earth . . . [with] men . . . blown to pieces by shell or crushed to death by the masses of earth blown down upon them . . . " Then he went on to say:

Poor Capt Permezel had his leg frightfully shattered. It is said he must lose it.

In a later letter to the mayor of Essendon, and with the benefit of hindsight, Elliott elaborated:

Captain Permezel, although he had his leg carried off by a six-inch howitzer shell, and was dying, calmly took out his notebook and sent me as report asking that another officer be sent to take his place.

Removed from the line of battle, Cedric was quickly evacuated to the beach and transported to the hospital ship HMHS *Gascon*, lying about five kilometres off Gaba Tepe. There he died at around 2.30 am on 14 July.

Captain Cedric Permezel's body was buried at sea. As he has no known grave on the Gallipoli Peninsula, his name is recorded with other Anzacs on the Lone Pine Memorial.



Lone Pine Memorial (Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Sources

Australian War Memorial

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