

Temporary Sergeant Alexander Gladstone Galland

Rod Martin



(The All-Australia memorial)

August 1914 was a heady time in Australia. Britain had declared war against Germany and Austria-Hungary on the fourth of the month and Australia, through its new prime minister, Andrew Fisher, one month later pledged support to the last man and the last shilling. Crowds of young men besieged the recruiting stations around the nation, eager to do their bit for king and empire and looking forward to the excitement of battle and the chance to see some other parts of the world. Among the crowds in Melbourne was twenty-eight year-old Alex Galland. He was a storeman by trade, born and raised in Ascot Vale and still living there with his mother. At 190 centimetres tall and weighing seventy-two kilos, he was described by a comrade as being tall and well-built, and possessing fair, curly hair. Alex had spent five years in the militia, probably the local 58 Infantry Regiment (the 'Essendon Rifles') commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Harold 'Pompey' Elliott, so he was well-used to military life and discipline. He enlisted on 12 August and, along with many other members of the Essendon Rifles, he was assigned to 7 Battalion, commanded by . . . 'Pompey' Elliott.

Alex and the other new recruits trained at the Broadmeadows camp, and then embarked on A20 HMAT *Hororata* on 19 October 1914, ostensibly bound for the conflict in Europe.



The First AIF boarding HMAT *Hororata* at Port Melbourne, October 1914
(AWM C02491)

Soon after, the men arrived in Egypt and transferred to a training camp at Mena, just outside Cairo. Their target was to be Gallipoli, not the Western Front as most had assumed.

7 Battalion sailed for the Dardanelles in April 1915. On the twenty-fifth of that month, 'Pompey's' men went ashore as part of the second wave, early in the morning.



7 Battalion boats landing at Anzac Cove, 25 April 1915
(AWM P00229.001)

Their 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 at 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.

Despite the large losses of men, Alex 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 Krynithia. 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. While there, Alex was promoted to the rank of lance-corporal on 6 June. 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. 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



Steele’s Post

(AWM A00745)

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 to stop the Turks' advance. After some confusion, a close call with the Turks and 'Pompey's' own involvement, a sandbag barrier was eventually constructed. Engineers eventually blew that part of the tunnels with dynamite and created a new crater, quickly called Dyer's after the engineering officer in charge.

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 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 . . ."

7 Battalion spent time in and out of the dangerous Steele's Post until ordered to participate in an attack at Lone Pine in August. Designed as one of a number of feints to draw Turkish attention away from a landing of British reinforcements at Suvla Bay to the north, the Battle of Lone Pine was one of the few allied victories at Gallipoli. 7 Battalion took over the trenches there after 1 Brigade had captured them, and then held them against repeated Turkish counter-attacks. Four of the men won Victoria Crosses for their bravery at this time, but eighty-seven others made the supreme sacrifice.



7 Battalion men at Gallipoli, August 1915

(AWM C01029)

Despite Lone Pine, the Allies could not gain overall control of the peninsula and a stalemate ensued. During this time, Alex was diagnosed with influenza and then enteric fever, and he was evacuated to a hospital at Mudros on the island of Lemnos. He was sufficiently ill to be evacuated further to England, and he sailed on the British hospital ship *Aquitania* in October. Alex was to spend several months in England recovering from his illness and then convalescing. By the time he returned to his unit in August 1916 it was located in the Somme Valley in France and had already lost many men in the murderous



HMHS *Aquitania* (left) at Mudros, 1915. She was the sister-ship of the ill-fated *Lusitania*, sunk by a German u-boat in the Atlantic in April that year with the loss of approximately 1 100 lives. The ship on the right is the RMS *Olympic*, sister of the equally ill-fated *Titanic*. (AWM H10368)

Battle of Pozières, which began the previous month and was still going on. 7 Battalion had two active sessions in this battle: 23-27 July and 15-21 August. When it was finally relieved on the last-mentioned date, the battalion's strength was listed as twenty-six officers and 547 other ranks. It was depleted by almost fifty percent.

The men moved north into Belgium and were based near the town of Ypres. They stayed there until late October, alternately resting, recuperating and training in reserve and then spending time in the front line. They then moved back to the Somme, spending what has been described as a horrendous winter in the trenches near Mametz.



Icy conditions on the Somme, January 1917

(AWM E00171)

It was while on the Somme that Alex was promoted to the rank of corporal in late November. The following January, to rationalise and strengthen their front, the Germans staged a strategic retreat to their heavily fortified Hindenburg Line. 7 Battalion played its part in moving forward and occupying some of the territory now abandoned. Alex was involved, but was struck down with appendicitis the following month and evacuated to Reading War Hospital in England, classified as a severe case.

When Alex left hospital he spent some time at Hurdcott Camp, west of Salisbury, before returning to the trenches on 13 August. By that time, the Third Battle of Ypres had begun. 7 Battalion was based near Bailleul in northern France, having withdrawn to that area after being badly mauled at Bullecourt in April-May. The men were in training for involvement in the battle the following month. The battalion's numbers were at full strength, but it may be that there was a need for experienced non-commissioned officers and that is why Alex was appointed as an acting sergeant (without the extra pay!) on 24 August.

The battalion began moving north towards Belgium on 13 September, the commanding officer having received preliminary orders for a 'forthcoming stunt' in which the unit was to participate. The 'stunt' became known as the Battle of Menin Road, located near Ypres. At dawn on 20 September, 1 and 2 Divisions advanced side by side in heavy mud after overnight rain. Les Carlyon writes that many of them were wet from the waist down and carrying several kilos of mud on each boot (as well as their twenty-seven kilo packs) as they assembled for the jump-off. Despite these handicaps, the troops gained a limited victory. They advanced about 1 200 metres, but at the cost of 5 000 casualties. The total gain in territory as a result of this battle was about nine square kilometres. As Carlyon points out, it was hardly going to win the war.

The divisions were then withdrawn from the front and went into reserve, 7 Battalion being based at Steenvoorde in northern France. Its numbers had been reduced by almost fifty percent. While there, Alex was appointed to the rank of temporary sergeant (again, probably with no extra pay!) on 27 September. The success at Menin Road and then nearby Polygon Wood on 26 September inspired British commander-in-chief Sir Douglas Haig to plan more assaults, hoping to achieve his initial aims of capturing the small village of Passchendaele and then using that base as a springboard for seizing the German-held portion of the Belgian coast and the submarine pens located therein. Haig's next target was the strategic ridge at Broodseinde.

7 Battalion arrived at Westhoek Ridge on 2 October. The Germans knew something was afoot and began shelling the Australian positions on the third. This continued through the night and up to the jumping off time of 6.00 am on the fourth.

And that was the approximate time when Alex was killed by one of the shells.

Interviewed later by the Red Cross, Private J. Charleville said that Alex was in the front line, waiting to advance. A shell exploded nearby and killed Alex and a lieutenant. Another witness, Corporal W. White, said that Alex's head was blown off. This may or may not be correct, as he also said that Alex was a captain, so it may be a case of mistaken



A shell hole near Ypres, 3 October 1917

(AWM E00707)

identity. Either way, Alex was definitely dead, lying in the trench. Private Charleville also commented that he did not know if Alex was ever buried. The evidence would suggest that the answer was 'no' because Alex's body was never found, identified and given a proper burial. It may have been dismembered or buried by a subsequent shell.



Woods and no man's land at Broodseinde Ridge, 4 October 1917.

(AWM E00961)

As Alex's body was never found, his name was inscribed on the Menin Gate War Memorial in Ypres.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

In 1967, Alex's nephew claimed the specially issued Gallipoli Medal on his behalf.

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