

# Private Thomas Henry Aldridge

## Rod Martin

In March 1915, labourer Tom Aldridge enlisted in the Australian Army in Euroa, Victoria. Almost thirty-one years old, Tom was quite a big man for his time, over eighty kilos in weight, and standing 175 centimetres tall. He had a fair complexion, with light brown hair and blue-grey eyes. It may be that Tom attempted to enlist when war broke out in the previous August, but was rejected because of bad teeth. Embarrassed by riches in the form of multitudes of applicants, the doctors in 1914 were able to pick and choose, and tooth decay was one of the barriers to selection stipulated by the military. By March 1915, perhaps, some doctors were more lenient. Certainly, the government wanted to keep recruitment numbers up, and turning blind eyes to requirements that were quite rigidly enforced previously may have been a way of doing it.

Tom's life may have been a lonely one. It would seem that he was an orphan, as he failed to cite any next of kin ('not known') on his initial attestation form. When the duplicate was made soon after, and in possible response to pressure from the army, he named an uncle, Mr. T. Donovan of Wolseley Parade in Kensington as his next of kin – hence his association with the Essendon-Flemington District. Just how close Tom was to this man remains unknown. It would appear that Tom did not live in Flemington, as he enlisted in Euroa, and was commemorated after his death in the small settlement of Ruffy, near Mangalore. What is more, no commemorative notice appeared in the *Argus* newspaper after Tom's death, and Mr. Donovan was no longer at the Kensington address by 1920 – as evidenced by the fact that Tom's medals and memorial plaque were never claimed. His records indicate that Mr. Donovan did accept Tom's personal effects when they were sent back to Australia during the war. However, there is no evidence of him replying to a request for information on next of kin and, by late 1920, he is referred to as 'untraceable'. The medals and plaque were placed in store.

Tom was assigned to 6 Reinforcements, 14 Battalion. He trained at Broadmeadows and embarked with his compatriots on A62 HMAT *Wandilla* on 17 June.



(AWM PB1150)

The ship duly arrived in Egypt sometime in July and Tom transferred to Gallipoli at the end of the month. He and the other 104 members of 6 Reinforcements arrived onshore on 2 August. By that time, the original members of 14 Battalion had been involved in the action since the first landing on 25 April and had taken up a position at a precarious spot called Courtney's Post (after the battalion's commander), along the lip of the newly named Monash Valley.



Troops digging support trenches at Courtney's Post

(AWM A01210)

From the top they faced the Turks across a narrow gully. Behind them was a steep cliff that fell away to a gully below. Alan Moorehead tells us that 'no man's land' between the combatants was no larger than a small room, and the Turks could easily toss hand grenades across this space into the Anzac trenches. 14 Battalion held on to this spot resolutely despite determined Turkish efforts during early May to retake it and break through to the beach. A massive attack by the Turks was carried out on 19 May and the battalion's Lance-Corporal Albert Jacka won the first Australian Victoria Cross of the war while fighting with his mates to repel the assault. From then on, 14 Battalion became known as 'Jacka's Mob'.

The Turks suffered 10 000 casualties in this unsuccessful attack, 3 000 of them deaths.

After this foray, the Turks retired to their trenches, and a regimen of bomb-throwing and sniping on both sides was established. The Turks were never able to dislodge 14 Battalion from its position on the front line.

All men need rest and recuperation, however, and the battalion was relieved in mid-July. It moved into reserve in the appropriately named Reserve Gully. The rest was almost over by the time Tom appeared on the scene, however. In early August, incorporating newly arrived British troops, the Allies planned to break out at a number of spots along that line in order to drive across the Gallipoli Peninsula and take the forts guarding the Dardanelles Straits. On 8 August, the troops already in position would stage a number of feints, designed to take Turkish attention away from the British reinforcements landing at Suvla Bay, to the north of Anzac Cove.



14 Battalion men in their dugout, Courtney's Post (AWM A03803)

A number of attacks would be made that day, including ones that have become infamous: Lone Pine and The Nek. Another target was called Hill 971 and 14 Battalion was assigned to assist in taking that position. At 3 am on 8 August, the troops assembled and moved forward. They did actually take the hill but met strong resistance very quickly and the battalion's war diary indicates that chaos and Turkish counter-attacks ensued, the Allies suffering heavy losses. By 7.30 am, the order came through for 4 Brigade (including 14 Battalion) to retire. By the end of the day, 14 Battalion had ninety-three wounded and 128 missing. The attack had been an expensive failure, as had most of the other attacks planned for that day. The one exception was the assault at Lone Pine, but the position was gained at terrible human cost (10 000 casualties, 9 000 of them deaths) and its capture had no impact on the overall strategic situation.



Looking north to Hill 971

(AWM G01802)

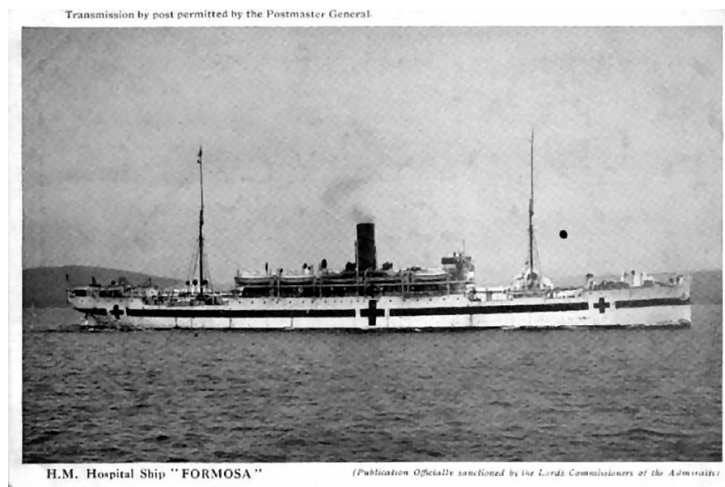
After the unsuccessful attack, the battalion relieved a British unit in Australia Gully and dug in under periodic enemy fire. Of great concern were the activities of Turkish snipers and their howitzers, and the troops had to deepen the trenches to provide more protection.

On 21 August, after a preliminary bombardment of the Turkish positions, 14 Battalion was involved in an afternoon attack on Hill 60. At 3.45 pm, 104 men attacked the hill, but were hit heavily by Turkish machine gun and rifle fire, and were unable to advance. At 4 pm, 100 more advanced, but suffered just as heavily. The survivors reached a bank and dug in late in the day, only to be shelled overnight. They were able to hold the position until 1.50 am on 23 August, when they were relieved by men from 16 Battalion. They had suffered 103 casualties, including the battalion chaplain, who was killed.

The field diary for 26 August indicates that things were quiet at 14 Battalion's position. "Nothing special to report," wrote the commanding officer, "Quiet both day and night on our front." However, his report for the next day noted that fifty-eight men had been wounded, so his definition of 'quiet' probably meant that no major action had occurred. Sporadic sniper fire, shrapnel shells and heavy artillery bombardments were still the order of the day.

One of the fifty-eight wounded was Tom. He was hit in the back, abdomen and shoulder. The report says he had 'GSW' – gun shot wounds. However, that term was sometimes used in a general sense to indicate any kind of wound. Given the multiple hits, it may be more likely that he was struck by shrapnel or splinters from a high explosive shell.

Tom was evacuated to the hospital ship HMHS *Formosa*, situated offshore, and died there on 28 August.



([www.gallipoli-association.org](http://www.gallipoli-association.org))

He was buried at sea and, because he had no identifiable grave, his name was registered on the Lone Pine Memorial at Gallipoli.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

## Sources

Australian War Memorial

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

National Archives of Australia

Moorehead, Alan: *Gallipoli*, London, NEL Mentor, 1974

[www.gallipoli-association.org/forum/forum\\_posts.asp](http://www.gallipoli-association.org/forum/forum_posts.asp)