

Private John Eddy Phillips

Rod Martin

The tiny settlement of Walhalla sits in a deep valley in the Gippsland mountains. Today, it is a popular tourist spot. When John Eddy Phillips was born there in 1885, however, the town was at its peak as a gold producer, supporting a population of around 5000. Eddy, as it would seem he preferred to be called, grew up in the bustling metropolis that boasted fifteen hotels (but only four churches!), two breweries, a school containing almost 600 students, a jail and its own newspaper. The occupation of his father (also John Eddy) is not known. However, it is probably a good bet that he worked either in or for one of the two main mines in the town – the Long Tunnel and the Long Tunnel Extended. Alternatively, he may have worked as a timber-getter, denuding the surrounding hills and mountains of wood to be used as stays in the mines or fuel for the ore-crushing batteries that ran twenty-four hours a day.



Walhalla in its heyday (circa 1897) (www.users.on.net/~tphefley/photo-album/Walhalla)

In 1899, however, tragedy struck the family when John Eddy Senior died at the age of fifty-two. His wife Margaret was left with four children to support. At the age of fourteen, young Eddy, the second oldest, may well have been working already in one of the town's industries. However, the heyday of Walhalla was over. The gold was being worked out, jobs were drying up and people were leaving town. The railway from Moe finally arrived in 1910, but the last mine closed down only three years later, and Walhalla soon became little more than a ghost town.

Along with many others, Eddy was probably already gone by 1913. When he enlisted on 10 September 1914, he was living in Flemington. He was twenty-nine years old by this time, single, and working as a horse driver.

Once in the army, Eddy was assigned to 14 Battalion, part of 4 Brigade, commanded by Colonel John Monash. He did his initial training at Broadmeadows - earning his first demerit when he was fined one pound on 23 November for 'breaking camp' - and sailed from Melbourne on A38 HMAT *Ulysses* on 22 December of that year.

The first troops headed not for Europe as was originally assumed, but for Egypt. Once there, 4 Brigade was established in a training camp at Heliopolis, to the north-east of Cairo. It was going to be part of the assault on the Dardanelles, the grand British plan to knock Turkey out of the war. It was while they were at Heliopolis that Eddy went AWOL in early February 1915. It must have been for a considerable period of time (perhaps he was magnetically attracted to the delights of nearby Cairo!) because he was put on the defaulters' register for twenty-eight days – which probably meant incarceration of some form and hard labour.

Punishment over, Eddy became part of the landing at Gallipoli that began on 25 April 1915. As a member of 14 Battalion, he probably went ashore in the afternoon. Because the Australians and New Zealanders were landed in the wrong place, confusion prevailed for the first few days as the Allied forces attempted to gain footholds on the rugged cliffs. Once they did, 14 Battalion was regrouped and ordered to take up 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

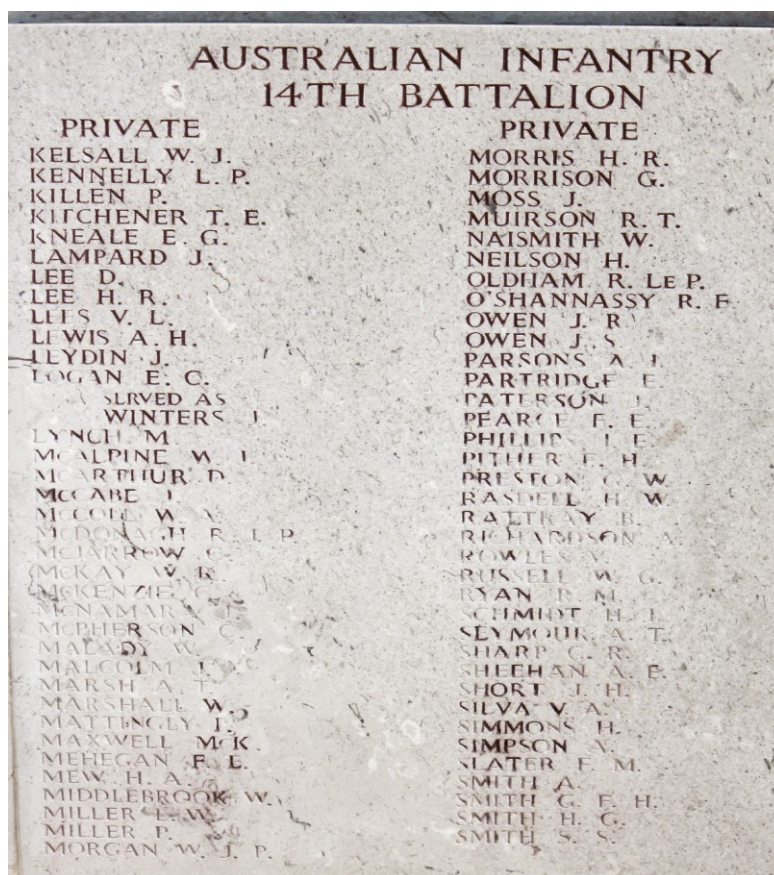
(AWM A01210)

From the lip 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 wider 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.

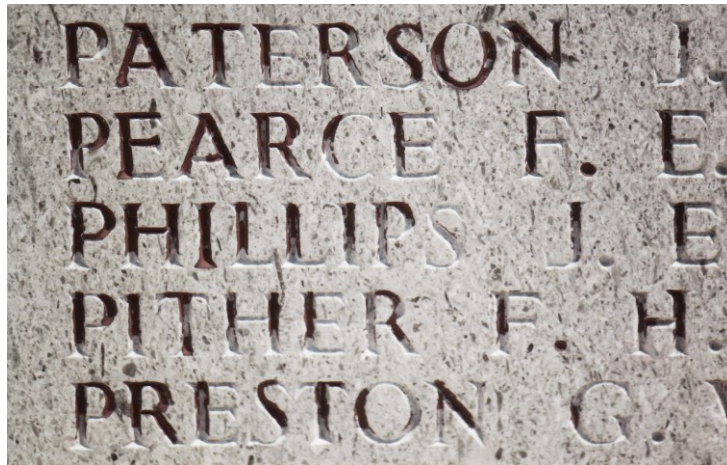
After this foray, the Turks retired to their trenches, and a regimen of bomb-throwing and sniping on both sides was established. The Turks were never able to dislodge 14 Battalion from its position on the front line. In early August, however, the Allies planned to break out at a number of spots along that line in order to drive across the Gallipoli Peninsula and take the forts guarding the Dardanelles Straits. Their efforts would be reinforced by new British troops landing at Suvla Bay. One target was called Hill 971 and 14 Battalion was assigned to assist in taking this position. At 3 am on 8 August, the troops assembled and moved forward. However, they 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 to retire. The attack had been an expensive failure.

Some time during the night or early morning, Eddy had been killed in the action. The fact that the official documents state clearly that he was killed during the attack indicates that he was identified and possibly buried where he fell. It is also quite possible, however, that his body had to be left out in the open as his comrades retreated, and then slowly rotted away in 'no man's land'. If the other troops did have a chance to quickly bury him on the slope, then his resting place was obliterated at a later time, for he was officially listed at the end of the war as having no known grave. In consequence, his name was recorded on the Lone Pine Memorial established by the Imperial War Graves Commission after the war ended.



14 Battalion Tablet, Lone Pine Memorial

(Robert Cathie)



A rather sad event occurred in the following year. The military authorities wrote to Margaret Phillips, saying that they had received a report that one of Eddy's army comrades, a Driver Kennedy, had written home to say that Eddy was still alive. Evidently, a man named Harry Brummage reported to Kennedy that he had seen Eddy in a London hospital, and he had lost a leg. The military authorities said that they would investigate this story and let her know the outcome. She must have waited with bated breath for the reply, obviously hoping beyond hope that her son was alive. However, the whole thing was either uninformed hearsay or a bad case of mistaken identity, as the army wrote back later to confirm that Eddy had died at Gallipoli.

Eddy was survived by his mother, two brothers and a sister. There is no record of any of his siblings having children.



(The Age, 6 October 1915)

Sources

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