

Driver Douglas Gibbs Baker

Rod Martin

The so-called 'Dinkum Aussies' were those who enlisted in Australia between August 1914 and April 1915, a halcyon period for the military when eager young men besieged the recruiting offices, keen to do their bit for king and country and thrilled with the prospect of a 'bit of sport' overseas. One of the first of these brave souls was Doug Baker, a twenty-four year-old from St. Kilda. Born in Ascot Vale, he was a bookkeeper by trade, 174 centimetres tall, sixty-seven kilos in weight, and possessing fair hair and brown eyes. He signed up on 18 August and was assigned to 6 Battery of 2 Field Artillery Brigade with the rank of driver.

Whether Doug was used to handling horses is unknown. Certainly, his trade as a bookkeeper would have done nothing to prepare him. However, skilled or not, he would quickly become familiar with the teams of horses that were used to pull the British eighteen-pounder guns that were the mainstay of the Australian artillery during the war. Once his gun was positioned, Doug would probably assist in the loading and firing of it.

After his basic training, Doug embarked with other members of the First Australian Imperial Force on A9 HMAT *Shropshire* on 20 October 1914, initially headed for the Western Front in Europe.



HMAT *Shropshire* May 1917

(AWM P01843.001)

While *enroute*, the convoy was diverted to Egypt. The decision had been made to invade the Dardanelles and, hopefully, knock Turkey out of the war. 1 AIF landed in Egypt in December and spent Christmas at Mena Camp, near Cairo.



2 FAB men enjoying Christmas Dinner, Egypt 1914 (AWM C00314)

After spending four months at Mena (and possibly sampling the fleshpots and bazaars of Cairo!), Doug and his compatriots sailed for Lemnos Island in mid-April. On the twenty-fifth of the month, the landing was made at Gallipoli. The first gun (from 4 Battery) went ashore that same afternoon and immediately came under fire from the Turkish positions. It fired a few rounds in return in the early evening. Most of the guns and horses began going ashore on the twenty-sixth.



Men and horses of 4 Battery landing at Gallipoli (AWM J03269)

It was soon realised that the hilly terrain of Gaba Tepe was unsuited to horses. In consequence, some were never unloaded, and those that were were sent back within a month or so. The guns were emplaced and protective covers built over and around them. When they were moved in response to particular battles, it was mainly by hand. The danger for the men and horses was constant. The Turks frequently shelled positions along

the narrow shoreline. On 6 May, fourteen of the twenty-four horses on shore were killed in this way. The next day a 2 FAB lieutenant and gunner were killed and one gun put out of action.

The available evidence would suggest that 6 Battery did not go ashore at Anzac Cove, but instead remained effectively in reserve on board ship until 4 May when it and other artillery units went ashore in support of 2 Infantry Brigade. The men had been sent from Anzac Cove to reinforce British troops assigned to capture the village of Krithia near Cape Helles, at the southern tip of the peninsula. For a coverage of what the gunners did at Cape Helles we are fortunate to be able to access the diaries of Lieutenant Ralph Doughty of 2 Battery, 1FAB (reproduced on http://australianartilleryassociation.com/gunners_memories).

The British 29 Division was involved in the initial assault at Cape Helles on 25 April, landing at five beaches. Three faced little opposition but the other two came under very heavy fire and casualties were high. Commanded by the incompetent Major-General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston, their first attempt to take Krithia, on 28 April, was a slaughter, costing the division 3 000 casualties. Hunter-Weston decided to try exactly the same thing again, on 6 May. The Australian guns were landed on 4 May to support this action, and the additional troops transported from Anzac (including 'Pompey' Elliott's 7 Battalion). The terrain was less confronting than at Anzac, so Doug probably had the chance to cart his gun from the beach towards the advance trenches, about seven kilometres inland.



The terrain at Cape Helles

AWM PS1647)

The assault began on 6 May, and Doughty recorded that, '*. . . they're [the Turks] not half peppering us. . . . [a] sniper has our range and occasionally lobs one into our pit. We're after him tonight . . . Bitterly cold.*' As an example of what Doug and his compatriots had to endure, Doughty comments that, on 8 May,

Another big bombardment today. We were in action from 10 am to 7 pm. fired 220 rounds. 120 field guns in action together. Talk about an inferno. The noise was

deafening. . . Both friends and enemy lost terribly. The Turks had to ask for an armistice to bury their dead. Fierce fighting all night.

Doughty notes that the gunners were only about 1 100 metres from the Turks' front line trench, so they were in constant danger of counter-bombardment, especially from the enemy's large German howitzers.



Men of 3 Battery in their gun pit, Cape Helles

(AWM C01187)

The so-called Second Battle of Krithia was also an unmitigated disaster, so what did Hunter-Weston decide to do? He decided to do the same thing yet again – with the same result! In early June, the guns thundered again and men rushed to their deaths in large numbers. Sizeable numbers of 29 Division's 34 000 Gallipoli casualties were lost in these fruitless assaults, as were many Australian troops and other Allied forces.

There was some minor success at Cape Helles but, for the most part, the place was a slaughter yard for the Allies with little to show for the blood that was shed. Regular fighting went on during June and July and, in early August, a major diversion was made as part of the general offensive on the peninsula designed to cover the landing of British reinforcements at Suvla Bay. Like most of the Australian attacks at Anzac, it was also a costly failure.

The batteries began returning to Anzac Cove in mid-August. Before that happened, however, Doug had committed some kind of indiscretion in June. His record indicates that he received five days' field punishment number 2 for 'neglect of duty'. The punishment involved heavy labouring while in shackles.

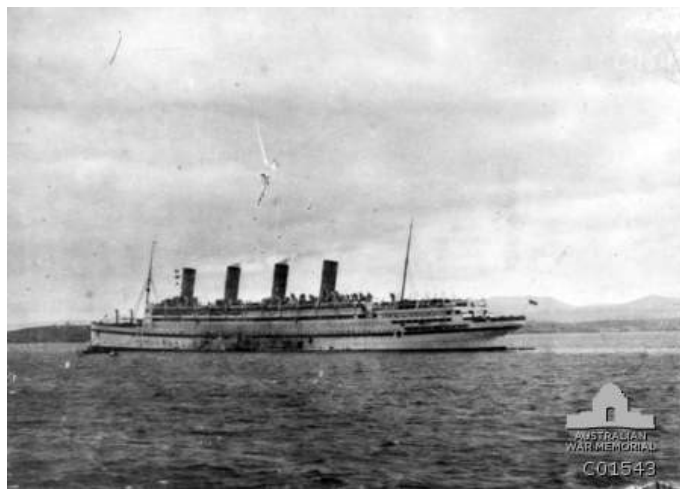
Twenty-four of 6 Battery's horses arrived back at Anzac Cove on 18 August, most of the men arriving two days later. Some of the men and guns were then immediately sent to Plugger's Plateau to relieve the New Zealanders there. The conflict was by this time

grinding down into a war of attrition, neither side having the energy to conduct major attacks. Instead, periodic bombardments and sniping became the order of the day. 2 FAB guns were located at various spots around the cove and fired on many of the enemy sites.



Shrapnel Gully, taken from 2 FAB Headquarters (AWM H15146)

On 19 October, with winter beginning to settle in on the peninsula, Doug was taken ill. Diagnosed with debility, he was evacuated to the field hospital at Mudros on Lemnos Island. He had recovered sufficiently to be sent to a convalescent camp by the start of November. However, his condition deteriorated, he was diagnosed with jaundice (hepatitis) and taken aboard the hospital ship *Aquitania*, to be evacuated to England.



HMHS *Aquitania* at Mudros, September 1915 (AWM C01543)

Doug never made it to England, however. He died on the last day of November while the ship was near Gibraltar and was buried at sea.

Because Doug had no known grave, his name was inscribed on the Lone Pine Memorial at Gallipoli.



(www.anzacsite.gov.au)

Sources

Australian War Memorial

en.wikipedia.org

[http://australianartilleryassociation.com/gunners memories](http://australianartilleryassociation.com/gunners%20memories)

<http://www.anzacsite.gov.au>

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