
Indefatigable:

Private Edward Potter Bell

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Service no 2682

47th Battalion, AIF

Edward Potter Bell's story of service is not one of valour but nevertheless it is one that needs to be told, as it exemplifies the hardships soldiers faced more than a century ago when mental health issues were poorly understood. Edward was born in England at Newcastle-upon-Tyne in Northumberland on 8 Feb 1898. His mother Minnie died when he was only a boy and on 23 November 1912 Edward, alongside his brother Thomas and father Henry, boarded the steamship *Indarra* from the Queensland Line bound for Melbourne.

By 1915 Edward's father Henry had returned to England and Edward had made his way to Brisbane, where he signed up on 1 July at the age of only 18 years and 4 months. Edward had troubles almost from the start. Frequently ill, he was admitted to hospital on Lemnos at least twice between November 1915 and April 1916, before finally joining the 47th Battalion on 20 April 1916.

It wasn't long before Edward was facing trouble of a different kind. In May 1916 at Habieta, Egypt he was charged with "using insolent and obscene language to an NCO" and "attempting to break camp whilst a defaulter". He was fined 21 days' pay but remained with his unit. On 22 July Edward was the subject of a court of enquiry held at Berlancourt in France to "enquire into and report upon absence without leave 23/6/16 to 19/7/16 and deficiency of kit (if any)". Edward was recorded as a deserter



EP Bell, one of the soldiers photographed in "The Queenslander Pictorial" supplement to The Queenslander, 1915. Soldier portraits, page 24, 25 September 1915.

and the cost of his missing kit – £9.6.10 ½ – was deducted from monies owed to him.

By October 1916 Edward was at Perham Downs in England, where he faced a court martial for several acts "to the prejudice of good order and military discipline" including presenting a pay book



Totally and Permanently Disabled Soldiers Association (TPDSA) NSW Christmas Party, likely held at the Pitt Street club house in the early 1950s. Many years later this photograph was donated to the Association's archives by Edward Bell's descendants.

in London on 2 September for payment, knowing that the entries were all false; when confined for this, escaping; and while in London masquerading as a Sergeant (i.e., wearing three chevrons). He was confined for a total of 39 days while awaiting trial and sentenced to a total six months' imprisonment with hard labour and pay forfeiture of 221 days. As was common during the War the rest of his sentence (101 days) was remitted on 30 December so that he could be transferred back to the front in France. On 5 Jan 1917 he rejoined the 47th.

After coming under fire during active duty, another court of enquiry was convened on 16 July 1917. Edward had escaped from a respite camp at La Creche on 17 June where he had been sent for "fatigue" and was still absent without leave. He was eventually apprehended in London on 2 August

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and placed under close arrest. AIF commanders were determined that Edward do his duty and requested his release to be returned to service overseas but, once again, Edward was admitted to hospital, this time at Bulford on the Salisbury

Plains. He escaped his escort on 25 August and was apprehended yet again in London on 6 October. Throughout Edward's service commanding officers seem to have interpreted his repeated infractions and attempts to escape as nothing more than acts of disobedience that needed to be quashed, rather than as a cry for help.

He rejoined his unit one last time in February 1918, but in March he was re-admitted to hospital in France as "sick", before finally being transferred

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to a mental health unit in a field hospital – and beginning to receive the treatment he had needed for so long. On 4 April 1918 he was transferred to the Royal Victoria Hospital in Hampshire, which specialised in treating shell shock. Here he finally received a diagnosis of "Dementia Praecox", the mental health condition known today as schizophrenia.

He returned to Australia on board the *Boonah* on 21 July 1918 and was formally discharged from the AIF on 9 October 1918, having battled the onset of a debilitating mental health condition not only without support but also under extreme conditions

for over three years. Edward's discharge papers tell of what he was experiencing by 1918 – "irrational and irrelevant speech: delusions of persecution". At Rouen he was described as suffering "acute mental confusion: disoriented: very incoherent: visually and aurally hallucinated". His medical team in England noted that he was "self-centered, anergic [listless], emotionally deteriorated and solitary. Thin and in poor health. Sleeps poorly because of the voices. Tendency to flex cerea [a form of limb rigidity associated with schizophrenia]." When he regained some coherence Edward claimed that his medical officer in France had given him something that had "sent him off his head", but there is no way of knowing what really happened, if anything.

His final diagnosis upon discharge was "congenital mental instability, adolescence, aggravated by active service and stress of campaign."

Edward's story is not all bleak, however. He was awarded a disability pension on discharge and settled in Sydney. He finally married in 1937 to Mima Webster, and they welcomed twins, a boy and a girl, in 1939. Edward was a founding member of the TPI Association in NSW, serving as Joint Treasurer in 1935 and Joint Secretary in 1936, and as a committeeman for several years. Until his death in 1956 Edward was an active and enthusiastic member of the Association, despite his ongoing issues.

Many years later Edward's descendants donated an extraordinary photograph to the Association's archives – a large, high-resolution print of a TPDSA NSW Christmas Party, likely held at the Pitt Street club house in the early 1950s. This photograph has been chosen as the cover image for the upcoming history of TPI NSW.

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