

## Private John Knox Adams

Rod Martin

Grocer John Adams was twenty-two years old when he was one of the first young Australians to enlist in 1914. He was single, around 170 centimetres in height and weighed sixty-six kilos. His complexion was described as fair, with brown hair. He lived with his parents at 122 McPherson Street in Essendon (now classified as part of Brunswick West). Without much doubt, he was probably one of the many thousands of young Australians who besieged the recruiting offices on the outbreak of war earlier that month. He was probably motivated by the call to arms to defend king and empire, or the lure of a trip to exotic climes, or just a sense of adventure. Quite possibly, he was motivated by all three aspirations as, surely, were many others.

Being from Essendon, John was assigned to the newly-formed Seven Infantry Battalion, created out of the Essendon Rifles militia unit and commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Harold ‘Pompey’ Elliott. John had no previous military experience. However, under the command of the experienced Pompey, he would probably soon learn.



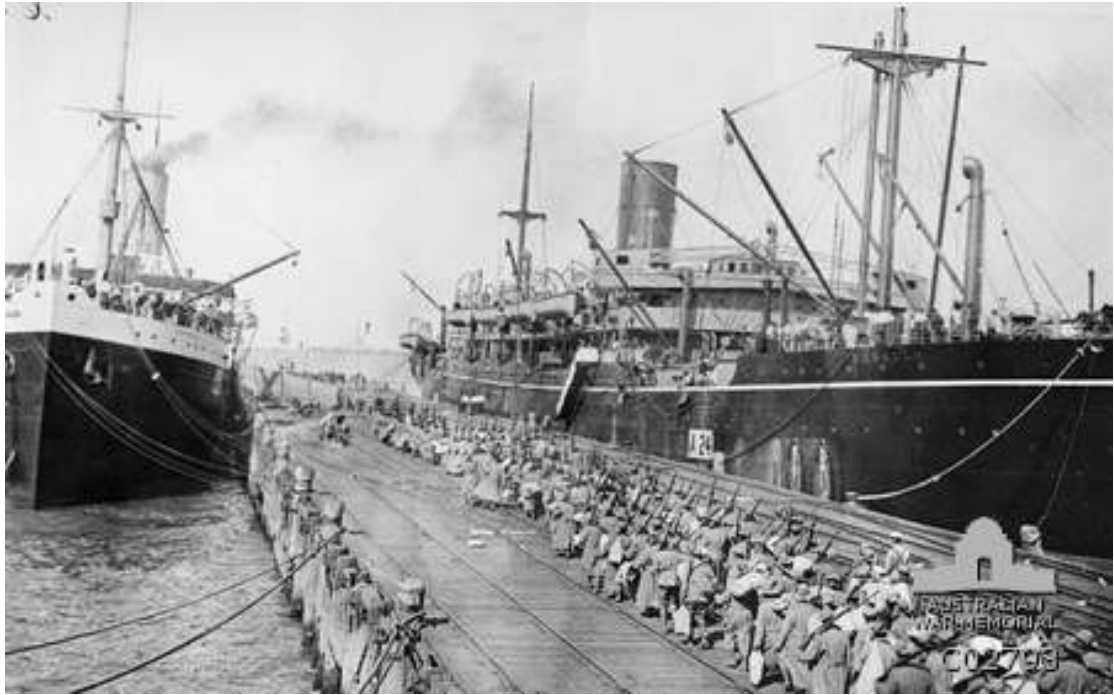
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H18389

A company parade of 6 or 7 Battalion recruits, Broadmeadows, August 1914

(AWM H18389)

The first consignments of Australian troops headed for duties in World War One sailed from Melbourne on 19 October 1914. John was amongst them, on board A20 HMAT *Hororata*. The convoy sailed west, headed for Albany on the south coast of Western Australia. There it would be joined by vessels from the other Australian capital cities as well as from New Zealand. They would then sail for the Middle East, ostensibly aiming for the recently established Western Front in France and Belgium.



HMAT *Hororata* (left) and HMAT *Benalla* taking on troops, Port Melbourne, 19 October 1914 (AWM C02793)



King George Sound, Albany. The information board shows the disposition of the ships of the convoy In October-November 1914. *Hororata* was situated third from the top in the left-hand row. (Rod Martin)

While *en route* to the Middle East, the commanders of the expeditionary force received orders that the troops would be landing in Egypt instead of travelling to Marseilles. The British War Cabinet had decided to attack Turkey, the aim being to capture Constantinople (now Istanbul) and knock the Turks out of the war. They had recently entered it on the German side. The Anzacs, as they were to become known,

were to be used along with British and French troops in an attack on the Gallipoli Peninsula, the aim being to capture the Dardanelles Straits and open the way for allied warships to sail through and capture the city.

The troops arrived in Egypt in December 1914 and transferred to a training camp at Mena, next to the Pyramids, on the outskirts of Cairo. They trained there in the desert sands and also helped to defend the Suez Canal against possible attacks by the Turks. Being close to the city while at Mena, the men took every opportunity they could to savour the delights of the settlement – both in the front streets and the back ones!



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

J05576

Men of 7 Battalion catching the trams for Cairo!

(AWM J05576)

Whether John participated in such antics is unknown, and whether he took part in the so-called 'Battle of the Wazza' the day before the troops left for Alexandria to sail towards Gallipoli is also unknown – but it is possible. The Haret el Wasser red light district quickly became a target for the troops. Frank Chung of news.com tells us that

For some months leading up to April 2 1915 – Good Friday – tensions had been simmering between the Allied soldiers and the locals.

Many had contracted venereal disease in the brothels, some complained of overpriced or poor-quality alcohol, and there were even rumours of soldiers being stabbed by Egyptian pimps.

Tensions boiled over that day and an estimated 2 500 Anzac troops wrecked the district. Order was finally restored late in the evening, but not before at least one man was killed and several were wounded. About fifty soldiers were arrested.

The problem was, as Pompey Elliott put it, the men were heartily sick of the sand and dust, and were losing interest in their training. The departure for Gallipoli came not a moment too soon. Upon leaving, Pompey wrote that

*We have seen the last of Mena Camp, thank heaven for that, and before dawn we will have seen the last of Cairo, and three times thank heaven for that.*

Ross McMullin adds that Pompey and his men would hardly have felt so buoyant if they had known what destiny had in store for them.

After spending some days preparing on the island of Lemnos, the Anzac forces sailed for Gallipoli. On the twenty-fifth of April, Pompey's men went ashore as part of the second wave, early in the morning. The first 7 Battalion boat and three others headed for shore, but they drifted off course and headed towards a point in the cove directly opposite the one designated for 7 Battalion. Later boats followed suit, captured by the drifting currents and landing on the most inhospitable part of the coast, about two kilometres north of where they should have been.



Boats, believed to be those of 7 Battalion, approaching the shore at Gallipoli, 25 April 1915. (AWM H03546)

Despite bullets and shrapnel flying around them, the men of 7 Battalion stuck manfully to their task as their boats approached the shore. When they finally reached the beach, of the 140 men carried in the first four boats, only thirty-five were unscathed. The Turks maintained a withering rate of fire on the first boat as it sat on the sand, killing many more of the troops. By this time, boats carrying men of other battalions had drifted into the cove as well, and the troops were all mixed together when they landed on the shore. The best laid plans of British command came to nought as a result. Just where John was in this maelstrom can only be imagined. We can assume that he made it to the shore relatively unscathed, or his death would have been reported later that day when a roll call was made on the beach. The vista that presented itself to the men gathered there would have been disheartening, to say the least. Instead of the undulating terrain they had been told they would be approaching,

they saw steep hills, dissected by eroded valleys and gullies and covered in thick gorse bushes. The commanders on the beach decided that they had to get out of there or they would increasingly become sitting ducks for the Turks who were ensconced on the heights. The only way was up so, following orders to drop their heavy back packs, the men then began scrambling into the gullies, headed for the top.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C01006

Dugouts in Monash Valley, behind Anzac Cove. The photo gives a good idea of the terrain through which the men had to advance on the day of landing. (AWM C01006)

The incredible fact is that, in spite of increasingly fierce Turkish resistance, a number of the men actually made it to the tops of some ridges, evicted the Turks from their positions and established defensible locations. On 25 April, Anzac troops seized more ground from the Turks than was taken during the next eight months of fighting. The sad thing was that, because of the chaos on the beach, those men could not be quickly resupplied and reinforced and thus be in a position to chase the remaining Turks out of the area. Upon hearing of the attack, Turkish commander Mustapha Kemal soon sent reinforcements to the area and established the stalemate that existed for the remainder of the campaign.

Just what happened to John while all this was going on we do not know. Presumably, he got off the beach and headed up into gullies. How far he got is anyone's guess, and whether his body was discovered quickly or left to rot slowly in amongst the dirt and gorse is unknown. A board of enquiry, established on the beach on 2 May, determined that he died between 25 April and that date. It could not be any more certain than that. We do know that his body was eventually recovered and buried in Number 2 Outpost Cemetery. Whether this happened fairly quickly or whether his body was discovered after the war (as a result of searches and excavations such as those illustrated in the feature film *The Water Diviner*) is open to speculation. Notification of John's burial was not passed to his parents until 1920, allowing one to consider this possibility.



John was one of many 7 Battalion members to die that day or soon after. In fact, 7 Battalion suffered more casualties in the landing than any other Australian unit. It lost five officers and 179 men who were killed or who subsequently died of their wounds. Even Pompey was wounded, shot in the ankle while still on the beach and subsequently evacuated to a hospital ship. After hearing of these losses, Pompey wrote that

*They tell me that there is hardly any left of the poor old 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion.*

Later, after the battalion had been further decimated as a result of the attacks at Krithia ordered by the incompetent British major-general, Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston, he wrote that

*. . . the 7<sup>th</sup> Battalion at present is little more than a name.*

John's father was granted a pension of thirty-nine pounds (seventy-eight dollars) per annum from 3 August 1915.



(anzacportal.dva.gov.au)

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