



## CAPTAIN WILLIAM ORGAN WILLIS

[1877 – 1915]



15<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion

William Organ Willis was born in Malvern Victoria on 1 August 1877, the second-youngest of six children of William Samuel Willis (locksmith) and Alice Holland Willis (nee Roberts). His father died on 14 July 1891, when Billie was 13 years old. Billy was educated to matriculation standard at Wesley College Melbourne and passed the educational qualifying exam required to join the Army's Administrative and Instructional (A & I) staff.

Captain William ('Billy') Organ Willis was a talented and experienced infantry officer who had extensive military experience before joining the AIF, including service in the Boer War, militia and the permanent force. He was Adjutant of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion when he was killed in action near Quinn's Post on the Gallipoli Peninsular on 3 May 1915.

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His personality was described as: *Genial. Very good athlete. Excelled at long distances. He was a harrier, cricketer, and rower... Brave and gay ... with a cheery smile always doing his job. He was calm and confident, and always ready.*

He served as a private in the South African War (Boer War) with the Fourth Victorian Contingent, leaving Australia on 1 May 1900 and arriving in South Africa between May and Jun 1900. Sickness forced his return to Australia on 8 November but on 23 January 1901 he re-joined his unit in South Africa until the contingent returned home. He was discharged on 13 July 1901. For his service he received the Queen's South Africa Medal with three campaign clasps (Rhodesia, Orange River Colony, and Cape Colony).

After the Boer War he pursued pastoral interests near Beechworth Victoria. He also served in the militia between 1907 and 1911 (Second Lieutenant 30 July 1907, promoted Lieutenant 10 August 1908, Lieutenant A&I Corps 1910, and promoted Captain 29 August 1910).

Willis joined the Permanent Forces in 1911 and served as a permanent officer (regular army officer in today's parlance) until he joined the AIF in 1914: Lieutenant 1 February 1911; promoted Captain 19 October 1912; and posted to the position of Brigade Major HQ 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade Area, Rockhampton from 1 July 1913. On the outbreak of war he applied for commission in the AIF and on 20 Nov 1914 he was appointed Captain and Adjutant of 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion being raised at Enoggera.



*Group portrait of officers of the 15th Battalion prior to embarkation overseas. Capt William Organ Willis, the Adjutant, is circled.*

The 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade (including 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion) landed at Anzac late in the afternoon of 25 April 1915 and was involved in the desperate fighting at Quinn's Post where the opposing trenches were as close as six yards. The brigade was tasked for a major assault in early May. The 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion's War Diary for 3 May records: *The enemy made an attack upon our position early in the morning but was repulsed, we losing Capt. Willis killed...*

A letter from Gallipoli, written by a fellow officer, written to the Willis family was published in *The Argus* on 20 July 1915:

*...The few days of this struggle brought Billy to the fore in a wonderful way. Brave and gay, he led on, with a cheery smile always doing his job. He was calm and confident, and always ready. He was a gallant fellow, and my loss of my friend seems very poignant just now. He sleeps like a warrior, at peace, on the hill side where he passed away. A little wooden cross marks the place.*

*The story of the incident which brought us such grievous loss is this. A battalion from the British naval division had replaced some Australians in the firing line, and Billy's battalion was taking as much rest as is possible under the conditions here existing, while they remained in the scrub covered valley in support ... heavy fire had broken out along the front. As his duty demanded, he went up to investigate along with another officer. Just as they rounded the point into the trenches, a*

*bullet struck him, high up in the neck, about the base of the skull. He passed away peacefully without any pain almost at once. I am glad to be able to say it was no rashness on his part that led to his death.*

Willis was in his prime when he was killed at 37, one of 12 USC members who were killed at Gallipoli, four of whom were members of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion. He had been married for two years and left a young widow but no children.

Captain Willis has no known grave and is commemorated on the Lone Pine Memorial.



Sources included:

- Australian War Memorial
- National Archives of Australia
- Various web pages
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents