

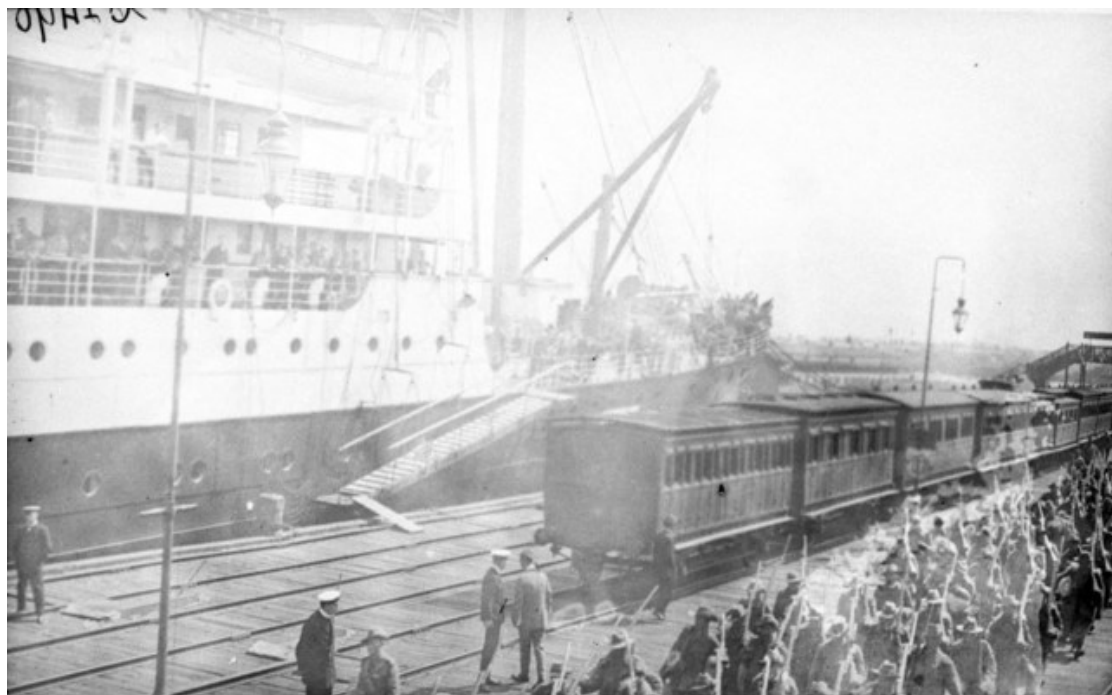
Sergeant Ernest Robert Fairlie

Rod Martin

He was an experienced teacher at Melbourne High School, and he was just finishing his degree at the university. However, in August 1914, Ernest (Ern) Fairlie received a higher calling. When war broke out that month, twenty-nine year-old Ern probably moved to enlist in the army as soon as he could. He signed up on 8 September that year and moved to Broadmeadows to undertake his training. Ern was one of the 20 000 so-called 'Dinkum Aussies' who rushed to sign up in the first few months after the war began, and he would be a member of the first contingent of the Australian Imperial Force to sail for Egypt in late October that year.

Ern was a stocky fellow, 177 centimetres tall and weighing in at seventy kilos. He had spent three and a half years in the special reserve (a militia unit) prior to enlisting, reaching the rank of corporal. It had ended when he moved away from the particular district in which he served. It would appear that, because of this service, he received the rank of lance-corporal upon enlistment. This was quickly increased to corporal and, on 2 May, eight days after landing at Gallipoli, he was promoted to sergeant. This may well have happened because of the attrition rate of officers and non-commissioned officers during and soon after the landing. More were certainly needed and, with his rank, experience and education, Ern would have been a very suitable candidate for higher duties. Had he lived, he may well have been promoted to officer rank before very long.

Along with the rest of 5 Battalion, to which he was assigned, Ern boarded A3 HMAT *Orvieto* at Port Melbourne on 21 October 1914 and headed for Albany in Western Australia.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C02490



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PS0368

HMAT *Orvieta* at the quay in Alexandria, 1914

(AWM PS0368)

Ships from across Australia, and others from New Zealand, gathered in King George Sound at Albany and then sailed in convoy on 1 November, bound for the Red Sea and the Suez Canal. The original plan was for them to sail through the Mediterranean to France and then join British troops on the Western Front. However, while they were *en route*, the British War Cabinet decided to adopt a suggestion championed by Winston Churchill and invade Turkey, which had recently allied itself with Germany and Austria-Hungary. The cabinet decided to use the dominion troops to bolster its own and those of the French in their attack on Turkey. As a result, the Australians and New Zealanders disembarked at Alexandria and headed to a designated camp at Mena, close to the Pyramids.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H15246

5 Battalion tents at Mena

(AWM H51246)

The troops were used initially to guard the Suez Canal from possible Turkish attack (the Turks occupied the Levant, Arabia and the Sinai Peninsula at that time).and were subjected to further training, usually under hot and dry desert conditions.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

J051 29

5 Battalion on a route march, Egypt, late December 1914 – early 1915

(AWM J05129)

When on leave at Mena, many men went into nearby Cairo and tasted the delights that the city had to offer. These occasionally included visits to brothels and one, in the Wassir ‘red light’ district, incurred the wrath of some men because of its poor-quality drinks, price rip-offs and a reputation as the source of most of the venereal disease amongst the troops. On 2 April, the eve before the first Anzacs sailed towards Gallipoli, some 2 500 Australians and New Zealanders, many of them intoxicated, descended upon the brothel and a large riot broke out. The so-called ‘Battle of the Wazza’ saw several brothels being set on fire, and considerable damage being done. It was finally broken up by a combination of civilian and military police and uninvolved military units. It became so infamous that C.J Dennis even wrote a poem about it! It would be naïve to believe that members of 5 Battalion were not involved. Whether Ern was amongst them we do not know. One would hope that he had the maturity and sense to stay out of such a schmozzle.

And so, the first AIF (perhaps minus a few who were in hospital, gaol or the guardhouse) began sailing for the Greek island of Lemnos the next day. 5 Battalion left Mena on 4 April and sailed from Alexandria on the fifth. Once at Lemnos, the troops spent their time undertaking further training, concentrating on rowing whaleboats and landing on beaches.

Details of the landing at Gallipoli on the morning of 25 April 1915 are by now well known. The first boats were dispatched from the transport vessels in the early hours

of the morning and headed for a spot called Gaba Tepe. However, it is probable that the naval ratings leading the boats lost their way and, no doubt helped by the currents flowing at that time, they headed northwards, bunching the boats together, and landed about a mile north of Gaba Tepe at what is now Anzac Cove. The terrain there was far more inhospitable than that at Gaba Tepe, consisting of badly eroded gullies, covered with coarse vegetation, leading up to steep ridges. The troops, with different units by now completely mixed together, had to forget about orders and were encouraged to just head up the gullies and attempt to dislodge the Turks shooting at them from those ridges. The incredible thing is that some of them actually got to the top and were able to establish a number of redoubts. The advance that first day was the furthest the troops reached in the whole eight months of occupation.

We have to assume that Ern and his 5 Battalion comrades were involved in these attacks. Just what happened to them, and how far they reached, is unknown, mainly because the battalion's war diary ends before the Gallipoli landing and does not resume until 25 May. Whether this occurred because the documentation was lost during the fighting or the battalion was so disorganised that official records went by the wayside for a significant period of time we do not know. It is probably the reason why Les Carlyon makes no reference to 5 Battalion in his book *Gallipoli*. He does, however, refer to the fortunes (or misfortunes!) of 2 Brigade, of which 5 Battalion was part, in the hours after the landing. He writes:

The 2nd Brigade had begun landing from about 6.20. It was supposed to be on the left, so as to take hill 971 and hold the line from there to Fisherman's Hut. This plan took no account of the terrain all along this line . . . The biggest trouble was the terrain, these ravines and washaways that had been thrown together by a lunatic. . . The Second Brigade, instead of heading left for Hill 971, was sent to the right, out on to 400 Plateau.

The men were located close to what would later be known as Lone Pine and were told to dig in until the overall situation could be clarified.

We have to assume that that is where they were by 2 May, when Ern was promoted to sergeant. Three days later, despite the hold on the territory at Anzac Cove still being precarious, 2 Brigade was withdrawn and despatched south to Cape Helles, at the tip of the peninsula. The men had been sent to reinforce British troops assigned to capture the village of Krithia near Cape Helles, at the southern tip of the peninsula. 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. Many men were lost when they attempted to land from a deliberately beached vessel called the *River Clyde*. In broad daylight, they were accurately picked off by Turkish machine-gunners on the heights as they tried to exit the ship. The remainder stayed on the vessel and disembarked at night.

The British troops were commanded by the incompetent Major-General Sir Aylmer Hunter-Weston, and their first attempt to take Krithia, on 28 April, was a slaughter, costing the division 3 000 casualties. It was then that the request was made for Australian reinforcements to be sent south from Anzac Cove.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

G00957

2 Brigade troops landing at Cape Helles. The *River Clyde* stands aground next to the pier.
(AWM G00957)

Seemingly devoid of any initiative or common sense, Hunter-Weston decided to try exactly the same attack again, beginning on 6 May, this time involving the Australians as well. After two initially unsuccessful efforts, a third assault was commenced on 8 May. Over the next four days, the fighting waxed and waned before coming to a halt, no territory of any real value gained. By the time the attack ended, Ern was dead. Just exactly when he died is unknown. Head counts and reports from accompanying troops after 12 May only allowed the army authorities to determine that Ern and many others had been killed at various stages during the four days.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PS1648

Cape Helles in 1915

(AWM PS1648)

Reports of Ern's death differed. One noted that he died while leading his company, presumably in a charge. A small marker was reportedly left at the place where he fell. Another, written in the Melbourne High School newsletter, indicated that he was hit by shrapnel and died in a dressing station. The man reporting the incident said that he had seen Ern's grave.

If that *was* the case, then the grave was later obliterated or just lost, for Ern is named on a panel at The Helles Memorial as one of many who perished there whose burial places are unknown. The memorial is the main Commonwealth battle memorial for the whole Gallipoli campaign, commemorating the 20 956 Commonwealth servicemen who died on the peninsula and, like Ern, have no known graves.



The Helles Memorial

(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

As a postscript to the battle, it should be noted that, despite failure once again, 'Hunter-Bunter', as he was mockingly known among the troops, actually attempted a third attack, using the same tactics and over the same ground. In early June, the guns thundered again and men rushed to their deaths in large numbers. Sizeable numbers of the British 29 Division's 34 000 Gallipoli casualties were lost in these fruitless assaults. At Krithia, 2 Australian Brigade lost one-third of its complement. 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. After this, Hunter-Weston earned another nickname: 'the Butcher'.

Another postscript to Ern's story is also a sad one. As a result of his death, Ern's father and his sister Janet were each granted pensions of thirty-nine pounds per annum. However, the pensions were cancelled in late 1917, after the father died. Writing to the military authorities from Ballarat in 1921, Ern's older brother, in revealing why the pensions were granted in the first place, pointed out that Ern had

provided the main financial support for the father and the sister. By 1920, Janet was also caring for three young children as their father – her brother – had suffered a nervous breakdown and was described as being in no condition to care for them or his sister. Janet herself was described as being in bad health and ‘desperately poor’, depending upon a small allowance for looking after the children, along with the earnings of a younger sister.

The military replied, stating that the issue of the pension was in the hands of the repatriation department. Whether any remuneration was obtained from that organisation is unknown at this time.

Sources

Australian War Memorial
Carlyon, Les: *Gallipoli*, Sydney, McMillan, 2001
Commonwealth War Graves Commission
en.wikipedia.org
Frost, Lenore
<http://www.anzacsite.gov.au>
National Archives of Australia