

--- MY INITIATION ---

I, No. A150, enlisted for service in the Australian Imperial Military Forces, 12th Light Horse Regiment and joined on 19th January 1915.

We didn't have much room to move about in, so we sat quietly around the decks, more asleep than awake, doubtful because we all were expecting to be launched into an undertaking that none of us quite realized the consequences. The time was about 4am, and very dark as we listened to the monotonous chugging of the ship's screws, wondering how much longer they would turn. Combined with the coolness of the night air, and the thoughts of the immediate future, our mental progresses were anything but bright.

The ship carried no lights, that fact alone did not improve our conditions. Suddenly we became conscious that the chugging had ceased and a new sound took its place, then we wondered when we heard a distinct murmur of men about us; the ship was waking up.

We rose to our feet to have a look round; and what a sight met our eyes! Our blood turned to water. "Well, this looks like it!" said a voice near by. "Struth!" whispered another. "This is it alright."

"No smoking you men, and see that you don't get boxed up!" said our sergeant. We picked up our kits and kept together as far as possible, then began to move along in single file.

"Silence you fellows!" growled somebody else. Why was silence so important? Out there, the noise was increasing in crescendo. From the far left to the far right through the murk, a low range of hills or a low bank of cloud, we soon discovered the difference.

The whole scene was fast lighting up from end to end, like a picture being screened for our benefit, the noise more and more intensive. To the left the racket was bad; at one point the whole side of a mountain seemed to be on fire. The guns were in action, mortars fought it out with grenades to the accompaniment of thousands of variegated lights of every colour. Hell had been let loose on earth for our benefit, or so it seemed.

I arrived at the top of the gangway where a naval officer stood counting us like a run of sheep through a race. Over the side we moved and groped our way down the gangway; there was no hurry to the black water below. The chap ahead of me suddenly grasped his thigh and spun around with an oath, that shocked us all, except the naval officer and two marines.

"Get him out of the way and attend to his wound, marine, quickly!" "Keep moving you men, we don't want to be here all night." Came another voice of command from somewhere. Into a boat we descended being shepherded into allotted places like sardines, and sat down. A muffled motor began ominously and soon we were moving; the hulk of the

great ship disappearing behind us. Nobody spoke as we watched the conflagration ahead.

"This certainly is it," said a soldier beside me.

"Well, I suppose it is what we enlisted for," said another scarcely above a whisper.

"Cheer up fellow, don't be afraid," remarked another at the rear of the boat. "There's plenty of life over there yet, listen to 'em!"
"Shut up, Bluey! This isn't a weekend booze party!"

The boat moved through the water at an alarming rate towards a small spot with a solitary light as a beacon. Soon we noticed a small jetty and the way that sixteen year old snotty maneuvered that boat to a standstill, the speed he got us off and way on his return to the mother ship, filled us with astonishment. He was out of sight before we cleared the jetty. Over in east were signs of an approaching dawn. We had landed on Anzac. As we moved off, another party moved on; another boat was there awaiting its arrival.

A string of stretcher bearers carrying their burdens moved without a word and very careful of their steps. We moved forwards for a short distance and were halted under a steep bluff, there we saw nothing of the racket that had been spread out before us before we landed. There was life around us, made more noticeable as daylight dawned, we sat waiting for something we didn't understand. The sun rose, soaring higher and higher as the morning advanced with us taking in the scene.

This was the base the fellows had won on that morning of the twenty fifth of April, while we were back at Holdsworthy forming fours. We remembered when the news had come through, and stunned, yet proud of the boys, so this was the sacred spot where a young nation had been born.

The War God Mars demanded his price and had been paid; there was proof of it by a number of small crosses we saw beside us. They made us think of Gethsemane not such a great distance away to the southeast. A number of recumbent figures were stretched out in a row quite close to us, some smiling grimly from their stretcher beds; some were bandaged and others were not; and some would live to fight another day. They did not complain.

Here was a great storage dump to keep the life blood of an army pulsating, food and water, ammunition for guns, a hive of industry in every sense. Tall men, gaunt men, sunburnt men moved about shirtless and bare legged, attending to their duties. We stood and watched a monitor some distance off shore in action. First one huge gun would raise its snout towards the sky, then fire viciously at an unseen target away to the south, being satisfied with its effort for the moment, then settle down again to rest while its mate would raise its snout as if in dreadful competition, belch out fire and smoke and give

voice to another attack, then in its place would settle back and wait the others reply.

Up the coast a little way we saw a battery of small guns go into action. One, two, three blasts of smoke and fire, three recoils and then a wait, but only for a moment. There was a pause then it came a burst of fire and thick smoke, one gun was out of action, two shots again was the reply and a wait, followed by a cloud of smoke and dust, there was a respite and only one gun replied.

We wondered then how it was that the single gun kept on firing, and why there was no reply to it? The ship that had brought us here had long ago departed, in its place sailed a beautiful white ship dressed like a bride except for her red trimmings.

The temperature was steadily rising, and having nothing to do, we ate a scanty meal of bully beef and biscuits. The dreadful racket inland had died down while we waited, and we didn't know the reason, no did we know the reason of our prolonged wait.

A soldier, lean and unkempt, came down a winding path towards us, and took a casual look at us while passing, when one of our men asked him what all the action was about that morning.

He turned in surprise and replied. "Some of our chaps got stuck into Abdul over on Chocolate Hill, I believe." He pulled a wry face as if it was a most ordinary occurrence. "Who the hell are you fellows?" he demanded with slight interest.

"We are the new army," said a perky fellow.

"Oh." He walked away without a word of 'hello' towards the jetty. The troops began to bestir themselves. A colonel had mounted a low grassy bank and was facing us, cleared his throat as we stood up in anticipation of perhaps some fatherly advice. We listened respectfully.

"Men!" He said in a tone we were not used to hearing. "I have not much to say, only this! The regiment will be broken up; it is a case I believe, of expediency! Each squadron will this morning go to a different post to re-enforce units who sorely need your help. You will be under another's command, yet no matter where you be or commands you, I trust you will to a man play the game. As for myself, I'm to command another unit. I wish you all the best of luck."

We looked at each other in consternation, for it was hard to realize that the old unit was being broken up, but there it was. Our identity was gone. We felt like outcasts without a home, all our pride as a unit had gone with the wind.

Our squadron commander shouted a subdued command. We picked up our kits and soon were trailing in single file up and over the hump that

sheltered us; down a gully into a deep sap, totally shut out from the world. Turning and twisting, here and there with nothing but the sky above, walls of clay on both sides. The atmosphere thickened, the heat made it unpleasant and sickly. For myself I was feeling sick. High above of the sap was a pair of boots protruding on which were flies and insects, and there were other things quite as unpleasant.

"I wonder who owns those boots?" remarked the fellow marching behind me. "Strikes me! He's still got 'em on!" said another. "Seems we are in a cemetery," said another in front of me.

They were the only ones who voiced an opinion. I noticed a couple of unfamiliar rifles with bayonets attached, not our design, and mess tins, empty cartridge shells, ragged home-spun clothes laid around, quite foreign to us. Where the sap shallowed a little, we saw scores of small holes, no more than six inches deep, scooped out. We didn't know till later what these meant. They were scratched out on that great first day in April, when our advancing men struggled to gain cover from that avalanche of lead they were forcing back.

Later when we came out into a dry gully, there was little more to see save scrubby uplands. Turning sharply left was a notice board 'Do Not Loiter' was its legend. Beneath it was scrawled in a less artistic hand, 'Hell-fire Corner'. We hurried by and entered a deep ravine along this dry water course, to the left a steep slope raised itself covered by stunted scrub where there was no sign of life.

On our right along its crest was a long line of fresh turned up clay, there was shooting going on. We heard the zip, zip, zip of bullets passing uncomfortably close over our heads which gave us a desire to cling to mother earth. There were men moving around as if they had all the time in the world to spare. Two thin men carried empty petrol tins towards us and moved on. "What place is this?" asked a perky fellow ahead of me.

"Turkey," replied one, as if he was surprised that nobody could be so ignorant. "What place do you think it is?"

"Well, Captain Cook captured a better country than this without firing a shot, I reckon." "You're mad!" said another fellow. There was no further comment. We were feeling much better now; it did not seem a bad place after all. Two laden stretchers passed by, each in turn looked hard at us, but made no comment. The sight didn't make us feel too good.

As the ravine narrowed we could see more earth works ahead, with a good deal more signs of life. Here was the end of our journey.

Several officers and men came out of a dugout to look at us. Then we were halted. There were scores of small dugouts, only a few were occupied. Their occupants sat gazing at us, and they were our kinsmen.

A red tabbed officer carrying a cane mounted a bank above us, waved it at us; the action was to draw our attention. He made an inspection and did not appear to be pleased with what he saw; we could not see why. It was not a speech of welcome but in this were disappointed.

"You reinforcements!" he roared, "I won't have any funny business around my post, and don't forget it! My men have been holding this post now for a hell of a long time, and I'm proud of them! Let me tell you this, I won't tolerate anybody here who is not prepared to fight! This is a tough place and don't forget it! I expect the lot of you to do your duty! That's all I've got to say, except that if I hear of any of you urinating in the saps, I'll have you tied to the gun wheel!" He descended and walked away, leaving us to our astonishment and disgust.

There were no gun carriages anywhere and we felt ourselves as alien almost as the enemy on the other side of the ridge. A sergeant major emerged from a hole in the ground to look us over; a gaunt, sickly sort of chap who showed little interest in life, had a word with our squadron commander or two then we were ordered to stand easy. He appeared to be carrying the responsibility of the war entirely on his shoulders. We were then separated, breaking us into troops so as to preserve our identity, up the incline and into funk holes. Every troop had been warned that it was down for duty at night, taking the information with a mixture of mild excitement, fear, with a slight feeling of lack of balance in the stomach. Hardly had we begun to reassure ourselves, when there was a terrific explosion and the dirt trickled down the sides of dugouts followed by an alarming burst of machine and rifle fire.

In suspense we waited, there were no casualties, and for this we were thankful. I stuck my head out and noticed two groups of men standing about yawning, like they would doing if at home or around a country pub. It was reassuring to me.

The afternoon was drawing on, we made ourselves comfortable as possible and had not long to wait, night duty men would be assembling before the open door of the Regimental Head Quarters below. I was surprised as I sat smoking a cigarette and saw a man standing outside of my dugout who seemed old and exceedingly dirty and neglected. His trousers had been cut off at the knees, his torso was naked and his hat had seen better days, and boots were falling apart. He was tall and thin, face unshaved and his legs were hairy; any dog in any country town would have sniffed at him with suspicion.

"Good day, Corporal," he said to me, cheerfully enough.

"Good day," I said.

"Have you a cigarette to spare?" he asked politely. "I haven't been able to snare a smoke for a week."

"Too bad," I replied, offering him my pack.

"Thanks, Got a match? They are scarce also."

"Certainly. Take six."

He lit the cigarette and drew the smoke into his lungs five times and exhaled before he spoke. "Scared a bit I suppose? Well you need not be. Noise won't hurt you. I reckon old Abdul saw you lot coming and tonight he will give you a proper reception when on duty, but don't watch for his bombs; they are nasty little fellows that can hurt."

"Why all the noise?"

"When he goes full blast, you'd think hell was being let loose. He does it to prove to us that he has a fearful, strong army in front."

"Does he ever attack?" I asked.

"My word, yes, especially when there is a new moon. He takes it as a sign of good luck, and sometimes hops into us. The last time, he got a hell of a drubbing; we crawled out on to the parapet and gave him all we had."

"Do you fellows ever have a go at him?"

"My word, yes. A week ago, but the luck was against us. Some of our fellows got into his trench, and it was no go. Lot of the poor devils never got back, there's talk of another attack soon, when we get built up a bit."

"Is he very far away?"

"Lord, no. Sometimes we can hear them talking."

"What place is this?" I asked mildly.

"This is Pope's Hill. The line swings round to the left and over Walker's Ridge and Russell Top. He's digging a large trench up there. You can see the dirt being chucked out every day. We think he is tunneling under our lines up there to blow us off the earth, but then we are tunneling under him too, so it's a case of who get in first. Along to the right is Bloody Angle where the 13th Batt' tore them to pieces. Next is Quinn's Post, another hot shop."

He stopped to light another cigarette. "Now, down there," he continued, "That gully is Monash Valley, where the General got pipped off by a sniper. It was bad luck for us, still we shot the Jacko who shot him. Now that gully leads into Shrapnel Gully down by Shrapnel Green."

"Have you been here long, Digger?" I asked with respect.

"Came over with the regiment. We had to leave our horses behind in Egypt. They were of no use here. Ah, well, I must move on and thanks for the smokes. I'm just taking a stroll around to introduce myself to the new fellows, and don't forget, I'm known as the old soldier in this outfit."

"How old are you?" I asked.

"Well, I'm like the spinster; I like to keep that to myself."

He walked away well pleased with himself. He looked a fully sixty.

Later on, we fell in with the relief, mixed up with the veterans to learn the know-how. Up the steep hill we marched in single file, glancing to the left and to the right we noticed many of the funk holes were still unattended, then into the bowels of the earth we plunged, a sap that was very deep, only where two men could pass. Every few yards we had to squeeze round a traverse, to stop bomb splinters from going too far they said. Tired men stood on the fire steps to let us pass, and gave kindly words of encouragement.

Periscopes were in use all along the sap, with rifles attached, other disdained such instruments and took a quick look over the bags. I was given my station and glanced about me. The place looked like an arsenal with all the paraphernalia that goes with a regiment at war, at that moment the place was as quiet as a cathedral.

I sat down on the fire step and proceeded to ask a few questions with those more experienced than myself, and was hushed promptly, commanded to lower my voice. "Voices draw bombs," said the Sergeant.

Suddenly, there was a terrific explosion somewhere, that startled me, it was followed by such a dreadful pandemonium of noise outside, I could scarcely appreciate such things, yet nobody about me seemed to take the slightest notice, except to stand, listen and wonder.

"Don't be afraid, Dig," said a veteran to me, in my ear. By the look of him, I would say that he must have spent his eighteenth birthday in the line. "That's the usual demonstration, Old Abdul is awfully nervy these days. He likes to inform us that he has millions of well-trained Ottoman Guards over there in support. Cripes, he wastes a fearful lot of ammo."

The young soldier took something out of a box; it looked like the familiar old two pound treacle tin I knew of at home. It had a fuse stuck into the end of it. Carefully he lit a match and applied it to the fuse, held it for a little while as it spluttered, then over it went high in the air, then I saw it fall. I waited, but the explosion was drowned in the general commotion.

"That's one for the buzzards," he said with a grin. "We stir them up like that. It annoys them."

"Was that a bomb you threw over?" I asked.

"Yes, a jam tin bomb. That's what we use to fight with. This is a mad war alright," he said. Then prepared another.

And that's how I was initiated in the First Great War!

The End

By Melvin James Sawtell-Harrigan
1955
Mareeba.

Melvin (Corporal) landed at 4 on the morning of Sunday 29 August 1915 on the old battlefield of Anzac at Gallipolli via troopship 'Prince Abbas'. Colonel Abbott said goodbye as the 12th Regiment was broken up and A Squadron going as reinforcements to Colonel Meredith, 1st Australian Light Horse on Pope's Hill. He was evacuated after four months at midnight on Sunday 19 December 1915 with the troops after last duty on Camel Hump with Sergeant Godfrey and Corporal Harrison.