John George (Jack) Tarrant

Born Mudgee 12/6/1894

Enlisted Wyong NSW 15/3/1915

On 22nd March 1915, I went into camp at Liverpool, NSW. After some weeks of training I was put into the newly formed 20th Battalion. We embarked as a battalion on the “Berrima” on the 26th June 1915. Arrived in Egypt in late July and was encamped at Heliopolis . Later we were sent to Gallipoli , arriving there on the night of 22nd August. As we were stepping ashore the man next to me was wounded in the neck by a stray bullet. I never knew his name but the chap on the other side of him was Sgt Guard, later Lieutenant Guard. (Bill Guard returned to Australia and later died in Canberra). After days later I was detailed as a bomber. My mate “Martin” apparently volunteered for us both. Martin was later killed in France in 1917. The bombers job was out past the front trench, which enabled us to reach there by a tunnel. The engineers had cut this tunnel for us. We had many killed or wounded at this job and we were running short of men.

My mate, Martin, was a left handed man and enabled him to throw his bomb without exposing too much of his body. I soon copied his style as I am partly left handed.

On the 25th April at “The landing” I had two brothers badly wounded who were now in hospital in Egypt. Late in 1916 they both rejoined their unit in France. They were both wounded again before the armistice. Later, my younger brother turned up in France at the age of 16 years. He enlisted under an assumed name.

Back to Gallipoli. It was all trench warfare in my time, a real stalemate. I have known a loaf of bread to be shared by 32 men. The biscuits (Huntley-Palmers) had to be soaked overnight to soften them up for chewing, or for making a kind of porridge. The body lice gave us a terrible time. Many men were evacuated through the sores caused by scratching. The meat, bully beef, “fray-Bentos” was very salty and the cooks could not do anything to relieve the taste of salt. The water was always scarce , especially for those men in the front line. The evacuation of our sick men was becoming a big factor at this stage. The heat and the flies was almost unbearable. Then suddenly we had a violent snow storm. The weather was freezing and the going was muddy and sticky. The heavy winds blew our landing gear away and the gadget that turned salt water into drinking water was put out of action. I had never seen snow before and was still cold until we left the place. Some time later Lord Kitchener put in an appearance and I believe he ordered the evacuation. You can imagine chaps like myself with just a louse ridden flannel shirt, a tunic, shorts and puttees and everything frozen. We were told (in whispers) of the evacuation. I mean in whispers. Lieut Norm Blanchard, just promoted from Sgt came to see me and my mate in the bomb crater. Although we were underground, he told us that the word ‘evacuation’ was not to be mentioned during our stay on Gallipoli. He whispered the plan to us.

This may sound strange but the evacuation was 100% and not one casualty during the clear out. The Australian who was responsible for getting us off that place, without loss of life was a very remarkable person.

What a difference to the landing?

Later, Capt Blanchard was taken prisoner in France on 5th May 1916. From one who served under him He was a gallant officer. Each day, until the evacuation, was growing tense. Every night strange forms would pass – small parties – and in the morning there were so many spaces. One post near me had 2 men on duty, originally there were 14.

Anyhow, my turn came on December 19th.

From our front line down to the beach there was a white tape plus a notice at intervals that read “Every man should follow this white tape”. Although this will be 70 years this April, my service there was 4 months I can still see the tape and the notices. My party of 10, I think, came down to the barge or wharf around 9 o’clock pm. We climbed down the hold of the barge and I went to sleep. Next thing we were being towed out to a British cruiser. The men on the cruiser were very kind to our boys. They gave us a small loaf of bread each and plenty of hot tea to wash it down. These sailors were very young chaps but they looked after us.

Later we landed at a Greek island – Lemnos.

What a different world we were in. Everything so quiet, no gunfire or rifle fire. There were a few British soldiers there. I spoke to the medical Sgt there and asked to be allowed to go on sick parade. I had the tip of my middle finger in homemade splints and a carbuncle on the back of my neck, This Dr was a very kind chap and looked after me until one of our own crowd arrived on the island. Our own Dr, Dr Hutcherson said he would take over and asked me to go back and thank the British MO. Well what a place to come to. There was a hand pump on the road side and everyone lined up in turn. Some of the locals had a donkey with a large tin on each side of the pack saddle. Most containers when filled with water were carried on their heads. After a while we embarked for Egypt to a place called Tel-el Keber. This was an immense camp. We were soon restored to good health and after a short spell we marched out into the desert. Our destination was a place called ‘Australian Hill’. We crossed the Nile at Ferry Post. We were mile for nowhere. Every but of transport, such as firewood, water and rations were brought out on camels and donkeys. We dug trenches and strong posts, but the first windstorm levelled them. We had patrols t maintain, especially through the night.

We were taken 10 miles each way for a swim. Imagine how you soon lost any benefits from a swim in the Nile. Sometime later we marched to some derelict railway, pushed into trucks (rail way) and finished up in Alexandria. From there we got to Marsailles in France sometime in March. Our journey from Marsailles was in railway trucks. The notice on each truck (in French) was 40 men or 6 horses. This journey took over 2 days. Along the railway lines there were many farm houses and the people would wave and if we were stationed they would rush over with a few eats such as be=read, biscuits, etc. Of course we had to pay for it as these folks were all on rations themselves. If ever man was to understand man it was during those days in the horse trucks. There was plenty of ventilation as they were built for animals. We arrived at a place called Steinbeck, as usual a long march to our camp. Later, for days, we marched towards the battle front. Finally we reached a village called Bois Grenier. In a few days we were in the trenches in the front line. The place was very damp and sloppy, so we could not dig trenches, but built barricades and moved around on duckboards. A French farmer was right in the line of fire. He was only 2-3 kilometres from our front line. We were told many time that these ‘Flemish’ people were not to be trusted. Anyhow our front line was very quiet, but the Australian troops were issued with a new kind of bomb thrower called the Stokes mortar. These mortars were new and we were trying them out on the hun. They were a deadly weapon. Well the hun started to retaliate with shell fire and big stuff at that. On the night 7.30pm of the 5th of May 1916, just as our company of men were being relieved after 9 days in the front line the bombardment started. Every sort of artillery the German had he let go at us. In 45 minutes every man not in the front line became a stretcher bearer Everything was quiet. Our losses (I think) around 180 men including 7 or 8 prisoners plus our two Stokes mortars. It was this stunt that Capt. Blanchard was taken prisoner. It was here that our sister battalions, out of the line , raced to our assistance. They came overland from their billets to our aid. The first couple I met were the 18th battalions. This bombardment was recorded as the heaviest every heard in France up to this date.

That was 69 years ago this May.

P.S.

I was returning to my unit after 14 days leave in London, arrived at Folkstone, had a cuppa, when the “armistice” was announced 11.11 am, 11th November 1918. My last ‘stoush’.

Jack Tarrant, DCM

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