

# Bugler Walter Joseph Steeth

**Rod Martin**

According to the *Argus* newspaper in June 1915, twenty-eight-year-old Walter Steeth had attended Essendon State School, then became an apprentice to his father, a well-known plumber, and had lived in the Ascot Vale and Moonee Ponds area for twenty-two years. We know that he attended school to at least year ten level because he recorded on his attestation form when enlisting that he had two years' experience in the senior cadets. Walter was a man of average size for those days, standing 170 centimetres tall and weighing sixty-seven kilos. His eyes were blue and he had black hair.

Walter enlisted in the military forces on 17 August 1914, just two weeks after the outbreak of war in Europe. He was a single man, and that may have convinced him that he was unencumbered and available to do his duty. Like many other early recruits, he may also have had a sense of adventure, relishing the chance to see the world before the predicted short conflict was over.

Walter was assigned to Pompey Elliott's 7 Battalion and appointed to the position of bugler. Whether he had any previous musical experience is unknown, as is the reason for the appointment. Did he learn the basics in senior cadets? At twenty-eight, he may well have been considered one of the more mature and experienced men of the battalion and given the position as recognition of this. In the absence of any definitive evidence, we can only guess as to the reasons for Walter taking up this role.

Along with the other 7 Battalion recruits, Walter trained at Broadmeadows.



Buglers of 6 or 7 Battalion at Broadmeadows, August 1914 (AWM H18390)

On 19 October 1914, Walter and his compatriots transferred to Port Melbourne and boarded A20 HMAT *Hororata* bound, they thought, for the newly developed Western Front in France and Belgium.



Members of 2 Infantry Brigade AIF (of which 7 Battalion was part) at Port Melbourne 19 October 1914 preparing to board either HMAT *Benalla* (right) or HMAT *Hororata* (AWM C02793)

After sailing from Melbourne, the ships gathered in King George Sound at Albany in Western Australia. There they were joined by vessels from all other states and from New Zealand. Together, they all sailed for the Middle East on 1 November 1914.



Troops at King George Sound. Note the vessels lining up in the water. (City of Albany)

As the ships reached the entrance to the Red Sea, the Australian commanders were informed that their force would be going ashore in Egypt instead of continuing to

France. Turkey had recently joined the German side in the war and the British war cabinet had decided to stage an attack upon Turkey, knocking it out of the war and opening up the entrance to the Black Sea. Britain and France could then supply their ally, Tsarist Russia, with war materiel and receive Russian wheat in return. The attack would be made at the Gallipoli Peninsula, the aim being to capture the Dardanelles Straits and move on the Turkish capital, Constantinople (now Istanbul). The Australian and New Zealand troops would be used in this attack, fighting along with British and French forces.

Walter and his compatriots were unloaded at Port Said and travelled to a hastily established base camp at Mena, on the outskirts of Cairo and adjacent to the Pyramids. They spent the next three months variously training, going on route marches in the desert and going to the Suez Canal to protect it from possible attacks by the Turks - who occupied the Sinai Peninsula, very close to the canal. They also visited Cairo on many occasions, and may have been involved in some of the high jinks that went on there. While at Mena, Walter wrote to his father, describing the situation and letting him know about what was to come. The letter was published in the *Essendon Gazette*:

Mr. Walter Steeth, writing to his father at Ascot Vale, from Mena Camp, Egypt, states that he is quite well. Sir Ian Hamilton had inspected the troops and he was quite impressed with what he saw of them, stating that excepting the Guards the Australians were the biggest and heaviest troops in the world. At the time of writing it was expected that the men would be under fire in a fortnight. The Colonel said they would be under fire, and gave them a few wrinkles about fighting. They were not to be down-hearted [sic] and were to kill two for each man they lost. The men were all getting their photos taken to send home to their relations. The Sikhs were camped just alongside them, and all had long black hair, which they looked after just like a woman did.

(20 May 1915. Courtesy of Marilyn Kenny)

Those months passed very slowly for the men who, when they enlisted, had dreams of seeing the world and having an adventure. Now, in Egypt, they got bored and became very sick of sand, flies and the stink of the city. Their officers had difficulty in keeping them under control. The lowest point came with the so-called 'Battle of the Wazzar' at the beginning of April. Troops descended upon a street in the red light district, complaining that it was the source of venereal disease, and that the alcohol sold in the hotels there was bad and overpriced. Considerable damage was done to several brothels and police took some time to break up the mob and send them on their way. Whether Walter or any of his compatriots were part of this we do not know, but it is possible as it was reported that up to 2 500 troops were involved. The officers would have had a difficult time keeping the men under control. When they all finally left Mena for Gallipoli a couple of days later, Pompey Elliott wrote to his wife 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.*

When the troops sailed from Alexandria they still did not know where they were going. They landed on the Greek island of Lemnos, set up camps and then began training in scaling heights and rowing whaleboats.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P00702.008

Practising in Lemnos for the Gallipoli landings. 14 April 1915 (AWM P00702.008)

Its destination now confirmed, 7 Battalion sailed for Gallipoli on SS *Galeka* on the night of 24 April. The ship anchored off a point called Gaba Tepe, the landing destination, at 4.00 am the next morning. 7 Battalion was scheduled to go ashore in the second wave, starting at 5.30. It had been planned to use light steamboats, captained by naval ratings, to tow several of the whaleboats to shore and then release them to row the rest of the way. By 5.30, however, no steamboats had arrived so Pompey ordered the first few boats to row the full distance. Holding the important position of bugler, it seems likely that Walter would have been in one of those boats. He had to stay close to his commanding officer in order to relay orders via his bugle. Sadly, currents must have played a part in the fortunes of these boats, as they and ones from other vessels drifted off course and headed for a point directly opposite and north of Gaba Tepe. There the terrain was far more rugged than at the designated landing spot. Turkish troops, complete with guns, rifles and machine guns, looked down upon them from the heights.

When they finally reached the beach, of the 140 men carried in those 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, hitting many more of the troops. Just what happened to Walter after this is open to conjecture. We know that he must have reached the beach relatively unscathed, or he would have been listed among the dead and wounded as they were processed there later in the day. Instead of finding an open plain in front of them, as they had been told, the men met very different country, described by Ross

McMullin as rugged ridges and ravines covered by obstructive, waist-high undergrowth.



7 Battalion boats at the landing spot in Anzac Cove, 25 April 1915 (AWM P00229.001)

While under constant fire, the soldiers, by now all mixed together with other units, had to scramble for cover and attempt to make their way up those ridges and ravines towards the first line of Turkish trenches. Casualties were very high and the men were scattered over a large area. Their commander Pompey, wounded himself, then struggled to establish what he called a rendezvous and gather the 7 Battalion men together. It took several days before the survivors were able to regroup. By 30 April, Elliott's command had lost more men than any other battalion.

The fact that Pompey was wounded on the beach may mean that Walter decided (or was ordered) to go on, following the other men up the scrubby slopes. What happened to him after that is unknown. When the acting commander of 7 Battalion did his tally of casualties at the end of April, he reported Walter as missing. He obviously had no evidence to the contrary at that time.

This is the point where the story of Walter's fate becomes somewhat contradictory and confused. On 22 May, the war department reported that he was wounded. On 15 August 1915, the secretary of defence informed his parents that he was wounded. On 30 September, the secretary sent a further letter informing them that his department was trying to discover what hospital he was in and the nature of his wounds. So, at that time, Walter's parents would have believed that he was still alive. However, lacking any other detail, the department on 31 October that year added to its statement that he was reported wounded but also indicating that he was 'missing' as well. Just how the administration knew that he was wounded if it also recognised that he was missing is perplexing - and especially so because 7 Battalion's initial report was just 'missing'. No mention of wounds. Perhaps he had been captured by the Turks. This must have been a very trying time for Walter's parents and siblings.



The whole confused situation was compounded in February 1916 when Private W.J. Fandley of 7 Battalion reported to the war department that he had seen Walter in a hospital in Malta sometime in June 1915. Around about the same time, a Corporal L. Crawford reported that:

I knew him as a bugler in my battalion. I was in the boat "Seangchow" [sic] going to Alexandria and he was brought on board. I saw him die on the boat, and saw him buried. 36 in all were buried at sea on the trip.

Replying to an enquiry from the AMP Society in October 1916 regarding Walter's fate, the war department noted that there was 'no definite official report' concerning Walter's death and quoted more details from Crawford, written from Luna Park Hospital in Heliopolis, Egypt. According to Crawford:

. . . Bugler W. J. Steeth died on the Seang Choong on 26 April 1915. I am so certain of the man because I read a ticket with his name and his battalion attached and saw him die at the hour of about 5.30 pm on the sail date. I reported his death to the Medical Officer on board, also I saw him buried at sea on Apr. 28<sup>th</sup> 1915.

How did the war department reconcile these accounts with the report it sent to the parents on 10 May 1916 stating that

There is no record of [Walter's] admission to any of the Military Hospitals and he has not been reported as a Prisoner of War?

Furthermore, on 18 December 1916, the department reported that it held the nominal roll of the *Seang Choon* ( a hospital ship), that covered the period during which Walter was supposed to have died, and it did not contain the name of W.J. Steeth. Was it a case of mistaken identity on the part of the the two soldiers who were so adamant that they had seen Walter that they both signed statutory declarations about it? Was it the case that the medical officer on the *Seang Choon* failed to register the death report given to him by Private Crawford? Was it the case that a body taken from the shore of Anzac Cove to the hospital ship was incorrectly labelled with Walter's name? All of these instances would probably have been possible given the confused situation at Anzac Cove in the first few days after the landing.

What we **do** know is that, in June 1921, the war department informed the parents that Walter's body had not been found. The assumption would have been that his bones still lay where his body fell somewhere in the hills above the cove, or his unidentifiable corpse had been buried by comrades or by shellfire.

Because he has no known grave, Walter's name is inscribed on the Lone Pine Memorial.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

## Sources

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