

Private Ernest O'Leary

Rod Martin

In December 1914, forty-year-old Ernest O'Leary was riding the boundary of a sheep station in south-western New South Wales. He had been born in Melbourne, and his mother lived at 2 Bangalore Street in Kensington. Whether that was his former home we do not know and, if it was, how long he had been gone from it is also unknown.



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It seems likely, however, that the forty-year-old had been away for some considerable time. When asked to state any previous military experience, he wrote that he had spent three years in the militia in Adelaide. A look into his life before and after the war gives one the impression that Ernest was something of an itinerant.

Despite being forty, Ernest applied for and was accepted into the military, signing up in Deniliquin in southern New South Wales and being assigned to the new 21 Battalion. He was slight in stature, standing only 165 centimetres tall and weighing only fifty-five kilos. However, he was obviously game and it may be that he joined the army partly for comradeship and adventure. Riding the expansive boundaries of a sheep station would have been a pretty lonely existence.

Ernest moved south to Broadmeadows after enlisting, and joined 21 Battalion when it was raised there in 1915. After completing their training, he and his comrades embarked for Gallipoli on A38 HMAT *Ulysses* on 10 May 1915.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PS0154

(AWM PS 0154)

Upon arrival in Egypt, the men of 21 Battalion stayed there training until 29 August, when they headed for the staging base on the island of Mudros, prior to departing for Gallipoli. While in Egypt, Ernest blotted his copy book in some way or other, because he was sentenced to two days of Field Punishment Number Two - hard labour. His war record does not indicate the nature of his offence.

The battalion landed at Anzac Cove on the eighth of September and bivouacked in Rest Gully. Two platoons from each company were then taken straight to a firing line, while those remaining moved into support trenches to wait their turn. There was obviously no gradual initiation for those arriving at Gallipoli after the initial landing on 25 April. It was a case of straight on to the beach, and straight into action! Over the next few days, the battalion suffered a few casualties from shelling, bombs and snipers. By 13 September, the unit commander was complaining about the state of the trenches:

. . . infested with vermin, fleas and lice, all ranks inconvenienced thereby.

Sanitary arrangements in regard to this Section need particular care and every endeavour is being made to perfect same.

By 16 September, 21 Battalion was spread out on the heights, sub-units being based at Steele's and Courtney's Posts. The Turks were bombarding the locations with shells, and the first member of the unit was killed on that day. On the next day, an unusual accident occurred. A man was wounded when a bullet hit the swivel of the periscope rifle he was using, then deflected downward and struck him in the eye. The projectile then exited through his cheek and entered his shoulder, finally leaving his body under

his arm. Fortunately for him, the medical officer was on the spot and managed to control the bleeding. He believed that the man would live.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A00744

A 21 Battalion soldier using a periscope at Steele's Post, September 1915
(AWM A00744)

By September 1915, the war at Gallipoli had degenerated into a stalemate. Each side took turns to bombard the other, neither of them gaining any ground. Courtney's and Steele's Posts, taken in the first couple of days after the landing on 25 April, remained in the Anzacs' hands until the peninsula was finally evacuated in late December. More men were evacuated before that date because of sickness rather than wounds suffered. On 30 September, the unit commander wrote that:

A large percentage of the men are suffering from diarrhoea or dysentery. A noticeable feature in the medical officer's statistics is that majority of the men suffering from this disease are men with defective teeth.

Also that about fifty of the men who parade sick are reinforcements of which we received approx. 200 just prior to leaving Heliopolis.

This Bn. Has been in the trenches 23 days and has sent 4 officers and 83 others to hospital, despite the most rigorous sanitary precautions. Included in this 83 are 24 wounded 13 of which were self inflicted by accident.

It would appear that the commander reacted to these facts by placing extra men on sanitary duties, probably in an attempt to reduce the incidence of dysentery and diarrhoea. Whether by sheer accident or because of his age, Ernest was one of the men assigned to this task on 30 September. One would assume that his role was to empty the latrines placed around the temporary dugouts and in the trenches, and then dispose of those contents in specially dug pits.



1 Battalion Pioneers building 'thunderboxes' at Gallipoli (AWM C01921)



A trench at Gallipoli. Note the 'thunderbox' in the alcove to the right.
(AWM P02648.026)

It may be the case that lifting and emptying the often overflowing latrines and then lugging a larger container back to pits located somewhere else injured or aggravated Ernest's back because, on 26 October, he was diagnosed with lumbago. However, there is no record of any relief being provided for the condition, either in the form of rest or medication. Ernest may well have had to just struggle on as best he could.

The first gale heralding the coming of winter occurred before 10 October, and the men were ill-prepared for the arrival of rain, snow and bone-chilling winds. Their dugouts, often built into the sides of the hills, provided scant protection from those conditions.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H03942

(AWM H03942)

When the first snow came, it may have provided some novelty value for men who had never seen it before. However, any entertainment provided by playing with snow would have been fleeting. The bitter cold that accompanied it must have been debilitating. Les Carlyon tells us that evacuations for sickness ran at more than 600 per day during October. Just how well forty-year-old Ernest coped with those conditions is open to speculation. Then a massive storm hit the peninsula on 27 November, lasting for three days.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

C00745

Snow in the trenches, November 1915

(AWM C00745)

Pelting rain, a hurricane and heavy snow made life miserable for the Anzacs. Carlyon tells us that

It was the worst blizzard on the peninsula for forty years. Any blizzard on the peninsula is fearsome because there is nowhere to hide. Suddenly you understand why the scrub never grows much higher than eight feet, why the pine trees are so small and twisted. Only one man died from exposure at Anzac, although there were hundreds of cases of frostbite.

The storm may have been the last gasp for Ernest's constitution. On 30 November, he was diagnosed with rheumatic fever and evacuated to the Red Cross hospital on Gezira Island in the Nile river, central Cairo.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P00088.009

(AWM P00088.009)

While there, Ernest contracted dysentery, something to add to his already chronic condition. The decision was made on 20 January 1916 to send him back to Australia. The diagnosis: frostbite and rheumatism. The effect: discharged as medically unfit on 21 January. He arrived back in Melbourne on 27 March.

Thanks to extra research by Lenore Frost, we know a little about what happened to Ernest in later years. His military record does contain a September 1930 statutory declaration sent by him to base records in Melbourne, stating that, while on a train journey from Sydney to Jerilderie in southern New South Wales in February 1930, he had lost his suitcase, which contained his discharge certificate. He was seeking a

replacement copy. The document may well have been an important piece of evidence when he was applying for jobs. The declaration was, after all, dated September 1930. The Great Depression was in full swing by that time. The trip to Jerilderie may have been an indication that he could not obtain a job in Sydney, and was heading back to the bush, possibly to seek another menial job on a farm or station. The electoral rolls indicate that, in Deniliquin in 1930, he was listed as a station hand initially and then, in 1934, a clerk. He had gone up in the world. Other listings for an Ernest O'Leary, clerk, perhaps the same man, perhaps not, can be found at Ballarat and Kensington in the 1920s. The latter location seems to be too much of a coincidence for it not to be our Ernest. By the time that he signed the statutory declaration in Fitzroy in 1930 he had moved to that suburb. Even later (1942), he was living in nearby Abbotsford and still listed as a clerk. By then, he was sixty-eight years old and was probably in receipt of at least part of the old age pension. It is heartening to believe that, despite the infirmities that truncated his military career, Ernest was still able to lead a productive life into his late sixties.

Sources

Australian War Memorial

Carlyon, Les: *Gallipoli*, Sydney, Macmillan, 2001.

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Lenore Frost

National Archives of Australia