

Alex Watson #245 9th Battalion and #1593-24th Battalion

Alex Watson was born at Maroon to parents Kirby and Mary Watson in 1893. He attended Maroon State School as a boy. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Alex did not stay on the land. He reported at his enlistment that he was a motor driver (as opposed to the more common in 1914, horse or bullock driver) He also stated that he had served for a period of time with the Queensland Police Force being stationed at Rosewood, Maryborough and Cordalba (near Childers) before being dismissed from the force on 13 January 1914.

Alex enlisted in Brisbane on 26 August 1914. This date is barely three weeks after war was declared which places Alex amongst those young men who rushed to the recruiting depots. He was allotted to the 9th Infantry Battalion which only a month later boarded HMAT *Omrah* at Pinkenba wharf for overseas. There is no record of Alex on the embarkation roll which may be explained by events later in his military career. He was 21 years of age at the time.

The *Omrah* sailed to Sydney and on to Melbourne where the assembled transports waited for the threat from a squadron of German cruisers from the China Station to resolve itself. Eventually, naval intelligence deduced that the squadron (save for the light cruiser "Emden") had sailed east across the Pacific and was no threat to the Australian and New Zealand transports which resumed their crossing of the Indian Ocean from Albany, Western Australia. During the crossing, the Australian cruiser HMAS *Sydney* encountered the *Emden* and forced the German ship aground. The other piece of news revealed as the convoy sailed via Colombo towards the Suez Canal was that Turkey had entered the war on the side of Germany.

The entry of Turkey into the war changed the strategic situation in the Middle East. The newly arrived Australians and New Zealanders, who were originally to be deployed to England and France, were soon accommodated in tented camps close to Cairo while the British Authorities attempted to meet the new threat to Egypt. It is well documented that soon after arrival in Egypt, some of Anzac began to exhibit poor discipline. There were several reasons for this.

The AIF was a volunteer force, remunerated at a rate of five times that of their British counterparts. The men had plenty of cash to spend. The main camp occupied by the Australians was at Mena on the outskirts of Cairo. Later when granted leave, cashed up young men could easily catch a tram from the camp into the centre of the city. Alex Watson would have been one of those soldiers out for a good time.

There was a deal of concern surrounding the behaviour of the Dominion troops. The British authorities expected that ordinary soldiers would show deference to officers due to the difference in class. The Australians generally were far more egalitarian having come from backgrounds that were virtually classless. An ugly incident in the red light district of Cairo on Good Friday 1915 became the catalyst for swift reactions from the Australian commanders. The incident which could best be described as a riot protesting about overpricing and the prevalence of venereal disease was reported in the Australian press. Outrage at the way in which Australia's good name was being sullied by a "Few rotten apples" caused the

Australian Commander in Egypt, General Bridges, to order that undesirables and men who had contracted sexually transmitted disease would be sent home to Australia and discharged.

The 1st Division finally received their orders to board ships at Alexandria on 1 March and on 2 March the battalions of the 3rd Brigade, which were to be the covering force for the amphibious landing on the Gallipoli Peninsula sailed for the island of Lemnos. There a vast armada of ships and men were assembled in preparation for the landing now commemorated every year on 25 April as Anzac Day. While aboard the 9th Battalion's ship in Lemnos, Alex Watson reported to the ship's hospital with a severe case of gonorrhoea. He and others suffering the same disease or worse were returned Alexandria for treatment and in accordance with the new policy was soon bound for Australia aboard HMAT *Ceramic*. Upon disembarking at Melbourne towards the end of May, Alex and his thoroughly demoralised cohort were marched to Broadmeadows camp.

Alex's file is devoid of information as to what happened to him when he arrived at Broadmeadows but after only a month after disembarking from the *Ceramic*, he was sworn in again using his own name at Seymour Camp. On this occasion, despite freely admitting he had previously served with the 9th Battalion Alex was allocated a new regimental number and joined the 24th Battalion on 22 June 1915. On 10 July aboard HMAT *Euripides* Alex sailed again for Egypt with his new found mates of the 24th Battalion.

By the time that Alex arrived back in Egypt, things had changed. The camps at Mena had been closed and new camps established at Tel-el-Kabir on the Suez Canal, miles from Cairo and temptation. On 30 August, the 24th Battalion boarded a transport ship for Lemnos and on 6 September landed at Gallipoli under cover of darkness.

The Gallipoli campaign had ground to a stalemate after the failed offensives of August. As newly arrived troops, the 24th spent much of its time in fatigue duties or defending the front line at Lone Pine until successfully evacuated from the Peninsula in December. Alex arrived back at Alexandria on 10 January 1916 and was immediately hospitalised with Mumps. Because 24th Battalion had suffered only a few casualties during their time at Anzac, they were among the first battalions to embark for Marseilles. There they entrained for a three day journey to Northern France and the Western Front.

The sector around Armentieres where the 24th found themselves was referred to as the "Nursery". It was a good place for newly arrived troops to become accustomed to trench life. The terrain was low lying and boggy which precluded large scale attacks from either side, however small trench raids were used to give the troops experience in confronting the enemy.

During one such trench raid, Alex Watson was killed. There are no details available surrounding his death except for a brief entry in the 24th Battalion War Diary which states that a trench raid just after midnight on 30 June 1916 resulted in one soldier killed and one wounded. It is fairly certain that Alex's mates brought his body back from no man's land as he was buried later that day at Ration Farm Cemetery with the Reverend Dunford in attendance.

Kirby Watson signed for his son's medals and memorial plaque in the 1920's.