

One Australian's grave on Gallipoli

Ashley Ekins



In April this year a small group of Australian visitors to the Gallipoli battlefields tramped inland from the coast road along the rough dirt track to a remote cemetery. They searched the rows of headstones and then quietly gathered around while one of their number knelt beside one of the markers. Maggie Hansen of Sydney had become the first member of her family ever to visit the grave of her father's brother, Private Herbert Walter Hansen.

The 7th Field Ambulance Cemetery at Gallipoli is a lonely place. Nestled in the foothills of the Sari Bair range some 500 metres from the sea, it is among the most northerly of the allied cemeteries. Anzac Cove is two kilometres distant to the south but seems much further. From here the rugged features of those famous Gallipoli landmarks, the Sphinx and Plugge's Plateau, are just distant silhouettes against the skyline.

The unit whose dead lie buried in this cemetery landed on Gallipoli in September 1915. There are over 400 graves, and many date from the ferocious fighting of the August offensive when the ANZACs launched their desperate, final attempt to break out of their beachhead enclave and capture the heights of the Sari Bair ridge. Their heroic efforts were in vain. The August battles proved to be the last throw of the dice at Gallipoli.

Maggie Hansen's uncle, Private H.W. Hansen, enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force on 21 January 1915 in Lismore, NSW. After basic training in Australia, he embarked with the 5th Reinforcements of the 15th Infantry Battalion. By high summer he was in the thick of the

action on Gallipoli. His battalion formed part of Monash's 4th Brigade which was given one of the toughest tasks of the August offensive, the capture of the Turkish-held Hill 971. This peak, the highest in the Sari Bair range, dominated the northern part of the Australian sector and overlooked both Suvla Bay to the north and the Dardanelles straits. Possession of these heights was the strategic key to the entire Gallipoli campaign.

The 4th Brigade attempted their assault by night, over rough and unreconnoitred terrain. Most of the men were weary from months of fighting and many were weakened through dysentery. The brigade soon became lost and broken up in the innumerable gullies; by dawn they were nowhere near their objectives. The ANZAC soldiers had been given an impossible task, as any modern visitor to the battlefields quickly understands.

Private Hansen's service record shows that some time during the advance on 7 August he received a "slight" gunshot wound to the ear. His wound was dressed at a field ambulance station, but it could not to keep him from the action. He returned to his unit that same day. At this stage of the Gallipoli campaign many men who were convalescing from sickness or wounds pleaded with their officers to be allowed to join their mates in the offensive. By the following day, Private Hansen was dead. He was killed in action, probably during the night attack, somewhere on the line of advance against Hill 971. He was just 24 years old.

The records are vague about the exact circumstances of his death. Given the confusion of the night assault this is scarcely surprising. Private Hansen was first buried by an army chaplain at the head of Chailak Dere, one of the principal gullies leading to the heights. Later his remains were reburied in Norfolk Cemetery even further north of Anzac Cove. But after the war many of these smaller cemeteries were consolidated and his grave was finally moved to 7th Field Ambulance Cemetery. Here in one of the most distant Australian graves he found a lonely resting place, far from his mates in the numerous cemeteries further south.

Ashley Ekins is a Senior Historian at the Australian War Memorial.

Above left: Maggie Hansen places a poppy in the soil in front of H.W. Hansen's grave and lays on the headstone a photograph of the uncle she never knew: a simple gesture of remembrance, but one which those with her will never forget. (Ashley Ekins)

