



Bendigo's original ANZAC Ross McMullin

Noel Edwards, a 20-year-old Bendigo engineer, enlisted so swiftly when the First World War was declared in August 1914 – he was at the Town Hall on the first day of recruiting before the doors opened – that he was really the original ANZAC from Bendigo. Like other early enlistees from the area, he joined the 7th Battalion, AIF, commanded by the redoubtable “Pompey” Elliott.

On 25 April 1915, Edwards struggled ashore on Gallipoli, saw lots of comrades hit, and endured days and nights of chaotic and terrifying combat. After a brief respite the 7th Battalion was sent to Cape Helles, where it was involved in the ill-fated charge towards Krithia. Edwards and his comrades were directed to make a long, uphill, impromptu advance across an unprotected spur in broad daylight, against entrenched Turks who had already stopped a series of similarly futile enterprises. “This advance was absolutely the hottest time,” that Edwards had yet experienced, but somehow he emerged unscathed.

In his company, only one-sixth of the originals were still going, and none of the original officers remained. Edwards found himself elevated to lieutenant. He proved an outstanding officer. Capable and courageous, irrepressible and inspirational, he maintained a positive outlook – “Every night we have a beautiful sunset,” he noted in his diary, and the regular swims he enjoyed were “a great pastime” – and he looked after the men of his platoon assiduously. They thought the world of him. “We have the best officer in the whole battalion bar none,” some said.

Between May and July he endured the heat, flies, dysentery and devastating Turkish shellfire. No other part of the entire ANZAC front was bombarded more heavily than Steele's Post in July, when the

7th Battalion occupied it. These “shells play great havoc with our trenches,” Edwards noted. “They often penetrate a sap and explode, burying several men at times.” Once again battalion casualties were severe; once again Edwards managed to escape.

In August came news that the troops would attempt to break the confining trench deadlock with a multi-pronged offensive. The 7th Battalion's task was to be a tactically dubious diversionary attack towards the Turkish stronghold of Johnston's Jolly. A Bendigo officer, Gil Dyett, had just received an appetising array of preserved fruit and other foodstuffs from a friend in Egypt. For veteran trench-dwellers these were luxurious delicacies. Dyett invited Edwards and another Bendigo-born lieutenant, “Curly” Symons, to join him in consuming them. Discussing the imminent assault as they hopped into Dyett's pears, cherries and figs, each of the three men admitted that he believed this would be his last meal. “The next few days promise to be very lively,” Edwards wrote in his diary.

After a busy night out in the open in front of the Turkish position, hauling in as much of the barbed wire as possible with rakes and grappling irons, Edwards and his men found that the attack had been cancelled. Instead, the battalion was ordered south to Lone Pine to bolster Australian resistance to repeated Turkish counter-attacks.

At Lone Pine the fighting was ferocious, and 7th Battalion casualties were soon mounting. Dyett was carried back down to the beach so severely wounded that he appeared to be dead. A blanket was reverently placed over him, ready for burial, before someone





noticed him move. Symons was among four 7th Battalion men awarded the VC for gallantry at Lone Pine. Pompey Elliott had sent him off to recapture a critical position with the memorable parting words, “I don't expect to see you again, but we must not lose that post.”

During the long night Edwards again inspired the inexperienced recruits in his platoon with his bravery and encouragement. He “deserved a VC if ever a man did,” one of them declared afterwards. During a lull in the fighting, with his premonition of death growing stronger, Edwards took the opportunity to write a cheery letter to his mother, describing the meal he had shared with Dyett and Symons. Soon afterwards the Turks launched another attack. Edwards fought with reckless zeal until he was killed by a Turkish bullet.

After Noel Edwards’ death, his younger brother Harold enlisted. As a member of the Australian Flying Corps, Harold witnessed the death of the Red Baron, Manfred von Richthofen. Another brother, Cyril, tried to enlist in 1918. But Noel’s friend Gil Dyett, now recovered from his wounds and in charge of recruiting in Victoria (after the war he was national president of the RSL for 27 years), aware of the family’s contribution and torment, privately destroyed Cyril’s enlistment papers.

Harold Edwards became one of the longest living AIF veterans before his death in 1998 at the age of 102. In 1990 he was one of a group of veterans who

visited Gallipoli for the 75th anniversary of the landing. It was his chance to find Noel’s grave. Having “given up hope of seeing where brother Noel fought and fell,” he wrote, “it was a sad satisfaction to see the place and put wreaths on the Lone Pine cenotaph and on his grave.”

Cut down at 21, Noel Edwards was typical of the calamitous casualties of his lost generation, remembered only by his family and a few friends like Dyett and Symons. In Bendigo his mother channelled her profound grief into poetry. Four years later, with the war over and AIF survivors returning, her anguish was still acute:

*How I shall miss him – when from oversea
The Anzacs come 'mid shouts of victory;
When eager voices answering smiles awake,
And hands press hands for old remembrance sake.
Full many a face will wear a mask of joy,
With heartstrings aching for the absent boy.*



Ross McMullin is the author of *The light on the hill: the Australian Labor Party 1891-1991*. He is currently writing a biography of Pompey Elliott.

Opposite page (top): New recruits to the AIF, some still in civilian clothes, enjoy a mug of tea at Broadmeadows training camp in October 1914. (AWM A05741)

Opposite page (bottom): Edwards’ friend, William “Curly” Symons, who earned a VC at Lone Pine, survived the war and settled in Britain where he served in the Home Guard during the Second World War. (AWM H06206)

This page (top): An Australian soldier watches anxiously from the behind sandbags as a comrade disappears over the top of the trench during the Lone Pine battle. A dead or wounded man lies under a blanket in the foreground. (AWM A05778)