

The Funeral Of Colleague Reverend Andrew Gillison

Rev Andrew Gillison (pictured right), then minister at St George's Presbyterian Church East St Kilda, enlisted as a chaplain in October 1914 and applied to be attached to the 14th Battalion. Padre Gillison began a diary, whilst based at the Broadmeadows Army Barracks. His diary, initially filled with touristy chats about pyramids and markets of Cairo, takes on a very different tone as sounds of the Anzac Day battle reaches their ship as it enters the Dardanelles.



“The moment the Anzacs had got a footing over the edge a machine gun opened upon them and simply withered them up. Such a storm of lead I had of course never before seen and could not have imagined, tearing up the ground and littering it with fragments of undergrowth and mangled men.”

It was the chaplains, small in number according to Dr McKernan, who sought to walk alongside the men, help in any way possible, not segregate themselves with the officers but live in the trenches with their men who won respect.

A close reading of Padre Merrington's diary, stored at the Australian War Memorial, describes how the 2nd Light Horse Brigade became the first light horsemen to be called to trench warfare.

Their task on 14 May 1915, a mere two days after arriving at Anzac Cove, was to *“seize and fill up certain advanced enemy trenches, which constantly menaced our lines”*, Merrington wrote: ***“There were many casualties. The deceased Light Horsemen were buried at the foot of Pope's Hill, near the approach to Quinn's (Post).”***

The detail and description in Gillison's diary enables the reader, 100 years later, to picture the conditions, the respect the chaplain held for the men and the role that he made for himself as someone who had no specific responsibilities beyond irregular Sunday services and burials. ***“...That night I took up my quarters at the dressing station with our medical officer. It was rather an eerie moment when I looked up to where... was holding his post 250 feet above, but quite close, and saw the glistening bayonets and the willing men and heard the order “Charge”...It was a sad night helping to dress and care for the wounded as they came down, many of them badly hit with shrapnel as well as rifle bullets. But they did not grumble. Indeed the way these boys have taken their suffering is a marvel.”***

Gillison was amongst the first chaplains to be landed at Gallipoli. Other chaplains were held back initially as they were taking up spaces on the landing vessels that were reserved for armed soldiers. Not surprisingly, much of his time was taken with burying the dead: ***“During the first few days burials were conducted by night or in the early morning on the hill just below the trenches. Necessity knows no law. Some of the men were buried by their comrades without a service as a chaplain was not at hand. Later we have had a burial ground not far from the beach which we have divided into sections, so that each unit may be kept separate. Here the burials are conducted at night. Carts are put at the disposal of chaplains to remove any bodies requiring burial and we take down a party to dig the necessary graves and carry out the burial. We get away about 11pm and back to our dug-outs any time from 2.30 to 8am, according to the work to be done.”***

Gillison's last entry dated 16 June describes the famous armistice that was agreed between the Turks and the Allied forces on 24 May to enable both armies to bury their dead. He wrote: ***“We calculate that there were buried that day between the trenches about 4,000 Turks...I never beheld such a sickening sight in my life and hope it may not be my lot again.”***

The padre from Melbourne was to live only another two months, shot down as he and a stretcher bearer attempted to rescue a wounded soldier, despite the entreaties of those around them.

Merrington, who conducted Chaplain Gillison's burial service, recorded that moment in his diary as told to him by witnesses: ***“...despite the warnings, they crept out in front. They got close to the man, when the Turks fired, and both were hit. They rose up and ran for our trench and reached it. Gillison collapsed but was conscious for an hour or two. He was shot between the shoulders where the bullet struck him as he crawled forward. The bullet came out of his chest near the heart. He and his gallant comrade were tenderly treated; but the end of Gillison was not far off...His words were of his loved ones in Melbourne and of the hope that never failed his courageous spirit.”***

Merrington describes the burial service in detail and then ensures the character of Gillison will not be forgotten: ***“He was a soldier and a friend to all. Full of high spirit and cheerfulness, knowing no fear, he led the men along the paths of their duty in this great campaign. He died for an unknown wounded man. What decoration, posthumous or in the time of life, can surpass the glory of his deed in pure, unselfish heroism?”***

Source: <https://crosslight.org.au/2015/04/05/lest-forget-chaplains-church-gallipoli/>

NOTE: Padre Gillison was the first Australian Chaplain to die at Gallipoli on 22nd August 1915 aged 47. Some of his last words were: ***“I'm just a servant going home to my Master.”*** He was mentioned in despatches.