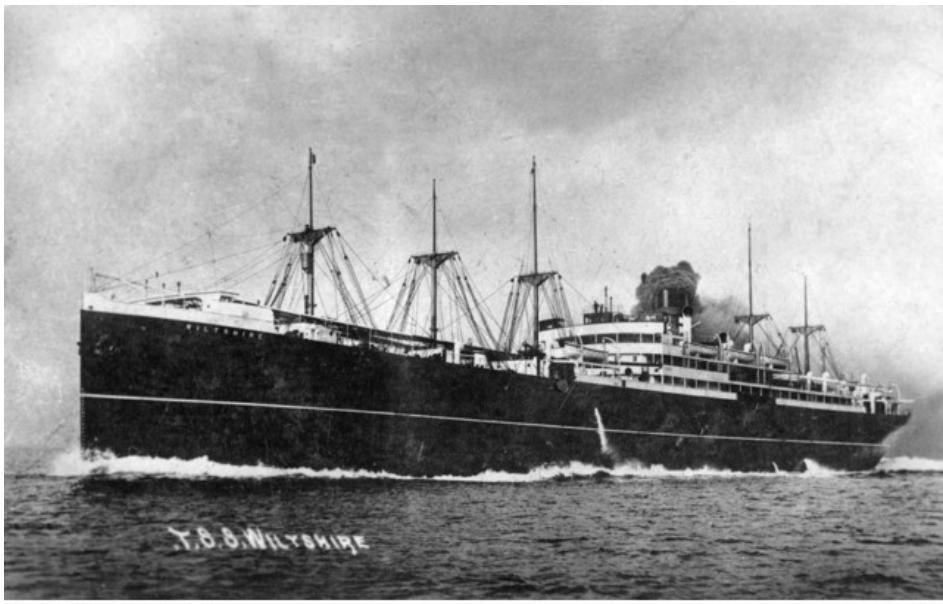


Lance-Sergeant George Melrose Fish

Rod Martin

He was quite big for his time, standing almost 177 centimetres tall and weighing seventy kilos. Salesman George Fish was twenty-three years old when he enlisted just two weeks after the outbreak of war in 1914. He was one of the relatively few men accepted into the First Australian Imperial Force, so he fulfilled all the physical requirements, such as height, chest measurement, good teeth and no flat feet. Hailing from 14 Mackay Street in Essendon, George had served in the militia medical corps for almost three years prior to the initiation of hostilities, so he was a natural for the regular medical corps, and was allocated to 2 Field Ambulance.

After completing his basic training in Melbourne, George sailed with the first convoy, embarking on A18 HMAT *Wilshire* on 19 October 1914.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

A04186

HMAT *Wiltshire*

(AWM A04186)

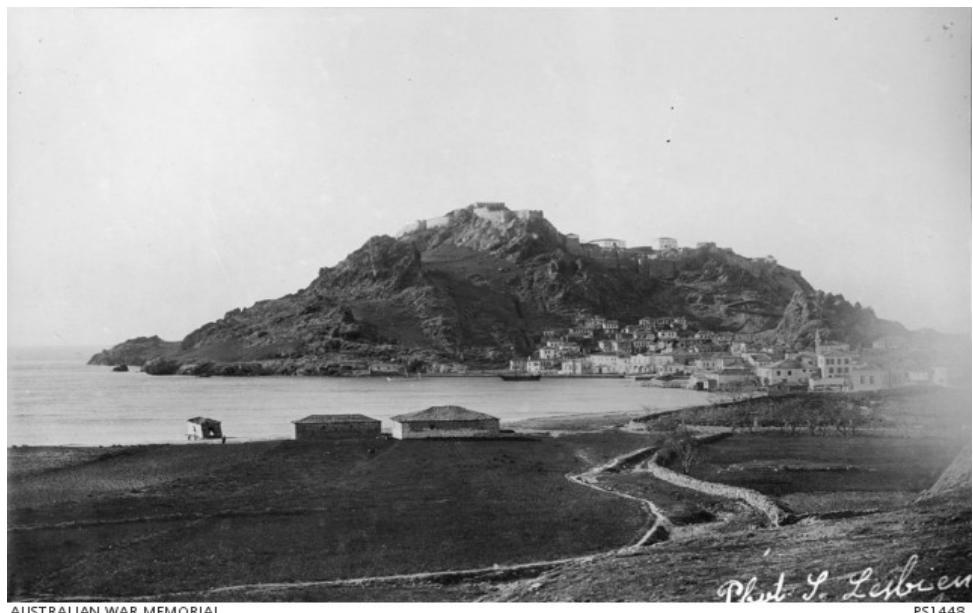
The first convoy was originally destined for the Western Front in France and Belgium. However, while the ships were at sea, the British government decided to attack Germany's ally, Turkey, in an effort to put that country out of the war and gain control of the Dardanelles Straits, thus opening up a supply passage To Russia via the Black Sea. Accordingly, the Australian and New Zealand convoys were instructed to stop and unload in Egypt, prior to an attack on the Gallipoli Peninsula.

The troops arrived in Egypt in December 1914. Initially, they were used to defend the Suez Canal from an expected Turkish attack. When they were not doing that, they were subjected to rigorous manoeuvres in the hot desert sand, so the medical corps, including the field ambulances, were probably kept very busy. Those who survived such punishing tactics without ending up in a hospital for a period of time were able to enjoy the many temptations of Cairo, the city only being a stone's throw from the camp near the Pyramids.



Troops on HMAT *Wiltshire* looking at the view of Port Said, December 2014
(AWM C01679)

The forced marches and the manoeuvres in Egypt were designed to prepare the men for the attack on Gallipoli, which finally came on 25 April 1915. 2 Field Ambulance formed part of the landing, and quickly set up dressing stations on the beach. However, George was not with them. Instead, he was left behind on the Greek island of Lemnos, becoming part of the first hospitals established near Mudros harbour. He was assigned to work in the so-called pack store. Presumably, this was the place where medical supplies destined for both the front and the hospitals on Lemnos were sorted and packed. Assuming that the field Ambulance was organised along the lines of the British Army field ambulance units, five men were assigned to the pack store



Mudros Harbour 1915

(AWM PS1448)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

AO3075

No. 3 Australian General Hospital, Mudros 1915.

(AWM A03075)

George was obviously good at his job because he was promoted to lance-corporal in early May, then to temporary corporal on 9 September, and finally to lance-sergeant on 26 November. By the time he received his last promotion, the decision by the British to evacuate Gallipoli had been made, and all troops were off the peninsula by Christmas. George had arrived back in Egypt on the third of that month.

With fresh troops arriving in Egypt on a regular basis, thanks to a liberalisation of the physical requirements and a vigorous recruiting campaign at home, the Australian and New Zealand forces were expanded and divided into two corps: 1 and 2 ANZAC. 2 Field Ambulance, originally connected to 1 Australian Division, became part of 1 ANZAC Corps and departed with the rest of its contingent on 26 March 1916, headed for Marseilles and the Western Front in France. Once arrived at the front, the Anzacs were sent to the so-called 'nursery sector' near the town of Armentières. This was an area of the front that was relatively quiet, and it gave the men a chance to acclimatise themselves to the realities of a modern industrial war. As the British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig, remarked to Lord Birdwood, the commander of 1 ANZAC Corps, "You're not fighting the Bashi Bazouks now!"

Having picked up seven motor ambulances and three motor cycles at Erquinghem, and having been bombarded by two German shells a few days later, two officers and fifty-five other ranks moved to Bac St. Maur on 29 April to set up an advanced dressing station. The remainder stayed at an established hospital in a school building at Estaires until 19 May, when they moved to Sailly to establish the main dressing station for 2 Field Ambulance. The Germans welcomed them with a barrage on 24 May, but no casualties were incurred.

The unit stayed at Sailly until early July when it moved out towards Vadencourt, arriving on the twentieth and establishing a hospital in the local chateau. It was not far from the Somme river, where a major allied attack (the largest of the war) had begun on 1 July.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL
An Australian motor ambulance

C02119
(AWM C02119)

2 Field Ambulance's war diary for July 1916 is remarkably uninformative about the actions in which its members were involved. We can only deduce from the sudden increase in the unit's casualties that it was well and truly in the war zone. Thirteen casualties (one death) were reported for the month. In August, the number was eleven, but four of them were fatalities. The first death occurred on the first of the month. It was George. He was injured in the leg, probably by a shell, on 29 July. After being taken to a field hospital and suffering the amputation of one leg, he died three days later.

Field ambulances were used to convey injured soldiers from casualty clearing stations to field hospitals further in the rear. The Germans would bombard areas near the front on a regular basis, and ambulances were sometimes unwitting targets: what one might call collateral damage today. On some occasions they were deliberately attacked. The numbers of casualties suffered by 2 Field Ambulance in July and August alone give an indication of the dangers the men faced while on humanitarian duties.

George was buried at Puchevillers British Cemetery, nineteen kilometres north-east of Amiens.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

POSTSCRIPT: George's mother, a widow, suffered the loss of two sons in the war. George's younger brother, Charles, enlisted with his mother's permission in July 1915 when he was a month away from his twenty-first birthday. He was originally assigned to 12 Reinforcements, 8 Battalion, but later transferred to 2 Field Ambulance, no doubt to serve alongside his older brother. He would have been grief-stricken to lose George, but he fought on for almost two more years before he too was wounded by a shell in April 1918, during the last Great German push.

Charles died on the seventeenth, eight days before the famous Battle of Villers Bretonneux, which marked the first turning of the German tide. The war ended seven months later.

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