

Private/Gunner Alman Wilfred Davey

Rod Martin

He was three months short of his nineteenth birthday when grocer Alman Davey of 63 Bowen Street, Moonee Ponds, volunteered with his parents' consent on 15 March 1915. Enlisting before the landing at Gallipoli, he can rightly be counted among the 'Dinkum Aussies': the first cohorts to join up after the war began. He was short in stature at 166 centimetres (the minimum requirement at that time was 162.6 centimetres) and weighed less than sixty-five kilos, but he was obviously keen to do his bit for king and empire. He joined 24 Battalion, trained at Broadmeadows and left for Egypt only two months later on A38 HMAT *Ulysses*.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PS0154

(AWM PS0154)

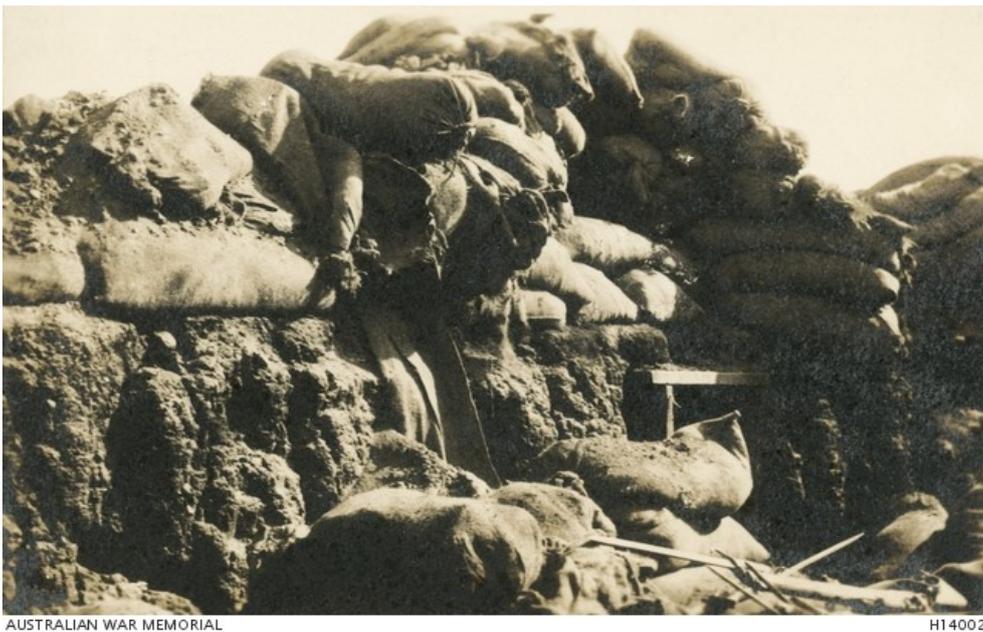
While *en route*, Alman was transferred to 22 Battalion. He arrived in Egypt some time late in June and became ill on 1 July, suffering from bronchitis. After spending eight days in hospital at Atelia, he returned to his unit and training, and was then sent to Gallipoli, along with the rest of 22 Battalion, on 30 August. The men disembarked on 5 September and walked to Lone Pine to take over the trenches there. The bloody battle for that location had been conducted early the previous month. The men had to occupy dugouts but spent much of their first day digging out a number of dead bodies, both Australian and Turkish. According to the war diary, the stench and the flies were '*awful*'. On the sixth, the men took their first shots at the Turkish trenches and were repaid in kind – very promptly! This was to be the pattern for the remainder of the year. After the offensives of early August, both sides settled down to a stalemated conflict, taking pot shots at each other using artillery, bombs (grenades) and small arms fire. By 17 September, the battalion commander was reporting that the men's letters home indicated that they were reasonably satisfied with the officers, rations and conditions (but too much bully beef and biscuits!) and there were no general complaints. However, most wished the war to be over (the initial 1914 enthusiasm for

the conflict would have disappeared very quickly at Gallipoli, as this report indicates) and they spoke '*lovingly*' of their Australian homes.



22 Battalion, newly arrived from Egypt, going into line at the southern part of Lone Pine, 6 September (AWM A00847)

Despite the stalemate, things were still dangerous. On 19 September, as an example, a major, captain and non-commissioned officer were in a dugout when it was hit by a Turkish shell. They were blown out of the structure and all three were severely wounded as a result.



Shellfire damage to a 22 Battalion post at Lone Pine (AWM H14002)

As October commenced, winter began to make its entrance. Both sides staged minor operations in the first few days of the month, but the strategic situation remained much the same. On the eleventh of the month, for reasons unknown, Alman was transferred back to 24 Battalion. There may have been a need to balance up numbers. 24 Battalion had arrived at Anzac on 7 September and had then moved through White's Valley (between Lone Pine and the coast), towards Lone Pine. At the time that Alman joined it, 24 Battalion was resting in White's Valley, having just been relieved from Lone Pine. If he thought he was going to have a well-earned rest, then he was wrong. The very next day, he and his new comrades were back in the trenches, subjected to and being involved in bombing and sniping. The men resorted to using a catapult machine with considerable success, throwing time fuse and percussion bombs at the Turkish trenches. In response, the Turks attempted to approach one section of the Australian trenches, but were repulsed at the cost to the battalion of one man killed and four wounded.

In the meantime, despite heavy Turkish shelling, the men were preparing the trenches for winter. In particular, there was a need to drain large amounts of rain water from them.



Men of 24 Battalion moving up White's Valley towards Lone Pine, September 1915
(AWM C02015)

The conditions – lice, stench, flies, shells, snipers and now increasing cold - were having a considerable effect on the newly-arrived battalions. On 14 October, the 25 Battalion commander reported that eleven officers and 531 other ranks (in other words, about half the battalion) had reported sick. Disease was increasingly having an effect. On the twenty-third, the commander reported four cases of diphtheria and one of scarlet fever. Those who were still standing spent a couple of days at Lone Pine and then were relieved for another couple of days. This appeared to be a routine.

While in White's Valley, they passed their time erecting dugouts to provide some protection from the winter cold. However, they had few materials to work with as no timber or metal was available.

It was noted by the commander on 21 October that the Turks were using larger bombs and also mines. Indeed, one of the reasons for the evacuation of Gallipoli in December 1915 was the fact that the Turks were moving German heavy howitzers into the area. These would provide them with extra firepower that may have been overwhelming. While the battalion inflicted more than its share of casualties on the Turks during this time, it had nevertheless lost twenty-one dead and sixty-six wounded by the end of October. Another 215 were in hospital with a variety of ailments.

November 1915 found the battalion still at Lone Pine, being shelled by the Turks on a regular basis while digging saps (forward-facing trenches) and tunnels towards the enemy lines. The men were also warned to take precautions against gas attacks, as there was a fear that the Turks would use them in an effort to extend their front line. On the seventeenth, after returning to Lone Pine from White's Valley, the battalion commander sensed that the Turks were 'very jumpy', shelling the Australian positions quite heavily. An enemy aeroplane passed overhead during the day, and it was also found that they were attempting to undermine the Australian trenches. Countering action was taken in consequence. It was during this day that Alman was injured. He was diagnosed with a compound fracture of his right hand and was evacuated to hospital in Alexandria. The wound failed to improve, his fingers becoming septic, so much so that the third one had to be amputated. The doctors noted that his hand was weakened by disease and injury, and they declared him permanently unfit for duty in early 1916.

Alman returned to Australia via HMAT *Nestor* in February, arriving in March and being duly discharged. He went back to civilian duties, taking up a new job as a salesman and living in Ruskin Street, St. Kilda South (now Elwood). The next we hear of him is on 19 May 1917 when he re-enlisted, this time in 27 Reinforcements, Australian Field Artillery Brigade. He was now a gunner, and he now apparently had brown eyes where in 1915 they were blue. Someone must have been colour-blind! The fact that Alman was missing a finger was obviously judged not to be a hindrance for someone involved in manning a field gun or howitzer. In any case, the recruiters were desperate for any volunteers by 1917. Recruits were by then rather thin on the ground, so much so that the prime minister, 'Billy' Hughes, had conducted a unsuccessful plebiscite on conscription the previous year, and was planning another one (also unsuccessful, as it turned out). Alman's preparedness to go to war again would surely have been welcomed by the government.

The new field artillery recruits were based at Maribyrnong. Alman was not there very long, however, when he was hospitalised for one day on 23 June, suffering from alcoholism. He was then transferred to a rest camp at Macleod and stayed there until 9 November, probably 'drying out'. During this time, he was hospitalised again on 15 September, suffering from influenza. The doctors diagnosed him with disorderly action of the heart (a form of arrhythmia?) and epistaxis (bleeding from the nose) and, on 20 October, he was declared 'unfit for AIF'. However, there seemed to be no action to demobilise him. Instead, he embarked on A15 HMAT *Port Sydney* on 9

November and arrived at Suez on 12 December. By the twenty-second of the month, he had disembarked at Taranto in Italy. From there he sailed to Southampton, and was transferred to Heytesbury, near the large training base at Salisbury Plain.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

J06317

A group of men of the Reserve Brigade, Australian Artillery, at Heytesbury, early 1918
(AWM J06317)

The men received most of their training at Heytesbury as the number of guns and trainers had fallen too low back in Australia for it to be carried out there. It wasn't long before Alman was in trouble, however. On 27 January, he was late to a 9.00 am parade (probably slept in!) and he was sentenced to three days confined to barracks. Given the location of the camp near Salisbury Plain, that may or may not have been a severe punishment.

On 15 April, Alman and his comrades were shipped to France, sailing from Southampton. By the nineteenth, they were in northern France and, on the twenty-fifth, joined 12 Army Brigade, Field Artillery at Busnes, south of Hazebrouck. Alman was allocated to 47 Battery. 25 April 1918 is significant in Australian military history, not only for being the third Anzac Day, but also for the brilliant Anzac counter-offensive conducted at Villers-Bretonneux, near Amiens on the Somme. In March 1918, the Germans had begun a 'do or die' offensive on the Somme, hoping to separate the British and French armies and push the British into the sea before American troops could arrive in large numbers (America had declared war against Germany in April 1917). Up until 25 April, their advance had been steady, the allied forces retreating along a wide front. When Alman arrived, 12 FAB had just repelled a German attack the previous day, firing 3 600 rounds in the process. The next day the German advance was checked at Villers-Bretonneux, saving the important railway junction of Amiens from attack. We do not know the details of Alman's placement in the brigade. The odds are that he was attached to a battery of eighteen-pounder field guns. Each brigade had a number of these, and each possessed six guns. However, each one also had a battery of howitzer guns, that were larger and fired a heavier

shell. He could have been allocated to that battery. Whatever the case, the brigade held its position during the next few days, firing back at the Germans in response to their bombardments. As an example, on 26 April, the batteries fired 1 279 rounds on nearby Paradis at the rate of four rounds per gun per minute for fifteen minutes, then three rounds per gun per minute for five minutes and then two rounds per gun per minute for ten minutes. It would have been very heavy work, conducted in dangerous conditions. The guns were targets for the German artillery and many men died while manning them. It was especially dangerous when a round hit a pile of live shells near the gun, ready to be used.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E02149

A camouflaged eighteen-pounder gun belonging to 12 FAB, near Vaulx, May 1918
(AWM E02149)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E04810

12 FAB camouflaged gun emplacements, north of Robecque, 16 May 1916 (AWM E04810)

The period between May and August 1918 saw the Allies holding their lines and regrouping, readying for an inevitable counter-attack, while sizeable numbers of American troops arrived on the battlefield. 12 FAB had become an army brigade in 1917, so it was not attached to any particular army division. Rather, it supported a number of them, depending on its location at any particular time. During May, it remained in the Busnes – Robecque area, subjected to harassing fire from the Germans. However, the commander reported that, on the whole, the enemy was very quiet. The brigade was relieved on 24 May and moved to billets near Lynde, arriving there on the last day of the month.

On 2 June, the commander reported something that was a growing concern across Europe. Despite it being close to summer in the Northern Hemisphere, and despite the commander reporting the next day as one that broke *'delightfully fine'*, an epidemic of influenza was spreading throughout the brigade. Three days later he wrote:

Epidemic of influenza or as is commonly called in Europe "Flanders Grippe" spreading through the Brigade, some units having as many as 30 men down, very few evacuations.

This may well have been the early stages of the Spanish 'Flu epidemic that spread across the world during the following two years, killing up to one hundred million people. Despite its popular name, it is believed to have originated in the United States and was probably transported to Europe by the arriving soldiers.

Between 6 and 8 June, the brigade moved back to the battleground, taking up positions near Strazeele ridge, protecting infantry from 1 Division. Harassing fire from both sides was again the order of the day. On the fourteenth, several shells were reported to have fallen on the location of 47 Battery, but no casualties were recorded. Three days later, the batteries were concentrated because a major attack by the Germans had been anticipated. However, it did not eventuate, and they returned to their pre-existing locations on the twentieth. That same evening, 47 Battery combined with the howitzer battery to bombard a designated location. Altogether, each eighteen-pounder battery fired 420 rounds during that day. On 21 June, the German artillery was more active, *'no doubt'*, the commander wrote, *'in retaliation of our stunt yesterday.'*

The Germans were reported to be much more active on the twenty-second, frequently shelling the front and support line systems, and laying down heavy bombardments, especially on the battery locations. The next day, the action continued, the batteries providing a creeping barrage for a 1 Division infantry assault on the enemy trenches. All the objectives were taken, plus eleven prisoners and six machine guns. More than 100 dead Germans were found in the trenches.

Alman lost his life on that day. The commander reported the loss of five men, mostly 'telephonists', who went forward to establish observation posts and were killed by a shell. A lieutenant accompanying them had a *'miraculous'* escape, being blown into the air, but only suffering a severe shaking. Alman was one of those so-called 'telephonists' (linesmen signallers), going forward, to a command post, keeping in

touch with the infantry, preparing to report back sightings to his battery. A report from Lieutenant Mountjoy, who led the party and was wounded, writing the following December, noted that the dugout they were in was hit by the shell. He described Alman's

. . . departure during the night was that of one gallant almost to recklessness, although it was not due to this recklessness that he was killed.

Alman was buried in a support trench, west-north-west of the town of Bailleul. A 'very good cross' was reported as being placed over his grave by the members of his battery. After the war, his body was transferred to Meteren Military Cemetery and interred there.

After serving at Gallipoli, Alman could have seen out the war from the safety of suburban Melbourne. However, the call to arms was obviously still strong in his mind, and he returned to Europe, this time to pay the supreme sacrifice.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Sources

Australian War Memorial

Commonwealth War Graves Commission

www.diggerhistory.info

National Archives of Australia

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