

Private William Walker Highton Elliot

Rod Martin

Bill Elliot, a clerk by occupation and a New Zealander by birth, was two months short of his twentieth birthday when he enlisted along with some of his friends on 18 August 1914. At 178 centimetres, he was a reasonably tall for the time, and quite lean at sixty-four kilos. He was described as having fair hair and grey eyes.

Bill had already had considerable military experience, listing on his attestation form one year in senior cadets and then two years in 'Pompey' Elliott's 58 Infantry (militia) Battalion. When war broke out, Pompey was appointed as lieutenant-colonel in charge of 7 Infantry Battalion, and a number of his militia boys followed him into that unit after they signed up. He described them as his 'Essendon boys'. Alongside Bill in the new battalion were his two good friends, Ellis Stones and Ken Walker. Together, when in 58 Battalion, they were known as 'the three musketeers', and they were also stalwarts of St. Thomas's Harriers Club in Moonee Ponds. Pompey was glad to have all three in his new battalion. In addition, it may well have been the case that, at the time of their enlistment, Bill was living with Ellis at his parents' home, because his parents were listed as living in Toowoomba, Queensland. Bill's local address was listed as care of Mr. T. Stones.

Unfortunately, when transcribing Bill's personal details from his attestation form, an army official incorrectly stated his second name as being 'Walter' rather than 'Walker'. A glance at the certified copy of the attestation form shows the error. This was to have ramifications later when his name was inscribed on the Lone Pine Memorial at Gallipoli.

Bill and his mates trained with 7 Battalion at Broadmeadows and embarked on A20 HMAT *Hororata* on 19 October 1914, ostensibly headed for the newly formed Western Front in France and Belgium.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL PB04 38
Troops boarding HMAT *Hororata* at Port Melbourne in April 1915 (AWM PB 0438)

The ships gathered in King George Sound at Albany in Western Australia. There they were joined by vessels from all other states and from New Zealand. Together, they all sailed for the Middle East on 1 November 1914.



Troops at King George Sound. Note the vessels lining up in the water.
(City of Albany)

As the ships reached the entrance to the Red Sea, the Australian commanders were informed that their force would be going ashore in Egypt instead of continuing to France. Turkey had recently joined the German side in the war and the British war cabinet had decided to stage an attack upon the Turks, knocking them out of the war and opening up the entrance to the Black Sea. Britain and France could then supply their ally, Tsarist Russia, with war materiel and receive Russian wheat in return. The attack would be made at the Gallipoli Peninsula, the aim being to capture the Dardanelles Straits and move on the Turkish capital, Constantinople (now Istanbul). The Australian and New Zealand troops would be used in this attack, fighting along with British and French forces.

Bill, Ellis, Ken and their compatriots were unloaded at Port Said and travelled to a hastily established base camp at Mena, on the outskirts of Cairo and adjacent to the Pyramids. They spent the next three months variously training, going on route marches in the desert and going to the Suez Canal to protect it from possible attacks by the Turks - who occupied the Sinai Peninsula, very close to the canal. They also visited Cairo on many occasions, and may have been involved in some of the high jinks that went on there. Those months passed very slowly for the men who, when they enlisted, had dreams of seeing the world and having an adventure during what was predicted to be a very short war. Now, in Egypt, they got bored and became very sick of sand, flies and the stink of the city. Their officers had difficulty in keeping them under control. The lowest point came with the so-called 'Battle of the Wazzer' at the beginning of April. Troops descended upon a street in the red light district, complaining that it was the source of venereal disease, and that the alcohol sold in the hotels there was bad and overpriced. Considerable damage was done to several brothels and police took some time to break up the mob and send them on their way.

Whether Bill or any of his compatriots were part of this we do not know, but it is possible as it was reported that up to 2 500 troops were involved. The officers would have had a difficult time keeping the men under control. When they all finally left Mena for Gallipoli a couple of days later, Pompey wrote to his wife that

We have seen the last of Mena camp, thank heaven for that, and before dawn we will have seen the last of Cairo and three times thank heaven for that.

When the troops sailed from Alexandria they still did not know where they were going. They landed on the Greek island of Lemnos, set up camps and then began training in scaling heights and rowing whaleboats.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P00702.008

Practising in Lemnos for the Gallipoli landings. 14 April 1915 (AWM P00702.008)

Their destination now confirmed, 7 Battalion sailed for Gallipoli on SS *Galeka* on the night of 24 April. The ship anchored off a point called Gaba Tepe, the landing destination, at 4.00 am the next morning. 7 Battalion was scheduled to go ashore in the second wave, starting at 5.30. It had been planned to use light steamboats, captained by naval ratings, to tow several of the whaleboats to shore and then release them to row the rest of the way. By 5.30, however, no steamboats had arrived so Pompey ordered the first few boats to row the full distance. Bill, Ellis and Ken had the privilege (if it can be called that) of being rowers in the first boat, followed by three others. Currents must have played a part in the fortunes of these boats, as they drifted off course and headed for a point directly opposite and north of Gaba Tepe. There the terrain was far more rugged than at the designated landing spot. Turkish troops, complete with guns, rifles and machine guns, looked down upon them from the heights.

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7 Battalion boats at the landing spot in Anzac Cove, 25 April 1915 (AWM P00229.001)

Despite bullets and shrapnel flying around them, the Three Musketeers and the others stuck manfully to their task as their boat approached the shore. Ken received a scalp wound, but kept going. Then Ellis was hit by a bullet that ricocheted off his oar and ploughed into his left knee. He tried to keep rowing, but the pain was too much, and another man took his place.

When they finally reached the beach, of the 140 men carried in those first four boats, only thirty-five were unscathed. The Turks maintained a withering rate of fire on the first boat as it sat on the sand, hitting many more of the troops. Bill was among them. Ellis was trying desperately to staunch the blood flow from his own wound as well as those of others, a dying mate laying across him, preventing him from moving. Stretcher bearers finally arrived after about an hour, lifted Bill and Ellis out and carried them on to the beach.

Bill was very badly wounded and was conveyed by boat to the HMT *Ionian*, laying offshore. He died on board the next day and was buried at sea.



Anzac Cove today

(Robert Cathie)

When he arrived at a hospital in Heliopolis, Egypt, travelling in the same *Ionian*, Ellis sent a cable home as quickly as he could:

Wounded leg Bill gone Ellis

As Bill had no known grave, his details were inscribed on the war memorial constructed at Lone Pine, Gallipoli, after the war. This was when the initial error in transcribing his second name came in. His name is listed on the memorial as ‘William Walter Highton Elliot’. When the war department informed Bill’s parents of the recognition, his father wrote back, pointing out the error. The war department replied, noting the mistake but saying that it was too late for a change to be made as the inscription had already been completed.



(Commonwealth War Graves Commission)

Only one of the musketeers - Ellis, with a permanently damaged knee - made it back to Australia. Ken Walker was killed by a shell fragment at Gallipoli in July 1915.

There would be no more running in the harriers.

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