

George Rigby

We now know more about what happened to Jack Rigby, who was killed on that first day at Gallipoli and was therefore unable to speak for himself, than we do about what happened to George, who survived the war. George in later years had the same reluctance to speak about his war experience as many other returned servicemen. His daughter, Judith Smith, later recounted that while he was happy to yarn about his early period during training at Mena Camp in Egypt, he never really talked to his family about the rest of his army service.

George had landed in the early morning darkness at a spot with some degree of shelter from the Turks, who had begun shooting mostly towards the fleet offshore. If George did actually make it any distance inland that morning, it was probably towards the 400 Plateau, Bolton's Ridge, or Second Ridge. What we do know is that, at around 4 pm, George was shot in his left leg. The bullet hit below the knee and tore through his calf, and he also sustained a second bullet wound to one arm.



Above: Corporal George Rigby.

He wasn't evacuated from the beach at Anzac Cove until the next day, on 26 April, and he must have been feeling very uncomfortable waiting for relief with the growing number of wounded soldiers. George was admitted to the No 2 Australian General Hospital at Mena House in Cairo on 29 April, four days after being shot. On 13 May he was discharged and sent to the Convalescence Camp at Helouan, where he spent the next five months. On 30 January 1916 he was admitted to the No 1 Australian General Hospital at Heliopolis in Cairo, suffering from asthma and recurring problems with his leg wound. Doctors noted that it hadn't repaired well; the muscles on his left leg had contracted and were wasted, and he had difficulty in walking. On 5 February he was admitted to the No 2 Australian Auxiliary Hospital, but was soon discharged again to his unit.¹⁸

Not long after this he was charged with being AWOL on the night of 13 March. His subsequent penalty was to be confined to barracks for 14 days, and he also forfeited pay for the two days he was absent. Going AWOL was a commonplace offence among Australian troops while they were in Egypt.¹⁹

George was posted to the Australian Headquarters in Cairo on 1st August 1916, although he was still not fit for active duty. In October he was assessed as having only Class B fitness, and as a result of this it was decided that he should return to Australia. On 18 October he embarked at Suez on the HMAT A44 *Vestralia*, officially travelling on escort duty, and during that voyage home he was promoted to the rank of Sergeant. After arriving in Melbourne on 21 November, he boarded the HMAT A67 *Orsova* and sailed to Sydney, from where he headed back to Brisbane. He was soon assessed as being medically unfit for further service but fit enough for discharge to earn his living, and he was subsequently discharged from the AIF on 27 December. His left leg had shortened as a result of his wounding, and he was partially disabled for the rest of his life. George was granted a pension from 28 December 1916, but this was subsequently cancelled in July 1917.

Carry on, Rigby – Part 2

His daughter, Judith Smith, later wrote in her family history that she felt that the Australian Government had not been very generous towards veterans after the war. George had been told that he could have an operation to fix his leg, and that he would only be granted a Repatriation Pension if the operation proved unsuccessful. He believed that there was a high chance of suffering more damage to his leg if he had the operation, and he therefore decided to forego that pension in favour of learning to live with his disability. He walked with a decided limp, so his shoes were adjusted to compensate for his shortened left leg.

After his discharge from the army George returned to his clerical job at Wills, Gilchrist & Sanderson Ltd. in Wharf Street in Brisbane. He met Edith Heather Huntington while he was working there, and the couple were later married in 1922. They raised three daughters, but sadly their only son, George, died shortly after birth.

George had obtained a job as a forestry officer and for this reason the couple moved to Atherton in North Queensland. The country was rugged and he was required to travel the region on horseback, using two horses that he had named *Steak* and *Onions*. George seemed to cope better in riding horses than he did with walking, but it was nonetheless a rugged life in the hot tropics with few modern facilities. The family thinks that the couple must have travelled a lot together around the Tableland, as they later talked often to their children about the country around Mareeba and Kuranda. The beauty spots of Lake Barrine and Lake Eacham were also fondly remembered. The couple then moved to Cairns, where George took a job as a clerk, and late in 1924 they moved back to Brisbane. George again took a job as a shipping clerk, this time with Howard Smith Ltd.



Above: Men from No. 15 Section of the 9th Battalion pose for an informal photograph at Mena Camp in Cairo, before the Brigade left Egypt to prepare for the Gallipoli assault. Corporal George Rigby, in charge of this section, is seated in the middle wearing a hat. All of the men in this section were originally in C Company, but this soon changed when the army restructured while in Egypt. George Rigby was among those who were transferred to A Company. Privates Frederick Fox and William Fisher, who were also in this group, were later to be on board the first boat to land at Gallipoli.

The men of Section No. 15

George Rigby sent home two photographic postcards of men who were in his Section No. 15, which were taken at Mena Camp in Egypt in either January or February 1915. These men had all originally enlisted in C Company of the 9th Battalion. The Australian Army restructured while the AIF was camped in Egypt, however, so that the number of companies within each battalion was reduced from eight to four. These changes necessitated many internal transfers, and as a result most if not all of George's men became part of A Company. Each of the battalion's four companies now contained 227 men of all ranks, with four platoons to each company, and with four sections contained within each platoon. Each section contained a corporal in charge of 12 men.

Army service files generally give scant mention of which section, platoon, or company each man was in at any given time. As an example of this, there is only one reference in George Rigby's file that shows he was in A Company at the time of the Gallipoli landings. Henry Mahaffey is actually the only member of this section whose file actually states that he was transferred to A Company on 30 January 1915. It was the A and B Companies of the 9th Battalion that landed with the first wave of troops at Gallipoli, with C and D Companies following soon after with the second wave.



Above: On the reverse of this postcard sent home by George Rigby, he writes: *This is No. 15 Section, "My Boys".*
Back row [L to R]: Pte Jamieson, Avery, Howell, Fox F, Atherton, Fox N, Stuart.
Sitting: Private Gunderson, Geo. Harris, Corporal GHR [George Rigby], Sherman, Mahaffey.
Front: Pte Fisher.

Five of these 13 men, including George Rigby, were to be wounded on the first day at Gallipoli, and one of them, Godfrey Sherman, was to be killed on that first day. Four others were to be killed during the course of the war, and at least eight of them spent significant time in hospitals suffering serious illnesses.

George Rigby's mates from his Section No. 15 were as follows:

JOHN MOTLEY ATHERTON, Regimental number 377.



John Atherton received a bullet wound to his left arm in May 1915 and was evacuated from Gallipoli to hospital in Malta. Following on from this he became seriously ill with typhoid, during which he was “*in bed 2 months*”. He was supposed to be repatriated to Australia but was instead discharged in England, whereupon he immediately enlisted with the Royal Flying Corps as a Lieutenant. He was later wounded in what appears to have been a flight training accident and spent many months recovering. He was finally posted to 85 Squadron and was receiving training on “*Handley Page machines*” when the war ended. John Atherton enlisted again during the Second World War. He was among the Australian soldiers captured in Rabaul by Japanese forces in 1942, and he was killed when the Japanese transport ship that he was on, the *Montevideo Maru*, was torpedoed by Allied forces. All of the Allied prisoners on board subsequently died.

ALLAN GORDON AVERY, Regimental number 338.



Allan Avery became seriously sick from sunstroke in August 1915 while at Gallipoli, and then received a gunshot wound to the thigh later that month. He also suffered from dysentery and mumps, and in 1918 he contracted influenza. He received a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant in the 9th Battalion during 1917. In August 1918 he was again wounded, suffering bullet wounds to his face, nose, left hand, and right elbow. He survived the war and was taking courses at the London Day Training School after the armistice, prior to returning to Australia in October 1919.

WILLIAM ARTHUR FISHER, Regimental number 362.



William Fisher was actually in the first boat to land at Gallipoli, according to a list displayed at the 9th Battalions War Memorial Museum at Enoggera. He suffered gunshot wounds to one arm and to his legs early in the second week at Gallipoli and was evacuated to hospital, and he later came down with a serious bout of typhoid. As a result of his illness he was repatriated home to Brisbane in Australia, and was discharged as being medically unfit in March 1916.

FREDERICK YOUNG FOX, Regimental number 389.



Frederick Fox was one of two brothers from Rockhampton in Queensland who were in Section No. 15, and he was in the same first boat ashore at Gallipoli as William Fisher. He later became very sick and was evacuated in August 1915 to hospitals in Egypt, where he slowly recovered. He then received a commission as a 2nd Lieutenant and was posted to the 49th Battalion, rising to the rank of Captain in October 1917. He was wounded in action on 25 April 1918, exactly three years after the Gallipoli landings, suffering a gunshot wound to his left knee. Frederick Fox survived the war and later married. He died in 1964.

NORMAN LAMBERT FOX, Regimental number 390.



Norman Fox was an older brother to Frederick Fox and was aged 24 when he enlisted. He came down seriously ill with diarrhoea while at Gallipoli and was evacuated in September to hospitals in Egypt. After he had recovered from his illness he was promoted to Corporal. While training in February 1916 at a School of Instruction at Zeitoun he was mortally wounded in a bombing accident. He died from abdominal wounds later that same day and was buried in the British Military Cemetery in Cairo.

OLIFFE GUNDERSON, Regimental number 359.



Oliffe Gunderson was 35 when he enlisted and he was easily the oldest man in Section 15. He was a book keeper by occupation and had lived at West End in Brisbane. Gunderson was never wounded nor seriously ill during WWI. It is likely that, because of his age and work skills, he was put in charge of supply duties while at Gallipoli. After the evacuation of Gallipoli he was transferred to the Army Ordnance Corps and was quickly promoted to Sergeant. In September 1916 he was awarded the Meritorious Service Medal "*in recognition of valuable services rendered during the present war*". On the afternoon of 24 April 1918 – exactly three years to the day since the 9th Battalion men boarded HMS *Queen* bound for the landings at Gallipoli - he was charged with being drunk while on duty. Six pages of his court martial proceedings are contained within his service files at the *Discovering Anzacs* website, which show that supporting witnesses all agreed on his general reliability and conscientious work ethic. He was nonetheless found guilty and was thereby temporarily reduced in rank. Oliffe Gunderson survived the war and returned to Australia in May 1919.

GEORGE HARRIS, Regimental number 297.



George Harris, like George Rigby, suffered serious gunshot wounds on the first day of the Gallipoli landings. He received wounds to his left arm and to his left leg and thigh. He was subsequently evacuated to hospital but remained "dangerously ill" for a lengthy period of time. Finally, in August 1915, his left leg was amputated. He was invalided back to Australia, and arrived home a few months before Rigby. George Harris died in 1965.

DOUGLAS HOWELL, Regimental number 351.



Douglas Howell became sick with dysentery in October 1915 and as a result he was evacuated from the peninsula, taking four months to recover from the illness. He was also wounded at least twice during the war, suffering a gunshot wound to his thigh in May 1916 and a gunshot wound to the chest in June 1916. He was promoted to the rank of corporal in October 1917. Douglas Howell survived the First World War and later enlisted with the 25th Infantry Battalion during WWII, serving in PNG.

WILLIAM JAMIESON, Regimental number 337.



William Jamieson was from Taringa in Brisbane and was aged just 19 when he enlisted. He was wounded on the first day at Gallipoli, suffering a gunshot wound to his right leg, and he was subsequently evacuated to hospital in Malta. He recovered from this wound and rejoined his unit at Gallipoli in July. In October he became seriously sick with diarrhoea and was again evacuated from Gallipoli to hospital. He was wounded at least four times during the war, which included a bomb wound to his arm and neck and a severe shrapnel wound to his left leg, and he was promoted to the rank of sergeant in October 1917. Jamieson was killed in Belgium by enemy machine gun fire on 24 April 1918, on the same day that Oliffe Gunderson was charged with drunkenness. His belongings were collected and packed by his former section mate, Lieutenant A.

G. Avery, but these were somehow lost in transit and by 1919 the family had received nothing more than a pocket Kodak camera that had belonged to him. William Jamieson was buried at the Meteren Military Cemetery, alongside four other 9th Battalion soldiers who were killed on the same day.

HENRY MAHAFFEY, Regimental number 361.



Henry Mahaffey was from Boonah in Queensland and was 25 years old when he enlisted in C Company of the 9th Battalion. His service file indicates that he was transferred to A Company on 30 January 1915. Mahaffey was wounded on the first day at Gallipoli with a bullet wound to his left arm. While with the unit he worked mostly as a stretcher bearer. In October 1915 he was wounded a second time when shrapnel struck his hand, and after the evacuation of Gallipoli he was promoted to Lance Corporal. He was wounded again in August 1916 in France with a gunshot wound to his left eye, and was later killed in action on 20 November 1916. He was subsequently awarded the Military Medal for his efforts in August, with the citation being as follows:

At Pozieres, France, 18/22nd August 1916, L/Cpl MAHAFFEY was in charge of a squad of stretcher bearers, he was repeatedly conspicuous for his bravery and devotion to duty. In spite of the fact that early in the operations he lost two of his squad he carried on his work with little assistance and in a most capable manner. Men were repeatedly buried in the front-line trenches when L/Cpl MAHAFFEY dug them out and rendered most timely and valuable first aid in their resuscitation. He repeatedly carried wounded men to the aid post over open country and under close enemy observation during which time the enemy kept up a persistent barrage of heavy artillery fire. On the last day L/Cpl MAHAFFEY was badly wounded in the eye but would not leave his duty until the other wounded had been cleared. Lance Corporal MAHAFFEY was also conspicuous during the attack on Pozieres on July 23rd ... his work has always been most praiseworthy.

Henry Mahaffey's brother, Corporal A. Mahaffey of the 25th Battalion, was also killed in action during the war.

GODFREY JOHN SHERMAN, Regimental number 206.



Godfrey Sherman was initially posted as missing but the finding of a later Court of Inquiry was that he had been killed on the first day of the Gallipoli landings. By June 1921 his father, W. Sherman, had met with the returned soldier Sergeant Webb, and wrote the following to the Base Records Office:

Sergeant Webb of the 9th Battalion claims to have witnessed my son's death. Sergeant Webb says that it was a shell which terminated my son's life, and that practically no traces were left, nor was any opportunity then offered for burial...

It had been a long period of anguish for the Sherman family in trying to find out what had happened to their son, which was made worse when his personal effects were sent instead to a woman in Sydney, who Godfrey had nominated as next-of-kin. To make matters even worse for the family, Godfrey's brother Leslie Sherman was also killed in action, at Zonnebeke in Belgium in 1917.

PETER FITZALAN MACDONALD STUART, Regimental number 378.



Peter Stuart was wounded on the first day of the landings at Gallipoli, and was later sent to hospital a second time suffering from jaundice. In January 1916 he was again admitted to hospital, this time with mumps. He was commissioned as a Lieutenant early in 1916 and was transferred to the 49th Battalion. On 4 September 1916 Stuart was shot in the head and killed by a German sniper while leading a bombing attack at Mouquet Farm near Pozieres in France.

Below: Men from No. 15 Section of the 9th Battalion pose for an informal photograph at Mena Camp in Egypt. Corporal George Rigby, in charge of this section, is seated in the middle of the group wearing a hat.



Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the invaluable assistance and support given by the late Judith Smith, who was a daughter of George Henry Rigby. I met Judith a couple of times during the 1990s to discuss our common Mitchell family history. She was a dedicated family historian who collected, collated and preserved much of the Rigby history and memorabilia, and she was most generous with the help that she gave to me. Much of Judith's material was later bequeathed to her daughter, Noelene Blatch, who has been similarly generous in allowing fresh access to Judith's records. I sincerely thank Noelene for allowing her photographs, postcards and other material to be presented in this article, and for her assistance in preparing this material.

I would like to acknowledge the work of Keith McPhee, who has provided background information about many of the returned veterans on the *Discovering Anzacs* website. This material has been of great benefit to me, especially his entry for Gordon Rigby, who left us with little personal information in the way of postcards and letters.

I would also like to acknowledge members of the Yeronga-Dutton Park RSL Sub Branch who have been supportive both in telling the story of Jack Rigby and in helping to secure the naming of Rigby Place at Heritage Close in Yeronga. In particular I offer my thanks to Ruby Luder, who as a former secretary of the RSL gave early support to promoting Jack's story; to Brenda Christiansen; and to Ross Wiseman, who as President also attended the unveiling of Rigby Place.

I offer my thanks to Vivien Harris, the Archivist at Brisbane Grammar School, for supplying a copy of the *Brisbane Grammar School Magazine* from August 1915 and for allowing access to school records.

I'd also like to thank the team at *LifeStoryPresents* for their generous effort in making restored copies of Rigby family postcards and photographs. This article has been a beneficiary of their work.

Lastly, I owe a debt of gratitude to Stephen Sheaffe of the Annerley Stephens History Group for his early support of this project, and for his many suggestions in helping to edit the final draft.

Endnotes

18. Much of this information about George Rigby's medical care and subsequent military record has been taken from Keith McPhee's account on the *Discovering Anzacs* website, posted on Saturday, 24 September 2016.
19. Philip Owen Ayton, *Hell of a Time – An Australian Soldier's Diary of the Great War*, edited by Elvala Ayton, published by the Text Publishing Company in 2019. Sapper Philip Ayton was just one of the many Australian troops who frequently went absent without leave. He seemed to take some pleasure in taking unauthorized leave, and he recounts numerous occasions in his diary of doing so. He declares on page 13, for example, that on Friday 11 December 1914, after only their first day of regular training at the Mena Camp at Cairo, "a few of us had a desire to see Cairo and as we were not allowed leave, we took it. Fourteen of us crammed into a motor car and went into town ... the next morning we had to attend orderly room for leaving camp without permission. All of us got 'an extra guard'. This was my first offence of breaking camp."