

Alec William Campbell
26 Feb 1899 - 16 May 2002

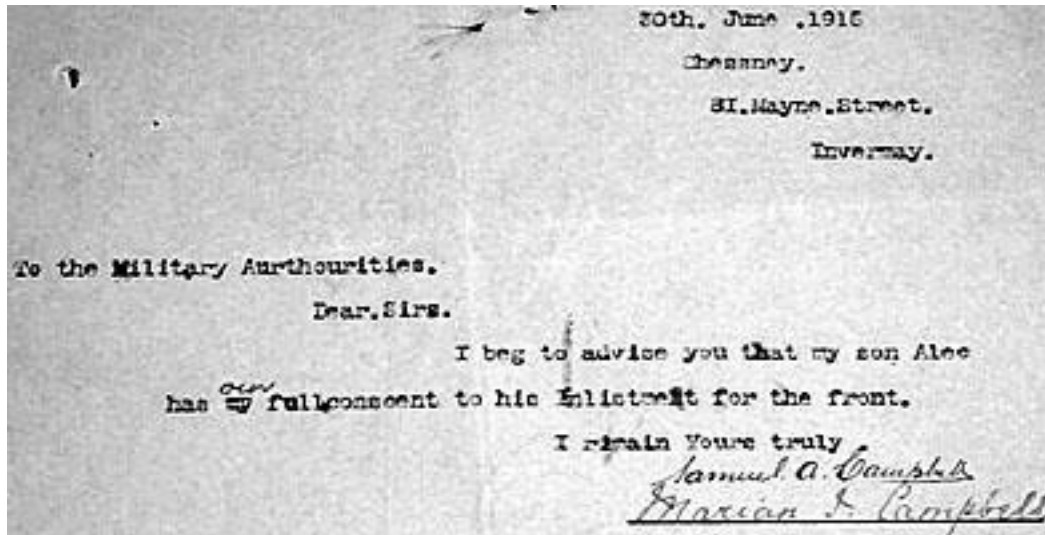


Alec William Campbell
'the Last Sentinel of Gallipoli'

The last entry in the roll of honour for Gallipoli was finally made on Thursday, 16th May 2002, when Alec Campbell, the last Anzac and last surviving participant of the Gallipoli campaign, died of pneumonia, aged 103. With his loss Gallipoli ceases to be a part of living memory and has truly become, as John North referred to it, 'a country of the mind'. The flags of a nation flew at half-mast, the front pages of the major newspapers were devoted to the event, and the Prime Minister cut short a visit to China in order to attend Mr. Campbell's state funeral at St. David's Anglican Cathedral in Hobart, Tasmania.

The story of the last Anzac begins in Launceston, Tasmania, on 26th February 1899, and thus spans three centuries. Alec was the son of Marian Thrower and Samuel Campbell and grandson of Donald Campbell, an immigrant from Argyllshire, Scotland. On 2nd July 1915, two months after the landing at Gallipoli was reported in the Australian newspapers, he presented himself at the recruiting office where he gave his age as 18 years 4 months. He was at that time, he stated, a clerk in an insurance company, and had served three years in the Senior Cadets at Launceston's

Scotch College. He was 5 feet 5 inches tall and weighed 135 pounds. Parental consent was necessary for anyone between the ages of 18 and 21 to enlist in the A.I.F., which should have presented an obstacle to enlistment because Alec had in fact lied about his age, raising it a full two years above his actual 16 years and 4 months. He met the problem of how to show the authorities he had his parents' permission head-on; he simply got it from them. On 30th June 1915 his mother and father signed a letter in which they give their consent to his 'enlistment for the front', unwittingly reserving a special place in history for their son, No. 2731 Private A. W. Campbell, 15th (Queensland & Tasmania) Battalion, 4th Infantry Brigade, Australian Imperial Force. He would be nicknamed and known by his comrades as 'The Kid'.



30th. June .1915
Cheesney.
81, Mayne Street.
Invermay.

To the Military Authorities.
Dear Sirs.

I beg to advise you that my son Alec
has ^{our} full consent to his enlistment for the front.

I remain Yours truly
James A. Campbell
Marian J. Campbell

The 8th Reinforcements, to which Alec was allotted, sailed from Adelaide on 16th August 1915 aboard the S.S. *Kyarra*, bound for Alexandria. On 18th October they and the 7th Reinforcements departed Egypt for Sarpi Camp on the island of Lemnos. A few days later they were taken on the strength of the battalion, or what was left of it. The 15th Battalion was at that time resting on the island, having suffered severe losses during the savage fighting for Hill 971 and Hill 60 in August 1915. The battalion holds the dubious honour of having the highest casualty rate of any unit of the A.I.F. that landed at Gallipoli, and the addition of the 7th and 8th Reinforcements could only bring its strength up to 13 officers and 453 other ranks. Mumps broke out amongst the new troops on 25th October and all reinforcements were quarantined until the 31st, when the battalion sailed back to Gallipoli aboard the *Osmanieh*. Due to exceptionally rough seas the 15th was unable to land at Anzac until the night of 2nd November, at which time it marched out to Hay Valley, the southern, inland arm of the Aghyl Dere [Hay Valley was named after Major Bruce Hay, Otago Mounted Rifles, who was killed in action here on 7 Aug 1915]. In this valley just below Bauchop's Hill was also sheltered the 4th Australian Infantry Brigade's Headquarters and the Brigadier, Colonel John Monash. This was a relatively quiet area in the far north of the Anzac sector. The 15th Battalion lost only one man killed in action here during the six weeks until the evacuation.

Nevertheless wounds were common and sickness was rampant; dysentery and yellow jaundice were still prevalent in the battalion, and on 28th November the troops awoke to freezing winds

and a blanket of snow dumped by an overnight blizzard. By unlucky coincidence the 28th was also marked down as the battalion's bathing day, and no blizzard was going to be allowed to interfere with that occasion. The men stripped naked, though the temperature remained below zero all day, and received from the cooks a quart of thawed ice and a strip of flannel per man, with which they proceeded to wash themselves. Private Alec Campbell was admitted to the 4th Field Ambulance on 8th December suffering from influenza. Discharged to duty three days later, he could hardly have suspected that this bout of illness was to be only the first of many in the months ahead. Alec's admittance to the small Field Ambulance in Hotchkiss Gully, Anzac, would stand as a punctuation mark in the story of his life, for although unsuspected as such at the time, it marked the beginning of the end of his service as a soldier of the Great War.

Two days after his discharge from the Field Ambulance, on the night of 13th December, the 15th Battalion filed out of Hay Valley and made its way to the pier on North Beach, from which it was evacuated from Gallipoli aboard S.S. *Carron*. There appears to have been a great deal of bitterness within the battalion that the honour of forming the Anzac rearguard fell to other units, with the 15th feeling it had been ordered to 'fade away in the night' almost a week before the final evacuation. With the Gallipoli Peninsula slipping behind him in the dark, Alec Campbell's war service was over.

The 15th Battalion was disembarked once more on Lemnos and spent the next ten days in the cold and exposed Sarpi Camp. A simple Christmas dinner was organised, and the unit departed Mudros Harbour on Boxing Day 1915, aboard HMT *Ascanius*. The battalion disembarked at Moascar, Egypt, on 30th December 1915, and marched out to its new camp at Ismailia. The weather and strain had taken their toll, though, and on 3rd January 1916, Private Campbell was admitted to the 1st Australian General Hospital in Heliopolis, Cairo, suffering from acute laryngitis. It seems his health had completely broken down. Over the next few months he was afflicted at different times with jaundice, scabies, head lice, mumps, palsy and paralysis of the right side of the face. His 'War Gratuity Schedule' form records that he was admitted to this or that hospital with the simple description 'sick', possibly because there was so much going wrong. Alec spent the time around his seventeenth birthday in and out of hospitals and convalescent depots, always rejoining his unit on discharge, but seemingly never able to remain with the battalion long before once again falling ill.

In the early evening of 27th April he was charged with being absent without leave and drunk, no punishment having been recorded. On 5th June 1916, he was handed over for trial by his Commanding Officer, having been charged with being absent without leave, and with 'breaking out of hospital'. Maybe it should have been foreseen that young Private Campbell would prove a handful for the authorities; he had after all stated on his attestation form that he had previously been in trouble with the police in Launceston for 'riding without a light'. Soon after this incident he was diagnosed with palsy and right facial paralysis, and was recommended for discharge. He would eventually lose his right eye. On 24th June 1916, he boarded the *Port Sydney* at Suez for the long journey home. His service with the A.I.F. officially ended on 22nd August 1916, just over a year after his enlistment, when he was discharged as medically unfit in Tasmania. He had joined the army, travelled half-way round the world, served at Gallipoli, been discharged, and was once again living with his parents, all long before he turned eighteen.

After his service with the A.I.F. ended, Alec's life can best be described as 'full'. He went bush and got work as a jackeroo in Tasmania, before undertaking carpentry training, building motor bodies, houses, and boats. He took up boxing and won the Tasmanian flyweight championship. In 1924 he married his first wife, Kathleen Connolly, and started a family. He gave up boxing and eventually had seven children. In 1927 he began working for the Launceston Railway Workshop and was a staunch unionist, becoming, in 1942, president of the Tasmanian branch of the Australian Workers' Union. During World War 2 he studied for an economics degree and met the woman who would become his second wife, Kathleen Corvan, with whom he had another two children - the second when he was 69 years old. He worked in the public service as a disabled persons' employment officer, in which capacity he later assisted incapacitated World War 2 veterans. He learned to sail, and took part in at least six of the gruelling annual Sydney-to-Hobart yacht races. He worked for the Heart Foundation until his retirement at age 80, and continued to drive until he was 95.

Despite all this, it is for his special connection with Gallipoli that Alec Campbell will be most remembered, and while it is sometimes stated that he blazed away at the Turks through loop-holes in the fire trenches, all evidence is against this. The 15th Battalion was not in the front line trenches after its return from rest on Lemnos, and Alec maintained, later in life, that at Gallipoli he was mainly engaged in water-carrying duties between the beach and the front lines, and believed he had never actually shot a Turkish soldier. In this he is supported by the 15th Battalion's history:

It is doubtful if one member of the 7th or 8th Reinforcements fired a shot in the direction of the enemy. They had learnt the art of fatigue work; had seen and heard the whine and explosions of shells; the crack of the passing bullet. They had become in the short space of time Anzacs... They were veterans of the unit... They had imbibed the glory of Anzac and they never lost it.

When discussing his status as one of the very few remaining veterans of Gallipoli, he would sometimes say, 'It's hard to believe - all those young men - gone.' For his services on the Gallipoli Peninsula 87 years ago, Private Alec Campbell, 15th Battalion of Infantry, was awarded the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal, and the Victory Medal. In 1967 he claimed his Anzac Commemorative Medallion, and in 1990 he returned once again to Gallipoli, to Anzac, as part of a trip organised for veterans to commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the campaign, and was presented with the unofficial Gallipoli Star, which he proudly wore. In 1999 he received the 80th Anniversary Armistice Remembrance Medal and in 2002 the Centenary Medal. He was featured on a set of stamps, *The Last Anzacs*, along with Walter Parker and Roy Longmore, which Australia Post issued to mark Australia Day 2000.

He died with Kate, his wife of 44 years, by his side. His funeral was attended by the governor-general and the governors, by the prime minister and his ministers and by politicians of every kind, by the chiefs of the Defence forces, and by his family. In a break with tradition, ten of the Campbell women; great-granddaughters, granddaughters, and a daughter, five on either side of the flag-draped coffin, flanked the guard of honour on Private Campbell's final journey. He was

carried on the same gun carriage that bore Weary Dunlop, Australia's greatest hero of World War Two, to his last rest. Jo Hardy, the granddaughter who runs the nursing home where Alec lived for the last part of his life, explained that, 'Alec was not a man of tradition. After all, he was a republican. We thought this was a way of showing that, and the family readily agreed.' On Friday, 24th May, 2002, the day of the funeral, Australian flags everywhere - all around the world - flew again at half-mast and throughout the nation a minute's silence was observed in honour of Alec Campbell and of all the soldiers who served at Gallipoli 'all those young men' - who had entered into the silence before him.

He was a boy soldier. A water carrier, rather than a fighter, a husband, father, grandfather, great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather; a champion of the worker and of the disabled; he was our last human link to Gallipoli and all that place symbolises.

He was the last Anzac. Australia mourns the loss of a national treasure. He imbibed the spirit of Anzac - *the place* - and he never lost it.

Source:

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Leaders of Anzacs: Officers of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps died at Gallipoli