Lance Corporal Charles Bunney

Unmarked but not forgotten

It was a cold, overcast day with a low fog hugging the creek line as I walked between the headstones in the cemetery of the goldmining town in central Victoria. The council worker leading the way carried an old fabric map. We stopped before a depression in the ground and the worker looked around, oriented the map, then turned toward me and said, 'I think he's under here'.

As revellers at home ushered in the 20th century, young soldiers representing the various states of Australia were pitched in battle against the Dutch-Afrikaner settlers, thousands of miles away on the South African veldt.

After several defeats, the Boers had reorganised their fighting men into groups of highly mobile commandos, harassing the British at every opportunity. To counteract this type of guerrilla warfare, the British High Command became increasingly more reliant on mounted troops, particularly those from Australia and New Zealand who coped very well in this type of conflict.

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AWM A04428. Melbourne, Victoria. c. 1899. Victorian Bushmen parading through streets prior to embarkation for South Africa.

A competent horseman and keen for adventure, Charles Bunney enlisted in the 5th Victorian Mounted Rifles, bound for the Boer War. The Left Wing, comprising four squadrons of horsemen, boarded a ship on 4 March 1901 and sailed two days later. When they disembarked at Port Elizabeth, they were dispatched to Pretoria by train.[1]

Their initial sorties were confined to long range patrols and, even though the terrain was harsh, the tough Victorians acquitted themselves very well. The Wing was then placed under the command of Major Morris, an Imperial Army officer.

As darkness fell on the evening of 12 June, the troopers were making camp at a place called Wilmanrust in the eastern Transvaal. As they settled down for the night, they were unaware that a hundred eyes watched them.

Under cover of darkness, the Boer commandos crawled toward the sleeping Victorians. Morris had posted his sentries too far out and some large gaps breached the perimeter. The Boers crawled forward silently bypassing each sentry in turn. The commandos, dressed in captured khaki uniforms and upturned hats—to cause maximum confusion in the fading light of the dying campfires—set upon the unsuspecting troopers.[1]

Many of the Australians were shot as they slept, others who were able to reach their rifles were cut down before they could return fire. Most of the surviving

AWM P01866.006. Pongola Bosch, Transvaal, South Africa, October 1901. Members of E Company, 5th Contingent, Victorian Mounted Rifles, in action against the Boers in front of the Pongola Bosch. The men have dismounted from their horses, which are being held at their rear, and have taken up position in a single line on the flat ground. From here, without the benefit of cover, they are firing their rifles at the enemy. The military column of which the Victorians formed a part captured 200 prisoners and 8,000 head of cattle in this operation.

Australians were rounded up, but about 80 managed to escape the carnage and hightailed it across the veldt on foot.

The Boers were shocked by their success. They had no use for prisoners, nor could they feed or care for them. A heated argument broke out amongst the commanders as to what to do with the captured Australians. Finally, as their comrades loaded the wagons with the seized arms, ammunition and stores, a party of Boers marched the uninjured captives out into the veldt where the troopers were then ordered to halt. They were sure that they were to be executed, but to the utter surprise of the prisoners, they were ordered to strip off their tunics and boots. The Boers then gathered up the surrendered equipment and galloped back to their column. (Records of the incident do not specify if Bunney took part in this action, and if so whether he was captured or was in the group who escaped.)

In the ensuing weeks, the Victorian troopers were subjected to harsh criticism for their perceived actions at Wilmanrust. The Australians knew that the reason for their defeat and capture was not due to shoddy soldiering but to poor leadership. They set out to show their worth. To prove that they were as good as any unit on the veldt—and prove it they did. By the time they left South Africa they had beaten the Boer at every turn and many among their ranks had been decorated, including one awarded the Victoria Cross.[2]

Charles Bunney returned to Australia, proudly wearing the Queen's South Africa Medal with five bars. Following his discharge, he returned to his hometown of Frankston where he resumed his trade as a carpenter.[3]

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When Australia was plunged into the First World War, Charles Bunney again enlisted to serve his country. Assigned to the 5th Battalion, 2nd Brigade, he sailed with the first expeditionary force, arriving in Egypt on 2 December 1914.

The 5th Battalion was part of the second wave to land at ANZAC Cove on 25 April 1915.[4] After ten days of ferocious fighting to hold their position, the brigade was transferred to Cape Helles to take part in the attack on the village of Krithia—an action that captured very little ground but cost the brigade dearly with the loss of some one-third of its strength. The battalion returned to ANZAC Cove where it saw further action defending the beachhead and at such places as the Valley of Despair and Lone Pine.

During his time on the Peninsula, Bunney responded to a call for tradesmen to reinforce the depleted Pioneers. He was sure his carpentry skills would be useful.[5] One day, as Bunney was installing beams for a new headquarters, he heard the scream of an incoming artillery shell. He dropped to the floor as the round exploded, showering him with splintered beams that crashed all round him as the dugout caved in. Though pinned down by the collapsed structure, he could hear his mates calling to him.

He screamed loudly to attract their attention. After what seemed like forever, he felt great relief as the last of the beams was lifted from his body. He was badly shaken but had suffered no physical injuries. However, following the cave in, he was plagued by recurring nightmares and would often wake at night to find himself clawing at the ground.

Bunney was temporarily attached to the 6th Battalion, but returned to his mates in the 5th just prior to the evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula in December 1915.[5]

He was promoted to lance corporal in March 1916 and remained with the battalion when it sailed for France the same month. In June of that year, the battalion was engaged in heavy fighting during which Bunney took a bullet in the left forearm. He was evacuated to the 2nd Field Ambulance, located just behind the firing line, but as the wound required additional treatment he was transferred to the 2nd Stationary Hospital, based at Boulogne.[5]

During his hospital stay, Bunney was granted day leave. The combination of having been wounded, the recurring nightmares and his over indulgence in French wine, led him to run foul of the law. He was arrested after getting into a fist fight with a French soldier. He faced a general court-martial and was found guilty of 'Drunkenness whilst on active service' but not guilty of an 'Offence against an inhabitant of the country in which he was serving'. He was sentenced to 28 days Number One Field Punishment.[5]

In September 1916, he rejoined his battalion. He remained with them through the winter of 1916-17, said to be the worst in 30 years. During actions at Passchendaele, the Hindenburg Line and Broodseinde Ridge, Bunney did his country proud. Behind the lines he was a member of the 5th Battalion Band and at the front he doubled as a stretcher-bearer. He participated in actions to halt the

AWM E01810. The 5th Battalion Band, 1918. Charles Bunney, back row, second from the left.

German Spring offensive during March and April 1918. In June 1918, he was sent on 'Blighty' leave.[5]

Bunney's health was deteriorating. The nightmares and sleepless nights that had disturbed him since the cave in on Gallipoli persisted, driving him to consume more and more alcohol. He was admitted to hospital suffering from a nervous disorder, where on examination doctors found that: his heartbeat and breathing were irregular, he suffered with lower back pain, that he often trembled and his hands were frequently cold and clammy.[5]

A decision was made to repatriate Bunney to Australia. He was assigned special duty on a transport as a submarine guard. Another guard on the same ship was Private Billy Sing DCM, the ace Australian sniper, nicknamed the 'assassin of Gallipoli'.

On his return to Australia, Bunney was discharged as medically unfit. His health and his drinking habit did not improve. He was often in trouble with the law for being drunk and disorderly and he was regularly in and out of the repatriation hospital, fighting an endless battle to have his injuries recognised and so make him eligible for a pension.

In 1928, Bunney could no longer cope and placed a .22 calibre rifle to his stomach and pulled the trigger. His wife returned from shopping to find her husband lying on the kitchen floor in a pool of blood. He was rushed to the Caulfield Military Hospital for emergency surgery. After he recovered from his wound, he was admitted to an asylum where he was treated for acute alcoholism.[6]

Charles Bunney's Medals. (Author's Collection)

In the wake of the Great Depression, which began in October 1929 when the value of stocks and shares tumbled, the unemployment rate jumped dramatically. By the end of 1930, 20 percent of the Australian workforce were jobless—by 1932, this figure had risen to 29 percent. Charles Bunney was one of the casualties of these hard times. He drifted around the countryside looking for whatever work he could find and like so many of the Great War veterans, he was forced to sell his British War Medal—of value due to its high silver content.

In 1937, following the death of his wife from cancer, Bunney moved to the central Victorian town of Dunolly. On a pension of two pounds and two shillings a week he took up residence in a de-licensed hotel, the Windsor Castle, with his

mate Robert Gray—a retired prospector.[6] At the same time, living at the hotel but on the floor below Bunney was a stockily-built man aged around forty, named Thomas Johnson.[7]

It was the October long weekend in 1938. Gray was in his room going about his chores when, suddenly, Johnson burst into the room carrying an axe. He confronted Gray and yelled at him to stop making such a racket. Gray, a man not easily intimidated, told the intruder to 'bugger off'. Johnson, enraged that his demand had been taken so lightly, raised the axe and attacked the old man. The blow to his head sent the Gray sprawling to the floor. As he lay bleeding and helpless at Johnson's feet, the attacker struck again, using the bloodied axe to deliver a mortal blow to his defenceless victim.[8]

Bunney, hearing the commotion, went to investigate. As Bunney entered the room, the blood-splattered Johnson attacked, striking him on the head with the axe. The old man crumpled to the floor and as he tried to crawl into the hallway, Johnson grabbed him by the ankles and dragged him back into the room. Bunney clawed at the floor boards as he made a futile attempt to escape. Johnson raised his axe and attacked twice more, both times smashing the weapon into his victim's skull.[9]

Johnson rummaged through the men's pockets and rifled through a wooden box, where he knew Gray hid his money in a jar. He closed the door on the mayhem he had caused, secured the room with a small padlock and threw away the key as he walked along the main road towards the pub at the other end of town. There, he ordered a meal and a bottle of wine—which the landlady thought to be odd, as she knew Johnson was out of work. After his meal he sat in on a card game with the local patrons.[7]

Later, Johnson returned to his room to sleep. He stayed on at his hotel for a further two nights, during which time he considered disposing of the bodies down one of the many disused mines, but ultimately took no action to hide his crimes.[10]

He then noticed the smell of the decomposing bodies emanating from the old men's room and decided it was time to leave town and head for Melbourne. As he walked along the road, a truck slowed and offered him a lift. Later, the driver would testify that Johnson was strange to say the least, and he was glad to see the back of him.

Meanwhile, at the hotel, a friend of Bunney and Gray's was concerned they had not been seen for a couple of days. He tried their room but was thwarted by the padlock. He also noticed the smell. He asked a younger man to climb up onto the outside balcony of the hotel and check the room through the window. The scene that confronted the man caused him to go deathly pale. He climbed back onto the balcony and sat mumbling to himself, 'It's terrible. It's terrible'.[11]

The local police officer was called. As he smashed his way through the door, the stench was so overpowering it made them retch. Inside the room, lying on the floor, were the bodies of the two old men. Alongside them lay the bloodstained axe and Bunney's felt hat, complete with an axe cut.

A couple of days later, Johnson calmly walked into Dandenong Police Station and surrendered to the young constable on duty.[12] Two months later, at Johnson's trial, the jury deliberated for more than six hours before returning a verdict of 'Guilty'.

On passing sentence, the judge looked Johnson in the eye and in a sombre voice stated, 'You have been found guilty of murder. Your punishment is you will be hanged by the neck until you are dead.'[13]

On the night before Johnson's appointment with the hangman, little did he know that a public rally was being held on his behalf. Many believed that he was insane and should be committed, not executed. A telephone call was made to the then Governor of Victoria, Lord Huntingfield and the incumbent Premier, Mr Dunstan. Both men had retired for the evening and would not be disturbed.[14]

Johnson was offered the services of a clergyman to accompany him to the gallows, but he refused. As the hood was placed over his head and the rope placed round his neck, Johnson stood calm and composed as though resigned to his fate.

Notes

1 Wallace, RL, *The Australians in the Boer War*, Australian War Memorial & Government Printing Service, Canberra, 1976

2 Wigmore L, *They Dared Mightily*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963

3 National Archives of Australia: Boer War Service Records,1372 Private C Bunney

4 Speed, FW (ed.), *Esprit De Corps: The History of the Victorian Scottish Regiment and the 5th Infantry Battalion.*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1988

5 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 969 Private C Bunney

6 C Bunney, Department of Repatriation File, Melbourne, Victoria

7 The *Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, 7 October 1938

8 The *Argus*, Melbourne 7 October 1938

9 The *Courier-Mail*, Brisbane, 8 October 1938

10 The *Truth*, Melbourne 29 October 1938

11 The *Argus*, 7 October 1938

12 The *Courier-Mail*, 10 October 1938

13 The *Age*, Melbourne, 13 December 1938

14 The *Herald*, Melbourne, 23 January 1939