

# 2Lt Henry 'Ernie' Eibel

## *The iceberg*

*Long, black belts of thick barbed wire formed a formidable barrier. Beyond the wire were reinforced concrete pillboxes, the deadly barrels of machine-guns jutting from the openings. The air was thick with bullets and the red-hot splinters of artillery rounds.*

*A young second lieutenant calmly waved his men forward, his commands delivered with cool efficiency. He seemed oblivious to the deadly projectiles that whistled around them. Suddenly, a high explosive round exploded in front of him and he sank to his knees.*

On 21 September 1914, barely six weeks after the outbreak of the First World War, Henry 'Ernie' Eibel enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Like so many of the early volunteers, Ernie was a country lad. He had grown up on the family property, 'Yangan', near Warwick in southern Queensland. Working on the land offered little in the way of adventure for the young farmer and the thought of joining so many of his countrymen on an overseas trip to fight the Hun proved irresistible.

Time passed quickly for Ernie and the other new recruits, as they endured and became accustomed to the regimentation and rigours of training and life in uniform. Ernie enjoyed being a soldier and the camaraderie of the other young men in his unit was a far cry from the lonely and often isolated life of the bush.

The long sea voyage followed by the months of training in the desert environment of Egypt only heightened young Eibel's resolve to serve his country to the best of his ability. He was young, fit and, so he thought, indestructible.



It was a calm, clear night. As the moon sank below the horizon, a small steam pinnace took the landing boats in tow, their human cargo excited, yet apprehensive, about what lay ahead.

'Cast off', came the whispered signal for the soldiers to man the oars and head for the beach. As the bows of the boats grated on the shingle a few metres from the beach and the first men started wading ashore, all hell broke loose. Some made it to the sand and headed for shelter under the cliffs; many of the men in the boats were struck by a hail of bullets fired by the Turks entrenched in the hillsides overlooking the cove. Others, laden with full packs, were cut down as they struggled through the shallows—never having fired a shot in anger. (In the months that followed, Australia would suffer 26 111 casualties including 8141 deaths in this place called Gallipoli.)

Eibel's reputation amongst his fellow ANZACs was second to none. His composure and imperturbable demeanor had a calming effect on those fighting

alongside him—inspiring many of his mates to suggest that iced water flowed through his veins, so giving rise to the nickname, 'Iceberg'.

On 12 May 1915, the Turks launched a savage attack against the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion's position. As the enemy soldiers rushed towards them, the responding firepower of the ANZACs cut them down with deadly accuracy. Ernie set his rifle sight on one Turk after another, each shot finding its mark, each bullet eliminating yet another adversary.

Suddenly the tables turned for Eibel. The enemy bullet that struck him had the same effect as a kick from a mule, the force of the impact throwing him to the rear of the trench. As he took his hands away from his head, he saw that they were covered in blood. He calmly ripped open his field dressing and wrapped it over the side of his face. He slung his weapon over his shoulder and made his way to the nearest dressing station.

Eibel's wounds were serious enough to warrant his evacuation to the Australian General Hospital in Egypt. He required treatment and recuperation that would continue for the next four months.<sup>1</sup>

In September, on his return to ANZAC, Eibel was promoted to corporal. Five weeks later he was promoted to sergeant. Ernie again joined the fray with relentless determination as if trying to make up for the weeks he had been away due to injury. During his absence from the battle, many men had been less fortunate than he and had been killed in action.

In late November 1915, yet again, 'lady luck' deserted Eibel. He was once more sent to hospital, this time suffering from mumps—one of the many diseases that was now rife among the Allied troops on the Peninsula.<sup>1</sup>

After the December evacuation of Gallipoli, the exhausted troops returned to Egypt. In the months that followed, they were rested, reorganised and re-equipped.

Successful recruiting drives during the Gallipoli Campaign meant the government could now implement a plan to double the size of the AIF. The strategy was simple—halve each of the veteran battalions to form the nucleus of new battalions. Thus, the 15<sup>th</sup> was divided to form a second battalion—the 47<sup>th</sup>. With the split, Eibel remained with the 15<sup>th</sup> and was promoted to Company Sergeant Major.<sup>1</sup>

In June 1916, the AIF sailed for the Western Front. The Force was now prepared to take on the German Army, in what many believed to be the real war against a real enemy. As a veteran of the Gallipoli Campaign, Eibel did not share this opinion. For eight months the ANZACs had fought a long, hard, bloody battle against 'Johnny Turk'. That some ten thousand ANZACs had lost their lives during the campaign had proven that the Turks had been a very worthy adversary—in a very real war.

Upon their arrival in France, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion deployed in an area known as the 'nursery sector', for it was here that they could become accustomed to the sights and sounds of warfare on the Western Front.

Their introduction to life under constant artillery fire concluded, the battalion moved forward as a part of the force tasked with capturing vital ground at Pozieres and Mouquet Farm. The German artillery fire was awesome. Around the clock, their guns launched continuous salvos of every calibre into the Australian trenches.

Eibel's unit (C Company) occupied more than 500 metres of trenches.<sup>2</sup> Unperturbed by the situation, Ernie patrolled the line, between shots placing his hand on a Digger's shoulders and comforting him with words of support and encouragement.

'How's it going, mate?' he would ask.

'I'll be right, Sir', would be the reply. The 'iceberg's' cool, unflustered demeanor brought a sense of calm to a situation that could otherwise only be described as hell on Earth.

Ernie's company was ordered to launch a forward assault and seize a vital section of a German trench. As the whistle blew, the men of C Company swarmed over the top. The enemy was caught off-guard and began to break and run. As the Diggers pursued the Germans into their trenches, they were met with a merciless hail of bullets. Casualties were high and the ensuing companies were forced to retreat to their original lines. C Company was now cut off.

A runner braved the fire to bring a message to the company commander. 'Fire your SOS flares, Sir, and fall back under the cover of the barrage', he gasped breathlessly.

As the friendly fire began to fall, the order was given to retire. Eibel's head-count of his men established that several were missing. Jumping back into the trench, he searched until he came to a collapsed section of the trench wall. Huddled together, some wounded and others stunned by the shell blasts, were about a dozen men. Eibel organized the group; those who were slightly hurt were tasked to carry the more seriously wounded and those who were only dazed were ordered to man the available weapons to provide covering fire for the withdrawal.

Suddenly, in broken English, a German called for the party to surrender as they were outnumbered and apparently cut off.<sup>2</sup> Eibel took the Mills bombs from his pocket, pulled the pins and threw the grenades in the direction of the voice. Grabbing a couple of the men by the collar, he dragged them to their feet. 'Hurry up. Let's get out of here', he urged.

As the retreating party stumbled over the broken ground, Eibel would stop, drop to one knee and snipe at the enemy. With crisp, clear directions he ordered his

remaining Lewis gun team to engage larger targets. Upon reaching, but before entering the safety of their own trench, Ernie paused to survey the ground they had just covered. Satisfied that he had not left anyone behind, he dropped below ground. For his actions that day, CSM Henry Eibel was Mentioned in Despatches.<sup>3</sup>

The Australian battalions had suffered heavy losses at Pozieres. The 15<sup>th</sup> was no exception and Eibel was promoted to fill a vacancy among the officers. He now proudly wore the rank of a second lieutenant.

On Christmas Day 1916, the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion was out of the firing line. As the officers of the battalion toasted the festive season and feasted on a fine dinner, Eibel glanced around the room and asked himself, 'I wonder how many of us will be alive next Christmas?'<sup>4</sup>

In late April 1917, the front was unusually quiet. Australian forward patrols found the German trenches empty. But as the Allies advanced the reason became apparent. The Germans had not retreated; they had withdrawn to shorten their line and hence make it easier to defend. The Diggers were confronted by belts and belts of thick, black, barbed wire, supported by large pine logs. Beyond the wire barricades were reinforced concrete pillboxes, their machine-guns positioned to fire in overlapping arcs—deadly fire that would be impossible to penetrate. This series of fortifications was dubbed the Hindenburg Line and the history books would refer to this action as the First Battle of Bullecourt.

The high command devised a strategy whereby the Allies would launch surprise attacks with no artillery, just infantry and tanks. The commanders were dumbfounded by the plan. 'This'll be murder,' they declared.

Eibel briefed his men and made it sound so simple. 'Move forward, no matter what, move forward.' As the Diggers advanced towards the tape which marked



*AWM E03481. A view of the long, black belts of thick barbed wire which formed a formidable obstacle to the Australian and American troops in the storming of the Hindenburg Defence System.*

the line of departure, the usual cheerfulness was missing. As they lay on the ground waiting for zero hour, a light covering of snow fell on the khaki-clad figures. When the second hand reached twelve, the lines of troops rose as one and advanced towards the enemy.

The Germans had suspected that something was brewing and were ready and waiting. A barrage of artillery rained on the ANZAC ranks but the Diggers did not falter until they hit their first obstacle. Using wire cutters, they breached the initial line of barbed wire entanglements. They continued to advance until they reached the first row of German trenches. It seemed they had achieved the impossible. However, fortune was not on their side. They had outrun their tanks, which had either bogged, broken down or been destroyed. The ANZACs would have to face the enemy without mechanised support.

Eibel moved his men forward. His platoon was leading the battalion's advance. They successfully eliminated the first machine-gun they encountered before suddenly becoming the target of the German field gunners. Incoming artillery rounds bombarded the platoon. Then their worst nightmare was realised—the 'Iceberg' crumpled to his knees.

His batman raced to the officer's side and knelt down beside him. He took the shell dressings from his kit and packed them into his officer's shattered chest. As the distraught batman was trying to stem the flow of blood, Eibel was calmly removing his maps, papers and flares from his pockets. 'Take these documents to Captain Dunworth and tell him I'm finished,' he whispered to the batman.

'But Sir, you're not dead. I'll get a stretcher-bearer,' the batman protested.



*AWM E01418. View of a tank crossing a trench on its way into action during the attack on Messines Ridge. Note the other tank in the background.*

‘No,’ gasped Eibel. ‘But I will be dead by the time you get to Captain Dunworth.’

Reluctantly, the loyal batman took a last look at his platoon commander. Tears welled in his eyes as he clutched the documents and flares tightly in his hands. With a heavy heart and an impending sense of loss, he set off to find the captain.<sup>2</sup>

The Hindenburg Line did not fall that day. The Australians, having expended their supplies of ammunition and bombs, were forced to withdraw. Those who could not escape through the maze of barbed wire were confronted with two options—fight to the death or surrender.

The 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion suffered heavy losses as a result of this hastily planned and mounted attack. As the enemy forces swept forward in pursuit of the retreating Allies, they passed hundreds of Australian bodies suspended on the wire entanglements. They would also have passed the body of Henry Eibel, the gallant Australian who accepted death as he accepted life, without fear or favour.

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#### Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, Second Lieutenant HA Eibel
- 2 Chataway TP, Goldenstedt P, *History of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF during the Great War 1914 – 1918*, Revised edition, William Brooks & Co., Brisbane, 1948
- 3 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 4 Autographed Christmas Menu, 1916, held in author’s collection