

Sergeant William Wass, MM

Only a dog tag

The machine-gun fire was murderous; it seemed to be coming from all directions at the same time. The Diggers unsuccessfully tried to edge their way forward as time and time again they stopped to burrow their faces into the ground in an attempt to avoid the barrage of bullets.

A young platoon commander raised his head to get his bearings but an enemy 7.92mm round blew it apart like a ripe melon, splattering his blood over those around him.

William Wass was born in Derby, England.¹ He chose the life of a professional soldier and at an early age enlisted in the British Army, assigned to the local regiment, the Sherwood Foresters.¹

The young Wass thrived on the spit, polish and discipline of army life. With the outbreak of hostilities in South Africa, the Sherwood Foresters were deployed to fight the insurgent Dutch-Afrikaner settlers, known as Boers.²

The climate was unforgiving—sweltering heat in summer and bone-chilling cold in winter. After a spell chasing an elusive enemy across the African veldt, Wass's battalion received orders to move to the docks for immediate embarkation. Spirits were high as the men packed their equipment and loaded the supply wagons in anticipation of their impending journey home.

As the lines were cast off and the ship moved from the quay, their reverie was shattered as they learned they were not going home; they were going to China.³

In their campaign against westerners, the militant 'Boxers' were carving a path of death and destruction across northern China; their targets, the European civilians and missionaries and westernised Chinese. A small, but well-armed multinational force was besieged in Peking and various nations hastily assembled a relief force to liberate the beleaguered garrison.

Wass's unit was soon in action, facing a human horde that swarmed towards them. The Foresters stood firm as the Boxers came closer and closer, their blood-curdling cries of 'Sha!', 'Sha!' (Kill! Kill!) sending shivers down the Englishmen's spines. Coolly and calmly the orders were issued, 'At fifty yards, volley . . . fire! Present . . . fire!' The hail of bullets brought down the entire first wave and most of the second. The orders were repeated and more Boxers fell. As the Foresters advanced up the narrow street, they clashed with the forward elements of the attacking mob, their bayonets dispatching many of the enemy assailants.

The overwhelmed rebels soon dispersed and fled, closely followed by the Foresters who took aim and fired a parting salvo. Wass observed the bodies littering the street. As he glanced down, he saw his boots were splattered with fresh blood. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and awaited the next order.

In the ensuing weeks, the rebellion was quelled and order finally restored. The Sherwood Foresters embarked yet again, this time bound for India to garrison the borders along the North West Frontier. Postings to Egypt, Singapore and Hong Kong followed.³

After the thrill of action, the tedious life of garrison duty was not to Wass's liking. When his term of enlistment was up, he chose to take discharge and try his luck in Australia.



In 1914, William was working as a machine fitter in Sydney. One afternoon after he had knocked off work, he called into the local pub for a drink. The bar was abuzz with the talk of the German push across Europe and Britain's declaration of war against the invaders—the British Empire was again at war.

Wass presented himself for enlistment in the AIF and was allocated to the newly formed 2nd Battalion.¹ He was one of the originals and proud of it. With his military background, William was soon promoted to the rank of corporal in Battalion Headquarters.¹ In October 1914, the 2nd Battalion boarded the troopship *Suffolk*, bound for Egypt.⁴

At the desert training camp at Mena, Wass proved his worth within the headquarters time and time again. The young officers readily sought his advice and his cool, calm efficiency served as an inspiration to the younger soldiers.

By April 1915, the 1st Division was on the move; equipment was packed and loaded into wagons and the troops including the 2nd Battalion were moved to the docks and the waiting troopships.

The night of 24 April was deadly calm and the invasion fleet waited patiently beyond the horizon. Then, as the moon disappeared, the fleet edged closer to the darkened shoreline in preparation for a dawn assault landing.⁵

As they abandoned their landing craft on the pebbly beach, Corporal Wass rallied his troops. 'Stay close to me and keep your heads down', he ordered as he led his section up the hill.

That first night, the ANZAC forces held a grim toehold on the Gallipoli Peninsula. Maintenance of communications was critical to the defence of the beachhead. Wass had his signallers fully operational as semaphore positions were sited, runners briefed and telephone cables laid to the companies. The job done, he screwed the last two wires into the telephone set then briskly turned the handle. 'All lines are working, Sir', Wass said as he passed the handset to his commanding officer.

That night the Turks counterattacked in force, but the Diggers held on and retaliated with deadly efficiency.⁶ When a line was severed and communications lost,

Wass would send runners to the forward companies to deliver vital messages. If it became too dangerous, he would deliver the messages himself.

The ANZAC forces soon settled into the rigours of trench warfare on the inhospitable peninsula. Turkish snipers were ever present and caused havoc from their vantage points on the high ground. The signallers were their prime targets, but to ensure vital communications were maintained Corporal Wass had his men work in parties of three—two to conduct repairs and one to cover the others with a rifle. Some became victims of the snipers, but another always stepped forward to fill the gap. William's abilities did not go unnoticed and soon he was promoted to sergeant.¹ Many commented that the 2nd Battalion's communications were as 'sound as a pound'.

In August, the battalion took part in the assault on Lone Pine. The blast from the whistle was the signal for the troops to attack. Racing across the open ground, the signallers carried the spools which spewed out the vital telephone cable as they ran. On reaching the enemy lines, the Diggers dropped into the darkness of the covered trenches and engaged the Turks in fierce hand to hand combat.

AWM A05778. Gallipoli, Turkey, August 1915. A front line trench after the attack on Lone Pine, with dead or wounded lying in the foreground. A soldier watches anxiously from the shelter of the sandbags as a comrade makes his way over the top of the trench, only his legs being visible.



As the battle raged, the commanding officer turned to Wass and yelled, 'Get me headquarters, Sergeant!' Wass tried the line but it was dead. Grabbing a rifle, he paused to survey the open area towards the old trenches where bullets were flying in all directions. Taking a deep breath, Wass scrambled from the trench and raced across the open ground, weaving as he ran. He let the cable run over the top of his cradled rifle, all the time looking for the break in the wire.

Suddenly there it was: the two shattered ends of the line lying about ten yards apart. Snatching up one piece of wire, he lurched forward to retrieve the other. Suddenly, the concussion of a round threw him backwards and as he struggled to regain his senses he felt the warm trickle of blood dripping from his forehead.

Crawling forward, he retrieved the other end of the line and, baring the wires, tied the severed wires together. A burst from a Turkish machine-gun forced him to seek cover in a depression, which barely covered his body. Mission accomplished, once more he ran the gauntlet of enemy fire and, with the machine-gun rounds bouncing round his heels, he stumbled his way back to his commanding officer.

Picking up the receiver, he checked the line. 'Ready, Sir', he reported.

'About time', the commanding officer replied as he grabbed the handset.

Suffering blurred vision, Wass checked himself all over. It appeared that his head wound was his only injury. Satisfied he was in no immediate danger, he applied a shell dressing and soldiered on for the next four days without rest.⁷

The men serving with him noticed William was suffering badly and pressured him to report to the unit medical officer. 'It's the beach for you, Sergeant. You're in a bad way', the doctor advised.

The wound was serious and Wass was evacuated, first to Lemnos and then to Egypt. The doctors were amazed that the sergeant had carried on for so long with his injury, as closer examination revealed that Wass had a badly fractured skull.¹ He remained in hospital for the next four months, returning to the battalion after its evacuation from Gallipoli.



Moves were afoot to expand the AIF. The 3rd Division was being raised in Australia while the 4th and 5th Divisions were formed by breaking up the existing units.⁶ Thus the 2nd Battalion gave up some of its own to form the 54th Battalion, 14th Brigade of the 5th Division. Sergeant William Wass was one of those chosen to form the nucleus of the new battalion. It was at this time that he learned he was one of the first to be awarded the new Military Medal for his actions at Gallipoli.⁸

In June 1916, the Division moved to France. Its first major action was at a place called Fromelles. The 54th Battalion formed part of the assault force against a feature known as 'Sugar Loaf Salient'.⁹ As the battalions moved forward, with so

AWM H16396. Men of the 53rd Battalion waiting to don their equipment for the attack at Fromelles.



many troops massed in one place, the Diggers thought they were in for an easy time.

Suddenly there was mayhem. The British brigade covering the right flank bogged down, enabling the German forces to concentrate most of their firepower on the ANZAC line. As the Diggers advanced, enemy machine-guns on their flanks launched a massive barrage and with deadly accuracy, cut a swathe of carnage throughout the ranks.⁹ The Diggers tried in vain to return fire, but the Germans held the high ground and their machine-guns continued their relentless bombardment of the Australians.

The 54th Battalion's command post consisted of a shell hole. Communications were non-existent as many of the reels lay in the hands of the dead signallers who now littered the battlefield. The commanding officer needed information and his only option was to use a runner. He turned to William. 'Wass, get a message to Brigade. Tell them we're pinned down and we need some support, and we need it in a hurry.' Grabbing his rifle, Wass ran, crawled and scurried towards the rear, jumping from shell hole to shell hole, soon disappearing into the cordite haze.

Under cover of darkness, the remnants of the shattered units withdrew from the Salient. The beating suffered by the 5th Division was severe enough to keep it out of the war for months.⁹



AWM A01560. Part of the German front line after the attack on Fromelles (Battle of Fleurbaix) which took place on 19 July 1916 and 20 July 1916.



RELAWM16344.005.
WW1 Aluminium
identity disc on a leather
thong to wear around
the neck. Stamped on
the front were the
owner's details. This disc
belonged to John
Simpson (the man with
the donkey)

Many weeks later, the German Red Cross delivered a sandbag full of personal effects and dog tags to the Swiss authorities. They had been collected from the dead of the Fromelles battlefields. Amongst the identification discs was one that read 239 W. Wass.¹⁰

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 239 Sergeant William Wass MM
- 2 Boer War history notes in author's possession.
- 3 Archival information Sherwood Foresters London, UK, viewed by author, 2000
- 4 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 2nd Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 5 Taylor FW & Cusack TA, *Nulli secundus: a history of the Second Battalion A.I.F., 1914-1919*, John Burridge Military Antiques, Swanbourne, W.A, 1992
- 6 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume I, the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 7 Newspaper Article, *Sydney Mail*, 10 January 1917, page 34
- 8 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 9 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume III, the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 10 AWM 1DRL/0428, Australian Red Cross Society, Missing and Wounded Enquiry Bureau