

# Lance Corporal Francis Curran, DCM

## *The bomber*

*With the skill and athleticism of an A-grade cricketer, the khaki-clad figure repeatedly fielded the hissing bombs in mid air as they flew towards him. With no time to hesitate, yet with deadly accuracy, he hurled them back to their senders. Those missiles that managed to escape his agile hands fell spluttering to the trench floor, only to be smothered with a sandbag or flicked back over the parapet.*

Francis Patrick Curran was born in Tenterfield, New South Wales, in 1887. On joining the workforce, he became a carter and postman by trade. Young Frank was also a very keen sportsman, excelling at football and boxing. In September 1914, Australia, now at war by virtue of being a member of the British Commonwealth, called for volunteers to join a military force to go to Europe to fight the German oppressors.

Like so many of the mates with whom he had attended school and played sport, Curran joined the queue at the local enlistment office. As a result of growing up in a country town and his choice of trade, Frank was a very competent horseman; it was therefore not surprising that he was assigned as a reinforcement to the 7<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment (7 LHR).<sup>1</sup>

The unit, as part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Light Horse Brigade, departed Sydney by ship in late December 1914, bound for places Frank had only read about in his school geography books. The troops arrived at Mena Camp near Cairo in Egypt on 1 February 1915.

After months of intensive training in the hot, sandy conditions of the desert, the infantry battalions of the AIF were given the order to prepare to move. They were



*AWM P00152.020. Part of the Mena camp showing the proximity to the pyramids.*

fit, tanned and raring to go—in their minds they were invincible. As the trains carrying the troops to waiting ships pulled out from Cairo station, the departing Diggers shouted boisterously as they waved farewell to the light horsemen who were to remain behind. With shoulders slumped, a dejected Frank returned to the camp. (Initially, the light horsemen were considered unsuitable for Gallipoli, but were later sent as reinforcements, without their horses.)

The landing at Gallipoli did not go well for the Allies. In the early days of the war, the losses suffered by the infantry were severe; additional fresh forces were required to bolster the tiny beachhead before the ANZACs were pushed back into the sea.

To a man, the troopers of the light horse volunteered to double as infantry. They had come a long way to fight for their country—with or without their horses. Frank slammed home the bolt of his .303 rifle and threw his bandolier over his shoulder. Finally, it was the light horsemen's turn to show the Turks a thing or two.

The 7 LHR disembarked at Gallipoli in late May—just in time to help repulse a series of savage attacks by the Turks.<sup>2</sup> The troopers had barely reached the relative safety of the Australian trenches when they were suddenly exposed to a style of warfare they had not encountered before—nor been trained for in Australia or at the Mena Camp—*hand-thrown missiles*.

Grenades had not been issued to the landing force, so these were weapons that were unfamiliar to the ANZACs. However, the Turks had an endless supply of bombs—round black metal missiles, about the size of a cricket ball, with a few seconds' fuse. Initially, to retaliate, the soldiers had little option but to retrieve these bombs before they exploded and return them to their owners. However, it was not long before the resourcefulness of the Diggers led to 'homemade' bombs being manufactured on the beach, using jam tins filled with any available scraps of metal they could find.<sup>3</sup>

Curran, now a lance corporal, soon showed the worth of his deadly throwing arm. His ability to catch the incoming bombs in mid air and to then launch the projectiles into the enemy lines with deadly accuracy became legendary. In their letters home, the troopers paid tribute to his bravery and the skill and audacity of his daring exploits.

By August, the campaign had developed into a prolonged war of attrition. In an attempt to break the stalemate, the British High Command devised a plan for a landing at Suvla Bay, while at the same time creating a series of diversions along the ANZAC lines to distract the Turks. These diversionary actions at Chunuk Bair, The Nek and Lone Pine—names that would become etched in history as places where so many heroic young Australian and New Zealand soldiers died—were scenes of some of the bloodiest battles fought on the Peninsula.



*AWM G00267. Gallipoli 1915. Two soldiers sit beside a pile of empty tins cutting up barbed wire for jam tin bombs. The bombs were made near the beach, a spot popularly known as the 'bomb factory' near ANZAC Cove. All the old jam tins and other empty containers were used to make bombs which were filled with fragments of Turkish shells and enemy barbed wire which had been cut into small lengths.*

As the New Zealanders battled their way up the slopes of Chunuk Bair, the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiments were suffering heavy casualties at The Nek. Wave after wave of ANZACs brandishing fixed bayonets charged the Turkish lines, only to be cut down by a wall of bullets. Each new line of attackers had to scramble over the dead bodies of mates who had been alive just a few minutes before. (In 1919, when a group of ANZACs returned to Gallipoli to give their dead a proper burial, at The Nek they found more than three hundred Australian bodies in an area smaller than a tennis court.)<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, the infantry assault on the fortified trenches of Lone Pine was to continue for four days, mostly hand-to-hand fighting. On reaching the enemy trenches, the Diggers found them covered with thick pine logs. In some places, the attackers had to break through the roof with their bayonets, before dropping into the inky darkness of the trench to engage the defenders. No quarter was asked or given by either side. This protracted action resulted in the loss of more than two thousand Australians.



*AWM A02022. Australian troops in the Turkish Lone Pine trenches, captured on the afternoon of the 6 August 1915.*

The 7<sup>th</sup> Light Horse was rushed in to consolidate the infantry gains. Curran immediately made his way to the unmanned forward trench, prepared to engage the enemy in a bombing duel, the action at which he excelled. The screams coming from the enemy positions indicated that his bombs were right on target.

Two troopers rushed in to assist. Curran calmly turned to them in between throws and said, 'I can handle this, you just keep me supplied with the ammo'. Weaving along the length of the trench, Curran would light the fuse with one hand and throw with the other.

At times he caught the Turkish bombs like a cricket ball in mid flight and threw them back before they exploded. However, some Turkish bombs did get through and, as they lay spluttering on the trench floor, Frank would either

flick them over the lip of the trench or smother them with a sandbag. He kept this up for hours, unwilling to rest before the Turks withdrew. For his acts of bravery in the Lone Pine trenches, Curran was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.<sup>5</sup> It was the first awarded to a member of the 7<sup>th</sup>.<sup>6</sup>

Frank's daring exploits did not end at Lone Pine. In September, as a result of another hostile encounter with the enemy, he was Mentioned in Despatches.<sup>5</sup> During this engagement he displayed exceptional bravery, impeding a Turkish bombing attack single handedly while in full view of the enemy.<sup>5</sup>

Following the successful evacuation from Gallipoli in December 1915, the ANZAC forces were withdrawn to Egypt to rearm, reinforce and re-equip. The regiment became part of the ANZAC Mounted Division, joining the forces defending the Suez Canal against an anticipated invasion by the Turks across the Sinai Desert.

Curran, now a corporal, watched enviously as the infantry battalions boarded the ships to transport them to the Western Front. The light horsemen were to stay behind in Egypt to continue the fight against the Turks, but Frank was convinced the desert would become the backwater of the war.



*AWM G01291. Gallipoli Peninsula, 17 December 1915. A delayed action device for firing a rifle by means of weights operated through water escaping from one tin into another. A rifle could be left to operate twenty minutes after the device was set. Six rifles were left by 3rd Brigade to fire following the departure of the last party to evacuate the Peninsula.*

He decided to take matters into his own hands, stowing away on a ship bound for France. Once there, he was sure that he would be able to secure a posting to the infantry. His mates tried to conceal his absence, but when the ship docked in Marseilles Curran was discovered. His dreams of staying in France were shattered when he was branded a deserter and returned to Egypt under close arrest.<sup>6</sup>

The news on his return to Egypt was that the Turks had attacked the British garrisons at Katia and Oghratina, and that his regiment had gone into action to defend the vital Romani tableland. In doing so, the Mounted Division successfully halted the advance of the Turkish juggernaut as it swept towards the Suez Canal.

Curran was spoiling for a fight. Seizing an opportunity, he escaped from his guard and made his way, unarmed, to the front line. On reaching the battlefield, despite having no weapon, he set about helping the stretcher-bearers with the casualties. Learning that some wounded troopers were still lying in no man's land in the blistering heat, Curran set forth on a one-man rescue mission. Under heavy fire and with no protection, he carried the stranded Diggers back to the safety of his own lines. Time and time again, he braved enemy fire to collect yet another wounded comrade and drag him to safety.<sup>3</sup>

On Curran's fifteenth rescue sortie, a Turk fixed his rifle sight on the unarmed Digger and squeezed the trigger. In the blink of an eye, Frank Curran was dead—a bullet had pierced his heart.<sup>6</sup>

Today, in the immaculately kept Kantara War Memorial Cemetery, just a stone's throw from the Suez Canal, one can visit the final resting places of light horsemen who died in the desert campaigns of the Great War. Among them you will find a weather-beaten grave. Etched in the headstone are the words, *In Memory of Corporal Francis Patrick Curran DCM.*<sup>7</sup>

### Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 859 Corporal FP Curran
- 2 Australian War Memorial website [http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit\\_10561.htm](http://www.awm.gov.au/units/unit_10561.htm).
- 3 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume II, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 4 Anderson, M, *Don't forget me, cobbler!*, Australian Army, Canberra, 1995
- 5 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 6 Richardson JD, *The History of the 7th Light Horse Regiment AIF*, Radcliffe Press, Sydney, 1919.
- 7 Visited by author, August 1999

