

Bombardier Cecil Edwards, MM

The artillery signaller

The concussion of exploding shells rocked their senses. The screech of artillery fired from the field guns of both sides was deafening . . . but communications had to be maintained.

Cecil Francis Edwards was barely nineteen when Great Britain declared war on Germany. Cec was among the first to join the long queues of young Australian men eager to volunteer to serve their King and country. Like most of his generation, the lad didn't much fancy walking—only swagmen travelled long distances on foot—so he had no desire to become an infantry 'foot-slogger'.¹

He was rather impressed by the style and look of the uniforms worn by the light horsemen and artillerymen, with their leather boots and leggings, tailored jodhpurs, spurs and bandoleers. However, it was the prospect of working with both horses and the big guns that swayed him to choose artillery.



AWM ART19842. Power, H Septimus, *First Australian artillery going into the 3rd Battle of Ypres* Painting—oil on canvas London 1919, 50.4 x 91.3 cm.

This work shows a team of six horses, three mounted and three led, struggling through thick mud pulling a heavy 18 pounder gun on the limber. Six other soldiers on foot are helping to haul the gun, all moving away from the viewer. Septimus Power has captured the dash, the urgency, the immediacy of guns being moved to give fire support on the battlefield. You can almost hear the sound of mud sucking on the hooves, the gasping of the horses, the slap of leather, and creaking of axles, and the shouts of men. And you can imagine the sounds of the great battle beyond and sense the danger towards which the gun team is headed.

He was assigned to No 2 Battery, 1st Australian Field Artillery Brigade, as a gunner (a member of a detachment that loads and fires artillery guns).² The battery was a mix of raw recruits and trained militia soldiers. It was equipped with the quick-firing 18-pounder field guns which could hurl a high explosive shell or shrapnel-filled projectile nearly six kilometres. To the gunners, the 18-pounder was the perfect 'killing' machine and they developed a love for, and devotion to their guns that no woman could ever understand.

'Into action, out of action; load, unload; action left, action right; mount, dismount!' While at times it seemed as though their training would never end, the enthusiastic new recruits accepted the long hours of instruction and discipline without complaint, acutely aware that the German gunners would be equally well drilled and share the same determination to survive. Time passed quickly and within a few weeks the first contingent of soldiers of the fledgling AIF was embarking on ships for what most believed would be the opportunity of a lifetime.

Cec waved enthusiastically to the crowds of families and friends standing shoulder to shoulder on the docks as they bid farewell to departing loved ones. As the troopship passed through the Heads, he took a long, last look at the city he called home, eyes fixed on the familiar Sydney skyline until it was out of sight. Cec wiped a tear from his eye as he pondered whether he would survive this war to see his beloved home and family again.

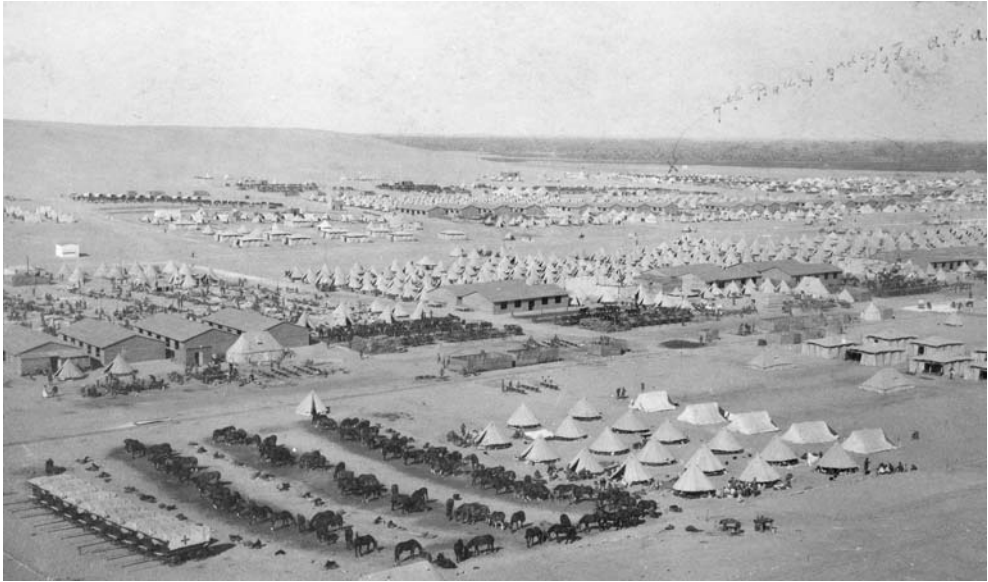
Life on board ship was no holiday. There was plenty of work to be done. Horses needed to be fed, watered and groomed, stables kept clean and guns maintained... and there was more training. Of relative importance was the need for cross-training. Young Edwards laughed as he looked at the telephone handset. 'Why do I need to know how to use this, Sarge? I'm a gun number.'

'So that when some Hun blows your mate's head off, you can take over his job, you dumb ass', the sergeant replied sarcastically.

Cec soon appreciated the value of the additional training and listened intently, keen to learn these new skills. His hard work and enthusiasm led to his becoming a very competent signaller.

As time passed and the ship steamed closer to its destination, the men's eagerness to enter the war against the Germans increased to almost fever pitch. But it seemed the Hun was not to be their first opponent. Turkey had entered the war as an ally of Germany and the Diggers were now bound for training grounds in North Africa, not England as many had thought.²

By the time the ships began their transit of the 160-kilometre-long Suez Canal, the convoy had been at sea for some six weeks, and there was much excitement as the men caught their first glimpse of mystical Egypt. For several days and nights, as they moved slowly through the Canal, an exchange of shouting and



AWM P00117.001. Mena Camp, Egypt. This photo represents about one fifth of the whole encampment.



AWM J05576. Men of the AIF crowding on board tram cars when going to Cairo on leave.

cheering between the Australians on board the ships and the Indian troops camped on the banks filled the air. Until now, the Indians and their English officers had not been aware the Australian force was on its way.

In early December 1914, the brigade disembarked at Alexandria, a Mediterranean seaport, north-west of Cairo. From here they were transported by train to Mena Camp, a vast 'city' of tents in the shadow of the great pyramids.²

At Mena, in the dry desert conditions, the gunners trained long and hard with a grim determination to ready themselves for the battles they had yet to face. During off-duty hours they crowded onto trams—often sitting on the roof or standing on the footboard—headed for the bars and 'entertainment' spots in nearby Cairo.

By early April 1915, Cec and his mates were hardened, confident and eager to tackle the enemy. They did not have long to wait.



From the deck of the troopship, Cec watched the ferocious battle being waged on the shore. He turned to his troop commander and asked, 'What do they call this place again, Skipper?'

'Gallipoli', the officer replied.

Mesmerised by the unfolding war, the gunners were unaware of the problems the ANZAC artillerymen faced following the landing in the early hours of 25 April 1915. The force had been sent ashore at the wrong place. Instead of the flat beach they had expected, they faced sand dunes and rugged cliffs. The beachhead lacked the vital areas of flat ground needed to allow the field gun batteries to deploy. The 18-pounders' lack of the necessary trajectory to allow for the hilly terrain of the Gallipoli Peninsula meant the gunners were without the ability to accurately engage the enemy entrenched in the hillsides above them.

With hearts thumping and pulses racing, the artillerymen on the ships didn't care about such trivial matters; they just wanted to get ashore and take part in the fighting, to finally face the reality of war—and the horrors of hell on earth. But they would have to wait a little longer.

There was no room for all the guns to be unloaded at ANZAC Cove and as the 18-pounders were found to be totally unsuited to the terrain, the field artillery brigades, including Cec's battery, were forced to remain aboard their ship. In early May, the brigade was deployed to support the British at Cape Helles.³ The terrain at the Cape was deemed to be more suitable for the 18-pounders than that found at ANZAC—but the area also accommodated the Turks.

During the campaign that followed, the gunners played a game of cat and mouse with their Turkish artillery counterparts. The Turks were familiar with the terrain and had little difficulty pinpointing the Australian gun positions for quick and



AWM H15391. Gallipoli, Turkey. 1915. Australian artillerymen beside a well-camouflaged AIF 6 inch howitzer which was the largest calibre gun in the area.

accurate engagements. Cec and his mates in the batteries were forced to become masters of camouflage and deception.

Guns were hauled up near-vertical cliffs using ropes, brute strength and pure 'guts'. The Diggers concealed their large weapons using local foliage and hessian.³ They deployed in absolute silence, then opened fire with a devastating barrage, quickly moving to another position before the Turkish artillery could respond. Sometimes they succeeded and other times they were caught by the bigger calibre and better positioning of the enemy guns.



AWM G00918. Australian artillerymen dragging guns into position after the landing at ANZAC.

At times the Diggers would be forced to 'duel' with an enemy battery's guns. The noise of the exploding shells from both sides was deafening.

The Diggers felt safe behind their dugouts, but would scurry for cover when the Turkish shrapnel shells burst overhead. Not all made it to safety and the list of casualties among the gunners grew as more and more made the supreme sacrifice. These men were buried on the Peninsula, never to return to their homeland and families.

In early October, the brigade was redeployed to ANZAC. By now, the gunners had been at Gallipoli for several months and, like so many of the Allied troops, Cec became ill and required hospital treatment on Lemnos Island. He recovered to return to the fighting a short time later.¹

Following the landing in April, the Allies fought heroically, but failed in their objective to gain control of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The casualty toll continued to climb—the ANZACs alone lost some ten thousand men. The approaching winter would make conditions even harsher for the men and the storms and rough seas at that time of year would disrupt the landing of necessary supplies. The greatest fear of the Allied generals was that a withdrawal could cost half the total force. After several weeks of hesitation, the British Government finally decided to evacuate.³ Cec and his fellow Diggers were upset at the thought of quitting ANZAC—they had expected to stay until they had conquered the Turks.

It was planned that the evacuation should be carried out under a guise of normality. Silence, movement under the cover of darkness, and the use of any innovative ruse to deceive the enemy remained the order of the day. As Edwards strained to manhandle the gun onto the barge in the darkness, the grind of the wheel against the pebbles of the beach sounded loud enough to attract every Turk with a rifle—but not a shot was heard.

From the barge being towed out to sea, Cec looked back to the place they first had sighted so many months ago. His eyes filled with tears as he thought of the scores of dead mates who remained behind. Many of the Diggers, like Cec, felt they were deserting their fallen mates and one was heard to say 'I hope they can't hear us leaving'.

Back in Egypt, the surviving ANZACs were given the chance to rest, re-equip and retrain. During this time of respite from the war, Cec welcomed the opportunity to catch up with his two brothers Les and Lionel, who had both seen action at Gallipoli with the infantry and survived physically unscathed.

The war raging in Europe became the focus of daily life. For the gunners, training consumed most of their waking hours, as they were desperate to reinforce and refresh many of the lessons they had forgotten while serving on the Peninsula.

This was also a time of great change. Following the success of the recruiting drives during the Gallipoli Campaign, there was a need to expand the AIF, to

reorganise and split the divisions to make room for the reinforcements. Many of the veterans of ANZAC were required to transfer to the new divisions to provide a nucleus of experienced men to train the new recruits. Many did not want to see their units divided, or be separated from their mates. Others saw it as an opportunity for promotion or to change to another corps. Edwards was one of those who transferred to the new 4th Division Artillery.

On their arrival in France, the artillerymen found this to be a 'gunner war'. Great lines of guns would hammer at each other, hour after hour and day after day. The men of the ammunition columns were forced to run this gauntlet of counter-battery fire to keep the guns supplied.

Young Cec, now promoted to bombardier, was serving as a forward observation party signaller. His new position required him to man his phone line, ready to pass vital information to the gun position officer, who would use it to bring devastating fire upon the enemy.

All too often, Cec and the infantry unit his detachment was supporting would find themselves on the receiving end of the German artillery fusillade. It was not unusual, during an enemy counter-barrage, for young Edwards to have to leave the safety of his shell hole and crawl over the broken and muddy terrain to repair the shredded ends of the telephone cable severed in the bombardment.

In late 1916, Cec was moved back to Brigade Headquarters for a 'rest'. He was to help man the forward artillery exchange in 'York Trench'. On 20 December, soon after his arrival at the exchange, he sat in the dugout of the 4th Division Artillery command post chatting with his mates about the approaching Christmas and what preparations for the festivities would be taking place at home.

Suddenly there was pandemonium. The dugout was rocked by one explosion after another. The switchboard was inundated with calls for close-in artillery support. The duty officer stuck his head outside to evaluate the scene as an incoming round exploded, killing him and collapsing the front of the dugout.

Another round hit the roof, smashing the hardwood beams into splinters. A large sliver of timber struck the signaller sitting next to Edwards, killing him instantly. The next round blew Edwards across the dugout floor, slamming him into the wall. His eyes filled with mud, Cec groped around for his helmet and jammed it back onto his head. As rounds continued to explode around the dugout, he crawled across the floor to his seat. Wiping the mud from his eyes with his sleeve, he picked up the telephone handset and placed it to his ear, but the line was dead. Looking around he saw the ends of the wire hanging from the shattered ceiling and swaying in the breeze.

Grabbing a set of pliers, Cec stood up, only to be blown across the dugout again—losing the pliers as he fell. Regaining his senses, he tried to reach the tattered cable; yet another explosion sent him sprawling. He lurched forward



AWM E00798. Signal Engineers, with a reel of cable to lay a surface telephone line to a forward unit. Buried cable routes were mainly relied on, but when these failed through shellfire, surface lines were run out as a temporary measure until communication by the buried lines was restored.



AWM E00747. Signallers laying a line of telephone cable.

again, this time successfully, grabbing the end of the cable before he hit the ground. Stripping off the protective covering with his teeth, he spliced the ends together.

He crawled back to where he'd left the handset. It was dead—there had to be a break beyond the dugout as well. Crawling through a hole in the partially collapsed roof, he made his way outside. Shells continued to explode around him and he felt the heat from the red-hot splinters whistling overhead. He quickly located and repaired the severed ends then clawed his way back into the relative safety of the dugout.

As he picked up the handset, he heard a voice at the other end screaming into the telephone. On answering, Edwards heard a loud and curt 'It's about bloody time!' followed by a series of co-ordinates which he relayed to the battery command posts. The cable was severed again and again, but each time Edwards successfully conducted repairs and kept open the line of communication to the guns.

When the enemy shelling subsided, a party made its way to the caved-in shelter. 'Is anyone in there?' the officer yelled.

'Yeah, me, Edwards', came a muffled reply. As they forced an entry through the shattered timber beams that had once been the roof of the dugout, they found Cec still clutching his handset.

'Crikey mate, how did you survive this?' the officer asked.

'Just lucky I guess', replied Edwards.

On 14 May 1917, Cec Edwards paraded before the corps commander. He smiled as two medals were pinned on his chest—the Military Medal for bravery in the field and the coveted Italian Bronze Cross for conspicuous service at 'York Trench'—awarded for his courage under fire and his determination to support his mates regardless of the threat to his own safety.⁴

Young Edwards continued to fight on the battlefields of France and Belgium, at Fleurbaix, Ypres, Bullecourt, Messines, Ploegsteert and Hamel—places that would be etched forever in his mind as scenes of some of the bloodiest fighting on the Western Front.

The Edwards family had paid a high price for their part in the Empire's fight for freedom. Cec's brother Les was severely wounded at Pozieres, resulting in the loss of his left hand. His other brother Lionel, wounded and gassed, was repatriated to Australia where he was discharged as medically unfit.⁵

In September 1918, Cec was ordered to report to the command post. He was informed that, because he was a 1914 veteran, he was being sent home on furlough. As the ship made its way across the Mediterranean, Edwards became ill and was forced to disembark at Suez for a brief period in hospital.



AWM E04852. Gassed Australians awaiting medical attention at the Dressing Station at White Chateau, near Villers-Bretonneux.

On Boxing Day 1918, Cec thrilled to the sight of Sydney Harbour and the skyline of his home town, which, in his darkest hours, he was sure he would never see again.⁵ For the battle-weary young Digger, it was a time of mixed emotions. The crowds waving and cheering from the docks filled his heart with pride, but there was also a feeling of great sadness and loss for the mates he had left behind.

Walking down the gangway of the ship, he saw his two brothers waiting on the wharf to meet him. They slapped one another on the back, happy to be reunited and relieved that all three had made it safely home. As they headed away from the dock, Cec noted Les's empty sleeve and the gasping, wheezing cough that troubled Lionel, and he thought to himself, 'Yeah, we've served our country well'.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 267 Bombardier C F Edwards
- 2 Bean, C E W, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume I*, the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 3 Bean, C E W, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Volume II*, the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 4 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 5 *The All Australian Memorial, A Historical Record of national effort during the Great War*, Australian Publishing Service, Melbourne, Date Unknown.