

Private Edward Elart

A man with a secret

The young sailor stared pensively at the dark grey outline of the battle cruiser moored alongside the pier. A million thoughts ran through his mind as he stood transfixed, as if in a trance. A passing sailor stumbled against him and muttered, 'Come on mate, better get aboard'. His reverie interrupted, the young seaman turned away from the ship and jogged towards a waiting tram.

'WAR!'—this was the bold headline that dominated the front pages of newspapers around the country. It was the topic of conversation in every home, pub, shop and factory as young Australian men from all walks of life flocked to the recruiting depots to sign up for service overseas. A hastily assembled force of soldiers and sailors was already preparing to sail to seize German assets to Australia's north.

As eager young volunteers skirted around him, a young man paused and stared intently at the building that housed Naval Headquarters. He was poised to go in, but, on the threshold, he changed his mind. Instead, he turned on his heel and headed towards the military barracks down the road, where some time later he stood before the officer, raised his right hand and pledged, 'I, Edward Elart, do hereby swear...'¹

Edward had been allocated to the newly raised 1st Battalion AIF and, along with the other volunteers who also had enlisted that day, he marched to the temporary barracks at Randwick Racecourse.¹

In the early days of the Great War, uniforms and equipment were in short supply, and many of the new recruits commenced their initial training wearing their civilian clothes, drilled by uniformed non-commissioned officers of the permanent forces. Eventually, Edward lined up to receive his first issue of the coarse woollen tunic and breeches, and an oversized hat that the quartermaster sergeant ceremoniously jammed on his head.

Days drifted into weeks during which time the battalion was slowly whipped into shape. Edward enjoyed the close contact with the other recruits and soon had plenty of new friends. He worked hard to prove his worth and whenever a volunteer was required, Edward was among the first to raise his hand.

Soon the waiting and anticipation to put their training into practice was over. The order came, 'We're breaking camp and moving to the docks tomorrow'. As the lines of khaki-clad figures marched proudly towards waiting ships, a group of sailors stood at the roadside to watch the 'gravel crushers' pass by. Edward quickly turned his head the other way as he drew near them.

With the rest of the Division, the 1st Battalion was bound for the training camps in Egypt.² As the ship plied its way across the Great Australian Bight, Elart spent hours standing by the railing, staring at the ocean as it surged past the side of the ship. His mates noticed that he always seemed preoccupied when not actively involved in training.

Life in Egypt and their exposure to so many new sights, sounds and smells was akin to an exotic adventure for the young Diggers. They found plenty to keep them occupied on leave in nearby Cairo. They bought souvenirs to send home to family and friends, enjoyed drink that was cheap and plentiful, and for the more adventurous, the brothels in the local *Wassers* provided other forms of entertainment—delights that many a youngster had never before experienced. Such ‘pleasure’ however, also often left them with a dose of disease that was not quite so enjoyable.

Before long, the Division was on the move again. The troops boarded ships at Alexandria and headed east across the Mediterranean towards Turkey. On Saturday 24 April 1915, after a brief layover at Lemnos Island, the convoy set sail for the Gallipoli Peninsula.³ The Diggers aboard the ships spent the hours before the dawn landing in a variety of ways. Some attended religious services, some wrote letters, the experienced bushmen broke up crates to provide a supply of firewood to carry ashore, and others, like Elart, spent the time contemplating what lay in store for them.

As the landing boat nudged the shore, the Diggers leaped out. Some made it to the relative safety of the cliffs, others lay face-down on the bloody sand. Some didn’t even get out of the boats before Turkish machine-guns cut them to pieces.

The platoon was ordered to move up the cliffs, self-preservation their prime objective as enemy bullets caused havoc among the ANZACs struggling to reach some form of shelter. When they reached the top of the cliffs, they moved forward by sections and were ordered by the officer to dig in along the ridge. Assessing the situation, Elart complained to his superior, ‘But Sir, we’re miles short of our objective’.

‘We’ve been landed in the wrong spot. The enemy has the high ground, knows the country and he’s got reinforcements moving up. I think we’re in strife mate, so just start digging’, the officer replied.

That first night was one of sleepless anticipation for the ANZAC troops. The smarter ones knew how precarious their situation really was. If one part of the ANZAC line were to be breached, they would be overrun. The Turks were determined to drive out the invaders and their attacks were relentless. The Diggers fought like demons and held their position—but at a terrible cost in young lives.

Life on the Peninsula had become a routine of living and fighting in trenches and dugouts. It was a campaign of sniping and bombing under the constant threat



AWM A01829. Troops of an Australian battalion on the deck of the battleship Prince of Wales in Mudros Harbour just before the landing at Gallipoli.

from enemy snipers and artillery. To put one's head above the parapet was to risk having it blown off.

By mid-May, the Diggers had been subjected to a continuous enemy barrage and the Turks now were poised for an all-out attack, their objective to push the infidels back into the sea.

Elart took his place in the line, two of his mates standing on either side of him. 'Right lads, watch your front, mark your targets carefully', the sergeant ordered. In the blink of an eye, there they were—Turks, hordes of them, screaming and yelling, heading straight towards the ANZAC line.

'God help us', Elart prayed.

Bullets flew in all directions—it was on for young and old. As fast as he used up one clip of ammunition, Elart slammed another into place. An incoming round struck the soldier on his right, throwing him backwards and, less than a minute later, the Digger on his left took a round between the eyes. The Turks had reached the threshold of the Australian trenches. Elart continued to squeeze the trigger, eject the expended round, fire, eject, fire and eject—it was just a blur.

Suddenly it was over and the Turks were withdrawing. The Diggers continued to engage the enemy as the Turks broke and ran. When Elart finally laid down his rifle, its barrel was smouldering and red-hot. He examined the bloody crease where a bullet had grazed his upper arm and considered how lucky he had been.¹

During the ensuing weeks, the events surrounding the deaths of his two friends continually played on his mind and he couldn't help but contemplate how close he had come to joining them. After much agonising he wrote two letters, one to his commanding officer and the other to General Walker, now in command of the 1st Division. When he had finished, he asked the company clerk to ensure that they were delivered.

A Turkish machine-gun had been set up and was causing havoc in front of the 1st Battalion's position. Sergeant Harry Freame, the battalion's renowned Japanese–Australian scout, had unsuccessfully ventured out over the previous two nights in an attempt to silence the gun.

On the night of 6 June, he was ordered to go out again. 'I'll need a couple of blokes to go with me', Freame said. A newly arrived lad by the name of Morris said he'd go and the other volunteer was Edward Elart.⁴

Just after dark, the trio crawled out from their lines—Freame armed with his customary twin pistols and five bombs, the other two with a rifle and two bombs each.⁴

The three silently moved forward and suddenly there it was, the troublesome machine-gun. Each primed a bomb and on Freame's command they hurled them towards their target, the missiles landing fairly close to their mark. The Diggers then moved to the rear of the gun and threw more bombs. The Turks retaliated with rifle fire. The threesome continued changing their position until they had expended their supply of bombs. In a last-ditch effort, Freame emptied his pistols in the direction of the enemy post.⁴

Out of ammunition, the men snaked their way back towards the ANZAC line. Elart was in the lead, Morris behind him and Freame brought up the rear. They made it through the first strands of wire before Elart got caught on one of them, jangling some old jam tins that had been attached to it. The pre-action arrangement had been that there would be no firing until the party was safely 'home' but, unfortunately, no-one had informed the young sentry who instinctively fired towards the noise.

The round hit Elart through one eye, travelled down his neck and exited through his shoulder, then continued its path through the face and shoulder of Morris.⁴ Freame dragged both soldiers to safety, but sadly for Elart, it was too late. His wound had proven fatal.

The commanding officer read Elart's letter with interest:

Sir, It is my desire to present myself as a defaulter before you. I am a deserter from the Royal Australian Navy. I am known here as Edward Elart but my real name is Harry Hart. My rating was Stoker HMAS "Australia" when I cut the painter at the time when war was least expected. When war broke out I left my job in Portland and went to Sydney with the object of surrendering myself. But when I reached there I thought of the long term of

punishment to be gone through, and the reception a man would get on the ship, so I took advantage of the other outlet for my services to my country, and came as a soldier. It was my intention to remain silent and be "Edward Elart" always. The reason why I do not remain so is the experience of that memorable Sunday and also the attack by the enemy a few mornings ago, when my mates were shot on both sides of me, and when I was also slightly wounded make me realise that the honour of death may now be any mans and I wish to go out with a clean bill. It is for my sister's sake. I know that the penalty for my crime is a severe one and to say the least of it I could lose everything. I have weighed it over in my mind for a few days. But I have also heard that a free pardon has been granted to offenders of my calibre. Perhaps the authorities in their clemency may pardon me and count this as part of my five years service in the Navy (about 8 more years) when we go home again. I am writing this statement so as not to take up your valuable time in talking. My next of kin is Mrs G Turner, 40 Bronte St, East Perth. If she could one morning get a note saying that I could use my name again, it would be the finest present in the world I could make her.

Trusting that I may have the matter put before the authorities so soon as a favourable opportunity presents itself.

I am your obedient servant

*103 Edward Elart
14 Platoon 'D' Coy 1st Battalion⁵*

At the Australian War Memorial, in front of the Hall of Memory where the remains of the Unknown Australian Soldier have been laid to rest, and overlooking the tranquil Pool of Reflection, are stone cloisters overlaid with bronze panels known as the Roll of Honour. On these panels are engraved the names of more than one hundred thousand Australian service men and women who have died in wars. Private Harry Hart, alias Edward Elart, is one of them.

Author's note: An estimated 150 Australian sailors deserted in World War 1 to serve in the ranks of various armies of the British Empire.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 103 Private E Elart
- 2 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 1st Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 3 Stacy, BV; Kinson, FJ; Chedgoy, HV, *The History of the First Battalion A.I.F., 1914-1919*, First Battalion: A.I.F. Association, Sydney, 1931
- 4 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume II, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 5 E Elart/H Hart, letter to the CO 1st Battalion, Gallipoli, 25 May 1915