



Chaplain Alfred Goller. (Photograph courtesy Mr W Connell)

Chaplain Alfred Goller

The insubordinate padre

Soldiers fight wars in many different ways, using a variety of weapons. Some use a rifle or a machine-gun, while many are part of a team such as those operating the large field guns. Others serve as nurses or stretcher-bearers armed with medicine and compassion. But a padre's weapon is faith—faith in his God, faith in the cause for which the soldiers to whom he ministers are fighting, and faith in his fellow man. This is the story of one such 'soldier of the cross'.

Alfred Ernest Goller was born in Bannockburn, Victoria in July 1883. His parents were simple people with strong religious convictions, who had raised their son with the same set of values. Alfred did well at school and continued tertiary studies at Melbourne University. A keen footballer, he was awarded a coveted 'blue' for his skill on the field. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts with Honours and was ordained as a Presbyterian minister in March of 1908. Until the outbreak of war in 1914, he served the church in the Victorian country areas of Birchip and Mia Mia.¹

Australians from all walks of life had flocked to join the newly formed Australian Imperial Force and it was not long before many of them were engaged in the battles on the Gallipoli Peninsula.

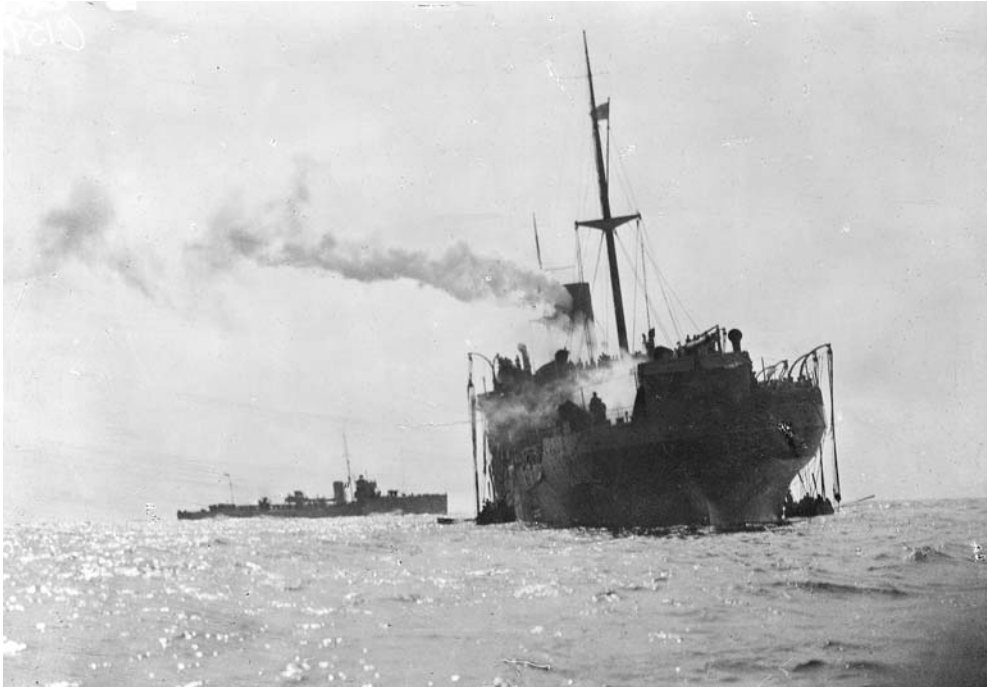
A duty that befell members of the clergy in every city and town across the nation was the delivery of news from the Front. Ministers of all denominations were called upon to deliver the telegrams advising families that a loved one had been killed, wounded or was missing in action.

It was not long before the sight of an approaching clergyman caused people to cringe in fear, lest they be the ones to receive the dreaded piece of paper detailing the death of a husband, a son, a brother or a father.

After years of being welcome in the homes of his parishioners, Alfred Goller tired of being a 'messenger of death' and the fear his presence brought to the local people. Despite the fact that it meant leaving behind a loving family, Goller decided that he would be more useful at the Front.

On 16 January 1917, he enlisted in the AIF and, a month later, Padre Goller climbed the gangplank of the troopship *Ballarat*.² As the ship pulled away from the quay, he bid farewell to his beloved wife and three young children.

The Padre was extremely active during the long voyage. To maintain morale, he organised concerts, sports events and a newspaper to entertain and occupy the sixteen hundred troops.



AWM C01592. *The transport HMAT Ballarat after being torpedoed by a German submarine off the southern English coast. In the background a British destroyer is standing by to take the troops.*

As the *Ballarat* steamed through the English Channel and the troops on board commemorated the second anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, without warning, a German torpedo slammed into the side of the ship.³ There were some 1792 aboard the ship when the torpedo hit, but there was little panic as the Diggers collected their equipment and assembled on the decks. Padre Goller scurried through the lower decks, checking to ensure that no-one had been left behind. Back on the main deck, he moved casually through the ranks, lighting cigarettes and reassuring the troops—he was an inspiration to all.

Within 15 minutes of the torpedo strike, destroyers of the Royal Navy arrived at the scene and pulled alongside the stricken vessel to transfer the troops and crew. The intrepid padre was one of the last to leave and was an observer of the final moments of the *Ballarat*—offering a silent prayer as the ship slowly slipped beneath the icy waters of the channel. He was later commended for his composure and support at the time of the sinking.³

On his arrival in England, Padre Goller was attached to a number of training battalions. He pestered his commanders to send him closer to the Front, for this was where he felt he could do the most good. Finally his persistence was rewarded and, in September 1917, he set sail for France.

Initially he was attached to the 2nd Australian General Hospital, where he witnessed first-hand some of the worst carnage brought about by war—men with horrific wounds, amputated limbs, gassed, blinded and most likely maimed for life. Again he felt that he could do more and pleaded to be attached to a front-line unit. His request was granted and Chaplain Alfred Goller was posted as padre of the 37th Battalion, 10th Brigade.²

The padre's presence produced immediate results. Although he could have exercised his privilege to remain in the transport lines, he chose to be permanently attached to the battalion's medical officer during times of action.⁴ The battalion was in the thick of the fighting, in such places as Ypres, Messines, Mondicourt, Warneton, Marrett Wood and Dernancourt. The dauntless padre was ever-present, scouring the battlefields for wounded—both Allied and enemy.



AWM E00952. Mule transport with the 3rd Division following a 'corduroy' track near Zonnebeke, in the Ypres Sector.



With the two conscription referendums defeated at home, the number of reinforcements was decreasing. The AIF Divisions were continually going into action undermanned, yet pressure was being applied by the British Government for more Australian recruits. Something had to be done to bolster the ailing Divisions. A decision was made to disband some battalions to provide additional

men for the others. The 37th, which had been reduced to little more than company strength, was one of those chosen to suffer this fate.⁵

The Diggers were horrified. 'Why us?' was the cry. A meeting was convened by the men. They were adamant they were staying with the 37th and all agreed that they would carry out every order except the command to 'fall out'. The final parade was scheduled for 10 am. The brigadier assumed his position and gave the order for the men to fall out to their new battalion. The officers, warrant officers and most of the senior non-commissioned officers obeyed the command. One soldier fell out and was applauded by the rank and file for having the courage to stand by his convictions. The soldiers encouraged the remaining sergeants to follow—to save their rank. Padre Goller stood fast. The commanding officer (CO) said, 'You can fall out too, Padre'.

'No Sir', was the reply. 'If ever the men needed a chaplain, they need one now'.⁴

The senior officers tried to persuade the men to carry out the order, but they would not be swayed, so they were left to ponder their fate. A corporal was elected 'CO', parades were held, guards and picquet lines were maintained and battalion administration was conducted as usual. The men were out to prove that, within their old battalion, there was a bigger issue than insubordination—one of honour and commitment. The battalion and all it stood for meant everything to the men.

Padre Goller, always available when they needed him most, was instrumental in maintaining the morale of the protesting Diggers. He often toured the picquet line late at night to bolster their spirits and reinforce the morality of their resolve to stand up for their beliefs.⁴

As a retaliatory measure, the high command cut off the men's rations—but other units in the area readily gave up half of theirs to feed the protesters. Supply units changed the routes of their convoys and arranged for boxes of food to 'fall off' as they passed the 37th's lines. As a contingency, the battalion had a specially trained party ready to raid the nearby light railway at Mont St Quentin.⁴

Days later, the CO visited the rebelling troops and approached the chaplain. 'Well Padre, the men have got their wish.'

With a wisdom that matched the pride of these men, the authorities allowed the 37th to retain its identity and return to the battlefield, its burden made more onerous by its lack of numbers. It is unlikely such an incident would have been allowed to take place in the army of any other country in the world.⁴

A brisk autumn wind was blowing as the CO placed a whistle to his lips and checked his watch. The second hand moved slowly towards the twelve. The shrill blast of the whistle broke the silence and the men surged forward, their mission to breach the reportedly impregnable Hindenburg Line.

As the battalion reached the belts of black barbed wire entanglements, the German machineguns opened fire. The deadly salvos destroyed the front ranks of the 37th. The remainder of the battalion consolidated in a hollow and readied themselves for the next push. To the front, the wounded could be heard moaning. Without hesitation, Padre Goller crawled forward and dragged the injured men back to the safety of the depression.

When the battalion again sortied forward, the padre stumbled across the bodies of three 'A' Company men. As he collected their personal belongings, he paused and offered a silent prayer over each of the bodies. Suddenly, a single shot rang out and the padre fell dead.

The men of the battalion were deeply traumatised. Not only had they lost their padre, but a mate as well. They reflected on the man who had been Alfred Goller. His Christianity was exemplified by his life. Chaplain Alfred Goller was no 'fire and brimstone' preacher, but one who earnestly lived to serve his fellow man and selflessly chose to share the risks taken by the brave Diggers to whom he had ministered.

Sadly, the padre was killed just prior to his scheduled return to Australia—his period of service almost completed. Ironically, not only was it to be the last battle for the gallant padre, but also the final action for the 37th Battalion.²

The admiration of his men can be summed up in the words they placed above his grave:

*Our Padre - Semper Idem
Passed from Death to Life*

Notes

- 1 Notes from the Connell Collection, courtesy the late Bill Connell, Curator, Glenbrook Military Museum
- 2 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, Chaplain A E Goller
- 3 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume IV, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 4 A brief History 37th Battalion, courtesy the late Bill Connell, Interview with the author, 1997
- 5 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume VI, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936