

2Lt Robert Graham, DCM

The soldier of fortune

When Bob Graham presented himself for enlistment in the AIF, the crusty old sergeant manning the desk asked, 'Have you had any military experience, mate?'

'Yeah, a bit', Graham replied.

Robert Louis Graham was born in Canada on 16 April 1876. The son of a superior criminal court judge, he spent much of his vacation time as a youngster among the friendly Indian tribes of central Canada.¹ Young Graham learnt to hunt game, fish, navigate using dead reckoning and drive dog teams. He was comfortable on the water and he learnt to make and paddle bark canoes along the great rivers and skate across frozen lakes.



Sergeant Robert Graham, DCM. (3rd Battalion History)

At the age of 16, a yearning for adventure struck the teenager, inducing him to run off to see the world. He obtained work on a topsail schooner and made his way to Nova Scotia. There he secured a position with the crew of the English barque *J'or de Nel*, which was destined for Liverpool. As he stepped ashore in England, the lad found himself in a new land with only 30 shillings in his pocket.

Liverpool was the headquarters of the well known White Star Line which employed Bob as an apprentice shipwright and sent him to the Harland and Wolf shipyards in Belfast. As part of his apprenticeship, he served on HMS *Fox* and was on board when she participated in the Ashanti uprising in 1896.¹

In order to coax young Bob to return home, his father offered him a position in his office, which the lad accepted, sailing to Canada soon after. In the meantime, war had broken out between the United States and Spain, prompting Bob to change his plans and enlist in Colonel Fredrick Finniston's 20th Kansas Volunteer Regiment, setting sail for the Philippines in the early part of 1898. With the defeat of the Spaniards, Bob returned to the United States in July 1899 and took discharge.¹

Bob did not return home. Instead, he joined the North West Mounted Police and served with 'N' Division until the outbreak of the Boer War in October of that year. Bob wasted no time—he enlisted for service in South Africa and joined Lord Strathcona's Horse. In 1900, elements of the unit were sent for special duty to help suppress the Boxer Rebellion, as part of the Legation Guard in China. Amongst their ranks was Bob Graham.¹

The mission completed, Bob returned to South Africa where he took his discharge from the regiment, then joined the Natal Mounted Police and participated in the expedition to Somaliland, in search of the infamous rebel known as 'The Mad Mullah'.¹

After the expedition returned, Bob sought his discharge and set sail for Canada where his father persuaded him to settle down. He decided to return to school, matriculate and enter university to study medicine. Bob made every effort to please his father, but in April 1905, on reading of trouble in Nicaragua, he abandoned his studies and set off in search of yet more adventure.

In Nicaragua, the rebel General Rey was attempting to overthrow the government and Bob saw a golden opportunity—to run a cargo of Winchester rifles to the rebels. On his return to Galveston for another shipment, Bob became aware he had attracted the attention of the Texas Rangers. He didn't fancy doing time in prison, so he returned to Nicaragua and enlisted with the rebel forces. He was given a commission in the artillery by Rey's Chief of Staff, General Victor Gordon, who was himself a soldier of fortune. Bob's service was to last five months—until the rebels were finally victorious.¹

In the meantime, forces in neighbouring Guatemala determined that a change of government was about due. General Gordon offered his services and took Bob with him, this time as a captain of engineers. The revolution spluttered to a finish seven months later.¹

Bob, still suffering wanderlust and the thirst for adventure, sailed for Australia and then to India where he hoped to join an expedition to Tibet, headed up by Colonel Younghusband. As luck would have it, however, he was struck down by a bout of malaria in Rawalpindi and the expedition left without him. He returned to South Africa where the Zulus were causing trouble, but finally ended up in Stockade Jacobstown. Once the uprising had been subdued, Bob returned to the United States.¹

He then travelled to Alaska, where he drove dog teams for the North American Trading Company. In the summer of 1909, he signed on to a whaler out of Nome, sailing the icy waters of Canada's north. He landed and was paid off in Maine, USA.¹

Bob continued to drift. He visited Buenos Aires, British Honduras, worked on the Texas oil fields and on Arizona's Roosevelt Dam. A revolution broke out in Mexico and again Bob tried his hand as a 'gunrunner'. The United States' authorities were soon on his tail, forcing him to make his way to Tampico, Mexico, where he was commissioned into General Carranza's Army as a colonel of artillery—a term of service that lasted 17 months.¹

In 1911, Graham was again at sea, making his way first to Cape Town, then by tramp steamer to Bordeaux, France. On arrival in the southern French port of

Marseilles, he joined the ranks of the famous French Foreign Legion. Graham was sent from France to Sidi bel Abbis, then on to the outpost village of Ouadda. Life in the Legion was not to Bob's liking, so he deserted, eventually making his way back to civilisation and again under what he termed 'the British flag'.¹

He sailed for Cape Town and then to Australia where, on his arrival in Sydney in August 1914, he learnt of the war with Germany. He wasted no time finding his way to Victoria Barracks and enlisting in the 3rd Battalion AIF.

Among the scars and distinguishing marks noted on his record were: tattoos on his chest, arms, legs and hands; a sabre wound to the right hand; a bullet wound to the left thigh; a spear injury in the right leg and a dagger wound inside the left elbow.²

When the 3rd sailed for Egypt and the ships were closed down for the night, crowds of young soldiers would gather around Bob to listen to his stories of the countries he had visited and of the battles he had fought.³

On 21 April 1915, Bob Graham was promoted to Lance Corporal.² When the ANZAC forces landed at Gallipoli, Graham's value as a soldier was soon apparent. He was seen by the high command as 'a scout of unusual ability'. They saw fit to give him a free hand to carry out many and varied jobs which were sensitive to say the least. He was regarded as the battalion's intelligence expert and his powers of observation and attention to detail became legendary.

In those first days, he would spend hours on end perched in his vantage-point on Bolton's Ridge from where he could look across the gully known as the Valley of Despair. With the aid of his telescope, he could clearly see the Turkish lines and their support areas. At times he knew of the visit of high-ranking Turkish and German officers before the Turkish Headquarters did.¹

For his work in the early stages of the Gallipoli campaign, Bob Graham was Mentioned in Despatches.⁴

His work was not without incident and he was wounded on 27 April—seriously enough to retire him from the battalion for three weeks. On his return he was promoted to corporal.²

It was during the August attack on Lone Pine that the man, termed the 'fighting machine', showed his true prowess. It seemed to those around him that Bob was everywhere at once during the battle.³ One minute he was seen attacking Turks with his bayonet, next he was observed with a bomb in each hand, lighting them from the cigar clenched between his teeth and throwing them into the enemy trenches. In a battle—where to show one's head risked certain death—he had the uncanny sense to know when to stand up, take aim, fire, and return to the safety of the trench. He did, however, suffer a minor wound, although, following treatment was fit to return to duty the same night.



AWM G01126. Australian troops relax inside a captured Turkish trench at Lone Pine. The effect of our howitzer shells on the heavy head cover of pine logs—the breaking through of which in taking Lone Pine was the great difficulty—is shown.

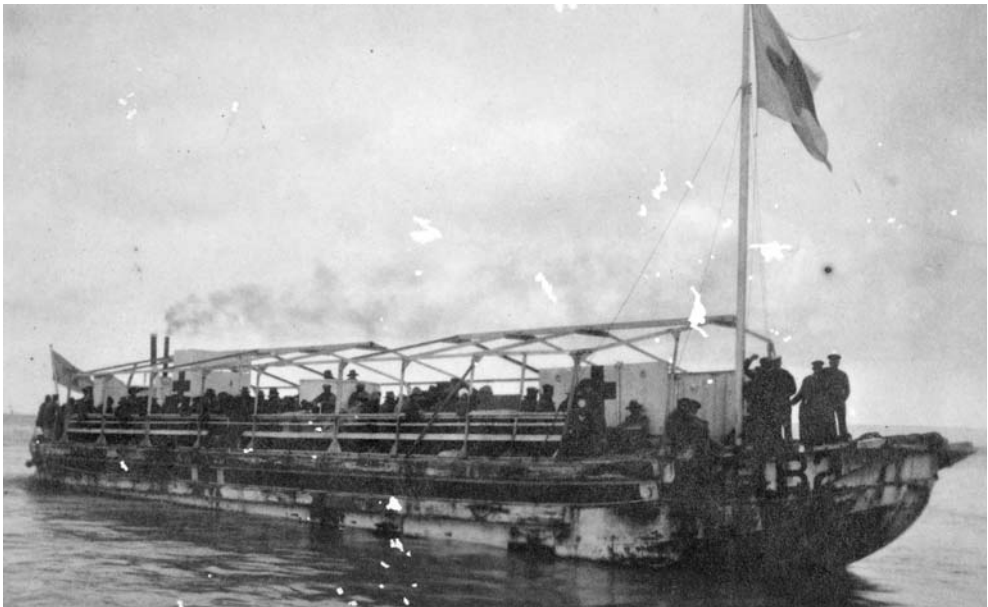
For his actions at Lone Pine, he was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. Part of the citation reads: ‘. . . In the Lone Pine trenches he displayed great bravery and energy in the constant bomb fighting’. The French were so impressed by Bob’s actions that they awarded him the coveted *Medaille Militaire*.⁴

He was promoted sergeant on 30 October 1915.

One day, in the closing stages of the Gallipoli campaign, Graham awoke in his observation post and was surprised to see a series of flags heading to the front of the Lone Pine position. Scanning the Turkish lines, he noted a large number of troops in full battle order, massing to attack. Headquarters was notified and the Diggers quickly trained every available machine-gun on the approaching enemy.¹ As the pre-attack Turkish artillery fire lifted, the ANZAC machine-guns opened up, taking out the first wave of attacking troops. The Turks immediately had second thoughts about continuing the assault.

In mid-December, Bob was summoned to 1st Brigade Headquarters. While making his way to the beach, however, a sniper found him in his sight and squeezed the trigger of his Mauser. Sergeant Graham swore and fell to his knees as he felt the burning pain of the bullet wound to his stomach. He required specialist treatment so was transported to the hospital ship *Laufranc*, which lay off offshore.²

Bob recovered from his wound and rejoined the battalion after its evacuation from ANZAC. On 28 March 1916, the 3rd Battalion—now reinforced and



AWM P00591.002. Gallipoli, 1915. Hospital barge carrying sick and wounded from shore to ship.

re-equipped—disembarked at Marseilles, en route to the Western Front and the war against the mighty German war machine.³

Bob soon settled into life on the Front. He became renowned for his lone night-time sorties towards the enemy trenches. In recognition of these scouting exploits he was Mentioned in Despatches a second time.⁴ On 3 July 1916, his luck ran out when he took a bullet in the left upper arm, shattering his humerus.² He was evacuated to England, but the doctors were certain that the wound spelt the end of Graham's fighting days—obviously the doctors didn't know Bob Graham very well.

During his time in England, Bob met 24-year-old Irene Rhodes whom he married in September 1918.⁵ While he was still in England, Robert Graham Junior was born. The baby captured the old soldier's heart and he was often seen strolling through London, proudly showing off his son.

The German forces were now in headlong retreat. Bob could see the writing on the wall as he made every effort to be certified fit for combat. However, the war ended and the armistice dashed his resolve to return to battle.

Not long after, Bob heard of a force being raised to fight in Russia. Irene pleaded with him not to go, but he needed the stimulation that only combat could provide. He volunteered and was commissioned as a second lieutenant. Russia was a dirty and disorderly action, but Graham was glad to be there. He was back doing what he did best, fighting.

One day, he was set upon and captured by a Red Russian patrol. He was sentenced by a military court to be shot, but as he was being returned to his cell after the sentencing, he took his guard by surprise and killed him with his bare hands, before making good his escape to his own lines.¹ For his actions in Russia, he is reputed to have been awarded the Russian Order of St John Second Class and a Mention in Despatches.⁶

Graham returned to England where waiting on the dock to greet him was Irene holding baby Robert. On 14 June 1919, the troopship *Bremen* departed England with a very different cargo—the English and French wives and children of the returning Diggers, sailing to Australia to start a new life. Among the passengers was the Graham family.²

Bob's life as a husband and father in the post-war years presented new and difficult challenges. It wasn't an easy time for the old soldier who had spent all his adult life in one battle or another. It is not surprising that, in 1920, he was fined five pounds for fighting in a Sydney pub.

In 1921, he 'shed' some 20 years from his age and enlisted in the 'first 1000' of the fledgling RAAF. He soon found, however, that air force life was not to his liking, and he was discharged as 'likely not to become an efficient airman'.⁷

In the following years he worked on the Cordeaux Dam in southern New South Wales, during which time the Graham family increased to six, with the addition of three more children, David, Teresa and Norman.



In 1939, Australia was again at war and Bob Graham, now 63, was living in the Sydney suburb of South Hurstville. He wrote to the Army Records Office stating that his record of service had been destroyed in a bush fire the year before. He asked if he could obtain another copy, as 'now that we are in another war, our country may call on my services again...'⁸

For Bob, to stay behind in a time of war was inconceivable, so giving his age as 43, he enlisted in the 2nd AIF on 13 September 1940. During training, his actual age was discovered and he was subsequently discharged.⁹

In March of 1941, young Robert Jnr sat at the dining room table and, directly addressing his father, he stated, 'Dad, I enlisted today'. The old soldier could do little but shake his son's hand and tell him how proud he was. Young Robert was posted to the 2nd/18th Battalion and sailed to Malaya.¹⁰

On 20 December 1941, Bob Graham once more attempted to enlist. Again—after falsifying his age as 43—he was accepted into the militia and was assigned to the 2nd Garrison Battalion. He found that he was not suited to life as a militiaman and deserted. He was struck off the unit's strength in February 1942, but his records indicate that he was not finally discharged until 1946.¹¹

As the war raged to the north of Australia, the Grahams followed the course of the Japanese thrust down through Malaya and towards Singapore. Robert's battalion was in the thick of the fighting and, by all reports, giving a good account of itself.

In mid-February, the Graham family received the inconceivable news that Singapore had fallen and that the Australian 8th Division had been defeated. Was Robert alive? Was he dead? Was he a prisoner? These questions distressed and haunted the family members as they waited for news. But they would have to wait more than three and a half years to learn the fate of their beloved son and brother.

In 1945, victory over the Japanese was announced and, amid all the celebrations, the Grahams waited anxiously for news of Robert. It arrived in October of that year. Robert was dead. He had been a prisoner in Borneo's infamous Sandakan POW Camp where he had been tortured, starved and beaten and then had been forced onto one of the death marches. On 5 June 1945, racked by the effect of the brutal treatment and disease, he could march no more. It is not clear if he simply died by the roadside or was killed where he lay by a Japanese guard.

The family noticed that Bob was never the same after the news of his son's death. He was often withdrawn and preoccupied by thoughts and mental pictures of the atrocities that his son had been forced to endure. Bob believed that he had always fought a good fight against a fair and honourable enemy. This had been an ignoble way for his son to die.

Robert Louis Graham, DCM, died on 22 March 1958 aged 82.

Author's note: Bob Graham was a true adventurer and very much a person of mystery. In researching the man, it was apparent he used various middle names, his birth date changed many times and he also claimed the award of decorations not listed in his official records. The main source of this story was an article which appeared in a 1936 edition of the New South Wales Returned and Services League's journal, 'Reveille'. The other primary source was Graham's record of service.

Today Bob Graham lies at peace in Sydney's Woronora Cemetery. His gravestone commemorates his son and his wife Irene who joined him in 1979.

Notes

- 1 'Graham of the Third', *Reveille*, 1 June 1936
- 2 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, Second Lieutenant R L Graham
- 3 Wren E, *Randwick to Hargicourt : History of the 3rd. Battalion, A.I.F.*, McDonald, Sydney, 1935
- 4 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War. (The citation appears in the AWM file but the award does not appear to have been made. Bob did use the post nominal MM on his enlistment documentation in WW2—the award of the Medaille Militaire does not warrant the use of these post nominals.)
- 5 Certificate of Marriage
- 6 Not found in official records but listed on WW2 records of service documents
- 7 RAAF Records, *The First 1000*, Melbourne, Victoria
- 8 R Graham, letter to Australian Army Records Department, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, 15 December 1939
- 9 National Archives of Australia: WW2 Service Records, Robbe Raymond Graham
- 10 National Archives of Australia: WW2 Service Records, NX71570 Private RJ Graham
- 11 National Archives of Australia: WW2 Service Records, N387670 Private RN Graham

In peace, sons bury fathers, but war violates the order of nature and fathers bury sons.

Heroditus, Greek historian c. 484-425 BC