

Private Edwin Hoare

Sorry mother

Spurred on by a crowd of bystanders, the two soldiers exchanged a flurry of blows. A sergeant forced his way into the inner circle. 'Righto, break it up, break it up!' he shouted. As the crowd dispersed, the sergeant held the men at arm's length.

'Why don't you save your fight for the Germans, you pommy git?' snarled one of the offenders.

'What the hell would you know about fighting Germans?' the young Englishman retorted.

Edwin Cooper Hoare was British, born and bred. He worked hard as a fruit farmer to help support his parents.¹ At the end of a hard day's work, the young lad often wandered through the fields that surrounded his home in Hastings. He would try to imagine the famous battle that had been fought more than eight hundred years ago on the very ground where he now sat.

It was 1914 and the papers were full of the news of the German offensive across Europe. Britain had issued Germany with a stern warning to withdraw or suffer the consequences. The ultimatum went unheeded and the British Government had no choice but to declare war on the defiant Huns.

Young Hoare stood red-faced while his proud mother fussed over him as she adjusted his uniform and straightened his tunic. As he boarded the train following an emotional farewell, he promised his parents he would take good care of himself and return safely.

The Rifle Brigade had a long and distinguished history and now 17-year-old Edwin was part of it.¹ The rigours of military life suited the boy and he thrived on the camaraderie of working and training with men of all trades and professions.



The Western Front was a hell beyond the comprehension of sane men. The soldiers of the British Army were being mowed down in their thousands, while generals with a hunt-club mentality continued to pit flesh and blood against machine-guns and artillery.

Young Edwin gave a good account of himself in those dark days of early 1915. Week in and week out, he took his turn in the firing line or lumbered under the weight of stores and ammunition on the late night carrying parties.

Unfortunately, the hardships of life in the trenches soon took their toll on the teenager. Having to contend with bitter cold, lack of sleep, poor rations and disease-carrying rats was more than Edwin's young body could endure. He was evacuated to hospital suffering pneumonia, fatigue and exhaustion.

After treatment at the base hospital in England, Edwin was forced to face a medical board to assess his fitness to remain in the army. The outcome was devastating for the young soldier. To be discharged from the army as medically unfit, and denied the opportunity to continue to serve his country at its time of greatest need were consequences the lad had not anticipated.

On Edwin's return home following his discharge, his beloved mother met him as he stepped off the train. While Mrs Hoare was grateful to have her son home safe and sound, she made every effort to reassure him that he should shoulder no guilt. He had served England to the best of his ability and done all that could be expected of him.

Edwin tried to go back to his old life, but was unable to settle. Any time he ventured into the local village, the ladies would talk in hushed tones as he passed or simply turn their backs on him rather than greet him. He was treated no differently to the men who refused to go to war. He felt ostracised and unwelcome. Edwin pondered long and hard on what to do and decided that it would be better if he moved elsewhere. His mother understood his dilemma and suggested that migration to Australia and a warmer climate might be a sensible option.

Edwin took his mother's advice and secured passage on a tramp steamer. However, on his arrival down under, he found the attitude in Melbourne no different to that in England. Like any young man not wearing uniform, no matter what the reason, he was scorned and ridiculed. Often in the pubs, Edwin overheard men with no military service discussing their 'knowledge' of the war.

'That's not what it's like in battle', Edwin would interject.

All too often Edwin heard the sarcastic reply, 'And what would you know about it, young fella?'

'Cause I was there, at the Front', Edwin would respond angrily.

'Yeah and pigs might fly.'

Edwin was not backward in coming forward, contradicting these barfly experts, often leading to a bar-room brawl. Sometimes Edwin held his own, but more often than not, he came off second-best, spending the following few days nursing the cuts and bruises that covered his face and body.

Fearing that one of his tormentors could cause him real harm, Edwin purchased a small nickel-plated revolver for his own protection.² the young man also decided that the only way to silence his critics was to re-enlist in the military.

'You're a little on the scrawny side, aren't you, lad?' commented the recruiting officer.

'I've served before, Sir. Over a year in the British Army. In the Rifle Brigade, Sir.'¹



Edwin Hoare, now aged 19, was found to be fit to serve and was soon back in uniform. He was sent to the Royal Park Training Depot, in central Melbourne.¹

However, trouble seemed to follow the young recruit and he became moody and very much a loner. His platoon sergeant noticed that the lad never seemed to be happy and carried out his work with an almost perfunctory attitude.³

The other soldiers constantly taunted him about what they regarded as the poor performance of the British Tommies and the pathetic leadership of the British generals. Edwin would retaliate with his fists, but the lad was no match for the more powerfully built local recruits. Invariably following these fracas he was forced to seek treatment at the Regimental Aid Post.

‘By God lad, you’re a glutton for punishment’, the medical officer commented, as he bandaged the soldier’s wrist. ‘Why don’t you just ignore them?’

‘I’m no-one’s fool, Sir. I’m as good as any of them’, Edwin protested.

The taunting continued and Edwin became more and more withdrawn. His platoon sergeant spoke to him on a number of occasions, but the lad was reluctant to discuss his problems.

Ultimately, it all became too much. One day, when Edwin's morale had reached an all-time low, he sat in his tent and wrote two letters, which he placed in separate envelopes. The first he addressed to his mother, the other envelope he left blank.

He reached into his kit bag and took out a small cloth bundle, which he placed into the pocket of his tunic. He then secured the letters in his uniform pocket and hurried off to the tent that served as the Presbyterian chapel.³

Edwin cut a pathetic and lonely figure as he sat at the table, engrossed in thoughts of his home and parents in faraway England. Slowly and deliberately he withdrew the cloth bundle from his pocket, revealing its contents—the revolver he earlier had bought earlier and smuggled into camp. He placed the muzzle of the weapon against his right temple, pulled back the hammer and squeezed the trigger.

At the Board of Inquiry, the letters that Edwin had written on the day of his death came to light and were presented as evidence.⁴ The contents of these brief notes provided some insight into the character of Edwin Hoare and his state of mind when he chose to take his own life.

They read the first letter—meant for the authorities:

I wish to mention that I am an Englishman and that I had eighteen months service in the British Army (including three months on active service in France, some time before the first Australians were landed there).

Will the authorities have the courtesy to forward this letter to the address given on the envelope? I should be much obliged if a copy of this letter could be taken and sent by a separate mail-boat to avoid danger of the contents of the letter being lost owing to submarines.

It is a very small favour to ask and perhaps it will be complied with. It will be about the only favour that the Military has ever done me in return for my small services.

(Signed) E.C. Hoare⁵

Printed on the back of the envelope was the following:

N.B. Do what you like with the revolver and ammunition, but don't send them home to England on any account. The police are welcome to both.

(Signed) E. Hoare

The other letter was addressed to Edwin's mother:

Dear Mother

I know that this letter will come as a great shock to you all. I have been unhappy for some time. The fact is that I am physically weak, but I have not learned to hold my tongue and do nothing when I hear my country or myself being abused. It is a great mistake to possess more courage than can be backed up by one's physical powers. Unfortunately too, I have a strained hand and shall not be able to do any fighting for at least a fortnight, and there is nothing that worries me more than being thought a coward.

To leave that subject. You know I have always been very self-conscious and that makes life a misery for one. I am determined to end my life at last. I wish I could see you again before I die. I know I have behaved badly to you sometimes; but my unfortunate temperament was a cause of it. I have no doubt at all that you forgive me. Please don't you or father worry over me, whatever you do.

I shall have peace at last. My love to you and father and Kathleen. May God bless you all.

Your affectionate son

Edwin

P.S. I would have sent this note privately by post, instead of leaving it in my pocket; but I wanted a copy of it to be made and one sent by this mail and one by next one so that if one is lost owing to submarines you will get the other.

I sold that portmanteau and my civilian clothes a few weeks ago. They fetched one pound, which I meant to send on to father but I forgot and spent most of it.⁶

Private Edwin Cooper Hoare was laid to rest in Melbourne's Springvale Cemetery.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, V60642 Private EC Hoare
- 2 Captain BD Fethers AAMC, witness statement to Board of Enquiry, Royal Park, Melbourne, 12 March 1917
- 3 Sergeant RL Hall, witness statement to Board of Enquiry, Royal Park, Melbourne, 12 March 1917
- 4 Board of Inquiry into death of Private E C Hoare, Royal Park, Melbourne, 12 March 1917
- 5 Edwin Hoare, suicide note to the coroner, 9 March 1917
- 6 Edwin Hoare, suicide note to his mother, 9 March 1917