

Private Noble Stephenson

Dead or alive?

A mother sat in the gloom of the parlour, amid the stale air and behind drawn blinds. The only sound was the creak of the rocking chair as she moved back and forth. Tears trickled down her cheeks as she clutched a framed photo of a young soldier tightly to her chest.

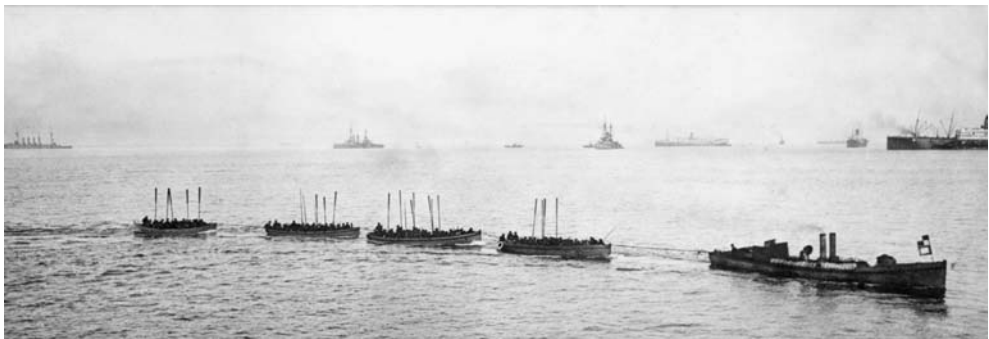
A young 18-year-old coal miner read the headlines of the *Lithgow Mercury*. **'WE ARE AT WAR'** it said, in big, bold print.

Noble Stephenson had been a member of the local militia unit for the past six months and he knew exactly what those words meant.¹ He felt sure that he would be called upon to do his bit. Stephenson was an intelligent young lad; in addition to his militia service, he was studying coal mining, survey and mechanical drawing at night school.

Noble's unit was mobilised to guard the Lithgow Small Arms Factory.² As a producer of weapons for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), this facility was vital to the war effort, and was considered a prime target for enemy saboteurs, whom the local population was sure lurked in every shadow.

Noble wanted to do more than be a factory 'watchman'; he was eager to enlist in the AIF and take part in a real war. On 13 October 1914, clutching the signed letter of consent from his parents tightly in his hand, he swore his oath to serve King and country.

As the lad held his mother in his arms, he whispered, 'Don't worry Ma, I'll be all right'. With that he clutched the rail and boarded the train as it moved down the platform, waving from the step until the station and his mother were out of sight.



AWM P01287.001. 25 April 1915. Four boats, loaded with Australians, being towed by a steam-pinnace to North Beach, Gallipoli Peninsula. In the background are other troop transports and warships.

Late in the afternoon of 25 April 1915, a landing boat approached the thin ribbon of beach at ANZAC Cove, the air alive with the whistle of bullets and the rumble of explosions. As the boat nudged the shore, the sergeant screamed, 'Go! Go! Go!' Stephenson wasted no time clambering over the side into the waist-deep water, then running to the shelter of the cliffs. He could not help but notice the bodies littering the sand. 'They're not moving. They must be dead', he thought to himself as the reality of the situation sank in.

Over the next few days, the ANZACs fought for their lives. They gained very little ground and knew that, if any part of their line fell, the Turks would be on the beach in minutes and the campaign lost.

On 29 April, the 13th Battalion held its position in a depression known as Shrapnel Gully.³ Stephenson was spotting for his mate as they engaged a Turkish rifleman. Peering through the gap in the sandbags, Stephenson turned to his companion and said, 'You got him, mate!' Suddenly, a rifle shot rang out and Stephenson's body was flung against the back of the trench. A Turkish sniper had noticed the movement behind the sandbags and had fired at the young ANZAC. The Mauser round had fractured, but not penetrated, Stephenson's skull.⁴

Private Scobie forced his shell dressing into his mate's wound. 'Stretcher-bearer! Stretcher-bearer!' he called frantically. 'You'll be right, mate. You'll be right', he tried to reassure the unconscious Stephenson as he lay on the floor of the trench. The young Digger's body suddenly went limp and his head slumped to one side. Scobie looked down at the blood-stained face and knew his mate was dead.¹

He watched through tear-filled eyes as Stephenson's body was carried away on the stretcher. Scobie turned to another Digger and explained, 'I used to work for his Dad. We've been mates for years'.⁵



Little is known of the fate of Noble Stephenson's body after it was moved from the trench. His parents received no official notification of his death or the wounds he had received. In fact, the only word they had received from their son was a quickly scrawled card dated 18 April.

In July 1915, another Lithgow family, the Hatches, received a letter dated 6 June, from their son, Clem, who was also in the 13th Battalion. He wrote that he had been slightly wounded and on returning to the front had been told that Noble Stephenson had been wounded in the head and evacuated.⁶

Anthony Stephenson, Noble's father, was furious. Why hadn't his parents been informed that their son was wounded? So many questions were going through his mind. How serious was his condition? Where was he now? He sought the assistance of the editor of the *Lithgow Mercury* to draft a letter to their local Member of Parliament, seeking information on young Noble.⁷

The Army searched their records for Stephenson's whereabouts. They immediately sent a telegram to the family stating that the soldier was 'wounded and missing'. The Red Cross also launched an investigation. Private Scobie was interviewed and stated that Stephenson died in his arms.⁵ Another Lithgow soldier came forward and said that Corporal Hugh Patterson of the 13th Battalion received a letter that had been written for Stephenson in an Egyptian hospital saying he was 'slowly recovering'.⁸

Private Mahon of C Company, 13th Battalion, stated that he had often seen Stephenson in the Casualty Clearing Station after he had been wounded, although the latter had remained unconscious.

With the evacuation of Gallipoli in December 1915, the ANZAC forces finally had time to take stock of the overall situation. Courts of Inquiry were conducted for all missing personnel. The court convened on 28 April 1916 found that 1122 Private Noble Stephenson, 13th Battalion AIF, was killed in action on 29 April 1915.⁹

Members of the Stephenson family were devastated, as they had lived in hope that the rumours were true and that their son was alive and lying in a hospital bed somewhere overseas. When she received a cheque for £52—the government compensation for the loss of her son¹—Margaret Stephenson resigned herself to the fact that her boy was gone.

What the family could not come to terms with was that they could not obtain any of Noble's personal belongings. They had been promised faithfully that his effects would be forwarded as soon as possible, on the next available passage, but they waited in vain.²



IDENTIFICATION WANTED.

The military authorities are desirous of identifying the man whose photograph appears above, and they will be glad if the next-of-kin will, on seeing it, immediately communicate with the officer-in-charge, Base Records, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne, at the same time mentioning "B.R. 49935."

On Saturday 28 April 1917, Anthony Stephenson answered a constant banging at his front door. His neighbour held out a copy of the *Sydney Telegraph*. 'It's Noble! It's Noble!' the neighbour blustered as he pointed to the paper. The photo in the newspaper was reported to be that of a soldier who was suffering memory loss. The caption said, '**IDENTIFICATION WANTED**'. As he stared at the photo, Stephenson's eyes filled with tears. 'It's him', he sobbed.³



IDENTIFICATION WANTED.

Anthony Stephenson immediately contacted Army Headquarters in Melbourne. He stated that he, other family members and friends were certain that the *Telegraph* photo of the soldier was his son Noble. Stephenson's father could not wait for an answer by mail and travelled the three-day journey to Melbourne by train.¹⁰ The major in charge of the case was sceptical as he compared the studio portrait of the man's son with the photo printed in the newspaper. The similarity was, to say the least, very vague.

Army Headquarters stated that another party had apparently claimed that it also knew the identity of the soldier. The licensee of the Steyne Hotel on Sydney's Manly Beach was sure that the photograph was that of one Harry Wright, who had worked at the hotel until his enlistment in February 1915.¹¹

The Stephensons were adamant that the two photos were of the same man, their son, and that he was alive but not in his right mind. A series of letters was exchanged between them and Army Headquarters and the bitter contention as to Noble's fate was to continue for months to come.

In the meantime, Anthony Stephenson launched his own investigation. He travelled to Manly and spoke to the licensee and employees of the hotel. They stated that it was the first that they had heard of any inquiry. Anthony Stephenson was furious. 'How could this be?' he uttered angrily.

Base Headquarters assured him that the Military Police had interviewed hotel staff and had submitted a report pertaining to the interview, which, in fact, named the man in the photograph as Wright.¹²

The events of the past two years were having a dreadful effect on the lives and health of Margaret and Anthony Stephenson.¹³ Margaret had stopped going out and family friends had commented on how the couple had aged in such a short space of time. Noble's parents were sure that there had been some sort of cover-up and that they were not being told the whole story. They believed that it was now up to them to learn the truth about what had happened to their son.

Many a Lithgow lad was still serving in the 13th and their letters from home were filled with the Stephensons' plight. One soldier remembered Noble Stephenson occupying the hospital bed next to him. He said that he did recover, eventually, from the wounds but he was 'a bit silly' afterwards. He was not surprised when Noble was taken away for further treatment—reportedly to an institute for the insane.¹⁴

The most disturbing information came in October 1917, when a Corporal Abbott wrote to the Stephensons. In the letter, he stated that he knew their son quite well as he had served in the 13th Battalion as a sergeant. He remembered seeing Noble in a hospital in England in February of that year. He said that a bomb had gone off in front of the lad's face, which had knocked out his top teeth. He also said that, judging from the number of wound stripes on the soldier's left sleeve, he had been injured several times before. Anthony Stephenson was bewildered. 'How could they let his son return to combat in that state of mind?' he questioned.

Finally, the Base Records Office admitted that the soldier who had appeared in the newspaper thought that his name was Wright and, as he couldn't remember the identity of his unit, they assigned him to the 1st Battalion.¹⁵

In a final desperate letter, the Stephensons pleaded to have this soldier, who they believed to be their son, sent home. They were sure that, with the love and care that only a family could provide, they could restore his memory and nurse him back to health.



Private Harry Wright was seriously wounded on 3 May 1917. His wounds were severe enough to warrant his return to Australia in January 1918.¹⁵ The Stephensons were notified that he would arrive and disembark in Sydney and, finally, the matter would be settled. As they waited anxiously at the base of the gangplank, an officer led a soldier towards the waiting couple. 'Is this your son, Mrs Stephenson?' he asked.

She looked deep into the soldier's eyes, then turned to the officer, shook her head and said, 'No, it isn't'.

Author's note: After the war, in cemeteries all over Europe, simple headstones were erected above graves in which were interred the remains of Australian soldiers who could not be identified. Etched in the headstones were the words 'An Australian Soldier of the Great War: Known Unto God'. The AIF was second to none in the care and accountability of its soldiers but the system was not perfect. Did Private Noble Stephenson die at Gallipoli or at a later time in a hospital? We will never know. Today, Noble Stephenson is one of 4221 names commemorated on Gallipoli's Lone Pine Memorial, which honours the Australian soldiers who gave their lives at ANZAC but who have no known grave.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 1122 Private Noble Stephenson
- 2 Historical notes from the Connell Collection, courtesy the late Mr W Connell
- 3 White, TA, *The History of the Thirteenth Battalion, A.I.F.*, Tyrrells, Sydney, 1924
- 4 614 Private W Holland, 13th Battalion AIF, letter to Red Cross
- 5 989 Private J Scobie, 13th Battalion AIF, interview with Red Cross
- 6 Anthony Stephenson, letter to Department of Defence, Melbourne, 2 August 1915
- 7 Anthony Stephenson assisted by the editor of the *Lithgow Mercury*, letter to E S Carr MP, Lithgow, 16 July 1915
- 8 614 Private W. Holland, 13th Battalion AIF, Witness Statement to Court of Inquiry, Serapeum, Egypt, 6,8 and 28 April 1916
- 9 Findings of Court of Inquiry , Serapeum, Egypt, 6,8 and 28 April 1916
- 10 *Daily Telegraph*, Sydney, 28 April 1917
- 11 Army Headquarters, Melbourne, letter to Anthony Stephenson, 23 May 1917
- 12 Department of Defence, Melbourne, letter to Anthony Stephenson, 12 June 1917
- 13 Anthony Stephenson, letter to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, 19 May 1917
- 14 Anthony Stephenson, letter to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, 29 October 1917
- 15 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 270 Private H Wright