

Gunner William Vandertak

A fight for a belief

He was a proud soldier, with a proud name. He joined the AIF to fight for his country for what he believed to be a just and rightful cause.

William Vandertak was 22 years old when he enlisted in the AIF, following the outbreak of the Great War. A labourer from Wagga Wagga, Vandertak was assigned to the 13th Battalion of the 4th Brigade.¹ He embarked for Egypt in late December of 1914, disembarking at the Mena camp, where the 13th would prepare for the assault on the Gallipoli Peninsula.²



Gunner William Vandertak (Family collection)

Amid the noise and mayhem of the landing, the men of the 13th scrambled ashore and ran the gauntlet of the hail of Turkish bullets and bombs directed at the invaders. The battalion had landed at ANZAC Cove on the afternoon of 25 April 1915, and the Diggers soon realised that survival depended on their being

able to negotiate their way to the relative safety of the cliffs, without joining the growing number of casualties that littered the beach.

After the Diggers had settled in for their first night in the trenches, the Turks launched a massive attack. William Vandertak and his mates were forced to defend their positions, carefully choosing targets and taking them out with surgical precision. A hissing noise drew his attention to an object about the size of a cricket ball that had landed on the floor of the trench. The burning fuse alerted those nearby that the object was about to explode, prompting a loud cry of, 'Bomb! Bomb!' Vandertak dived for cover, but the exploding device was close enough to shower his right thigh and arm with red-hot shrapnel.¹

Vandertak refused help and, under the constant threat of sniper fire, made his own way to the first aid station on the beach. His wounds were serious enough to warrant not only his evacuation from the Peninsula but necessitated his being sent for specialist treatment in England.¹ It would be four months before he was deemed fit enough to return to Gallipoli and rejoin the battalion.

With the evacuation of Gallipoli in December 1915, the battalion returned to Egypt where the AIF was being expanded and reorganised. The 13th was split to provide experienced reinforcements for other units. A call went out for men to join the artillery, and Private Vandertak was one of those who volunteered to change corps. He was a good soldier who worked hard to master his new trade, and, on 15 April 1916, Vandertak was rewarded for his diligence with a promotion from gunner to bombardier.¹

Orders were received to embark for France and in August 1916—for reasons of his own—Vandertak asked to revert to the rank of gunner. He had his first brush with authority in March 1917, when he overstayed his leave by 12 hours and received a penalty of five days' field punishment.¹

The gunners have a fierce pride in both themselves and the guns they serve but artillery is a prime target on the battlefield. In July 1917, Gunner Vandertak was tasked to lead a small group of Diggers on an extremely dangerous patrol. Departing just after last light, it was midnight before they re-entered the safety of their battery position carrying two wounded. Exhausted, Vandertak approached the command post to make his patrol report. When he entered, he could not believe his eyes. An Australian officer was toasting the Kaiser's health. The usually quiet Vandertak was overcome by a fit of rage and disgust. He stormed towards his superior and angrily tore off the offending officer's insignia of rank.³

Gunner Vandertak was placed under arrest and detailed to face a General Court Martial on the following charges: *Whilst on active service striking a superior officer, Drunkenness and Using insubordinate language to a superior officer.* Vandertak was resolute in his belief that he was innocent and, when asked to plead, he looked his commanding officer in the eye and responded, 'Not guilty'.

Witnesses were called, the evidence presented, and, finally, the verdict was handed down. *Guilty as charged on the first charge, Not guilty on the second charge and Guilty as charged on the third charge.*⁴

Vandertak was dumbfounded as the sentence was read out—five years' incarceration in a military prison.¹ As the door of his cell in No 2 Military Prison was slammed shut behind him, Vandertak remained adamant that he was innocent and that he had been unjustly accused of crimes he did not commit. But how could he prove it?

He appealed against the severity of the charges and, when his case was reviewed, the sentence was commuted to two years' hard labour. Vandertak was determined to clear his name—something he knew he would find extremely difficult to achieve in prison. He decided his only option was to escape. On 3 November 1917, he put his plan into action. As he was climbing the prison wall, however, he was seen by a patrolling guard, who immediately drew his revolver and fired. Vandertak fell to the ground with a bullet in his chest.¹

He was admitted to the general hospital at Rouen in a serious condition and ultimately sent to England for review by a specialist.¹ He remained in England, under guard, for the next four months. Vandertak wrote to the authorities asking for a remission of his sentence, but because of his escape attempt, he was unsuccessful. It was resolved to return him to Australia to serve the remainder of his sentence. On 16 March 1918, he climbed the gangway of the troopship *Kanowna*, not as a returning hero, but as a prisoner under escort.¹

Following his arrival in Sydney on 24 May, it is believed—although it is not recorded in his file—that Gunner Vandertak was placed in the cold, damp cells of Darlinghurst Gaol, to await his fate.

A series of letters containing repeated requests for a retrial and a remission of Vandertak's sentence was exchanged between Australia and AIF Headquarters, London. In the meantime, the after-effects of the injury sustained from the military policeman's bullet caused Vandertak's health to deteriorate. It was decided to dishonourably discharge him from the AIF as medically unfit.¹

When he stepped from the train at the Wagga railway station, there were no bands, no speeches, and no backslapping. As he walked towards his mother's outstretched arms, he glanced at the sign hanging above the station and shook his head—it read 'Welcome Home'.

Vandertak was still hell-bent on clearing his name. Soon after his return, he received a certificate through the mail, accompanied by a *Return from Active Service* badge. It detailed his name, number, unit and the words: *Served with honour and was disabled in the Great War. Honourably discharged on 7th September 1918.* It was signed by King George V. In Vandertak's mind, finally justice had prevailed and he had received what he understood to be a King's



Vandertak at Wagga Railway Station with mother and sister. (Family collection)

Pardon.⁵ Unfortunately, this was not the case, and he soon realised that another battle was just beginning.⁶

In 1919, Vandertak made inquiries about applying for a medical pension. The authorities stated that the wounds which now made him no longer suitable for the army, could not be attributed to active service.¹

On 27 March 1922, Vandertak questioned why other veterans had received their service medals while he had not. A board sat and considered Vandertak's request, but, as he had been discharged dishonourably, he was refused any entitlement to his medals. Once again he took up the fight, his only evidence to support his case being the certificate signed by the King; but once more his request for his medals was denied.⁷

Disheartened and beaten, Vandertak turned his back on society. He never attended an ANZAC Day activity or spoke to his family about his war service. He sent his children to a Catholic school, even though they were not of that faith, so they did not have to sing the National Anthem or salute the Union Jack, as was the practice in the government school.³ Often around ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day, Vandertak's children would ask why their schoolmates had their fathers' war medals to wear, but not them. He could not find it in his heart to answer.⁸

Refusing to give up, Vandertak carried on the fight to clear his name until the day he died in December 1938. His wife, Lizzie, then took up the challenge, not only to vindicate his name, but also to obtain the pension that she felt her family deserved. She had some success when, in 1940, the authorities recognised that the injuries which had contributed to her husband's death were war related and she was awarded a small fortnightly payment. She continued her struggle well into the sixties. She applied for a War Service Home but was rejected—based on the assertion that her husband had been dishonourably discharged.¹



Honourable Discharge Certificate that caused confusion. (Family collection)

With the passing of Lizzie Vandertak, her daughter, Iris, continued the fight and started to dig a little deeper. She discovered that what the family had thought to be a King's Pardon was, in fact, a certificate issued to all soldiers wounded in action.

Further investigation revealed that the military police were not in receipt of an official commitment warrant for Vandertak, hence he was not officially a prisoner. This should have allowed him to be honourably discharged under the auspices of being medically unfit. Unfortunately, in Vandertak's case, a communique dated 19 September 1918, twelve days after his discharge, stated that there was to be no remission of his sentence, and thus he would still have forfeited all medals and entitlements.⁹

In 1977, Iris Struber wrote to the then Minister of Defence, Jim Killen. She pleaded yet again to have Vandertak exonerated and, on 19 February 1978, she received a comprehensive letter detailing all aspects of her father's case. A new ruling had been made that, given the period of time that had elapsed, an *Honourable* Discharge was warranted, and that not only his war medals, but the ANZAC Medallion for service on Gallipoli would be issued.¹⁰

It was a proud David Cartwright, the 14-year-old great-grandson of William Vandertak, who strode along the streets of the New South Wales coastal town of Ulladulla on ANZAC Day 1978.⁵ With head held high, in step with veterans of all conflicts in which Australians have served, young David marched with William's three service medals hanging from his right chest for all to see.

Author's note: This is not a story of who was right or who was wrong. It is a story of one soldier who never wavered in the belief of his innocence, and the dedication of his family who supported him and continued the fight for 60 years until he finally received the justice he believed he deserved.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 574 Gunner WH Vandertak
- 2 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 13th Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 3 A Field, 'Honour for Shamed Digger', publication unknown, 1978
- 4 F Cranston, 'Lifting the Veil of Secrecy after 60 Years', *Canberra Times*, 17 December 1977
- 5 This document was in fact a King's Certificate on Discharge—issued to all soldiers /sailors/airman discharged from service
- 6 S Cook, 'Bill's Name Clear – 60 years later', newspaper clipping contained in B2455 file, date and newspaper unknown
- 7 National Archives of Australia: B2455, op cit., correspondence on file.
- 8 Mrs Glenda Cartwright (granddaughter), interview with the author, 1998
- 9 Department of Defence, letter to W Vandertak, 19 September 1918
- 10 Department of Defence, letter to I Struber, 19 February 1978