

Private Charles Williamson, MM

Ask no questions

On the windswept slopes of Gallipoli, with shot and shell raining all around, a grimy figure, sporting a British accent and dressed in the uniform of the French Foreign Legion, presented himself at Headquarters 3rd Battalion, Australian Imperial Force. His name was Charles Williamson, although this was not the name he gave to the astonished sergeant he confronted at battalion headquarters.¹

The man who appeared, wraithlike in the dust of ANZAC, was already the veteran of a number of military campaigns. English born and bred, Charles Williamson initially joined the militia, serving as a soldier of the 3rd Battalion, Royal Fusiliers. In April 1898, he decided to move to full-time soldiering, joining the crack Coldstream Guards.

While he revelled in life as a soldier, Williamson did not cope well with the harsh discipline of the Guards and deserted in October that year. He returned to face the full wrath of military justice in December and was court-martialled for his trouble. He was sentenced to one month's hard labour, with all previous service forfeited. On his release, he sailed with the 1st Battalion, Coldstream Guards, for garrison duty in Gibraltar.²

In 1899, relations between the British Government and Transvaal were becoming increasingly strained and, as a precaution against the outbreak of hostilities, a brigade of Guards, including the Coldstreams, was earmarked for service in South Africa. With the declaration of war on 12 October, the Coldstream Guards received orders to embark, destined to see action against the Boer Commandos. Williamson relished the thought of combat. He was captivated by accounts of fierce battles against the infamous Dutch-Afrikaner settlers. His dreams were, however, destined to end in frustration. In a futile gesture, the Guards were tasked with chasing the swift and elusive Boer cavalry on foot, with no thought given to the provision of horses.

Long, tedious treks into the veldt with little or no action soon wore away the Williamson zest. Back at their base camp, the guardsmen were tasked with standing picket in the blockhouses which were placed at intervals around the camp's perimeter. These strongholds were bitterly cold and depressingly damp in winter and in summer resembled ovens, the heat of the merciless African sun baking their hapless occupants.

With the cessation of hostilities in May 1902, the Coldstreams reverted to the tedious garrison duties that mark peacetime soldiering. The inactivity proved too much for the roguish Williamson. In August 1902, he broke camp and went absent without leave. On his return, he faced the now familiar routine of the court martial and was awarded a month's hard labour.² On his release, Williamson

returned to England sporting the King's South Africa medal, which he regarded with contempt, since he had seen little action worthy of recognition.

In October 1903, he married Harriet Cubitt at St Mark's Church in London. Army life proved not to Harriet's liking and the couple soon parted company amid acrimonious scenes. Williamson then took discharge from the Coldstream Guards and fled England for the continent.

The yen for soldiering next found him in the ranks of the celebrated French Foreign Legion. Here, no questions were asked of a man's past, only of his fighting ability, and Williamson was a fighter.

His first tour with the Legion took him to the sands of Abyssinia, where the Legionnaires were consigned to quell a native uprising in the French colony. In the midst of the turbulence and chaos of one particular skirmish, Williamson's courageous actions resulted in his being awarded the French medal for bravery, the coveted *Médaille Militaire*.

With the outbreak of World War 1, the Legion was sent to the Gallipoli Peninsula where elements of the French forces were to land alongside the British at Cape Helles. The Australians and New Zealanders (ANZACs) were to come



French troops training on Lemnos Island prior to Gallipoli landing. In the background, the troopships at anchor in Mudros Harbour.

ashore at Gaba Tepe, but in fact, they disembarked at Ari Burnu, two miles further north.

Williamson landed at Helles on 28 April, and characteristically was soon in the thick of the fighting. Inexplicably, he then deserted the Legion and, incredibly, given the scale and ferocity of the fighting, made his way up the peninsular to the ANZAC beachhead.

When the grimy Legionnaire strolled into the Headquarters of 3rd Battalion, AIF, he gave his name as Williams and cheerfully—but unofficially—attached himself to the battalion. He was described as tall, lean and rangy, with a rigid military carriage, a soldierly bearing and a personality that was as mysteriously charismatic as the uniform he wore.¹

ANZAC was not the place to question a man's past, even one as obviously mysterious as Williamson's. So it was, despite the initial consternation of the battalion command, that he was allowed to remain and serve with the 3rd. Before long, early mistrust of the newcomer was replaced with implicit confidence. The Diggers found Williamson a first class fighter and, on 1 July 1915, the battalion hierarchy decided to officially enlist him in the Australian Imperial Force.³

On 6 August, the battalion was preparing to attack a heavily defended position known as Lone Pine. In three days of relentless and bitter fighting, most of it hand-to-hand—and during which time no fewer than seven Victoria Crosses were awarded—the position was won from the Turks. Williamson received a bullet wound to his right leg which forced his evacuation, first to Lemnos Island and then to Cairo for treatment. He rejoined the battalion in mid-September, as the unit took three days' rest at Mudros.

Once again, the period of inactivity proved too much for Williamson. His roguish behaviour led to strife within the battalion, and he fell foul of his commanding officer whose solution was simple: he handed the troublemaker back to the French authorities.¹

The Legion does not treat desertion lightly. Williamson was summarily court-martialled and condemned to death by firing squad. Incredibly, as he was marched off for the execution of his sentence, a Coldstream Guards officer recognized the prisoner. In an ugly confrontation, the officer retrieved Williamson from the firing squad at pistol point, returning him to the commanding officer (CO) of the 3rd Battalion.²

Williamson's fate was then the subject of much heated debate by the major parties concerned. The French vehemently refused to take him back and, after further argument, he was granted a reprieve from his death sentence—subject to his return to the Australian Imperial Force.

The CO of the 3rd Battalion was loath to accept him, but realised that his knowledge of French might prove useful. Eventually, he was temporarily detached to

the 6th Mule Transport Battalion serving in Salonika. Williamson had escaped the prospect of an ignominious death, staring down the rifle muzzles of a French firing squad, in return for continued service with the ANZACs.

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CERTIFICATE OF ATTESTING OFFICER.

The foregoing questions were read to the person enlisted in my presence.

I have taken care that he understands each question, and that his answer to each question has been duly entered as replied to by him.

I have examined his naturalization papers and am of opinion that they are correct.

(This to be struck out except in the case of persons who are naturalized British subjects)

Date 17 July 1915

D. J. Moore Capt. 3rd Bn.
Signature of Attesting Officer.

OATH TO BE TAKEN BY PERSON BEING ENLISTED.*

I, Charles Henry Williams ¹⁵⁰⁰ McLevate swear that I will well and truly serve our Sovereign Lord the King in the Australian Imperial Force from 17 July 1915 until the end of the War, and a further period of four months thereafter unless sooner lawfully discharged, dismissed, or removed therefrom; and that I will resist His Majesty's enemies and cause His Majesty's peace to be kept and maintained; and that I will in all matters appertaining to my service, faithfully discharge my duty according to law.

So HELP ME, GOD.

C. H. Williams
Signature of Person Enlisted.

Taken and subscribed at Angac in
the State of Pemansulo of Gallipoli
this 17th day of July 1915,
before me —

D. J. Moore Capt.
Signature of Attesting Officer.

* A person enlisting who objects to taking an oath may make an affirmation in accordance with the Third Schedule of the Act, and the above form must be amended accordingly. All amendments must be initiated by the Attesting Officer.

The howling winds of Salonika and Serbia, characteristic of the harsh Baltic winter, took a heavy toll on Williamson's health and he developed severe bronchitis. In January 1916, he returned to the 3rd Battalion, now training in Egypt. At that stage, as part of the expansion of the AIF, the battalion was to be split up, with elements sheared off to form the nucleus of the new 55th Battalion. He was promoted to sergeant and allocated a role in the raising of the new battalion.

The commanding officer of the 3rd Battalion was particularly impressed with Williamson's drilling of his platoon. He described Williamson as 'a splendid sight, combining the cold, calculating efficiency of the Coldstream Guards with the magnetic fire of the Legionnaires. He was almost hypnotic, inspiring those under his command to parade ground manoeuvres that had no parallel in the Australian Imperial Force'.¹

Williamson's health continued to deteriorate, and in April he was again hospitalized. Tests showed that he had developed active pulmonary tuberculosis—regarded at the time as an incurable disease.⁴ Despite his protests, Williamson was scheduled for repatriation to Australia and subsequent discharge. He appealed the decision, arguing that, since he had not enlisted in Australia, he could not be discharged there. He requested repatriation to England or discharge in Egypt, to allow him to make his own way home. The authorities would not be swayed and, on 5 July, Williamson embarked for Australia, where he was discharged in August 1916.⁴

Initially, Williamson found work in the Newcastle area. Eventually, however, without friends or family and with his money all but gone, he concluded that the best way to secure a passage to England would be at the government's expense. In November 1916, despite his tuberculosis, Williamson reenlisted in the AIF.

Again using his pseudonym, Williams, he found himself boarding the troopship *Port Napier* bound for England.⁵ At this stage, Williamson was allocated to the 7th Reinforcements of the 46th Battalion, which was locked in battle on the Western Front. On arrival in England, the reinforcements entered a period of intense training and, characteristically unable to cope with the lack of action, Williamson again fell foul of military justice.

In April 1917, he disobeyed a lawful command, breaking camp and using insubordinate language to a superior officer. He was sentenced to six months' hard labour. On review, the sentence was reduced to one month's detention with a loss of 203 days' pay.⁶

On his release, Williamson returned to the 46th Battalion with the rank of lance corporal, and was promoted to corporal a month later. The 46th was thrust into the battles of Menin Road and Polygon Wood, suffering horrific casualties. Following its withdrawal from the line in early January, the battalion went into a brief period of rest and reorganisation. This was disastrous for Williamson, for

whom military punishment appeared devoid of all effect. On 18 January 1918, Williamson's name again appeared on the charge sheet, this time for drunkenness and striking a superior officer. His punishment entailed reduction to the rank of private.⁶

In May of that year, Williamson was detached to D Company of the 45th Battalion which was moving to the front line at Monument Wood. Securing the battalion's flank was a crack French unit, the 3rd Regiment de Marche de Tirailleurs. The French Regiment had attacked earlier and suffered heavy casualties. Many of the dead and wounded still littered no man's land in front of the French line.

Williamson heard that a particular French officer was among the missing. Obsessed with finding this man, he sortied out in search of the officer's body, but instead, found scores of wounded soldiers. He dragged them back to the safety of the trenches, setting off again and again into the fray, oblivious of his own safety. On his last foray, he found what he was looking for: the body of the French officer. As Williamson signalled for assistance, a single shot rang out. The victim of a German sniper, Williamson's body slumped over that of the Frenchman.⁷

Captain Lemouland, Commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment de Marche de Tirailleurs wrote to the Commander of the Australian 12th Brigade, describing the incident and the admiration of the French soldiers for the gallant Australian.⁷ For his actions that day, the French awarded Williamson the Croix de Guerre and Lemouland requested that the Australians recognise his bravery in similar fashion. Williamson was awarded the Military Medal on 6 May 1918, for 'bravery in the field'.⁸

Who was the dead French officer? Why was Williamson so intent on retrieving his body? We will never know. The death of Private Charles Williamson marked the loss of a brave, if maverick, soldier. Williamson was remarkable not simply because he was the only man to 'enlist' at Gallipoli. He stands out as a soldier whose incredible courage in the face of battle upheld the fighting traditions of the Coldstream Guards, the French Foreign Legion and the Australian Imperial Force.

Notes

- 1 Wren, E, *Randwick to Hargicourt: History of the 3rd Battalion A.I.F.*, McDonald, Sydney, 1935
- 2 Archive files of the Coldstream Guards, Regimental Headquarters, Wellington Barracks, London, United Kingdom.
- 3 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 2923 Private CH Williams
- 4 AWM 1DRL/0428, Australian Red Cross Society, Missing and Wounded Enquiry Bureau, 1914–1918 War
- 5 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 46th Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 6 Polanski I, *We Were the 46th: The History of the 46th Battalion in the Great War of 1914–1918*, 1999
- 7 Captain Lemouland, Commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment de Marche de Tirailleurs, letter to the Commander 12th Brigade AIF, 4 May 1918. (Source: AWM World War I Biographical Cards)
- 8 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War; see also AWM 131, Roll of Honour Circular 1914–1918 War.

Transcript of letter from Captain Lemouland, Commander of the 2nd Battalion of the 3rd Regiment de Marche de Tirailleurs.

*3rd Regt. De Marche de Tirailleurs
Algeriens*

*2nd Bn.
In the Field
4-5-18*

I have the honour to report to you the conduct and the death of WILLIAMS, Charles. Australian soldier, ex French Legionnaire French Médaille Militaire.

This man who was not a stretcher bearer, and who, not belonging to the unit in charge of taking the "Monument" could have avoided to expose himself, did not stop yesterday to carry or help to carry our wounded men.

He was looking for them on the battlefield, between the lines, and bringing them back with great gallantry and great disdain of death.

He himself signalled to us that a French officer, dead, was still lying in front of our lines and throughout his description, we recognized one of our comrades.

Although I opposed it, and told him that at dusk we would have the body taken away, he decided to go back and look for it this morning and he was killed by a bullet in the heart.

I refused to leave the body of this humble but heroic Australian soldier one moment longer between the lines because yesterday he saved the life of so many of ours.

A party of stretcher bearers under the leading of "Medecin Auxilliaire risterucci" went out to fetch his body. He was handed over to your stretcher bearers at my headquarters and in the presence of the interpreter.

I should be very pleased if it could be possible for you to obtain a reward for this brave man so gloriously killed.

I am Sir,

Yours respectfully

*(sgd.) Capt. Lemouland
Commanding the 2nd Bn. of 3rd Tir*