

Alfred John Hearps



By William Scott



Shortly after Australia's declaration of war in August of 1914, a young clerk, aged 19, made his way from Queenstown to Pontville Army Camp in order to enlist. That young clerk was named Alfred John Hearps. He was one of 60 men from the small town on the West Coast of Tasmania that had signed up to take part in 'The War to End All Wars'.

Born on 6 March 1895 in Forth, Alfred was the second son born to Alfred and Eva Hearps. Alfred Junior's older brother had passed at the age of three months, while his younger sister would not be born until 1910. Alfred Senior was a farmer on the North-West Coast, ploughing the soil of Forth and surrounding areas. It is a mystery as to when Alfred Senior decided to move further South and take up a career in mining. However, after living in Queenstown for quite some time, he was attracted to the mining boom in Queensland and was based at Shannon Hill, Mount Morgan, Queensland. So, he, Eva and their young daughter moved interstate, leaving young Alfred by himself in Tasmania. During this time Alfred Junior worked in the mines after finishing school around the age of 16.

Alfred was of Aboriginal heritage, and was a direct descendent of Mannalargenna, one of the greatest native Tasmanian leaders and warriors. Hearps was one of 65 Tasmanian men with Aboriginal heritage who enlisted. Alfred was the first to enlist, soon followed by many more, including his list of cousins, some of whom fought in Gallipoli at the same time as him.

A military experience was nothing new to Alfred. Prior to enlisting in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), Alfred was a lieutenant with the senior cadets in the local militia – 90<sup>th</sup> Battalion. At his medical exam, the doctor described him as being 19 years and 5 months old, weighing 10 stone 4 pounds and standing at a height of 5 foot 8 inches. He was of a dark complexion with brown eyes and black hair.

He was also listed as living at Harvey's Hotel, Queenstown.

The newly enlisted men were stationed at Pontville Camp, training from August until mid-October 1914, when on 20 October, the Unit embarked from Hobart, Tasmania, on board Transport A2 *Geelong* – the ship that had brought soldiers down from South Australia earlier that month.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Departure of 12th Battalion on HMAT Geelong, October 1914.

After reaching Egypt, Alfred and the men of the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion found ways to amuse themselves with trips to the Pyramids and the towns, while training in the desert to take on the Turks.

Hearps and the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion rushed the shores of Gallipoli early in the morning of 25 April 1915. Alfred survived the campaign without obtaining any physical wounds. Like many of the other soldiers however, it was the mental strain that took its toll. In late July, he was evacuated from Gallipoli and hospitalised in Alexandria. Though he was diagnosed with a variety of things, it was most likely that he was suffering from both shell shock and poor health as a result of the horrible living conditions on the peninsula in Turkey. Several weeks later he returned to his unit and served out the campaign until the evacuation in December 1915.

Fast forward to July/August 1916. Alfred had not been out into the front line for some while. In the meantime, he had been promoted to Quartermaster Sergeant (the rank above sergeant), which would keep him out of the field, while remaining involved in the battalion's progress.

The 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion had suffered massively at Pozieres. In order to bring the battalion back up to strength, nine new lieutenants were needing to be appointed. Quartermaster Sergeant Alfred Hearps was one of the names put forward. So, Alfred was back in the line of fire, though this time he was leading the troops as an Officer.

It was on the night of 19 August 1916 when the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion had become involved in the wrestle for Mouquet Farm from the Germans. After realising that the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade was exhausted, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade was called up, which included the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

The 9<sup>th</sup>, 12<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> were assaulting Fabeck Graben. The 12<sup>th</sup> were coming in on the centre, with the 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> on their left and right respectively. Lieutenants Hearps and Roper were to take forward the left section of the line. Things did not go to plan, and they wound up around 50 metres over their objective, most likely due it having been destroyed by shellfire. Amidst the apparent chaos, the 12<sup>th</sup> were ordered to retire. It was during this retirement that 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Alfred John Hearps fell to the ground, shot in the neck.

His batman, a 26-year-old man by the name of Private Arthur Bean, stayed with Alfred for half an hour, offering whatever support he could. When it became far too dangerous for Bean to stay, he returned to the Australian lines, pleading for a chance to recover Hearps' body. Given the situation, the requests were denied. It was that next morning that Arthur never answered to the roll call and was marked as missing.

More than nine or 10 men, thought enough of Alfred to contact the Red Cross as to the situation surrounding his death, showing that his men respected him as an Officer. Charles Bean suggests that the Germans captured Alfred and he died within their grasps, though the report that he died of wounds shortly after his batman left his side has remained consistent in Red Cross reports.

In a letter to the Red Cross, his mother wrote:

*I am indeed heartbroken concerning my son's fate ... I do not know what to think or what to do. Will you please let me know exactly what you think; the suspense is getting more than I can bear.*

Second Lieutenant Alfred Hearps has no known grave and is commemorated on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial in France.

Alfred's mother, Eva, was torn apart when she heard what had happened to her son. She and Alfred's father had divorced and so she was desperately seeking as many of Alfred's possessions as she could. In the end, she was sent his Victory Medal and Memorial Scroll. Eva was forced to come to terms with the fact that Alfred's body could not be located and that the inscription that she had lovingly written would not be published.

Alfred's promotion to 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant is very pivotal. When he enlisted, he did so under European descent. Alfred most likely knew of his Aboriginal heritage, but should he have documented that when he enlisted, it would have made it harder, if not impossible at the time to enter the AIF. Though the record does not state it, Alfred was believed to be the first Aboriginal to be commissioned as an Officer.

Alfred John Hearps was a strong and determined man, who was prepared to defend what he stood for and the land that he loved. He was well respected by his troops and his actions should serve as an inspiration to us all.