

# Company Sergeant Major Roland Horace Dennis DCM

**By Laura Winter**

**Date and Place of Birth:** 27 July 1895, Clarence St Perth Tasmania.

**Family:** Son of George and Edith Dennis, brother to Archibald George, Henry Malcolm, Frank Gordon, Edith, Doris Lillian, Bessie Eileen, and Lloyd Vernon Dennis.

**Rank:** Company Sergeant Major, Sergeant, Lance Sergeant, Corporal.

**Service Number:** 225

**Date of Enlistment:** 20 August 1914, Brighton Tasmania

**Battalion Number:** 12<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion (20/8/1914 – 4/3/1916), 52<sup>nd</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion (4/3/1916 – 26/3/1917, 4/4/1917 – 26/4/1918) and 69<sup>th</sup> Infantry Battalion (26/3/1917 – 4/4/1917).

**Date and Location of Embarkation:** 20 October 1914, Hobart.

**Name of Ship:** HMAT Geelong A2

**Records of Battles:** Gallipoli Dardanelles Campaign, Zonnebeke, Villers-Bretonneux and Mouquet Farm.

**Awards and Decorations:** Distinguished Conduct Medal, October 1917 at Zonnebeke, *“for conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. During severe fighting, this warrant officer has displayed great gallantry and disregard for personal danger, inspiring and cheering all about by his example. His devotion to duty on all occasion has been conspicuous, and he has been of the greatest assistance to his company commander.”*

**Records of Wounding:** Dysentery; admitted to a Gallipoli field hospital 28 August 1915, and was transferred to Ghezirch, Egypt and was discharged 8 January 1916. Shell wound; likely at Pozieres on 12 August 1916. Contracted mumps; 11 February 1917.

**Date and Place of Death:** 26 April 1918, Villers-Bretonneux, aged 23.

## **Other:**

He attended Perth State School. Roland was Baptist in religion. He and his family lived on Clarence Street in Perth, Tasmania, and his father George worked as a road overseer. Roland enlisted with his best friend, David Henry Allan, and they were both hit by the same stray shell at Villers-Bretonneux and are buried next to each other at the Adelaide Cemetery. Roland made a will shortly before his death, and bequeathed his possessions to his mother, and signed in the presence of his friend David Henry Allan.

**Physical Description:** At his time of enlistment, Roland was 19 years old, 5’6” (168cm) tall, weighed 11 stone (70kg). His chest measured 34 – 38 inches (86 – 96cm), and his complexion described as ‘dark’, with blue eyes and black hair. Roland’s enlistment documents states he also had a scar on his left foot.

## C.S.M Roland Horace Dennis' War Story



On 20 August 1914, not even a month after war broke out, Roland enlisted in the 12<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion in the Australian Imperial Forces. He and his friend David Henry Allan both travelled to Brighton to enlist. Like millions of other young men around in Europe and the British Empire, Roland felt it his duty to enlist and serve his country. Similarly, they anticipated a great adventure, but could never have predicted the horrors to come.


Before Roland enlisted, he had been working as a labourer and boundary rider in New South Wales.

He was a popular, bright and good natured man, with a good sense of humour. An interview with his younger sister, Edith revealed “He was good at sport, loved his cricket and football. He was a very popular young man.” Roland had served for one year in the Junior Cadets. He returned from New South Wales to Tasmania in order to enlist. Because Roland was only 19, his parents had to sign a document permitting their sons enlistment.

Two months later, on 20 October 1914, Roland embarked from Hobart on the HMAT Geelong A2 for training in Egypt. The first group of Australian and New Zealand troops arrived at Alexandria on 3 December 1914. The days of training were long and arduous, working eight hours a day, six days a week. Many soldiers became sick with heatstroke and pneumonia.

*Shereby certify that this is a true copy of the original Attestation.*

13 Coy. J. Stewart May

AUSTRALIAN  MILITARY FORCES.

**AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.**

Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad.

No. 225 Name Dennis Rowland Norris  
 Unit 12th Battalion **52nd BATTN**  
 Joined on 20-8-14

**Questions to be put to the Person Enlisting before Attestation.**

1. What is your Name? PAY BOOK NO. 16299 of ... 1. Dennis, Rowland Norris
2. In the Parish of Perth in or near the Town of Langford in the County of ... 2. In the Parish of Perth in or near the Town of Langford in the County of
3. Are you a natural born British Subject or a Naturalised British Subject? (N.B.—If the latter, papers to be shown.) ... 3. Yes N.B.
4. What is your age? ... 4. 19
5. What is your trade or calling? ... 5. Labourer
6. Are you, or have you been, an Apprentice? If so, where, to whom, and for what period? ... 6. No.
7. Are you married? ... 7. No.
8. Who is your next of kin? (Address to be stated) ... 8. John & Dennis CLARENCE ST. Perth TASMANIA
9. Have you ever been convicted by the Civil Power? ... 9. No.
10. Have you ever been discharged from any part of His Majesty's Forces, with Ignominy, or as Incurable and Worthless, or on account of Conviction of Felony, or of a Sentence of Penal Servitude, or have you been dismissed with Disgrace from the Navy? ... 10. No.
11. Do you now belong to, or have you ever served in, His Majesty's Army, the Marines, the Militia, the Militia Reserve, the Territorial Force, Royal Navy, or Colonial Forces? If so, state which, and if not now serving, state cause of discharge ... 11. Senior Cadets 1 year 92nd Inf 1 yr attd serving
12. Have you stated the whole, if any, of your previous service? ... 12. Yes
13. Have you ever been rejected as unfit for His Majesty's Service? If so, on what grounds? ... 13. No.
14. (For married men and widowers with children.) Do you understand that no Separation Allowance will be paid to you either before or after embarkation during your term of service? ... 14.

I, Rowland Norris Dennis do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and I am willing and hereby voluntarily agree to serve in the Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Australia within or beyond the limits of the Commonwealth. And I further agree to accept not less than two-thirds of the pay payable to me from time to time during my service for the support of my wife and children.

Date 21-8-14 (Signed) R. D. Norris  
 Signature of person enlisted.

D. 27.14.—C. 2200. \*This clause should be struck out in the case of unmarried men or widowers without children under 18 years of age.

National Archives of Australia NAA B245 DENNIS R H

Roland's enlistment documents – National Archives Australia

On the fateful morning of 25 April 1915, Roland was one of the first to land on the shores of Gallipoli. This was Australia's 'Baptism of Fire', our first chance represent our country on an international stage. For the Turks it was like shooting fish in a barrel. Men were killed before then touched the sand, and by the end of the day, the beaches were strewn with the bodies of 2000 ANZACS. The 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion were among the first boats, and were capable of making the progress from the beach to capture their objectives.

At Gallipoli men's health was generally quite poor, and many suffered from sickness caused by poor nutrition, dehydration and fatigue. Roland suffered from a severe case of dysentery, and was admitted to an offshore hospital on the 28 August 1915. He was then transferred to the 1<sup>st</sup> Auxiliary Hospital in Heliopolis on the 3 September. He was not discharged until the 28 December, and finally rejoined his unit on the 15 January 1916, at Tell El Kebir, four months later. Roland also suffered a small shrapnel wound to his thigh, but he wrote to his family that it did not bother him greatly, and that he planned on having it removed upon his return.



Roland was transferred to the 52<sup>nd</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion, which was formed in the effort to 'double' the AIF. Half of this battalion were veterans from the 12<sup>th</sup>, the other half were fresh reinforcements. Because Roland was a veteran from Gallipoli, he was promoted to Lance Sergeant on the 4<sup>th</sup> March 1916, and then to Sergeant on 7 March. The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion sailed on the H.M.T Ivernia to Marseilles, disembarking on the 12 June.

The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was apart of the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, which attacked Mouquet Farm on 10 August 1916. It is presumable that Roland was in this battle, as it was recorded that only two days later on the 12 August he was wounded in action. A serious shell wound on his abdomen meant Roland was sent to the 13<sup>th</sup> General Hospital in Rouen, and then to England on 29 August. He spent some time at Perham Downs recovering. As Roland had been absent from his unit for three months, he was placed on a 'super list' for NCO's in that situation. He was then transferred into the ANZAC section of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Echelon was the third line of from the front. It was their duty to provide the front-line soldiers with supplies and ensure operations ran smoothly. It is probable that Roland was transferred here in his recovery.

Roland was then marched into hospital (yet again) for mumps, on 11 February 1917. Mumps was one of the leading causes of hospitalisation during WWI. Diseases typically seen in children were rife amongst soldiers, due to a lack of personal hygiene, poor living conditions and that no vaccines had been developed. Once discharged from hospital on the 26 March 1917, Roland was transferred to the 69<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion. This Battalion was formed as a part of an Australian government effort to comply with the British government's request for a sixth division. However, in September of 1917 this project was abandoned due to heavy casualties at Bullecourt and Messines. So, Roland was transferred back to the 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion on 4 April. Roland was appointed a Warrant Officer Class II, also known as a Company Sergeant Major, on the 22 September 1917.



The 4<sup>th</sup> Division was involved in the battle of Polygon Wood, as part of the third battle of Ypres. Soldiers fought to secure positions surrounding a small forest, near the Belgium town of Zonnebeke. This victory allowed allied forces to advance to Broodseinde Ridge. It was during this conflict that Roland earned his Distinguished Conduct Medal. The 31<sup>st</sup> issue of the Commonwealth Gazette, published on the 4 March 1919 acknowledged Roland's achievement:

*“For conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. During severe fighting, this warrant officer has displayed great gallantry and disregard of personal danger, inspiring and cheering all about him by his example. His devotion to duty on all occasions has been conspicuous, and he has been of the greatest assistance to his company commander.”*



(Left to right): Distinguished Conduct Medal, 1914-15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal. –  
*Courtesy of the Dennis family*

On the 12 January 1918, Roland went on leave to Paris, and returned to his unit, then went on leave again to the U.K.

The 52<sup>nd</sup> Battalion was involved in the re-taking of Villers-Bretonneux, in the Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux. This was one of Australia's most crucial battles of WWI, as it prevented the Germans from taking Amiens, a vital British transport hub. The battle began at dawn on 24 April, when the Germans attacked with gas, artillery and infantry. The German attack was successful, and throughout the day British attempts to regain Villers-Bretonneux failed. During the afternoon, the Australian 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Brigades assembled outside the town and began to plan their assault. It was going to be difficult, as it was unfamiliar ground, and they were unsure of the German positions.

Upon the men's realisation that it was soon to be the third anniversary of the first landings at Gallipoli, they became eager to prove themselves equal to the occasion. The Australians charged, overwhelming the Germans, allowing the Australians to penetrate enemy territory.

It was on the victorious night of 25 April 1918, Roland laid down his life for Australia. A letter from Chaplain Blackwood of the 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade, to Roland's parents details the events of that night:

*"He had a future before him, and yet it was not to be. He had gone right through the attack and was sitting in his trench on the night of the 25th when he was caught by a shell, and killed instantly. He felt no pain."*

Roland's best friend throughout the war, Sergeant David Henry Allan was hit by the same shell. They were buried together, and rest next to each other at the Adelaide Cemetery at Villers-Bretonneux.

