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^{th} Australian Infantry Battalion (20/8/1914 – 4/3/1916), 52^{nd} Australian Infantry Battalion (4/3/1916 – 26/3/1917, 4/4/1917 – 26/4/1918) and 69th 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 12th 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.

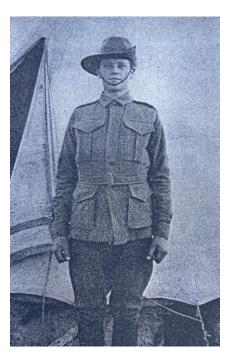
Two months later, on 20 October 1914, Roland emarked from Hoabrt on the HMAT Geelong A2 for training in Egypt. The first group of Australian and New Zealand troops arrived at Alexandria on 3 December 1914. The days of training were long and ardous, working eight hours a day, six days a week. Many soldiers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

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4. What is your age1	1. Labourer
5. What is your trade or calling !	5. Kabouret
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T. Are you married I	T. No.
	& Fasher & Dennis
8. Who is your next of kin 1 (Address to be stated)	CLARENCE ST. Perth
	TASMANIA .
9. Have you ever been convicted by the Civil Powert	no. 15/16/16
	. No.
10. Have you ever been discharged from any part of His Majesty's Forces, with Ignominy, or as Incorrigible and	n No
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with Disgrace from the Navy1	Senior Cadets. 1year ?
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Forces I If so, state which, and if not now serving,	11. 92" Safe 19. auto renound.
state cause of discharge J 12. Have you stated the whole, if any, of your previous service!	12. Yes
	13. No
13. Have you ever been rejected as unfit for His Majesty's Service 1 If so, on what grounds 7	10
14. (For married men and widowers with children)- Do you understand that no Separation Allowance will be	16
 (For merried men and widesers with children)- Do you understank that no Separation Allowance will be jacod to you either before to after embarkation during your term thereico? 	
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for the support of my wile and children."	(signed) R H Dennes
Date 21-8-14	Signature of person enlisted.
D.277/0.24C.3000. *This clause should be struck out in the case of unmarried men or widawers without children under 28 years of age.	
Mational 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 12th Battallion were among the first boats, and were capable of making the progress from the beach to capture their objectives.

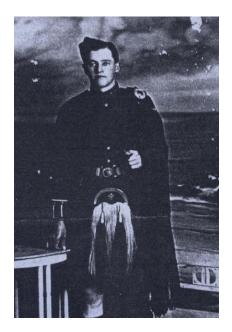
At Gallipoli men's health was generally quite poor, and many suffered from sickness caused by poor nutrion, dehydration and fatigue. Roland suffered from a severe case of dysentry, and was admitted to an offshore hospital on the 28 August 1915. He was then transferred to the 1st Auxiliary Hospital in 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 52nd Australian Infantry Battalion, which was formed in the effort to 'double' the AIF. Half of this battalion were veterans from the 12th, the other half were fresh reinforcements. Because Roland was a veteran from Gallipoli, he was promoted to Lance Sergeant on the 4th March 1916, and then to Sergeant on 7 March. The 52nd Battalion sailed on the H.M.T Ivernia to Marseilles, disembarking on the 12 June.

The 52nd Battalion was apart of the 4th 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 13th 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 3rd Echelon. The 3rd 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 hospitilisation 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 69th 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 52nd 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 4th 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 earnt his Distinguished Conduct Medal. The 31st 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 52nd 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 13th and 15th 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 mens' realisation that it was soon to be the third anniversary of the first landings at Gallipoli, thye 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 live for Australia. A letter from Chaplain Blackwood of the 15th 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 25gh 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 Cemetary at Villers-Bretonneux.



