

A REMINDER ETCHED IN ROCK

By Sarah Lenthall

The road is fluid, wrapping smoothly around the naked cliffs of the south Victorian coast, hugged almost protectively by the rugged, sharp rock face that 3000 men spent some 13 years cutting and blasting into shape.¹ Bathed in warm pastel sunsets and assaulted by a raw and icy wind, this stretch of country is both beautiful and wild - at once an icon of Victoria's growing tourism industry and a shrine to the past, simultaneously a celebration of mateship and a monument to the fallen. In truth, the Great Ocean Road, the world's longest war memorial and tribute to the pioneers of the Australian 'Digger' legacy, is a feat in itself. Built by returned World War One servicemen, the road represents the dedication and fortitude of everyday citizens, not only on the Australian shores which house its winding course, but on the beaches of Turkey, the fields of France and the deserts of the Middle East. It tells in part the story of a generation – a story often retold on paper and on film, but preserved most of all in the minds of the individuals whose names and numbers fill the nominal roll – men like Leslie Albert Kennedy.

Leslie Albert Kennedy had never held a gun in 1915. For the 23-year-old clerk from Ballarat, fear was a schoolteacher with a hard face and a harder ruler in her hand; patriotism was paying his taxes; hardship was a game of Aussie Rules football in the pouring rain; sacrifice was a picture hanging in church. Until 1915, war was voices from the verandah as the men of his father's generation gathered in groups to whisper about Brakfontein and Onverwacht.

Leslie Albert Kennedy enlisted in the First Australian Imperial Force on 8 March 1915, less than two months before the first casualty lists from the campaign abroad came flooding in and the name 'Gallipoli' rose up from the unknown shores of a distant land to make its way into the homes of Australian, New Zealander, French and British families, forever marred by the bloody loss of life and innocence that took place there. Leslie Albert Kennedy left a family and a life, number 2153 of the Seventh Australian Infantry Battalion (6th Reinforcement), aboard the HMAT A62 Wandilla on 17 June 1915, bound for the Gallipoli Peninsula. He was one of more than 416,000 young Australian men who volunteered their services in the Great War, and one of the more than 330,000 who left Australian soil to do so, serving in Turkey, on the Western Front and in the Middle East.² This is what the records tell us about Leslie Albert Kennedy. What they do not tell us is why Leslie Albert Kennedy, one of a generation of Australians who left exuberant boys and returned (if at all) reticent men, made his choice his duty.

90 years onward, the sheer waste of the fruitless and brutal campaigns of World War One, which left the flower of Australian youth strewn on foreign battlefields, is difficult to comprehend. Perhaps even more difficult to fathom is why in August 1915, the first news of the massive losses on the Dardanelles trickling in, voluntary enlistments in the Australian Imperial Force soared.³ By the Armistice of 1918, 8.5% of the budding Australian population had enlisted – nearly 40% of Australian men aged between 18 and 44 – despite conscription being

¹ The Official Great Ocean Road website, 'The building of the road' at <http://www.greatoceanroad.org>, accessed 15 August 2008.

² Australian War Memorial, 'Australian Military Statistics: Australian Military Commitments - 1885-1973' at http://www.awm.gov.au/atwar/statistics/1885_1973.asp, accessed 14 August 2008.

³ Major Helen Doyle, 'Australian World War I Casualties: Social Impacts', *Australian Defence Force Journal* 165 (2004), 24-34 (p 25).

defeated in the ballot box twice in 1916 and 1917.⁴ Almost a century later, we ask why – what is it that compels a person to exchange the comfort of home and loved ones for the perilous uncertainty of war raging a continent away?

In 1915, the realities of war were not televised, nor did they receive the realistic and often confronting cinematic treatment that they do today. For the great-grandchildren of men like Leslie Albert Kennedy, a generation brought up with the horrific war-time images of a century of conflict, the idea that men in their droves, spirited and driven by a sense of adventure, saw military action as a grand and bold undertaking not to be missed, is hard to understand. Young, athletic, sun-browned Australians, full of life and courage, embraced the chance to see the world. Romantic notions of war have gradually been buried along with the 102,807 Australians who have died in wars since Federation.⁵ Certainly for Leslie Albert Kennedy, idealistic notions, if ever he subscribed to them, must have been destroyed in his first moments at Gallipoli in which banners and cavalry calls were replaced with the mud, shit and death of a trench-scarred battlefield. Baptism at Jacob's Trench, Lone Pine, gave the 23-year-old his first taste of a real war. The Turks' losses almost tripled those of the First Australian Division, yet with half the Seventh Battalion's 680 O.R. lost, most in hand-to-hand fighting, success seems barely discernible from defeat.⁶ The following four years, haunted by the ghosts of Pozieres, Ypres, the Somme and Passchendaele, must have eroded that exuberant ignorance that spurred so many to offer themselves. And yet Australia's enlistments were at their highest after the initial wave of enthusiasm was clouded by the news of so many already lost.

Perhaps, if not enticed by a spirit of rugged adventure, Leslie Albert Kennedy signed his name in 1915 to avoid the shame of staying home – to avoid the soft white feather that could cut a man to bits, and make the physical and mental hardships of trench warfare preferable to the immense burden of guilt and dishonour visited upon the shoulders of those who remained. Watching as brothers and mates left for distant battlefields cannot have been easy, nor did it afford much choice for men whose innate sense of duty demanded that they count themselves amongst the ranks of volunteers. For Leslie Albert Kennedy, 5ft 6in tall with a chest measurement of 35in,⁷ even the demanding physical standards of the day provided no excuse.⁸ Rousing speeches and propaganda posters commanded that young men enlist to prove their sporting prowess and masculinity, or else be branded 'shirkers' or 'wasters'.

On the other hand, perhaps it was the call to defend the Motherland that led Leslie Albert Kennedy and his comrades to sign up. Flush with an ardent sense of patriotism, young British subjects looked with dutiful eyes upon the green fields of England, their own backyards freckled with colonial red and grey. While such allegiance to Great Britain – no more than an idea for many who had never set foot on English soil – may seem odd to young Australians of the 21st century, ties to the old country were still strong less than two decades after Federation. As Carlyon writes, 'Australians saw themselves as transplanted Britons'.⁹ Strangers to the battlefield and to the nation that claimed their patriotism, young men and women nevertheless answered the call, and departed from the nation's harbours to stirring renditions of 'God Save the King'. The Seventh Battalion was just one of many to form the new Australian Imperial

⁴ Graham Donley, 'Voluntary Enlistment Ballot Scheme, 1918', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* 38 (2003).

⁵ Australian War Memorial, 'Australians at war: casualties as a result of service with Australian unit' at http://www.awm.gov.au/research/infosheets/war_casualties.asp, accessed 21 August 2008.

⁶ Arthur Dean and Eric W Gutteridge, *The Seventh Battalion A.I.F – Resume of Activities of the Seventh Battalion in the Great War 1914-1918*. (Melbourne, W & K Purbrick Pty Ltd: 1933), p 28.

⁷ 'Attestation Paper for Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad – Kennedy, Leslie Albert', Australian Military Forces, 8 March 1915.

⁸ Graham Donley, 'Voluntary Enlistment Ballot Scheme, 1918', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* 38 (2003).

⁹ Les Carlyon, *Gallipoli* (Sydney, Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd: 2001).

Force. But if the volunteers left loyalists of the Empire, they served and returned fiercely Australian, imbued with a new-found sense of national pride that perhaps can only be born out of unity in conflict. It has been said that ‘the influence of the Gallipoli Campaign upon the national life of Australia and New Zealand has been far too deep to fade... it was on the 25th of April 1915 that the consciousness of nationhood was born’.¹⁰

The Australian Imperial Force was raised exclusively from volunteers – from men who chose to serve overseas in one of the bloodiest conflicts of the 20th century.¹¹ For many, initial motivations must have been overcast with the reality which greeted them in the trenches, as the enthusiasm and beliefs that led them to the recruitment office became but distant memories. Nobody ever asked Leslie Albert Kennedy why he volunteered to fight abroad in 1915, and he never disclosed this information. The real reason is but a matter of speculation – something that he took with him when he died suddenly of a heart attack on the platform of Auburn Station in 1954, almost 40 years lying between him and Turkish guns.

Yet perhaps it matters not *why* he, or the 416,000 other servicemen who enlisted, went to a war thousands of miles away from Australian shores, but *that* they went - that they served with the honour, courage, dignity and spirit that has become the legacy of the Australian ‘Digger’. Perhaps what deserves our admiration is not so much what compelled the prime of Australian youth to go, but rather what compelled them to carry on. For, whatever their various reasons for volunteering, their reasons for standing by one another when the danger was at its greatest and the hardship at its most unbearable, were stronger than the orders of their superiors. Bound not so much by the signature left on their attestation papers than by the brotherhood and sisterhood forged through their shared experiences, the young Australians who volunteered their services overseas in the Great War were there for others – their country, their community, their family, their mates. Not all were heroes in the traditional sense; fear, hopelessness and fragility must have darkened many a night for the ordinary sons and daughters of Australia who, by their own election, found themselves called upon to act in the gravest of conditions. Yet the selflessness and stoicism with which they met the adversities before them can be described with no other term: they were heroic, each man and woman a testament to the fortitude mustered by the ordinary citizen in times of need.

Their’s is a generation of few words. For many veterans, memories of the war are personal, understood only by those who were there. Yet there is one statement, one expression of gratitude and respect that is more powerful in its stillness and silence than any words of praise...The road is fluid, wrapping smoothly around the naked cliffs of the south Victorian coast...a reminder etched in rock of the voluntary sacrifice of 416,000 young Australians.

Afterword

Leslie Albert Kennedy was my great-grandfather. I dedicate this essay as a very short resume of his military career, however far it falls short of doing justice to the sacrifices he made between 1915 and 1918. Thankyou to my grandfather and mother, whose foresight in obtaining the war records that informed this essay gave me the opportunity to know my great-grandfather, even if only through knowing what he did for me and the millions of other young Australians who are privileged to inherit the tradition of ANZAC.

¹⁰C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume II - The Story of Anzac: from 4 May, 1915 to the evacuation* (Sydney, Angus & Robertson: 1924), p 910.

¹¹ Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia* (Melbourne, Cambridge University Press: 2008)

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