

# Lance Corporal Vernon Warner

## *Lucky to be alive*

*The soldier contemplated the empty sleeve of his pyjama coat then turned his attention to the damaged bible he held in his hand. He stared long and hard at the bullet that lay embedded in the pages of the book as he came to grips with how close he had been to death.*

To the sound of military music echoing between the buildings, the troops filed down Sydney's George Street, their bearing ramrod straight, yet with a relaxed swagger that had become so characteristic of the Australian soldier. As the ranks of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion came into view, Enid Warner struggled to see through the cheering crowd standing shoulder to shoulder on both sides of the street. She was desperate to catch a last glimpse of her husband, Vernon.

Clutching her tiny Australian flag, she jostled her way to the front of the throng of well-wishers where finally she caught sight of her soldier. 'Vern! Vern!' she shouted, trying to make herself heard above the noise of the band and the excited crowd. As he looked her way, he responded to her calls with a broad smile, a cheeky wink and an acknowledging nod of his head. Then all too soon, he disappeared amid the moving sea of khaki-clad figures.



*Lance Corporal  
Vernon Warner.*

Vernon Warner was born in Queensland on 31 December 1890.<sup>1</sup> His family moved to Sydney when he was still in his infancy and took up residence in the northern suburb of Artarmon. He was educated at North Sydney Boys' High School where he received an early introduction to military life. When compulsory military training was introduced for all Australian boys, he chose to be a naval cadet.<sup>2</sup> Vernon was a bright lad, and, on leaving school, continued further education as an apprentice engineer.<sup>1</sup>

On the outbreak of the First World War, Warner was among the early volunteers. After preliminary training in Australia as a member of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF, he boarded a ship bound for Egypt on 19 October 1914 and disembarked several weeks later.<sup>3</sup> For the next few months, under the clear, hot desert skies, the battalion undertook additional training.

In April 1915, Vernon and the other troops of the 1st Division AIF packed the last of their equipment as they anxiously waited for their orders to move and confirmation of their destination. They were tanned, fit and eager to face whatever the



*AWM C02727. Gallipoli Peninsula, Turkey, c. 1915. Men of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Light Horse Regiment taking over new dugouts near No 1 Outpost, on the left of ANZAC.*

enemy had in store for them. Unfortunately for Warner, his hopes of moving with the Division were dashed when he became ill and was sent to hospital for treatment.<sup>2</sup>

From his bed, he heard news of the landings at Gallipoli and the heavy toll of casualty suffered by the ANZAC forces. Warner felt helpless and frustrated that he was not with his mates and he pestered the doctors constantly to rule him fit for duty.

Lance Corporal Warner finally landed at ANZAC Cove on 5 May 1915 and carefully made his way over the rugged terrain to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion's lines.<sup>2</sup> As he passed a group of entrenched Diggers an old mate extended his hand to him, remarking, 'You look a helluva lot better than the last time I saw you'.

Before long, the Allies were bogged down in a war of attrition, resorting to any ploy that might give them an advantage over the enemy Turks. The Diggers of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, like their ANZAC mates, were endlessly engaged in the tactics of trench warfare, sniping and bombing, but primarily, fighting their hardest just to stay alive.

In August 1915, a plan was devised by the British High Command to land British troops at Suvla Bay. To cover the landings, the strategy included a series of diversions to be undertaken by the ANZACs—the Kiwis would attack the heights of Chunuk Bair, the Australian Light Horse would charge at The Nek and the infantry would launch an assault at a place called Lone Pine.

On 6 August, the Diggers sat in their trenches, hearts pumping and pulses racing, as they carried out final checks on their weapons and prepared for battle. The attack was scheduled for 5.30 pm that day. Since it would develop into a night action, the troops were ordered to sew white bands onto each sleeve of their tunics and affix a white triangle of tin to their packs. This would aid them in identifying one another in the darkness and avoid casualties from friendly fire.<sup>4</sup> As he tied off the last stitch, Warner turned to his cobbler and muttered, 'I reckon it just gives the Turks somewhere to aim'.

The word passed down the line, 'Get ready to move, get ready to move'. Warner hurriedly shoved his wallet, diary, pay book and bible into his tunic pocket. Huddled against the wall of the trench, Vernon faced his mate and said, 'You cover my back and I'll cover yours'.

Amid the explosions of artillery shells, the shrill sound of a whistle sent them on their way, bayonets fixed and glistening in the afternoon sunlight. As they ran forward—some laughing and singing, indicating their nervousness—all hell broke loose.

Warner struggled to stay alongside his mate. Suddenly, as if in slow motion, they saw a bomb hurtling through the air towards them. Warner screamed at his mate to take cover, but his friend didn't hear him. When the bomb exploded, a jagged piece of shrapnel took his mate's head off at the neck. He watched in horror as the decapitated body took a couple of steps before crumpling to the ground.

Warner, shaken at what he had just witnessed, paused as he realised his uniform was covered in his mate's blood. Before he had time to recover from the shock of his friend's death, he felt excruciating pain as a bullet slammed into him, tearing flesh and muscle, and smashing the bone as it passed through his left arm. He lay



*AWM P01116.063 Gallipoli, November 1915. The hospital at Walden Grove, where the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Field Ambulance was based, with its tents and dugouts in the hillside under snow after the blizzard.*

on the ground, staring at the darkening sky, feeling his life ebbing away as he lapsed in and out of consciousness. The last thing he heard before the darkness engulfed him was a gruff, 'You'll be right, mate'.

Warner struggled to open his eyes. The voice calling him was softer than the last he had heard. He felt a damp cloth gently pat his forehead. 'Welcome back, Corporal', the gentle female voice said.

'Where am I?' he asked.

'You're on a hospital ship off Gallipoli.'

Warner took stock of his surroundings and through a veil of pain he remembered being hit in the arm. 'Did you get the bullet out?' he asked.

'I'm afraid we had to take the arm off, Corporal', the sister replied.

Warner drifted in and out of consciousness for the next few days. During one of his waking periods, the sister said to him, 'You must have someone looking after you, Corporal'. In response to Warner's perplexed expression, the sister held up the items from his tunic pocket.

He saw that the Turkish bullet had perforated his wallet, diary, pay book and had penetrated three-quarters of the way through his bible, where the round was still visibly embedded.<sup>1</sup> Warner now realised the implications of the sister's remarks. Had the bullet gone all the way through the bible, it would have punctured his heart and killed him outright.

As he looked at the empty sleeve of his pyjamas, he declared, 'Sister, I must be the luckiest man alive'.

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#### Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 108 Private V Warner
- 2 *A Historical Record of national effort during the Great War*, Australian Publishing Service, Melbourne, date unknown
- 3 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 4 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume II, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936