

# WO2 Noel Eric Bolton-Wood

## *Age no barrier*

*It was early August 1914 as the three brothers sat at a kitchen table, listening intently as the eldest read aloud the news report of the German Army's rampage across France and Belgium. 'Well boys, it looks like there's gonna be a war', he said as he passed the paper across the table for the others to see.*

*Eric, as the youngest of the three preferred to be called, was merely 15 years old. He remained seated after his brothers had left, his young mind full of thoughts of the war. 'Ain't no way I'm missing this', he muttered to himself.*

Armed with a bogus letter of consent—supposedly written by his mother—the boy presented himself for enlistment in the AIF.<sup>1</sup> The recruiting sergeant eyed him up and down suspiciously. 'How old did you say you are, young fella?' he asked.

'Nineteen, just like it says in the letter, Sir', the cheeky lad replied.

'All right, move on to the doctor', the sergeant ordered with a flick of his head.

The medical examination was a breeze for the fit and healthy youngster, and Eric was subsequently allocated to the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion as a reinforcement. He thrived on the mateship, camaraderie and the day-to-day challenges of the military training. When on local leave, with a jaunty stride, he'd march down the main



AWM H03358. Liverpool, NSW, 1914. New recruits moving through the Army camp lines.

street of Liverpool tipping his slouch hat and winking at the giggling young ladies he passed en route. He was young, strong, cocky and full of fight.

The training was continuous for the men of the 13<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Even aboard the troopship taking them to Egypt, much of the day was spent honing weapon skills and preparing the Diggers for war.

On their arrival at the Mena training camp, Eric and his mates marvelled at the strange sights, sounds and smells of Egypt. Like most of the Australian soldiers at the camp, Eric had never ventured far from home before embarking on this 'grand adventure'—a sentiment shared by so many when making the decision to voluntarily go to war. He was in awe of the giant pyramids that rose from the sand so close to the camp and when on leave was quick to sample the distractions offered in nearby Cairo. However, he was constantly aware of the uncertainty that lay ahead, but, with his natural youthful enthusiasm, he saw little point in wasting time worrying about the future.



AWM A00429. *The 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division camp at Mena, Egypt.*

Eric remained in Egypt when the rest of the battalion moved out, headed for Gallipoli.<sup>2</sup> When news of the landings—and the heavy casualties suffered by the ANZACs—reached those back at Mena, Eric fumed. He felt as though he was letting his mates down by not being there with them. As he helped to unload the first of the wounded returning from the Peninsula, he choked back tears as he saw their shattered bodies. Among them were young men, who, only a few weeks ago while taking leave, had laughed and joked as they accompanied him on jaunts through the bazaars and amusement establishments of Cairo.

He continually pestered his superiors to be sent to the front and in August 1915 he finally was united with his unit at Gallipoli. He wasted no time launching himself into the thick of battle, joining the older, more experienced Diggers in a campaign of constant harassment, sniping, and bomb-throwing—using missiles

manufactured by the ANZACs from used jam tins filled with bits of scrap metal. Buoyed by his youthful air of indestructibility, Eric was in his element.

The lad was as proud as punch when, a couple of weeks later, he learnt of his promotion to corporal.<sup>2</sup> In the spirit of camaraderie that prevailed in the trenches, the older Diggers jokingly stood to attention as he passed.

Mail call produced a letter from home which informed him that both older brothers had enlisted—Robert in the 13<sup>th</sup> and the eldest, Albert, was a lieutenant in the 20<sup>th</sup> Battalion. ‘God! If all three of us are here on Gallipoli, the poor old Turks won’t stand a chance’, he laughingly told his mates.

Eric had been on the Peninsula for barely a month when he was struck down by sickness. He was evacuated to Malta, but it wasn’t until the following March that Eric was fit enough to rejoin the battalion, which was now back in Egypt, following the successful evacuation of ANZAC in late December 1915.<sup>2</sup>

During a muster parade, Eric heard that the battalion was to be split to help form units of the new 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Divisions of the AIF. Volunteers were also being called for service in the newly formed Imperial Camel Corps.

‘What do you think, Bob? Should we give it a go?’ Eric asked his brother.

But Bob was not a fan of these ‘ships of the desert’ and promptly replied, ‘You can keep your camels, mate, I’m staying here with the battalion’.

Eric decided to remain with the 13<sup>th</sup>, but again sickness struck the young Digger.<sup>2</sup> Whilst in the hospital both his brothers came to see him. ‘Well, mate, this is it. We’re shipping out sometime next week so I guess we’ll see you in France.’

‘Yeah, right, but don’t finish the war until I get there,’ Eric jokingly replied.

In August of that year, the padre visited Eric. ‘I’m sorry, Corporal, but I have some bad news for you. Your brother Robert has been killed at Pozieres.’<sup>3</sup>

‘Is there any news of my other brother Albert, Sir?’ asked Eric.

‘Yes, he’s been slightly wounded but he’s OK. And by the way, he’s been awarded the Military Cross for his actions at Pozieres.’<sup>4</sup>

‘That’s good. Mum’ll be very proud. Thanks, Padre’, Eric replied as he struggled to present a brave front.

‘I know it’s hard but is there anything I can do for you, Eric?’ the Padre asked.

‘No Sir, I’ll be right thanks’, the boy replied.

As the padre left, Eric headed for the orderly room. ‘Eh! Sarge! Do they still need blokes for that camel corps outfit?’



*AWM B01627.  
Australians of the  
Imperial Camel Corps  
lined up on their  
camels.*

On arrival at the camel lines, Eric faced the smelly, slobbering beast that had been assigned to him. 'Well mate, it's going to be you and me in this together, so we might as well be friends right from the word go.'

Eric was a natural soldier and soon after being posted to the corps he was promoted to the rank of sergeant.<sup>2</sup> At the tender age of only 16, Eric reputedly would be the youngest sergeant in the AIF.<sup>1</sup>

Following their success at Romani, the Imperial Camel Corps and their light horse brothers were in hot pursuit of the enemy as they withdrew across northern Sinai. It was just before Christmas 1916 when the Diggers moved into position around the seaside town of El Arish. In the early morning light they moved forward, rifles at the ready, only to find the main enemy force had withdrawn earlier. The remnants of the garrison offered no resistance and were soon rounded up.

For the Desert Column, there was no time to rest. They must now close with and destroy the enemy forces before the Turks had time to prepare their defences. A couple of brigades of light horse headed south towards the fortified village of Maghdaba, while the remainder of the light horse and the camel corps probed up the coast towards the border town of Rafa.

By early January 1917, the Desert Column was poised to strike at Rafa. Eric displayed a cool, calm efficiency, far beyond his years, as he deployed his troop to the south-west of the town. The ensuing battle, which at times went right to the wire, saw the Allied forces prevail. The Column was now in Palestine and rallied for an assault on the vital seaport of Gaza.

Sickness again struck Eric in February 1917, and for weeks his life hung in the balance as a severe fever racked his body.<sup>2</sup> However, this setback may well have been a godsend for Eric as he was unfit to take part in the first and second battles



*AWM P00190.004. Camel Corps crossing the River Jordan on pontoon bridge built by the Australian engineers.*

of Gaza, conflicts which inflicted terrible casualties amongst the units of the Desert Column.

Eric rejoined his cameleers in time to participate in the attack on Beersheba. The Imperial Camel Corps' mission was to act as a blocking force to the north—to cut off any retreat and deny enemy reinforcements access to the town.<sup>5</sup> In a classic eleventh hour charge, regiments of the Australian Light Horse seized the vital wells of Beersheba. After watering their beasts and replenishing their water bottles, the Camel Corps moved out towards Tel el Khuweilfe.

Less than a week later, Eric was informed that his brother Albert had died of wounds suffered during combat on the Western Front.<sup>3</sup>

As the Allied mounted divisions continued their push towards the coast, the Turks fought a fierce rearguard action. The light horsemen and cameleers were equal to the task as they moved closer to their prime objective and the jewel in the crown of the desert campaign—Jerusalem.

Just as Eric was preparing to celebrate his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, he was notified by his company commander that he had been promoted to staff sergeant.<sup>2</sup>

In the meantime, unbeknown to Eric, his mother had written to Army Headquarters back home in Australia and implored the authorities to remove Eric from active duty. In a heartfelt letter, she explained how she had already lost two sons

and Eric was her only surviving child. Her request was denied, the authorities stating, 'There are no distressful circumstances surrounding the case'.<sup>3</sup>

As the tempo of the desert campaign escalated, it was found that the camels were too slow to keep up so the decision was made to disband the corps. The cameleers were not happy that they would be separated from their four-legged 'friends'. However, their performance as members of the Camel Corps was something of which they could all be proud and they were confident they were equal to the challenges that lay ahead when they took up their new postings with the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiments.<sup>5</sup>

The ANZAC troopers endured a scorching summer as the campaign progressed across the Jordan Valley. As well as the intolerable heat, the Diggers had to exist on a diet of greasy bully beef and stinking water from Arab wells, but they had the enemy on the run and were determined to maintain the pressure—unsatisfactory living conditions were of little consequence.

In early October 1918, Eric's regiment was assembled on parade and advised that those who had enlisted in 1914 would be sent home to Australia on furlough. Eric knew he met the criteria to go home, but felt to leave now would be letting his mates down. He then considered his Mum and how much it would mean to her to know he was safe back home. With that thought in mind, he got out his kit bag and started to pack his gear.

Before leaving the regiment, and still a month shy of 19, Eric was promoted to Warrant Officer Class Two.<sup>2</sup>

Amid the streamers being thrown by the enthusiastic well-wishers and to the loud music being played by the band on the pier, Eric strode down the gangway of the troopship *Devon* as she docked in Sydney. Waiting for him was his mother—dressed in black and looking much older than Eric remembered her. He wasted no time pushing through the crowd to reach her. She hugged Eric with an intensity that not only showed the delight she felt at seeing her youngest boy, but displayed the magnitude of the grief she felt for the two sons who would never return.

Eric was discharged as medically unfit on 16 December 1918.<sup>2</sup>



After the war, Eric married his sweetheart, Marjory, and the couple took up farming on the outskirts of Windsor in New South Wales. They had five children, three boys and two girls—the eldest boy was named Robert, in memory of one of Eric's brothers.<sup>3</sup>

The family tried to work the land through the difficult years of the Depression, but the venture was unsuccessful. Subsequently, Eric sought work as a commercial traveller and moved his family to the Sydney suburb of Kingsford.



A little more than twenty years after the signing of the Armistice and the end of the Great War, Germany again was engaged in acts of aggression on her European neighbours. By September 1939, Australia was once more at war.

In June 1940, Eric marched into the barracks at Paddington to enlist for service in the 2<sup>nd</sup> AIF. He was allocated to the Army Service Corps and posted to the 1<sup>st</sup> Corps Ammunition Sub Park.<sup>6</sup> He soon settled back into the routine of army life and in August of that year he was made acting corporal. His unit embarked for the Middle East on the 14 September 1940 and a month later arrived at Haifa, a large Mediterranean seaport in northwest Israel. Eric was promoted to substantive corporal in November 1940.<sup>6</sup>

By the beginning of April 1941, German forces had advanced through the Balkans and were poised to invade Greece. The Australian 6<sup>th</sup> Division joined an Allied force sent to help bolster the depleted Greek Army—in a vain attempt to help stem the German tide.

Ammunition was desperately required at the front, and there was a sense of urgency as Eric tied down the tarpaulin on the last of the boxes being loaded onto the truck. The Luftwaffe had command of the skies and the main supply route was under constant observation. To get through, the convoy would have to take



AWM 007849. Greece, April 1941. The result of bombing.

their chances and run the gauntlet of enemy bombardment. The trucks hurried along the main road, spread out to avoid presenting a massed target to air or artillery attack.

Suddenly they saw them—in the distance, mere black dots against the cloudless sky. As they came closer, the Diggers could identify the bent, gull-like wings of Stukas, the deadly enemy dive-bombers. The drivers pressed the accelerators flat to the floor, in a vain attempt to outrun the aircraft and reach the safety of the mountain passes. Some made it, but others were caught in the open.

The drivers did their best to take evasive action to dodge the bombs, but it was useless. As Eric's truck careered at breakneck speed along the roadway, a bomb detonated directly in front of it. The vehicle ended up overturned in a ditch beside the road. Soldiers sheltering nearby struggled to free the driver and passenger from the wreck, but as they pulled the corporal from the cabin they realised that their efforts were in vain.

Eric's exploits of courage and determination, despite age, illness and personal loss, provide a shining example of the mettle of Australian youth in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet having survived the duration and ravages of the First World War, he again stood up to be counted when Australians were called upon to serve King and country in the Second World War. Sadly, Eric was not so lucky second time around.

Corporal Noel Eric Bolton-Wood was laid to rest in the Phaleron War Cemetery in Athens, Greece.<sup>3</sup>

---

#### Notes

- 1 Bolton-Wood family, interviews with the author, August 2000
- 2 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records 1910 WO2 NE Bolton-Wood
- 3 Connell W & Williams J, *For Your Tomorrow, We Gave Our Today*, City of Penrith RSL, 1999
- 4 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 5 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume VII, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 6 National Archives of Australia: WW2 Service Records NX31822 Corporal NE Bolton-Wood