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Life

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Thomas, 21, killed first week

By **PETER MCLADY**

PRIVATE Thomas William Marstella met an untimely end just one week after landing at Gallipoli.

The Tenterfield-born boy served with the 6th Reinforcements of the 15th Battalion A.I.F, who had the misfortune to land at Gallipoli just four days before the Allies began their second attempt to seize the Dardanelles.

Thomas was reported as wounded and missing in action on August 9, 1915 but his death on this day was not formally acknowledged until April 1916 following a Court of Inquiry held in Egypt.

Thomas' time at the front had lasted just one week.

Thomas was born in Tenterfield to Elijah and Agnes Marstella.

Agnes died in 1897 and Elijah remarried Mary Agnes Marstella in 1898. Elijah died in September 1914.

Thomas' older brother Frederick served with No. 4 Australian Driver Supply Column in France during the First World War.

Frederick survived the war and returned home to live in the Stanthorpe area.

Thomas, aged 21, enlisted in Stanthorpe on March 19, 1915. He gave mining as his trade and his stepmother Mary as next-of-kin, who was then living at Ballandean.

He departed overseas on active service from Brisbane aboard HMAS Karoola on June 12, 1915.

Together with the rest of the 6th Reinforcements, he joined the 15th Battalion on the Gallipoli Peninsula on August 2, 1915.

Thomas was among 20 battalions of reinforcements that landed at Gallipoli in preparation for the August offensive that was planned to begin on the afternoon of August 6, 1915.

The 4th Australian Infantry Brigade was made up of the 13th, 14th, 15th, and 16th Battalions.

The objective of the offensive for the 4th Brigade was to capture Hill 971, which was the summit of the Abdel Rahman Bair mountain range.

The plan called for the 4th Brigade to take up the extreme left position of the advance. They moved up the beach from Anzac Cove and then headed towards the last spur of the Abdel Rahman Bair range. At this point the 13th and 14th Battalions were to head north and form a series of outposts.

The 15th and 16th Battalions were to attack at Abdel Rahman Bair and then follow the crest of the spur all the way to the top of



TOO YOUNG TO DIE: Private Thomas Marstella has no known grave but he is remembered on the Lone Pine Memorial at Gallipoli.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



The Lone Pine memorial at Gallipoli.

the main range, Hill 971.

The 15th Battalion began their attack on the night of August 6. They moved through territory that should have been cleared of enemy troops. This was not the case and the 15th Battalion came under heavy fire.

Throughout the night, the 15th faced tough resistance and at times was engaged in fierce hand-to-hand fighting.

In his book, History of the 15th Battalion, Lieutenant Thomas Chataway wrote, "The enemy appeared to be in parties of 20 to 30, and as the country was very broken and very steep, their well-hidden rifleman had clear warning and ample time to train their weapons upon the advancing scouts."

The 15th Battalion suffered many casualties and by day break the advance had ground to a

halt.

Chataway wrote, "What deeds of heroism were performed before the light of day will never now be known."

The following day, the 15th Battalion dug in to consolidate the ground they had won. This was exhausting work, with the troops constantly under enemy fire.

Then, in the early hours of August 8, the order came for the assault to recommence.

Chataway wrote, "There was no action upon Gallipoli Peninsula, excepting, perhaps, the landing itself, which paralleled the attack by the Fourth Brigade upon the heights of Abdel Rahman Bair on the morning of August 8.

"When a disaster of such appalling magnitude occurs as that which befell the 4th Brigade on the morning of

the 8th, it is impossible to obtain a true picture of the scene. Their first line of men were sitting, the second kneeling, and as the spur got steeper, the lines of men stood up and fired over one another.

"It enabled them to bring about eight or nine lines of rifle fire to bear upon us. Up to this time, it was the worst rifle fire I had ever experienced in the open. We had a lot of 6th Reinforcements with us, but I must say that I never saw men show finer courage."

According to the 15th Battalion's War Diary, the battalion suffered many casualties in this fighting.

One hundred men were confirmed killed in action, 188 were wounded, and a further 102 wounded and missing in action. One of the men reported as missing in action was Thomas.

It appears Thomas' family

was first informed that he had been wounded in action. A telegram was sent to Mary Agnes Marstella at Ballandean on September 14, 1915 saying: "Regret Private T.W. Marstella wounded between August 7 and 8, not reported seriously, no other particulars available, will immediately advise anything further received."

Thomas' family was understandably keen to find out more information and so on October 16, 1915, Frederick Marstella wrote to Army Base Records asking "Could you give me any information as to the extent of the wounds of Private T.W. Marstella No. 2166 6th Reinforcements 4th Infantry Brigade (Queensland) wounded about August 8, last. Also his present address would be much appreciated."

Frederick received a prompt reply on October 24, 1915 from the Officer in Charge of Base Records.

The Officer wrote "... it is regretted the name of the hospital in which No. 2166 Private Thomas William Marstella, 15th Battalion, is located and the nature of his wound are not at present known here. He is not

reported as seriously wounded and Egypt advises in the absence of further details, it is to be assumed all such cases are progressing satisfactorily. Next of kin will be promptly advised upon receipt of any later information."

It appears that Thomas' family was left to believe that he had been wounded, but not seriously, and that he was recovering in an unknown hospital.

The grim reality was revealed in Thomas' Red Cross File where there was a statement from Private J.C. Hackett of the 15th Battalion, regarding Thomas and two other men.

"I knew them very well. They were in camp with me at Enoggera, Queensland, and came over with me on the Karoola in the 6th. Reinf to the 15th Batt. They were killed on August 8 at Sari Bahr. I did not see them but men of the Battalion informed me of their deaths that same day. They were my best cobbers and I made inquiries for them, I am sure they were knocked that day," he said.

Thomas' service record does not reveal when his family was finally informed of his unfortunate death.

WHO WAS HE...

- Name: Thomas William Marstella.
- Rank: Private.
- Service Number: 2166.
- Unit: 15th Battalion.
- Date of Death: August 9, 1915.
- Memorial: Lone Pine Memorial, Gallipoli.