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B. Foss Leach***



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SAYING SO DOESN'T MAKE IT SO

PAPERS IN HONOUR OF B. FOSS LEACH

**Edited by
Douglas G. Sutton**

**New Zealand Archaeological Association
Monograph 17**

Anthropologist at War

Roger Fyfe

Taranaki Museum, New Plymouth

INTRODUCTION

This paper is the personal story of Lance-Corporal H. D. Skinner (8/1837, D. Company, Otago Battalion, 4th Reinforcements, N.Z.E.F.) at war. It has been compiled from letters written while convalescing from wounds received at Gallipoli on August 9th, 1915 and from his father's diaries. ¹

Dear People,

I am going to try to give you my impression of three days and nights fighting against the Turks. If I seem to dwell on the terrible remember that it is that which attracts one's attention and sticks in the memory. And nothing I can say will convey one thousandth part of the horror of reality. I know too that in other parts of the world all kinds of charitable acts were being done. But what I want to put down is my impression of the fighting (Henry Devenish Skinner, St Davids hospital, Malta, August 18th, 1915)

In the last days of July 1914 the immediate prospect of war was greeted with widespread patriotic enthusiasm by the New Zealand public. On August 4th Britain declared war on Germany. On the 7th the New Zealand Government cabled the Imperial Government offering an Expeditionary Force, the services of which were accepted by Imperial authorities on the 12th.

Service to King, Empire and country was a tenet of New Zealand society and young men, fired with a mixture of patriotism and a sense of adventure, clamoured to enlist. On October 16th the first convoy of 8,574 troops left Wellington, to rendezvous with a larger Australian contingent. The New Zealanders, at least, mistakenly understood their destination to be England. Harry (Henry Devenish) Skinner (H.D.S.), then a school teacher, was soon to join their ranks.

On December 2nd, Harry's sister Irene sent a telegram from the family home in Napier to their father, William (then Commissioner of Crown Lands, Napier), who was away on business at Tarawera, saying "Harry enlisted passed medical test" (Telegram enclosed with William H. Skinner's (W.H.S.) diary, 1914).

With sentiments tempered by the implications of war, William Skinner wrote in his diary:

This was a bit of a shock to me. Knowing what this might mean to all of us. So many things might happen, & as a matter of fact have happened to many we know, or know of fighting in this dreadful war. However we are in God's hands & it is plainly the duty

of all young able and fit men, to defend their country at such a time, so we must bear it trusting that He will shield him and bring him back to us in safety. (W.H.S. Diary 2 December 1914)

No alternative was offered by the nation's politicians, press or even its parsons.

Harry, accompanied by Eva Gibbs, his future wife, visited friends and family in New Plymouth and Napier, while awaiting Defence Department instructions to present himself. The telegram appeared on January 20th, 1915 and Harry, then aged 27, arrived at Trentham Camp, Upper Hutt, on the 24th.

On April 17th, after three months training, the 4th Reinforcements embarked for the Front. Margin notes in William Skinner's diary that day indicate that after marching through Wellington, Harry and others from the 4th went aboard the *Willochra* during the afternoon and, accompanied by two other transports, left the Harbour before midnight (W.H.S. Diary 17 April 1915).

The same secrecy surrounded the movements of the 4th as had shrouded the 1st contingent. William Skinner noted in his diary on May 28th that the "Government advised by cable today that the 4th Reinforcements had arrived safely at their destination all well nothing said re place" (W.H.S. Diary 28 May 1915). The riddle however would not have been hard to solve because on April 25th, just eight days after the 4th embarked, Australian and New Zealand troops landed at ANZAC cove, the French at Kum Kale and the British at Cape Helles. Winston Churchill, then First Lord of the Admiralty, planned to seize control of the Dardanelles from the Turks and open the Straits to the battleships of the Royal Navy using an army of 70,000 men. On April 29th, New Zealand newspapers broke news of the heroic landings at ANZAC Cove.

The New Zealanders' camp was in the desert at Zeitoun on the outskirts of Heliopolis, about six miles from Cairo. In Egypt few of the young soldiers' thoughts were preoccupied with war, but, unlike most, Harry Skinner was not attracted by the delights of Cairo. The storerooms of the National Museum and the collections of pre-Dynastic stone tools had greater appeal for him (Freeman and Geddes 1959: 12).

Harry was obviously a regular correspondent. His father's diary (July 15th) notes the receipt via Eva of a "journal" letter giving accounts of the approach to Aden and the trip up the Red Sea. A more important entry mentions a letter dated May 28th from Egypt in which Harry says he is about to leave for the Front in two days time (W.H.S. Diary 15 July 1915). Harry's next correspondence arrived on an "active service" postcard dated June 5th and, despite the efforts of the censor, the family deciphered the address as "Base Army Post Office, Lemnos" (W.H.S. Diary 22 July 1915). It was from Mudros Harbour on this Greek Island that previous landings at Gallipoli had been dispatched. The 4th Reinforcements were no exception; they went ashore at ANZAC Cove on June 7th, 1915.

ACTIVE SERVICE

By the time the 4th Reinforcements arrived the campaign had become a bloody stalemate. Each side had fought the other into exhaustion and each needed time to reorganize. The original plan of the ANZAC landing had been to seize a beach-head before dawn, land more troops and expand the perimeter, then finally, the Australian and New Zealand Division would drive across the Peninsula, severing Turkish communications and their retreat (Pugsley 1984: 110).

The stalemate of the Western Front and the need to appease Russian requests for assistance against Turkish attacks in the Caucasus helped convince the British cabinet of the merit of a front in the Mediterranean. The original plan was to use battleships to batter Turkish forts guarding the Dardanelles Straits, steam to Constantinople and force Turkish surrender. By the end of February 1915 the outer defences had been bombarded and small parties of Marines landed against light opposition, successfully destroying large numbers of guns. The high loss of life on these same beaches two months later was almost certainly a result of these attacks which alerted the Turks to British intentions. On March 18th warships of the French and Royal Navies tried unsuccessfully to force the Narrows and subdue the inner forts. It was now felt necessary to commit soldiers in what would be the first large amphibious operation against a defended shore in over a century.

Because of the proximity of Turkish reinforcements, surprise and the ability to advance rapidly and seize objectives before the defenders could react was to have been the essence of the ANZAC success. The Royal Navy however delivered a fatal blow to hopes of success by landing the Force on an unnamed beach some two kilometres north of their intended landing site, which offered some 1300 metres of lightly defended beach and a relatively rapid route across low foothills, then passage up ridge lines to the objectives. None of those advantages existed at ANZAC Cove. The beach was only as wide as a cricket pitch and the deeply dissected slopes of the Sari Bair Range rose steeply, immediately behind the beach. The unanticipated landscape threw both the landing plan and military organization into chaos and allowed a much smaller Turkish force time to reinforce. Despite much valour in both attack and defence, the ANZAC advance was halted, and then driven back with tremendous loss of life on both sides. The landing was almost threatened with disaster. Turkish shell and machine-gun fire reached the beach and continued to do so throughout the remainder of the campaign. The Turkish forces held a distinct tactical advantage, vastly superior artillery and their snipers caused constant havoc. Under continual fire the ANZACS held a tenuous foothold, were severely hampered by logistic problems, especially water shortage, and suffered wholly inadequate medical support that continued to cause unnecessary suffering and loss of life. Such was the chaos that no accurate casualty figures were available for weeks.

Conditions could not have been worse. Never had 20,000 troops been committed to such a small wedge of inhospitable ground. Both wounded and dead lay untreated or unburied, death and putrefaction were everywhere. Despite an armistice on May 24th to bury the dead, conditions continued to deteriorate, swarms of flies flourished as did fleas, lice and ticks. Troops could only bathe if they had access to the beach; even then they were exposed to shellfire. The latrines were inadequate, dysentery commonplace, the diet nutritionally deficient and soon almost as many men required treatment for illness as for wounds.

When the 4th Reinforcements arrived in June the New Zealand troops had gradually taken over the line held by the remnants of the 4th Australian Brigade. Different New Zealand units were to rotate every eight days. In this way the Otagos (Skinner's Unit) alternated with Wellington at the infamous "Courtney's Post" (Byrne 1921: 141).

Courtney's had only one redeeming feature; it was the only post on the "Second Ridge" that actually overlooked the Turkish line. There its virtues ended. It was perched precariously close to the edge of "Monash Gully", was very cramped, lacked shade and the dead were buried throughout the earthworks. Either side perpetually manoeuvred to destroy opposing trenches, snipers were constantly vigilant for the incautious and hand-grenades

were an ever present danger. The latter undoubtedly caused the greatest casualties. The Turks seemingly had an endless supply of German manufacture, while the ANZACS could only retaliate with “do-it-yourself” equivalents fashioned from jam tins or whatever else was available. When not in the “firing line” Skinner and the other Otagos were committed to fatigue duties, digging roads, trenches and carrying rations, water and ammunition to the forward positions (Pugsley 1984: 241).

The official Otago Regimental history notes that:

... on June 9th, Reinforcements, the 4th, were received to the number of 4 officers and 239 other ranks. Owing to the reduced strength of the Regiment these were urgently required. There was a daily toll of casualties even under what might be regarded, in a comparative sense only, as normal conditions. (Byrne 1921: 42)

The “routine” was soon to be shattered. A plan, first conceived in May, to attack the left flank at night and again assault the heights of Sari Bair Range, was soon to be put into operation. Unfortunately the Turks had detected the increased interest since May and had reinforced the slopes with numerous new trenches. The troops were not told of the planned attack until August 5th and it is here that Harry Skinner’s narrative proper begins.

On the afternoon of Thursday, August 5th, Ellis [8/2264 Private Sydney Robert Ellis, Otago Infantry Regiment, Died Wounds, Gallipoli, 8/8/1915] and I sorted and packed our belongings and tidied the bivouac in “Monash Valley” which had been more of a home to us than any other place in the nine weeks since we had landed. . . The bivouac was a rectangular pit about four feet deep, the back wall being undercut for the better protection of our heads when lying down. It measured 7’ × 8’ and it had on the bank beside it a fire place over which grew some shrubs. (H.D.S. Letter 18 August 1915) [Parentheses Mine]

News of the coming battle was received with mixed feelings and Skinner, at least, objectively calculated his chances of surviving the offensive:

I computed our respective chances for the ensuing action. I put them at 2 to 1 one of us would be wounded and 3 to 1 against either being killed. That is I thought there would be 50% casualties, 17% being killed. (H.D.S. Letter 18 August 1915)

The advance was to be supported by an elaborate series of feints and executed in two stages. The lower slopes were to be seized in a silent night bayonet attack that included the Maori contingent, making way for two columns to thrust towards the higher ground. It was an ambitious plan that placed great demands on tired troops. It was estimated that it would take six hours to reach the crest in the dark, and that the dawn of August 7th would find ANZAC troops secure on the heights (Pugsley 1984: 271). The Australian objective was to seize “971” or Koja Chemen Tepe and Hill Q. The New Zealanders were to capture Chunuk Bair (see Figure 1).

To conceal the buildup, troops moved only at night and lay low by day.

Night came, beautifully clear, rifle fire grew brisker, and we marched off. I carried 220 rounds, my iron ration, a shirt, pair of socks, shaving gear, and such extra food as I could cram into pockets and haversack, we marched down the winding sap past the shadowy water tanks to the beach, then north among the stacks of stores and ammunition, into the sap again. On our left was the sea, on our right the group of hills one slope of which we had held since the beginning and the peak of which—Hill 971—we were to capture.

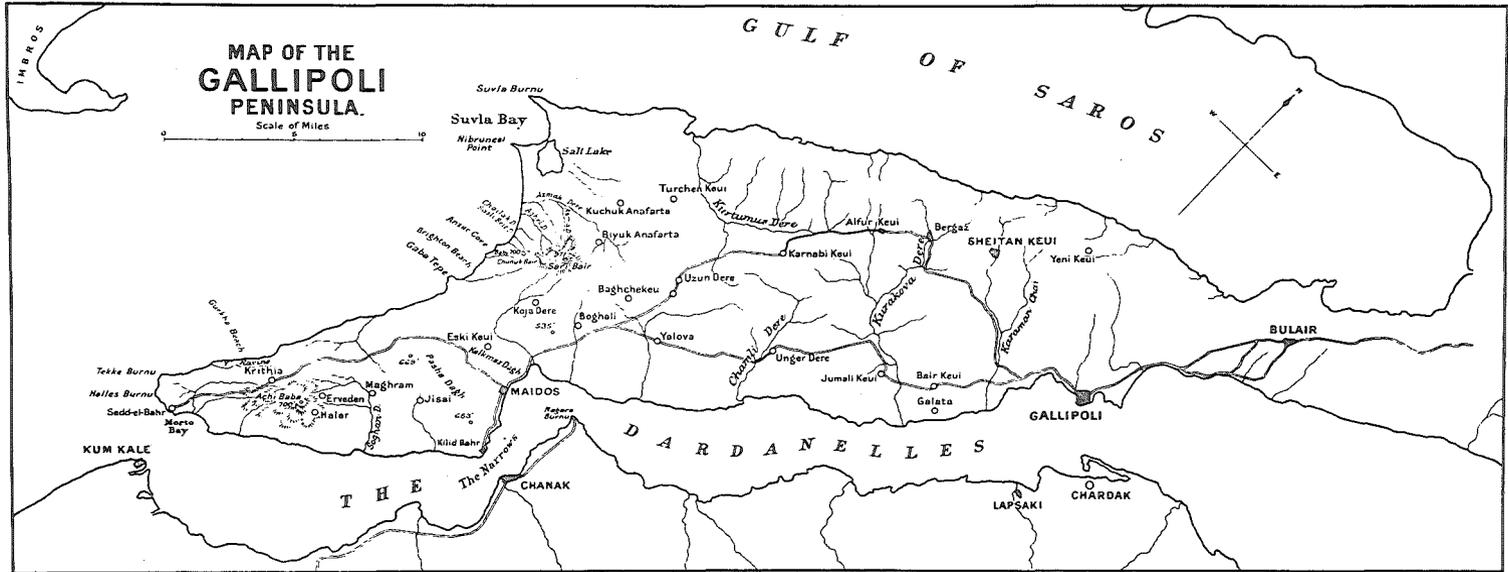


Figure 1: The Gallipoli Peninsula, from Byrne 1921).

Towards dawn we camped in a little valley (Happy Valley) . . . a German Taube flew over us but we lay still under the scrub and it did not see us. In the morning I went up with the water bottles of our section to the tanks on Walker's Ridge a terrible climb in the heat. As we stood in a long que the bullets began to drop about us aimed at some officers on the bank above us and Kelly [8/1390 Corporal Robert Kelly, Otago Infantry Regiment, killed in action, Gallipoli, 6/8/1915] a Corporal in D Company was struck and fell dead. (H.D.S. Letter 18 August 1915) [Parentheses Mine].

Although aware he would be engaged in a bloody offensive that night Skinner had the inclination to indulge in some idle sightseeing:

I looked out of a loophole at the glorious landscape spread out below—the slopes held partly by our dismounteds and partly by Turks, the green flats, the salt lake, the low range of hills forming the northern edge of the peninsula, and the Gulf of Saros. (H.D.S.: Letter 18 August 1915)

THE BATTLE FOR CHUNUK BLAIR

At 4.30 p.m. on August 6th the first of the diversions started with an artillery and naval barrage, followed by yet another enormously costly Australian attack on the Turkish trenches at Lone Pine. The main attacks were to start about 10 p.m.

After dark we fell-in in the dry creek bed and scrambled down into the sap. It was a still starry night. As we approached our post the rifle fire increased and bombs came from the hill on our right. The sap ended and we lay down on the flat at the foot of the hills. Two search lights were playing from the destroyers off Suvla Bay . . . We moved off in a file stumbling over tussocks and stones, slid down into a nullah and wheeled to the right. We had been under fire since leaving the sap. Our work was now to advance up a long valley and to hold the shoulders of "971" by dawn. The mounteds were to sweep up the spur on our right and another detachment (Wellington) to do the same on our left. We crept through a gap cut by our engineers in the barbed wire entanglement and stood confused in the dark amongst the stubble of a little field . . . and the Turkish trench spitting fire at us less than a hundred yards ahead . . . someone shouted "Charge" and we rushed forward yelling. I was about the middle of the line but the fellows bunched away from me to each flank and I was charging by myself. In my right hand I held my rifle with fixed bayonet in my left my precious spade. The Turks blazed at us until we were right on top of them. Then my legs suddenly melted and I was thrown on my face. I got up again and found I had been tripped up by the soft earth thrown out the trench. I left my spade, jumped into the trench and ran down with others towards the right. We ran over the body of a Turk who was wedged into the bottom playing possum. Those on the left shouted that there were Turks in the river bed and there was much rushing about and stumbling. The Turk got up and screamed for mercy. One of our wounded was calling out. On the left Ellis was mortally wounded. . . Sergt. Smith [8/1338 Sergeant Wilford King Smith, Otago Infantry Regiment, killed in action, Gallipoli 8/8/15] was also mortally wounded. McGaw got a bullet through the shoulder and there were others.

A party of bomb-throwers ran forward and took the second trench without opposition which was a good thing as the bombs were a failure. (H.D.S. Letter 18 August 1915)

I do not think I have told you that all our work had to be done with bayonet. We had been forbidden to load or fire a single round. A great black sugar-loaf hill disentangled itself

from the black mass on our right and from about half way up it we were halted, right turned and ordered to take the hill. The scrub was like a barbed wire entanglement only pitch black and denser. I made a mighty effort to be first at the top, but first, contrary to orders, I loaded my magazine in case I should run into a party of the enemy. I could hear twigs cracking in my right but not on my left. Then in a little glade I stumbled on a Turk. Whether he had been killed by shell fire or bayonet I do not know, but he lay huddled there and the sight was encouraging. Then came a steep bare slope with three dead Turks and beyond it our fellows streaming up a good road to the summit. (H.D.S. Letter 27 August 1915)

The plan however was starting to go astray. Confusion, inevitable in darkness, was causing delays and the advance slowed. Skinner was beginning to have doubts:

I lost my company and acted on the hurried orders of an official to dig in before dawn. By dawn according to the General's plan, we should have been dug in on Sari Bair (Hill 971) but we were so far off that it was impossible. Gus Levitt joined me and we heard Major Stephens shouting orders to Otago. So we plunged down into a deep gully in the half light and got in touch though Canterbury and Otago seemed inextricably mixed . . . It was daylight when we came out on the upper slopes where the open spaces were continuous. Then a cheer rolled along our front and we surged forward, anyhow, over the Turkish trench. Our part of it was quite empty. Then we stumbled up the steep slope of Rhododendron Hill to the summit line and began to dig in. (H.D.S. Letter 27 August 1915)

The dawn attack had faltered. For a variety of reasons the New Zealand attack had vacillated from 6.00 a.m. onwards on Rhododendron Ridge, 400 metres below Chunuk Bair, while the crest itself was almost deserted. The feint at Lone Pine had successfully siphoned away Turkish reinforcements (Pugsley 1984: 282). The New Zealand units now had to face a day of relentless and ever increasing Turkish fire as they struggled to dig even the most rudimentary cover on the exposed slopes.

Skinner's experience would be typical:

Bullets began to fly thicker and thicker coming from all sides except the direct rear, so I left the firing line to dig their trench and slipped back to dig a bivouac or shelter pit. I dug one deep enough to shelter my head and body but not my legs, a work involving time and energy. Then came the order—"Otago men to the left". As my dugout was on the right, I sorrowfully abandoned it and plodded off. Rhododendron Hill is somewhat conical so that very little movement towards the left brought Otago round the slope facing the Turks. Foreseeing this I disobeyed orders for a second time, and moved only half way round. By this time the Turks must have rallied and reinforcements must have poured in though not one could be seen on the slopes about us. Bullets whisked in a continuous shower. The wonder is that anyone lived at all. I lay down in a little hollow in the steep hillside and began to dig a bivouac. The hollow lay in a natural lane through the scrub which was picked up by a Turkish machine-gun. In no time they bagged ten or a dozen of our men as Otago streamed back across it from a position that was nothing less than suicide . . . I was hit in the ribs by a spent bullet which did not penetrate my shirt. This has happened several times now, but generally as the result of ricochets or shrapnel. (H.D.S. Letter 26 September 1915)

Medical support had improved little during the campaign, stretchers and bearers were still in hopelessly short supply. In any case it was impossible to evacuate wounded from

such a remote and vulnerable position in daylight. The men simply did the best they could. Skinner was one of those who tried to help:

I went out to bandage the wounded in the lane. Some had moved off, two were already bandaged, the dead lay about. A man was shouting and I went down to him. He was shot through the brain and was smothered in blood from which rose the invariable stench. Another fellow was busy on him and I gave a hand, as fast as we bandaged him he tore it off. We gave it up and left him to writhe there in the sun . . . Occasionally a wounded crawled by, making downhill for doctor or bearers. (H.D.S. Letter 26 September 1915)

During the afternoon of the 7th the Otago units were ordered to fall back into reserve with their place in the firing line being taken by Canterbury. It was at this point Skinner realized he had lost his tunic:

In the night attack we had worn on the back two patches of white calico for identification . . . I had taken off my tunic as being too conspicuous and now had lost it. With it went my last letters from Eva and home, my letter of credit, my letters from Dr Thomson and odds and ends. (H.D.S. Letter 26 September 1915)

The troops who had been in action since the previous evening refilled water bottles, had a meal and caught any sleep they could while relatively sheltered from Turkish fire. Sunday 8th was spent improving their temporary camp with earthworks. During this exercise, Skinner's thoughts were taken far from the field of battle.

. . . I struck what I thought to be a relic of the Stone Age, a grooved pebble, apparently a weight of some kind. I had a good laugh and put it in my haversack. (H.D.S. Letter 5 October 1915)

The rest ended that evening and beneath the cover of darkness the Otagos went to relieve the Wellington Battalion who, in bitter battles during the preceding night and day, had captured and held on grimly, with mounting casualties, to Chunuk Bair. After months of fighting, the goal of the Covering Force on the first day had been taken. The Turkish grip on the Dardanelles was finally threatened on the morning of August 8th and they reacted strongly. In a nightmare of a day two Turkish regiments were committed to drive the ANZACS from the crest of Chunuk Bair. Of the 760 of the Wellington Battalion who had captured Chunuk Bair that morning, there were only 70 unwounded or slightly wounded left (Pugsley 1984: 304).

Skinner's thoughts on the subject were shared by many of those who were lucky enough to survive:

Where were the twenty-thousand men to push home the attack and finish the war on the peninsula at a stroke? We were the sick and weary dribble on whom the task fell. There you have the history of the campaign in epitome. (H.D.S. Letter 5 October 1915)

Skinner's unit reached the front line about 10.30 p.m.

They had been bombed out of their fire trench and were holding on in the reserve trench on the reserve slope. Into this tiny furrow with its fringe of the dead who had been heaved out to make room for the living came the Otago Infantry. (H.D.S. Letter 5 October 1915)

During the day, much of the crest of Chunuk Bair came under increasingly heavy enfilading fire from either flank and was abandoned in favour of the reserve trenches behind

the crest. The new position too was vulnerable, the Turkish troops being able to throw grenades into the line from behind the shelter of the crest. It was a miracle that the line held.

On arrival the reinforcements set about improving the trenches. About twenty yards to his right Skinner noticed a little fire, which he thought must have been attracting Turkish attention.

I decided to crawl forward and put it out, and Gus for some unknown reason insisted on coming too. I passed the word that I was going down the Auckland lines a dozen times and heard it go. Then I went out on hands and knees, Gus with me. I found the fire was a dead man burning. His middle was burnt away and the flames lit up the clenched fists and wild eyes staring at the stars. Bang went a rifle in our lines, fifteen yards away and the bullet kicked the earth between my knees and hands ricocheting by Gus's cheek! That will show you what our nerves were like. (H.D.S. Letter 5 October 1915)

The Otagos did not have long to wait for a Turkish attack:

At midnight the Turks began the general debate which always precedes a charge. As they were beyond the crest we could hear all that was said. At length the shout of "Allah" grew into a roar and they charged. All we saw of them was a scattered flashing of rifles, ten yards or so above us which vanished under our "magazine rapid". Then out of the dark came staggering and shouting a wounded New Zealander who stopped one of our own bullets before he established his identity . . . Away on the left the Maoris were chanting a haka and calling the Turks to come on. (H.D.S. Letter 5 October 1915)

Although Skinner made no mention of it in his letter he later confirmed that he met his anthropological colleague at war, Peter Buck, who was serving with the Maori contingent (Condliffe 1971: 132).

In the midst of battle, confusion and darkness the troops seemed to accept as inevitable that they would occasionally be fired upon by their comrades, but this acceptance was never extended to their own artillery:

Then a search light from a warship away below us turned full glare on us and then the lyddite came. The shell comes screaming by, plunges into the earth—whuff—and explodes with a sound like the sudden tearing up of forests by the roots. And the bombardment was aimed at us! We crouched cursing in the bottom of the trench. The shells hit to our left and none of the men killed were in our platoon. A man went back to the telephone and the guns ceased. (H.D.S. Letter 5 October 1915)

Much of the rest of the night was spent preparing for the inevitable dawn attack and the artillery and sniper fire that accompanied daylight.

I got out and stripped the dead bodies of their equipment. Their sandbags we filled and built up round the end of our trench to prevent enfilade; their haversacks we turned to like purpose. I divided the food and tobacco among those around us and Gus cleaned a couple of the abandoned rifles and fired at shadowy figures on the skyline. I went up the bombed-out part of our trench and got some more sand-bags and a pick and spade. (H.D.S. Letter 8 October 1915)

The Turkish artillery was able to direct fire into the rear of the Otago trenches on Chunuk Bair from positions towards Suvla Bay and at dawn the shelling recommenced.

An officer came up to the rear parapet of our trench and asked us some question. There was a stunning concussion as we were wrapped in pink flame. We all collapsed and then scrambled to our feet again, each expecting to see the others blown to bits, but no one had a scratch. A shrapnel shell had burst over our heads. (H.D.S. Letter 8 October 1915)

With the first light also came the first attack on the trench.

Over the skyline some seventy yards away walked a Turkish officer in khaki, bearded, stout and crowned with a conical elongated cap that has taken the place of the fez. I fired some four shots at him, but they all missed! He was examining ground, pointing here and there and speaking to men who were lying unseen behind him. Then a score of Turks with bayonets fixed rushed out along a spur which formed a salient to our right. We opened rapid fire and they fell flat among the herbage. Then came a bomb and then another and then they came flying over the crest thick and fast. Our trench had no protection to prevent them rolling in, and would have been a death-trap had the Turks known. I jumped out and lay on the bank behind where Gus joined me. On the left the line wavered and broke, the men crowding out of the trenches. Shouts and orders brought them back. They were the unfortunates who had got the full blast of the lyddite. The line pulled itself together, steadied and opened a blast of fire on the skyline. The Turkish bayonet attack never matured. (H.D.S. Letter 8 October 1915)

Soon afterwards Skinner was wounded for the first time that day.

A Turkish shell burst in the air a hundred yards away. The group of us, now in the open behind our trench looked up and someone cried "Look Out". A black speck, growing magically in size, flew into our midst, grazing the outer side of my left thigh a little above the knee and scarcely drawing blood. It was a perforated iron disc called a diaphragm, weighing a pound or so. (H.D.S. Letter 8 October 1915)

Although slight in comparison with a head wound Skinner was to receive later that same day, it was ironically the spread of infection from this leg wound that eventually caused the greatest discomfort.

As the day wore on, the vulnerability and suffering of those in the trenches increased. They were "cut-off" from reinforcements and supplies. "Here were we, men falling all about, wounded men groaning, water and food run out . . ." (H.D.S. Letter 18 August 1915). Turkish fire continued to increase in volume and effectiveness and many were wounded a second and third time.

The predicament of those pinned on Chunuk Bair is clearly recorded in a sketch plan (Figure 2) and in descriptions made by Skinner.

This plan, which has no pretensions at all to scale, gives some idea of the lay of the land immediately in our rear. [See Fig. 2]. A triangle of flat land enclosed by two gullies stretched down from us, its apex pointing (about 2/3 mile away) rearwards. At the apex was a knoll from which two ridges ran back enclosing our Reserve Gully. Early in the morning the Turks placed men and guns to sweep the triangle from the left, while snipers cross fired from the right front. A sniper, perhaps two, crept down the spur to the spot marked on our left. The distance between him and me was about 70 yards. Thence he began to pick off one by one, the men on my right. All along the line on the right the fellows lay in dugouts that had not been joined to form a trench and were absolutely open to enfilade. So he picked them off at leisure. I asked three officers (one of them twice) if we could not dig him out with the bayonet. He was only a

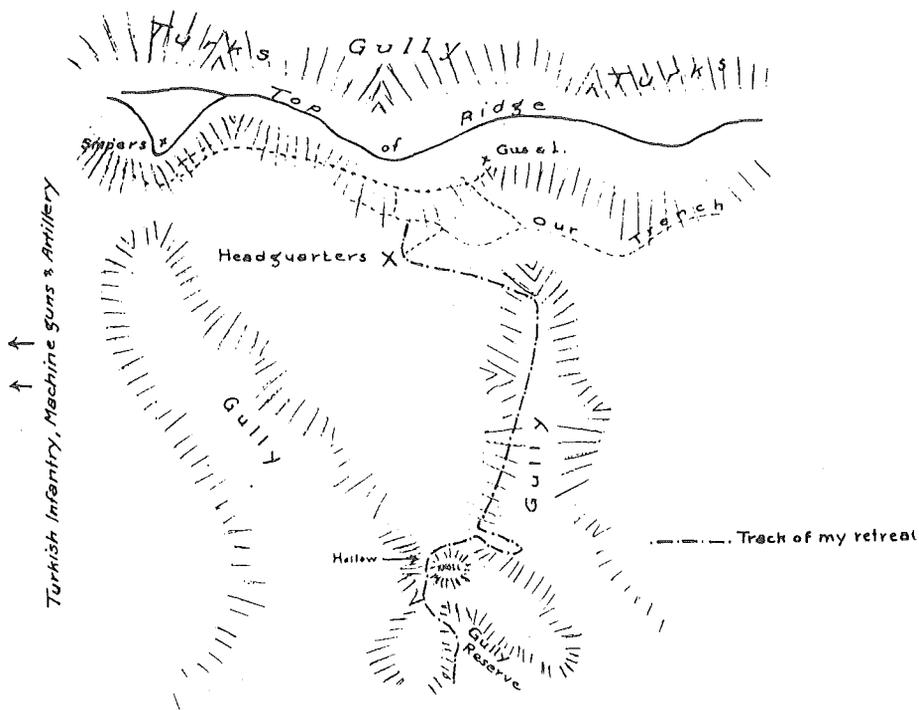


Figure 2: H. D. Skinner's route from Chunuk Bair to the beach.

few feet from one of our trenches. But what is the use of recriminations? Nothing was done. One body the sniper set alight with an explosive bullet and the cartridges in his equipment went off one by one as the flame reached them. One wounded man lay rigid on his back. The fellows started shouting and throwing clods at him. I looked and saw he had the muzzle of his rifle in his mouth and was trying to push off the trigger with the point of the bayonet. Each time it slipped off. He lay in the middle of the death-patch and none dared help him. Suddenly a man—I have never been able to find out who it was, jumped and ran to him and dragged the rifle from his hands and got back to shelter untouched. It was the bravest thing I have ever seen, but whether it was merciful or not, I am not prepared to say. Over the knolls below the apex there suddenly slid a little group 25 all told—Tommys of the "New Army". They wore the death-trap hat known as a solar helmet. Shrapnel opened on them but they dashed into cover in the gully on their right and came up to reinforce us. Roughly they followed my track marked on the plan. For the last few yards they came into our sniper's field of fire and three of them doubled up like shot rabbits in the short rush. One or two wounded went crawling or staggering down the triangle to be cut to bits by the machine-gun across the gully. At about eleven a second reinforcement came round the knoll to be greeted by a blast of fire mainly from the left. They did not run into the safety of the gully but disappeared in a little hollow below. At about 1.30 a third group appeared to vanish in like fashion. (H.D.S. Letter 8 October 1915)

Three Turkish regiments had been decimated in attempt to remove the New Zealanders. Both sides were fully stretched and there was mounting concern amongst the Turkish

command. If Chunuk Bair was lost, the line holding the ANZAC perimeter would have to retire. The New Zealanders were exhausted, but the foothold remained. The Otagos had lost 17 officers and 309 men (Pugsley 1984: 311). Skinner was amongst those forced to retire wounded.

The decision was made to relieve the New Zealanders on Chunuk Bair on the night of August 9th, and replace them with two "New Army Battalions". During the afternoon Skinner was to play a vital role in this course of events and was subsequently awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions. The Turkish army was also on the move. Every available man including their last reserves on the Peninsula were massing for a dawn bayonet attack.

THE FINAL ACTS

Like many soldiers' recollections of Chunuk Bair, Skinner's perception of time was distorted, everything seemed to take an eternity and it seemed as if the horror would never cease (Shadbolt 1988: 93). However, Skinner's active service at Gallipoli was drawing to a close. Sheer luck was to see him come within a whisker of certain death and survive with only superficial wounds. Circumstances that followed fortuitously saw him relieved from combat duties.

The interminable hours wore on. At 2.45 I was sitting on the edge of a knee deep trench, my fixed bayonet passing upwards across my temple. The sniper fired, at perhaps 60 yards. the bullet snapped the bayonet an inch above the hilt, where it crossed the temple, giving me such a sledge-hammer blow as laid me flat in the trench. Gus was by me in a second, and Ollie. I got to my feet a bit dazed, and pulled off the old felt hat. Blood came trickling down my face like a tar-baby. The edge of the bayonet, or perhaps the nickel casing of the bullet had scratched the top of my head, causing disproportionate bleeding. Gus took his own field dressing and put a wreath on me on which I rammed my hat. (H.D.S. Letter 8 October 1915)

Skinner had so far shown himself to be a cautious and intelligent soldier, brave and prepared to take risks, but only after careful consideration of the odds. Indeed it is surprising that given his grasp of the sensibilities of trench warfare, of defensive techniques and leadership, Harry only advanced to the rank of lance-corporal. Perhaps his willingness to disobey orders when he foresaw fatal consequences and his tendency to act independently told against him. Or maybe Harry already realized it was what military historians call a soldiers' battle, in which troops were frequently without command but somehow aware of what had to be done and each determined to do it.

Soon after being wounded Skinner was again back in action. But this time, uncharacteristically, volunteering for a task with only slight odds in coming through unscathed. Perhaps like many before him he may simply have had enough. But whatever his motive, he volunteered to cross the same exposed field of fire where earlier that day he had seen three groups of reinforcements decimated.

The Captain came up and said the Colonel wanted a letter taken back asking for help as we were cut off. I did not feel fit for bayonet work so I volunteered "Tell the commander of the reinforcements in the hollows there, to get them into the gully, where they will be safe. Get the letter about help from the Colonel and take it to Headquarters in Reserve Gully". Then I showed him how I proposed to cross the ground where the bodies of three Tommies lay, and I started on the track marked on the plan. I crawled

into the little watercourse mentioned in Clutha McKenzie's Reuter interview [Trooper Clutha Nantes McKenzie 11/511 Wellington Mounted Rifles was blinded at Gallipoli 8/8/1915 and later became Director of N.Z. Institute for the Blind]. Thence I bolted like a rabbit over the rise and into safety. I judged from the sound that the snipers got in a couple of shots. In the gully matters were very quiet. An occasional bullet spattered in, and when I got further down the artillery were attempting with scant success, a searching fire on it from the left. I came on the body of a Ghurka, dead three days, swollen and terrible, the face black, the tongue out, the eyes starting from their sockets. Then two more. Then a wounded New Zealander—leg broken, a crutch improvised from a cross-handled spade. I did not recognise the grimed white face, but he knew me after five years and we shook hands. It was Robinson, a law student of Victoria College, a great footballer, and a Rahotu man. I told him to keep moving towards the rear. Then more dead New Zealanders, one of them sitting erect in awful loneliness against a rock. Further on one was sitting propped against a bank. Here they lay so thick in the narrow bottom that I had to pick my way. Everywhere came cries of "stretcher-bearer" "water". Some were in delirium. One cried out for warm milk. I stopped to tell them we were holding on and that help would come after dark. And I may say that help did come—600 men with stretchers scoured the hillsides before the Bazouks could reach them. They said there were snipers on the ridge picking off all who tried to cross through the hollow and pass round the knoll to Reserve Gully. Every minute they were expecting them down with the knife or the bayonet. The slope from the bottom to the hollow was high and steep and rocky. I ran up it fast, and when at about half-way, the snipers opened on me, I flew. In a twinkling I was in the little hollow and there, in a pile, lay the bodies of our reinforcements—all dead. How they had been killed I do not know, but I suppose the shrapnel had found them. So the Captain's message was not delivered. I lay flat and got my breath. Then I discovered a man still living and to all appearances un-wounded. "Where's the track?" "It leads away from my feet". He was in fact lying in it. Apparently he did not dare to move. I knew that the next patch of track, about a hundred yards would be the warmest part of my travels, and I lay quiet. There was a terrific bang as a shrapnel shell exploded not more than six feet overhead. It was the signal and I sprang out onto the slope. I was not out three seconds before the machine gun got going, tracing patterns on the track and pattering about above and behind me. Never in the world's history has a hundred yards been covered in such time. There was a bang under my very heels—an explosive bullet I suppose. I gave one heave and bound and dived on my chest over the crest and into Reserve Gully. (H.D.S. Letter 8 October 1915) [Parentheses Mine].

I got to my feet. The valley was swarming like an angry ant-hill. The Fifth Reinforcements, very chubby clean and peach-blossomy by comparison with our worn and tattered scarecrows, were slogging in with pick and shovel at the new track. Mules laden with water, fatigues with ammunition, Indians, Australians, Maoris, Englishmen, New Zealanders climbed and slid the banks on either side while up the middle streamed hundreds of the New Army, their equipment and machine guns all complete and the men themselves a fine looking lot. Wounded being dressed, telephones laid, trenches dug, bivouacs. I have a confused impression of a crowd, and mugs of water, and countless enquiries about the firing line. (H.D.S. Letter 8 October 1915)

Skinner was obviously concussed and semi-delirious after his trauma earlier that afternoon. An eye witness account suggests that he makes rather light of what was in reality a nearly suicidal dash.

At this point I had better tell you what Sergeant Burk told me when I met him the other morning. He was looking down the slope along which I ran for the last part of my dash. He says it was one of the funniest things he ever saw in his life. There was my head tied up, my face half black, streaking by—no hat, no coat, no equipment and my puttees round my ankles, while all about me phit, phit, phit the jets of dust traced a moving wave pattern, till at the bend I gave one convulsive spring, and vanished. He thought they had got me and started the report to that effect which has already confronted me more than once. (H.D.S. Letter 13 October 1915)

Erroneous reports “wounded” or “missing believed wounded” were common in the confused battle conditions at Gallipoli. A conversation between William Skinner and Private William Horgan, Canterbury Battalion, in 1916, and recorded by the former, would seem to explain the source of at least one occasion when Harry was reported wounded. The sequel to Harry losing his tunic and its later discovery in a blood-soaked condition may have been an official report.

Horgan says that his squad picked up a coat on this spur (Rhododendron) . . . The coat was saturated with blood and on the inside was marked Skinner—Otago Regiment. (W.H.S. Transcript of personal communication 16 October 1916)

There were two Skinners in the Otagos at Gallipoli. The other, 8/105 Sergeant John S. Skinner, was evacuated sick on July 15 and therefore the tunic could not have belonged to him. Although the blood on the tunic was not Harry’s, but probably that of wounded he had tended, it would have been sufficient to cast doubt on the safety of the owner.

The only humorous anecdote Skinner had to tell of active service is by way of a private joke between his father and himself concerning the “curio” he found while “digging-in” on August 7th. William Skinner was a dedicated amateur anthropologist, collector and, at different times, assistant to S. Percy Smith who was editor of the *Journal of the Polynesian Society*. After the latter’s death he edited the *Journal* alone from 1922 to 1925. The Skinner Collection, gifted as a conditional bequest to the New Plymouth Borough in 1918, remains one of the most significant provincial collections, and Maori oral traditions recorded by William Skinner in his diaries continue to be published (Prickett 1983: 24). Harry quipped:

Here I may also tell a bit of a joke about the whole affair at which I think I know one person who will smile. It is about that stone-age curio I have mentioned. Before I left the trenches and Gus and Ollie, I stripped of all unnecessary weight. I abandoned everything except the Naylor’ Patent Razor Set and the curio. When I reached the Reserve Gully I found that the set in its little case had gone. All that was left was the curio. I had a jolly good laugh. (H.D.S. Letter 13 October 1915)

Although Harry had reached Reserve Gully without serious mishap, he still had a long way to go to reach the uncertain safety of the beach and the inevitable wait for evacuation. After giving a thorough briefing on the state of the line on Chunuk Bair, Harry was labelled and dispatched with an escort to the beach.

For many at Gallipoli, being wounded and evacuated was seen as a blessing in disguise, especially if the injuries received were of modest severity. But as Harry’s final narrative reveals it was by no means a guarantee of safety or an end to suffering.

He unrolled my puttees and helped me along, though I didn’t need it. When we came to a part of the track that was sniped, I sent him on ahead and ran over it alone. Down at the mouth of the gully by the trenches we took on the first night lay the black and

swollen body of a New Zealander who fell then. There he lay, passed and re-passed by thousands every day. Out in the open by the beach, lay the wounded—most of them on stretchers, of which there were thousands upon thousands—poor wretches calling and calling for help of every kind but generally for water or for someone to carry them to the boats. Stray bullets and shrapnel took toll of them as they lay. I sat down among the human wreckage on the sand by a little jetty. After a while I was taken into one of a string of boats and put on a trawler. It was dark and I fell asleep on the deck, the first sound sleep for eighty-four hours. I was awakened by a wave which wet me through. We were tossing in Imbros Bay and it was past midnight. I felt very cold, and went down to the crew's quarters. On the table was a half finished plate of rice and a spoon. I took the spoon and finished the rice and did the same with some marmalade and crusts that were there. Then we trans-shipped to the *Itonus*, a transport already crowded with wounded. In the morning we sailed for Lemnos with 950 wounded aboard. I slept with a couple of hundred others on deck. It was a perfect summer morning when I awoke, and the rugged hills of Imbros were falling astern. All around, on every inch of deck, the wounded lay asleep. For a moment the engines stopped, we swung round and there was a splash, as some poor battered body slid to eternal rest. For my part I think those happy that sleep together a band of brothers and heroes on the hills of Gallipoli.

The the wounded began to wake and call out. There was not an orderly or an ambulance man on deck where by some oversight many of the worst cases were still lying. Every sanitary appliance was hopelessly short. I got a can of water and a mug and went along. Some wounded are intensely selfish, but in general it is here that heroism burns steadiest and most. There was an Australian lance-jack who had stopped a bomb. His body was torn in the most terrible way—eyes out, hand off, lips half gone, and the whole body pitted. He lay like a mummy, the only part visible being his nostrils and the mouth. He had not been dressed for more than a day. His mind was perfectly clear and he told me something about himself. He wanted to have his arm amputated. It needed the strongest effort of will to keep steady as I poured the water between his teeth, for his wounds through lack of dressing, stank like a dung heap. This man was still living, though delirious when we came to Valetta, five days later. I do not know what happened after. As I was tending him an Australian, lightly wounded like me, came by with water and stopped to look. I said "Some of us are lucky, mate"—to which the blind man ignorant that I was speaking to another, replied, "Yes, we are". There was another Australian, a huge fellow, with a gaping wound high up on the inner surface of the thigh. It had not been dressed for three days and then only with a sketch of a field-dressing and it stank horribly. He was the most enduring soul I have ever known. (H.D.S. Letter 13 October 1915)

Skinner appears to have been the only man to make it back from the firing line to Reserve Gully on August 9th. His report of the dilemma of those in the forward trenches was obviously regarded with great consequence by the commanding officers;

I went at once to an officer from headquarters. He like everyone else, was obviously anxious. After the inevitable question about the line holding he hurried to say that at dusk two whole English Regiments would go up to take over the firing line ... The Officer cross-examined me and took my answers down in writing, I signing them. I said that I believed our fellows could hold on against attacks by equal numbers, even bomb attacks, but that if attacked in force, the position would be lost. I also said that we had not much confidence in the officers there. (H.D.S. Letter 13 October 1915)

The two New Army Battalions did replace the New Zealanders during the night of August 9–10th. However, unknown to both battalions the Turkish forces were gathering every

available man to counter attack. At dawn with bayonets fixed they swept over the crest in four waves and broke the New Army lines. (Pugsley 1984: 312) The Turkish forces suffered enormous casualties but the British forces had been thrown off the crest. All hope of success had gone, the heights of Sari Bair were again securely in Turkish hands. The battle weary New Zealanders were bitter that after all their efforts the ground had been lost and their wounded left to die on Turkish held slopes. (Pugsley 1984: 314). The exhausted New Zealanders were again thrown pell-mell back up the slopes in an effort to halt the Turkish advance.

Skinner's account of these events reflects that bitterness.

I may here add that they [New Army] did go up and that what was left of the Otago Infantry and Wellington Mounteds came back after midnight and fell asleep anywhere. At four they were aroused and told to come up and re-take the trenches which had just been lost. "Curses not loud but deep" and no more move by our men. Then someone said "They are getting our wounded". The men got up to the head of Reserve Gully where the Regiments were streaming in. The trenches which the New Zealanders had dug under fire and held for seventy-two hours had been lost in two hours. The pressure of course had been heavy. The Turkish Infantry swarming down over the triangle and adjoining slopes was caught by the concentrated fire of artillery, machine guns and rifles, and lost heavily. The Australians and New Zealanders have never failed each other but each has been more than once badly let down by New English formations. But before this reaches you, you will have already read the questions put in Parliament about the Suvla Bay landing and the inception and conduct of the whole disastrous campaign. Even the mad proposal to attempt to withdraw emanating from Lord Milner. (H.D.S. Letter 13 October 1915) [Parentheses Mine]

THE END

Harry Skinner was evacuated from Gallipoli on Tuesday August 10th and an official telegram to the family from the Minister of Defence confirmed that he disembarked at Malta, "slightly wounded" on Saturday August 14th (W.H.S. Diary 30 August 1915). Harry, however, obviously unaware of the anxiety he would cause, pre-empted the official notification with a cable the family received on Wednesday August 18th. It read "Shrapnel leg please cable tenner, Skinner, St Davids, Malta". An exchange of cables between William Skinner and the medical authorities eventually allayed the family's worst fears for Harry's safety. William Skinner expressed his relief in his diary:

The cable ... came as a bombshell, but oh what relief, to know that he was in such splendid quarters, the great Naval & Military Hospital at Malta with every care and attention, and to know that he was safe at least for a time. It was like lifting a great weight off all of us. So many friends killed and wounded and probably a number dying unattended on the battlefield and suffering. Truly we have much to be thankful for. (W.H.S. Diary 18 August 1915)

Harry was promptly transferred to England and dispatched a cable on September 20 to Eva from Bethnal Green Hospital, London, confirming his welfare and asking that his papers on the "Evolution of Maori Art" be posted at once c/o the High Commission (W.H.S. Diary 20 September 1915). The Skinner family were greatly relieved that their son had made a rapid and complete recovery. Harry's letters describing the Battle of Chunuk Bair began to arrive at intervals and the Skinner family, like so many New Zealand families, began to comprehend the ordeal suffered by all at Gallipoli.



Figure 3: New Zealanders awarded medals for distinguished service at ANZAC day celebrations in London, 1916. H. D. Skinner on far right. (From *New Zealand Sporting and Dramatic Review* 22 June 1916).

The high expectations for the Gallipoli campaign had foundered. Britain's experiment in traditional maritime strategy had failed and attention was again increasingly focussed on the Western Front. Gallipoli rapidly became an embarrassing backwater, expensive in men, material and effort but difficult to quit (Pugsley 1984: 335).

Planning for complete evacuation began in secret in early November. All care was taken to keep the troops, and more especially the Turks, unaware of the impending retreat. The plan was to gradually trickle men away, leaving the front trenches gradually thinner and thinner, the reserves would gradually disappear, but to the very end the front trenches would appear exactly as if they were held with full garrisons. The final evacuation would be completed over two nights, with 10,000 leaving each night. Rumours of evacuation were rife but it wasn't until the very last that details were released. On December 14th commanding officers were briefed, on December 15th all ranks were informed and on December 19th 1915 the last troops left Gallipoli. Ironically the evacuation was the best planned and most successfully executed part of the whole campaign.

Life entered a new and busy phase for Harry Skinner. He was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal which was presented on the first ANZAC Day, Tuesday 25th April, 1916 (Figure 3).

After a spell in Plymouth Hospital suffering from diphtheria Harry was posted to light duties in Southampton (W.H.S. Diary 4 July 1916). He was joined by his fiancée Eva Gibbs and on December 5, 1915 the two were married. Active service came to an end with Harry

being discharged “permanently unfit for further service” in May 1917. He was at last free to pursue his anthropological research. He joined the Royal Anthropological Institute and promptly enrolled for a Diploma in Anthropology at Cambridge University, for which he qualified in 1918. One of his first tasks was to identify the “curio” found at the “Apex” on the slopes of the Sari Bair Range; he decided it was a loom weight.

The war was still in progress when in October 1918, Harry and Eva sailed from Liverpool on the troopship *Remuera*. Soon after his return to New Zealand Harry was appointed to the staff of the Dominion Museum. However, before taking up the position in Wellington he was offered and accepted a dual position at the University of Otago as assistant curator of the University Museum and the first lecturer in Ethnology. It was in association with these roles, which he held for over 30 years, that he is primarily remembered today.

NOTES

1. This paper was written using contemporary transcripts of H. D. Skinner’s letters and W. H. Skinner’s original diaries held in the Taranaki Museum (Ms 019 [NRAMNZ A113] and NRAMNZ A114 respectively). H. D. Skinner’s original letters are in the Hocken Library Dunedin (Ms 1219/16). An edited version of the letters was published in *The Nelsonian* 32 (1), May 1916. I am grateful to Dick Skinner for his encouragement and approval.

GLOSSARY

A.N.Z.A.C.: Australian and New Zealand Army Corp. Also used as the name of the area held by the ANZACS.

Bombs: Hand-thrown fragmentation bombs—hand-grenades.

Enfilade: Enfilading fire sweeps a line of men or a position from end to end.

Feints: A sham attack to divert attention or deceive an opponent.

Firing-line: The most forward line of defences opposing the enemy.

Iron-ration: Usually dry biscuit and tinned food which needs very little cooking and is very compact.

Lance-jack: Lance Corporal.

Loophole: A narrow vertical opening in defences for defenders to fire through.

Lyddite: Naval explosive.

Magazine-rapid: A technique by which the bolt-action of a rifle is operated quickly to load and fire rounds from the magazine.

New Army: The first non-regular English troops who volunteered for service during Lord Kitchener’s recruitment campaign.

N.Z.E.F.: New Zealand Expeditionary Force.

Parapet: A defensive bank over which defenders fire.

Puttees: Fabric windings wrapped around legs from boot top to below the knee.

Salient: A prominent part or corner of a defensive line, jutting out conspicuously towards the opposition.

Sap: A defended trench used to approach opposing defences. Usually designed to prevent enfilading fire.

Taube: Reconnaissance plane.

Tommies: British (English) soldiers.

Unmounteds: New Zealand Mounted Rifles served at Gallipoli as foot soldiers and were nicknamed the "unmounteds".

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