

# **GALLIPOLI By Robert Street**

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# GALLIPOLI

**MY GRANDFATHER, ARTHUR STREET, DIED IN AUGUST 1970. I DON'T REMEMBER A LOT ABOUT HIM, BUT WHAT I DO, I REMEMBER WITH FONDNESS. WHEN I WAS ABOUT FIVE OR SIX I'D SIT ON HIS KNEE WHILST HE DRANK HIS 'DAVENPORTS' AND TOLD ME STORIES OF THE GREAT WAR. I NEVER FORGOT THEM. HE WAS IN GALLIPOLI, TURKEY. THIS IS HIS STORY:**

I was born in April 1891. My parents were working class, as were theirs before them. In those days if you were born working class you stayed working class. There wasn't any football pools then. Dad worked in a factory as a steel toy maker. Money was tight but we didn't starve. The old man saw to that. We lived in one of the old back to back houses in Miles Street near the city centre. I left school at fourteen and went straight to work. I took a job as a bicycle mechanic and then as an apprentice stonemason, but couldn't settle. Whatever I did it seemed that I would be trapped in the working class rut, living the rest of my life on the breadline and I didn't fancy that. I decided that I wanted to see a bit of the world and maybe somewhere along the way I might get a lucky break. So I joined up, the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Worcestershire Regiment. I was only nineteen, but had no ties so I thought I'd give it a go. They were based at Norton barracks in Worcester and that's where I did my training. It was hard there, but I was used to hard work so didn't mind and we were kitted out, fed and boarded. I think some blokes were just glad of that and to have a roof over their heads and regular meals. It was there that I used the Vickers machine gun, becoming quite a crack shot.

In 1911 I took part in a grand parade in London. We were 'dressed up to the nines' in our smart uniforms with tunics and fancy helmets. I really enjoyed being part of the pomp and ceremony. I could never have done anything like that if I remained at home.

Shortly after we were posted to India, in the Central Provinces and later to Burma. That was a real eye opener. The colonials out there lived a life of luxury whilst the locals lived in poverty. Of course we loved it, peacetime soldiering in a place where the King's shilling went a lot further than at home. We had servants or dhobis as they were called to attend our needs. They changed the sheets, washed our kit; one of them, shaved you in your bed if you wanted and all for a few annas. In the towns it was just as amazing. Street magicians and traders of all sorts descended on you to perform some trick or sell you something and it was so cheap too. One man put a knife through the back of his neck and you could see it moving by his adams-apple. Then, he removed it and not a mark could be seen. We couldn't believe our eyes, but it happened.

Peacetime soldiering wasn't a bed of roses though. We worked hard keeping the locals in order and especially when chasing bandits. We did have some free time, but there wasn't any real social life for us soldiers then. Of course the colonials were all right, they had their clubs and parties. Some of the officers were invited but not us regulars. Most of us had a form of hobby or other to fill the time, with some chaps becoming quite expert in their chosen vocation. Many would take up carving and produced some beautiful figures such as

elephants and tigers to remind them of India. I took up butterfly and moth collecting. I was in the forest one day and looked at a brown leaf that appeared to have snow on it. I went to touch it and it flew away. It was a large moth; I was amazed. It was then that I decided to catch them for a hobby. I obtained some mosquito netting and wire and cut down some bamboo and I was away. I caught hundreds of all sorts of colourful and exotic types, later mounting them in glazed frames. After the war, when money was tight, someone said they were worth quite a bit, so I sold them. A chap in America said he would buy them and I sent them off. He never paid me.

During one of my excursions into the forest looking for more butterflies, I heard a noise behind me. I thought it might be a bandit so cautiously carried on. Whilst pretending to be examining some foliage I took a crafty glance over my shoulder. I suddenly froze. It was a tiger. It was peering from behind a tree, weighing me up. Mind you, I must have looked strange in my old style uniform with sun hat and leather spine pad down my back. I think it was only a young one because it didn't seem fully-grown, but it was big enough to sort me out. I wasn't too far from the camp so decided to make my way back, waving the large bamboo pole with the net on as I went. This young tiger stalked me virtually all the way back, but I think the pole put it off fortunately for me and I was relieved to get back to safety. On another occasion whilst tramping through the undergrowth I disturbed a water buffalo. It wasn't pleased at all. I think it may have been a mother protecting its young. Anyway, it came after me and I ran as fast as I could. I ran towards a steep four-foot bank with this snorting animal chasing after me. I jumped up the bank and onto the track above, just as the beast got close enough to spin round and kick out with its back legs before scurrying off. If it had caught me it would have certainly broke my legs and it would have probably been all over for me. An injured animal of any sort doesn't last long in that environment. There was plenty of wildlife about then and we didn't frighten it either. Many a time hawks would snatch grub from your plate and even cheetahs snatched dogs from leads when people walked them down the forest tracks.

We travelled by train where we could. I remember getting off the train at Bareilly, one of the railheads and all I could see in front of me was a snow-capped mountain. It filled my whole view. I remember looking at the snow and thinking how could that be, when it was so hot and marvelled at how the snow glowed green in the moonlight. The gusting snow high on the mountain peak looked like clouds in the otherwise clear sky. I would have given anything for a few minutes up there in the cool air, out of the oppressive heat. When we moved around India, we took everything with us. From the train it was all packed onto horse drawn carts and mules. We carried our own kit. We didn't arrive at ready-made camps; we had to put the tents up when we got there after perhaps a twenty-mile march with a full pack in the stifling heat. You couldn't stop to rest and you only drank water when you were told to. On a long haul we would stop periodically at a pre-arranged place that was used regularly for camps. Here, there would be some masonry built Dutch ovens where the cooks would set up and provide our meals. It used to amaze me how we found these places they were in the middle of nowhere, but the officers seemed to know what they were doing. After setting up camp and completing what duties we had to we were allowed to fall out and the blokes would get on with their hobbies or play cards. We would be given some beer and it would usually end up with a singsong before retiring to bed to get some rest before an early rise and perhaps another long march.

The plains became really hot in the summer months and disease flourished. Everybody got something or other. You didn't report sick unless it was serious. If you did you had to collect your kit up and take it with you, so usually, we all mucked in, fetching and carrying for anyone that was ill, until they got better. Depending on what you'd caught, friends built a shelter in some quiet spot so you could rest, bringing food, water and what medicine was available until you were fit enough to return to your unit. At the height of the summer the sun parched the plains with virtually every blade of grass killed off and the soil dry and sandy, like a desert. Sometimes when we marched tremendous dust storms filled the hot air making it difficult to breathe. But we covered our faces and marched on. When the weather and disease became unbearable the army would send us up to a hill station where it was a lot cooler; somewhat like our British summers. We had to march there though, uphill all the way. As we went up the mountains the air got thinner which made some of the men ill. The cooler climate was a welcome change to me, but it became cold at night and some moaned at that. You couldn't win. As we continued up our ailments from the plains such as prickly heat and other skin complaints seemed to vanish. Rich, green pine forests replaced the dry, barren, sandy plains and healthy, well-fed wildlife made a refreshing change to the scrawny animals down below. The monkeys were fun at first but soon became a nuisance after a while, continually scrounging and nicking our food. After a short rest to recharge our batteries we went back down onto the plains and the heat. Of course the dry heat was not the only problem. After the summer came the monsoon when it rained continuously for weeks. If the sun did come out you became soaked with sweat only to be drenched again later when the rain started once more; you were never dry.

The War started in 1914. By 1915 we were called upon to go back to England before being sent to the front. We went home by ship and I for one was sorry to go. I had been there for four years and was used to the open spaces and lifestyle. I didn't have the choice though however, thought it would be nice to see everyone again. We arrived back in England on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1915, at Avonmouth and then by train to join up with the 88<sup>th</sup> Brigade. Soon after I got home I heard that my mother had died and was given forty-eight hours leave to visit the family. It wasn't a lot when you think about it now, but then I considered myself fortunate, as I hadn't seen anybody for such a long time, albeit under such circumstances. When I returned from leave almost immediately we were put on a ship to Turkey. We thought we would be going to France. The Turks had sided with the Germans and the powers that be decided to open another front in the east, knock Turkey out of the War and provide a supply route to the arm-starved Russian army. We had hardly got chance to acclimatise to the British weather and were back onboard heading for the sun again. We reassembled at Avonmouth on 22<sup>nd</sup> March. It was a lovely morning in the bright, warm sunlight. Everyone was cheerful, joking with each other, but the embarkation was a right cock-up. Our Regiment was split up with us all being spread out on four different ships. It didn't really matter though and we eventually arrived at Valetta, Malta, on the last day of March, the French sailors and their bands singing us in to 'God save the King' and 'Tipperary'. After coaling we sailed on, arriving at Alexandria, Egypt on 1<sup>st</sup> April 1915, Easter Sunday. Well, I'd never seen anything like it. The harbour was so packed we had to stay out at sea for three days before they could find room for us at the quayside. It was April 6<sup>th</sup> before we could disembark. Then, we passed through Alexandria to camp on the seashore by Mustapha Pasha. We re-embarked onto the SS 'Aragon' and set sail on the 11<sup>th</sup> April and two days later reached the Greek Island of Lemnos, off the coast of Turkey. We were to land on the Gallipoli peninsular by the Dardanelles, a tidal strip of water separating the peninsular from the mainland, leading to the Sea of Marmaria. Lemnos had a large bay suitable for the ships

and was to be the rear base for the invasion. I was one of thirty five thousand British troops sent to take the peninsula along with seventeen thousand Anzacs, a mixture of Australian and New Zealand soldiers. The Turks had eighty-four thousand troops to defend it. The British main force was to attack at five beaches – S, V, W, X and Y. We were part of the 29<sup>th</sup> Division and our initial objective was to land by Cape Helles and form a line across the peninsula, including the height of Achi Baba, about five miles from the Cape. The Anzacs landed further up the peninsula.

It was 25 April 1915. I'd just turned twenty-four earlier in the month. This was it, my first real action. The sea was calm almost like glass to look at. The blokes didn't say much as our ship made its way towards the landing area, everybody gathered themselves in their own thoughts, not sure of the outcome. The officers barked out orders and advice but I can't remember what they said, my mind was elsewhere. The British warships put up a tremendous barrage, continually shelling the coastline for hours to soften up the enemy in an attempt to make our landing easier. They couldn't go in too close; the Turks had laid mines to stop them. We climbed down rickety timber ladders onto the boats to be taken to the beaches. There was a hell of a commotion. The boats had suffered damage from the enemy fire and the seawater in them had mixed with the blood of those that had been killed or wounded previously and washed over our boots as we packed ourselves in. Everything seemed to be happening all at once and the noise was horrendous. Little steamboats pulled our string of boats towards the coast. We were supposed to go to V Beach but they said it was a death trap, so we were diverted to W Beach. About fifty yards from shore, they cut us loose and the sailors rowed us in with their backs to the action, but we could see what was going on. The Lancashire Fusiliers had gone before us and copped a right battering with over five hundred killed, however, a number had landed safely and established themselves on the beach. They won six VC's before breakfast that day. Some of our men were sick with nerves as we got closer and the sea was red with the blood of dead and wounded men, their bodies everywhere. Some were upside down, the weight of their packs pulling them down after they'd been hit. Bullets were whizzing past us, shells were bursting in the water and air above. Shrapnel was flying all over the place. Some of the guys in the boats got hit, including the sailors. One suddenly slumped over his oar. He couldn't have been more than a kid of fifteen. But we all were kids really. An officer shouted an order and he was moved aside and someone else took over. It must have been awful for those lads, having to row all the way back and then bringing another boat full of troops knowing what they were in for. As we got closer to the beach the worse it got. The shells from the Turkish guns were peppering the water all around us. Barbed wire was laid out in the shallows together with mines and they took a few boats out. Some blokes were sent over the side to cut a path through the wire so we could get closer in. Eventually we got close enough to get out and stand in the water to make our way to the beach. Men were falling all around as we went forward past the floating bodies of those that went before. We all carried our packs and me, I had to carry part of my Vickers machine gun. Another chap had the tripod. As we reached the beach bullets zipped into the water around me and I noticed the red sea foam breaking on the shoreline.

W Beach was a narrow strip of deep powdery sand in the shape of a crescent. It was about three hundred and fifty yards long and ranged from fifteen to forty yards wide. At either end the ground rose to high, crumbling cliffs. But in the centre the rise was more gradual and the defenders had elaborate barbed wire defences plus they were well dug in. Although the ships heavily shelled the Turks there were plenty of them crowded in the trenches above us

preventing us going forward. Their machine guns caused havoc as our men were running in all directions to find cover. Shell after shell burst in the air, sand and sea and splinters of shrapnel saturated the atmosphere and land mines were concealed in the soft sand underfoot. Men were dropping like flies. It was carnage; dead and wounded all over the place. The stretcher-bearers were the real heroes there. They didn't stop treating the wounded the whole time, despite being continuously under fire. We couldn't go back though. There was only the sea. So forward it was. Some troops didn't get artillery support and were stuck on the beach in the open with no shade from the hot sun and through the night. Things got so bad that everything had to be landed at night, even the water and food. The men in charge of the packhorses and mules had a right game keeping them calm. We still wore our thick, coarse uniform. It was very uncomfortable in that heat. Mind you it got cold at night out there and the thick uniform was most welcome then. We managed to find a track through the craggy, crumbling rocks and made our way up. It wasn't easy. We were on all fours at times, carrying our packs and equipment. Part the way up we approached a narrow section of the cliff track and a young officer, one of the Lancashires, was clinging to the cliff face preventing me getting by. I asked permission to pass but he didn't reply and just stared at me. It was only then that I noticed he was stone dead; frozen in position, clinging to the cliff. We moved him out the way and continued on. Eventually, despite being under heavy fire and suffering more casualties, we reached the top of the cliff. We passed a large Turkish gun that had been blown off its mountings by the shells from our ships. Nearby was a dead Turkish officer. I checked him out but all he had was a full pouch of tobacco. I took that although it wasn't as good as ours, but I would smoke it later, sharing some with the others. We moved forward towards our first objective, 'Hill 138' and dug in and established our position. Fortunately the chap carrying the tripod was okay and the 'Vickers' operational. The ammunition arrived too. We were ready for action. The enemy position was protected by a high, thick barbed wire entanglement and was virtually untouched by the ships barrages. There wasn't any way round so it had to be cut by hand. Volunteers came forward and all you could see was an arm raised out in the long grass, as a soldier would lie on his back cutting a path through the wire under a hail of enemy bullets. Suddenly the arm would drop and other volunteers would go forward until the path through was completed. Eventually enough paths were cleared and the position rushed and taken. We advanced and captured the next enemy position before dark and settled down for the evening. It was cold and rained that night. We were very anxious, lying in the open and exhausted from the day's battle. Many of our mates had been killed and we were running short of ammunition. We were expecting a counter attack during the night, but it didn't come, so we snatched what rest we could amidst the constant noise of action all around. The next day we moved on to help clear the Turks from their trenches above V Beach after which, we spent the rest of the day being reorganised, preparing for the next push forward.

During the coming week we inland, digging in where we went or taking over old enemy positions. The terrain was mostly scrub and long grass. There were areas of cultivation and some lovely wild flowers. Now and then we passed dead Turks, killed by the ship barrages. We had to bury them and generally did this after dark. When night fell there was no moon, it was pitch black and silent. Everybody talked in whispers and listened for the enemy who were expected to attack. We heard some noises in front of us on one occasion, but couldn't see anything. I set up the Vickers aiming just below waist height and fired, gently tapping the side of the gun to pan the whole area and ensure nothing was missed. Immediately screams and moans came from the wounded enemy but I continued. I had to, it was us or them. If they had got through we would have had it. At first light it was a dreadful sight.

The ground was littered with loads of dead and wounded Turks. I had cut them to ribbons with the Vickers. Many had limbs missing or hanging off and those left alive were screaming and moaning with the pain. I know they were the enemy but we couldn't leave them like that, so some others and me went into no-mans land and gave them some water and bandaged their wounds as best we could. Of course this was far better than the Turks treated our chaps when captured or wounded. They were more likely to torture them and nail them to wooden crosses. From then on if it was dark and we couldn't see anything or heard the slightest noise, I would send a burst or two of machine fire just in case. I may have used up plenty of ammunition but several times I got the enemy and saved our skins.

After a battle we would often let the enemy clear their dead. It would save us the trouble. At night we would bury our dead, including any Turks; it was hard work in that ground. They used burn theirs. But there were plenty of other things also, such as collecting rifles and ammunition and any other litter of the battlefield. Nothing was wasted. My job was to give indirect and covering fire for the advancing troops. We picked a high spot and got ready. To our surprise we could see the enemy trenches. Not only that, we could see into them as well so they had no cover. These trenches were not in the front line, but feeder trenches where the reserves assembled prior to moving forward into action. Well, they were sitting ducks and I let them have it. They fell like ninepins as I panned their trenches and they had no idea where the bullets were coming from. They kept their heads down and poked their rifles over the parapet of the trench and fired into mid air. I kept firing until there was no more movement in the trench. I must have killed dozens of the poor sods.

On another occasion I was giving covering fire to an infantry attack by some Gurkhas on a Turkish position. They caught a hell of a pounding from the heavy Turkish fire with many killed and wounded. As the injured Gurkhas tried to crawl back through no-mans land to our lines, the Turks threw oil bombs among them to stop them reaching their trenches. We couldn't go and help them. We would have bought it ourselves. We could only watch in horror, leaving them to burn to a painful death.

Now and then we would be held in reserve giving us a chance to rest, away from the front line. We needed it. We had lost a lot of men including the officers. In the middle of May we were pulled back for three days and the officers allowed us to spend some of the time bathing in the sea. We were sent down in small parties and made the most of it, but it was especially good to have a thorough wash and brush up after the conditions we had been fighting in. Our advance slowed in the following weeks as the Turks resisted and I continued with my job, manning the Vickers, giving covering fire to our attacking infantry, but constantly under fire as the machine gun was a prime target for the enemy to try to take out. During one episode whilst covering our lads, a bullet hit the Vickers causing the water-cooling jacket to leak. This didn't worry me really. I was used to bullets and shrapnel whizzing about close by. I calmly plugged the leak and continued firing. Suddenly, I felt a blow across my throat. It was as if someone had hit me with a sledgehammer. I was thrown right back across the machine gun nest. I must have been in shock, but I remember blood was spurting from my throat and I couldn't breathe. I was choking on my own blood. It was then that I realised I had been shot and tried to call out, but no sound came. It all seemed to take an age, but it was only seconds. Everything seemed in slow motion. I couldn't hear anything. I felt as if I was on the outside looking in. It's hard to explain. Then all of a sudden everything came back to life as shells went off around and the noise of the battle continued. My mates shouted and grabbed me dragging me clear and started to roughly bandage me up. I still

couldn't breathe properly. The sniper's bullet had severed my windpipe, smashing through my adams-apple and damaging my vocal cords. As they treated me I put my fingers into the wound to pick out the smashed bone and cartilage, freeing my windpipe to enable me to breathe again. It wasn't entirely successful, but at least I was getting some air into my lungs. They left me out of harms way and went back to their posts. I was now alone and could either stay where I was and perhaps die or be killed or try to get back to the first aid dressing station for treatment. I managed to get up and started to make my way back. It wasn't easy, I was in a dreadful state, still picking bits of tissue out of my wound and struggling for breath and the Turks were shelling the whole area. When I reached the dressing station it was pandemonium, they could hardly cope with the amount of casualties and the Turks shells were falling all around us. I couldn't do much about it so sat down with the others and waited to be seen. The shells were getting closer and some of the wounded men were getting hit again. The ground where I was sitting became wet and saturated my clothes. I thought a shell must have caught one of the water containers. But when I looked down I was sitting in a large pool of blood. The wounded chap next to me had been killed, some shrapnel had ripped his body open and his blood flooded the surrounding area. I felt that this was too close for comfort and decided to try to move to a dressing station further back from the front line. It was getting cooler and I had lost a lot of blood and was feeling cold. I took a thick greatcoat off a dead Turk. It was unused and neatly folded, but I had to be careful that I was not mistaken for the enemy as I moved back. When I arrived at the dressing station it was quieter but I was a lot weaker and needed treatment very quickly. As I waited I heard that one of the officers was going round shooting the severely wounded men to save them any further discomfort. Mercy killing they called it. Well I wasn't going to hang about to be shot by one of my own. Not after what I had been through, so decided to make my way back to the beach to see if I could get any help there. I can't remember too much about how I made it to the beach; my next memory was of being onboard the 'River Clyde'. This was one of the ships that carried the troops in. It wasn't out in the bay though. They nicknamed it the 'New Horse of Troy'. It had been run aground by its crew to get the troops safely onto V Beach, avoiding the underwater defences and guns that they would have encountered in the rowing boats. It was now being used as a hospital ship and I was on the operating table. The medics were trying to fit different sizes and types of tube to join my windpipe back together. They didn't give me any anaesthetic; I had to be awake so they could know if it worked. I'm sure they must have given me something but I was in agony. In the event the operation worked and I could breathe reasonable normally, but then there was the wound to deal with. They couldn't do much with that and just cleaned and tidied it up, leaving a gaping hole. They said it would eventually close and heal with time.

That was the end of the war for me. I was sent back to the Alexandria in Egypt for convalescence. While I was there we had a local Arab barber sent to cut our hair and shave us. Whilst tending me, he was fascinated by my bandaged neck and asked to look at my wound. I gently teased the bandage so he could view the damage. He jumped back in horror when he saw the gaping wound, so much so that it worried me how it might look when it healed. It did heal up okay in the end and I got my voice back albeit very gravelly. I used to wear a scarf at first to hide the scar, but over the years it faded and so I didn't bother. From Egypt I returned home to England and spent the rest of the war testing guns.

Shortly after I got back I met Ivy. We married in 1917 and had two boys. After the war I was discharged with a War Pension of just one pound per week. That wouldn't be enough, not with a family. But I had no trade. The army was my job. It was all I knew. Fortunately

Ivy's family were in the building trade and gave me a start. First as a labourer, then as a stonewall builder. The money they paid me was all right, but the work wasn't that regular and we couldn't survive on my war pension. Ivy was quite resourceful. In the late twenties and early thirties she opened shops selling second hand furniture, paintings and all sorts of bric-a-brac. I helped with the deliveries. It wasn't lucrative but we made ends meet. In the mid thirties she rented a large house and took in lodgers. Over a period of time we took over several more houses doing the same. This worked well with her business sense and me collecting the rent, doing odd jobs and repairs. We made a great team.

In 1939 the Second World War started. After a time, my eldest son Eddie was called up but was discharged out because of asthma. My other son Raymond joined up of his own free will. Well I went mad especially after what had been through. But what could I expect. Since he was a kid I told him stories of what I did. So although I wasn't happy about it I supported him, tried to give him some advice and told him not to be stupid. He survived and served with some distinction. In a way I'm glad they went; at least they could say they'd seen some of the world. They're married now and have their own children. They come to visit now and then and I tell the grandkids my stories. I wonder what they'll make of it all when they're older?