



Wartime experiences

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2010 marks 150 years since the formation of the first militia units, the forerunners of the army, navy and air force, in Southland and Otago. We take a look back at the southern experiences.

"Call yourself the cream of New Zealand?" barked the sergeant major. "Good God, I wouldn't like to taste the milk!"

The cheerful chastisement was just part of what Southland Gallipoli veteran Fred Rogers remembered as a happy time, training before departing New Zealand.

The man who would become Southland's longest surviving Gallipoli veteran would later speak of the large crowds that saw him and his cobblers off from Invercargill, and their shared sense of excitement and adventure.

Sailing to Alexandria, Egypt, was no great hardship either; packed like sardines in wooden bunks five tiers high, with lots of fatigue parties, many orders, whatever training could be crammed into the close confines, and a series of series of sick, dental and (ahem) short-arm parades, the nature of which needn't trouble us here.

Egyptian sand is perishing cold at night, but hot as hell during the day.

An inspection by General Sir Alex Godley was supposed to be a highlight, but proved nothing of the sort.

"We did it hard on the hot sand and were practically buggered."

The general's wife, who had watched the exercise, had been unimpressed.

"Get them to do it again, Alex," she told him.

Do it again, Alex became a catch-phrase after that.

"It was repeated all through the blimmin' battalion."

Men made the most of their leisure time. On the evening of Easter Saturday, in leave on Cairo, a disturbance broke out in a brothel, with Australians and New Zealanders putting in some fighting practice.

Rogers, who we hasten to add had been writing letters at the YMCA at the time, was called out to take charge of a picket to sort the row out. But they arrived to find it pretty much sorted already, save a burning piano that had been slung out of a second-storey window.

Otago battalion troops were taken to the Gallipoli peninsula on the vessel Annaberg; a journey which left them liberally infected with lice.

They hit the shore on lifeboats in about five feet of water.

When interviewed 75 year later, Rogers' voice still trembled at the memories.

"I'm sentimental as a rule and tears are pretty near to my eyes often when I'm talking about it. But when you were there you just had to face it."

He saw his first man shot before making shore. Then men rolling back down the hills and ravines which rose up from the narrow beach, some holding injuries as they tumbled. "It's pretty tough up there," he said to one.

"You're wanted up there mate," came the reply. Dead and wounded lay around him. It was a nice fine day.

Turkish fire claimed 15 men from Fred Roger's company. That night, he buried his first man. Alex Black,

from his own platoon.

From April 27 to May 2 they set up at Otago Gully then Shrapnel Gully.

In the twilight, going up the gully when rain had fallen, they saw puddleholes created by the hooves of Murphy's donkey, taking the wounded down to the beach. They hadn't had water for days, so strained some into their dixies.

In the gathering dark, they came to the foot of Pope's Hill, fixed bayonets, and climbed the rope to the top of the steep bank, then advanced, a few metres at a time, under heavy rifle fire and shrapnel.

"We were glad to take cover behind the Turks who had been killed since the landing. They were swollen up. I can still smell them."

Only three from his section were left and they had advanced further than anyone else. Just before 8pm, Rogers moved back, seeking orders, and sighted the second-in-command, Captain Fleming.

"I tripped over just prior to reaching him and nearly speared him with my bayonet."

Be careful, Rogers, the popular captain said before heading back with him to where his two companions had reached and telling them to stay put and dig in as best they could.

It was an uncomfortable position. The Canterbury regiment had failed to come up on their left, so they were open to fire from the flank. And the Royal Marine Light Infantry failed to come forward and dig trenches for them.

"That didn't go down too well with the Otago men at the time."

(Years later, when the Australian drama Gallipoli came out, Rogers was seethingly indignant about the capacious trenches around Mel Gibson and co.)

"As morning broke, I spotted a Turk firing at Tommy Vincent from behind a thyme bush ... Tommy bobbed up and was killed. I put three rounds rapid fire into the bush where the turk was and all was quiet."

A shot from the exposed flank caught one of Rogers' two companions in the back. The other, Peter Fraser, stayed there to look after him while Rogers ran back, bullets flying in the dust around him, to seek help.

He flung himself into a shallow, crowded trench, packed so tight that someone had to get out again. He'd arrived last, so out he went.

The call came back from Fraser: what would he do with the injured man? Rogers called back to take his personal effects and leave him.

There was a slight pause.

"I can't, Fred. They're all covered in blood."

What family would want those back?

Then they were under heavy fire, not only from both sides, but also – maddeningly – from the water.

"Our own destroyers were lobbing shells among us.

"They must have thought we were Turks. We were so far advanced."

A piece of shell hit Rogers in the ankle. Now he was lame.

Distressingly, he saw a grenade take down Peter Fraser and the injured Captain Fleming, whom Fraser had been helping back to the medics.

(Mercifully, both survived, though Fleming caught some fragments in his eyes.)

The flash of the Turks' fire was evidence of how close they were. A withdrawal, and a ruse, were decided.

A false advance would be called. The charge was called and then ... actually both sides retired.

Rogers was helped back to the beach.

In the headquarters bivvy, he saluted General Godley and reported that they had been waiting at the front for reinforcements. Not to state the obvious, but the general said they had not been able to get any to them.

Rogers and his, by then, eight companions were given rums – as far as he could later recall, that was his first taste of liquor – and the next day rejoined the remnants of their company, greeting them like brothers.

The May 2 push had cost 16 officers and 500 other ranks.

Now they were bound for Cape Helles. From the deck of the transport vessel, Rogers counted 18 rows of barbed wire, some with Tommies still hanging on them.

On landing he was made a sergeant. There had been 56 in his platoon. Now there were 16.

The history books say that on May 8 the New Zealand Infantry Brigade attacked entrenched Turkish positions in daylight, that the action failed, and the brigade suffered 835 casualties, bringing the toll for the first 14 days on the peninsula to more than 2000.

Fred Rogers remembers that up on high ground, the troops came across an open area which they gave the cheery name the Daisy Patch, because of the flowers covering most of it.

Then they moved forward in artillery formation.

"I can still set section after section ... mown down like a reaper mowing down hay."

He was in a group which made it to a spot where a house had once stood. The chimney was still standing and thyme bushes were all around.

Ahead of him, Stan Strang was shot through the lung. A quiet joker, that one, but a ready volunteer when jobs came up.

Rogers ran out and dragged him back by his arm to the chimney, where an Auckland officer – "a chap named Andrews, a one-pipper" – came up.

"I'll give you a tip how to make him comfortable," he said, standing up over the wounded soldier, just high enough to be shot dead himself.

The charge was ordered and the troops waded through the scrub, while the higher-placed Turks fired down on them. No good. They had to retreat.

Back at the chimney, Stan Strang was hanging on. Downhill a ways was a well, but those who had tried to reach it had been hit.

Rogers had a good view from where he was and decided to have a go. He buttoned a small kerosene tin into his tunic and bolted.

"Bullets went everywhere. I reached down and got my tinfoil, but was frightened to get going again because they knew I was there.

I waited a while and visualised how I'd go ... this way and that way."

He made it, and was able to give Strang a cup of Bovril. A comfort, at least, before he died on a stretcher.

The word came to withdraw to the cape and there Rogers had another reunion, and not just camaraderie. He met his brothers, Percy and Clarence.

Another move was announced. Rumours, generally reliable, had it they were bound for a place called Anzac Cove.

They'd never heard of it.

Anzac Cove, however, proved familiar. It was the place they had first landed. The name had been bestowed in their absence. and when they returned in mid-May they found it all of a bustle.

Just before their arrival the Turks had mounted a big attack on the Australian front and had suffered heavy losses with some 550 dead.

The bodies were reeking, so an armistice was called for.

It was May 24, a day Rogers would forever find hard to describe.

Wonderful and awful.

"There was no firing from 8am to 4.30pm. My cobber George Skerrett was in a medical group in No Man's Land, carrying all the personal effects off our own men."

The troops still hosted abundant communities of the lice they had taken with them from the Annaberg. Rogers was bivvied with one of his corporals, Ted Morris, when an issue of new shirts came. Morris hung his old shirt on a thyme bush and a patch of sunlight shone on to it.

The result was better than TV.

"There was an attack to see which lice got up to the warm spot first. The little buggers were climbing over their grandmothers and their great grandmothers ... thousands of them."

Anzac Cove was evacuated without loss of life from December 8 to 20. Of the 8556 New Zealanders there, 2721 died and 4752 were wounded. An 87 per cent casualty rate.

In 1990, Sergeant-Major Fred Rogers, of 8th Southland Company, returned to Gallipoli for 75th anniversary celebrations. He broke ranks and gave an unscheduled speech. Apparently, it was pretty good.

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