# Shrapnel Spitting Gunshot Birds

Two years in the Bendigo 67th Militia had prepared me well, and I would not let that training go to waste; the country and Empire needed men to fight. I'm not the youngest of us here at twenty-four. I feel for the young ones, especially those who don't even look like they're ready to shave yet. They are the most nervous. Wispy boys compared to us older fellows. I retrieved the Dunklings lever watch from the top pocket of my uniform, the one my mother had bought me before I departed for the training camp in Broadmeadows. I'd visited her on the way to Melbourne to join the 7th Battalion. She knew I had to go. She'd spent a small fortune on the watch, saying, 'You'll need this to keep tabs on things.' To this day, I still don't understand quite what she meant.

Raising the watch to my face, I squinted. I could make out the time: four a.m.

I put the watch away and *tap tapped* through the cloth of my shirt reassuringly once it was safely back in place. Standing there in the dark, my pack and shovel lashed to my back, reminding me of my role as an infantryman, I distracted my nerves with thoughts of the last nine months.

It was an easy decision to go. Two mates from Bendigo and I heeded the call to arms on the 5th of August by the Mother Country. There was I, Victor Eliason, ready to fight the Hun; Harry Listner, also twenty-four, an old mate from the Militia and drinking partner; and my other old friend, Bill Holdsworthy. He was a couple of years older than us and worked in Bendigo in an office. Bill's father, like mine, had been in the Boer War and insisted that without men to fight, all was lost. We didn't need much coaxing.

The wait for the recruitment office to open was the longest week or so of my life. We enlisted on the 18th of August at Bendigo Town Hall before travelling to Melbourne, and from there we marched to camp at Broadmeadows to raise the Bendigo-based battalion. In October, we sailed to Fremantle and onto Egypt for further desert training at Mena Camp. How the time flies. Bill and Harry are in the same platoon as me, and

we've certainly seen some things we could have only dreamed of before the war.

I am standing on the deck of the troopship *Galeka* with the other lads, looking at my watch, its display difficult to read in the available light—4:35 a.m. Not long now.

The ship begins to move closer to land, and we can see flashes of machine gun fire from a nest on the hill adjacent to the beach where we will land. This rapid-fire popping must be giving those on the ground hell. We're supposed to beach to the north of the first group. There were 1,500 men in the first wave and 2,500 of us in the second. That ought to give the Turks something to think about. We're waiting for the tows to return, but they are nowhere to be seen. I can hear muffled rifle fire responding to the machine guns rattling on the shore. The first wave went in under the cover of darkness, and we're due to go in soon, to reinforce our lads from the 9th, 10th and 11th Battalions. The moon disappeared over the horizon around three a.m., leaving us in relative darkness. I think our surprise attack has been thwarted, though, by the sounds of the guns onshore. The silhouette of mountainous terrain rising from the ocean towers: a dark, looming monolith of scattered enemies. How many of those bastards could be up there? I looked at my watch again: 4:50 a.m. Where are the tows?

The *Galeka* steamed towards the shore and now sat within six hundred yards of the beach. On the deck, we nervously shuffled but could barely move as we were crammed tight together, our packs on our backs at the ready. I hear the anchor being dropped, and shortly after, bursts of shellfire and shrapnel are exploding close by, threatening the ship and menacing our exit onto the boats. I rubbed my hands together to distract myself and knew it didn't matter if I whispered now that we were spotted.

'Where's Bill?' I asked Harry, who was standing next to me, staring at the horizon, his face stern.

'He's four up from me. He'll be one of the first to go with us.'

'You thinking what I'm thinking?'

'Yeah. Game is up, alright.'

'Sure is. We'll be in for it.'

We both stared out into the horizon, watching the flashes of light burning on the shore. Sounds of men and their gear shifting were replaced in moments

of silence by the gentle bumping of the lifeboats on the hull of the ship.

Colonel Elliot gave the order for us in the first three platoons to man the ship's lifeboats at five a.m. I turned to Harry and said, 'Here we go. Looks like we'll get a row in instead.'

Harry looked as confused as I felt. We'd been waiting for signs of the tows, but time was pressing on, they hadn't shown up, and the Commander must have thought it best to make a start. 'We're pretty close, Vic. Looks like we're going in.'

One of the *Galeka's* lifeboats was peppered by shellfire and shrapnel as we clambered over the side of the ship and down the rope ladders and netting there. We'd trained for this moment on Lemnos for days, joking then that we'd be able to do this blindfolded after all the attempts. Even so, the difficult task of climbing down with a full pack is not as easy as one would think.

About halfway into shore, rifle and machine gun fire began spraying us. The midshipman who were rowing kept their heads down and were aiming for the beach north of where we could see the flashes. We were meant to be securing the left flank near the Fisherman's Hut: our objective.

I touched my watch in my left top pocket and thought briefly of my mother. Harry was leaning against me heavily, and I turned slightly and shook him, noticing one of his eyes was missing. Trickles of blood oozed from this cavity where his eye and life had once been. His other eye stared towards the shore, as if it was willing the lifeboat on. Bullets whizzed by, sounding like fluttering birds, and the shrapnel exploded all around, seemingly exiting as the birds passed by. My mind began to slow, to take in every detail around me. It reeled as I realised the dire position of our advance. Cordite fumes drifted across the water, like a hazy miasma of impending death. I looked forward on the lifeboat for Bill and saw that he was still alive, manning one of the oars of the lifeboat after he'd moved a shot midshipman aside.

In the growing light of sunrise, I could see that many of the men in our lifeboat were either dead or severely wounded. The nearer we got to shore, the worse this became. It seemed like the Turks were picking us off like flies, their machine guns hacking through flesh. I noticed we were close to the shore now, and some of the lads were even jumping out of

the lifeboat to escape the barrage of bullets and shrapnel that was flying by. They went in, pack and all. The first of these disappeared under the deep water, weighed down by his pack.

As we neared the shore, the rest of us could see the shale beneath the surface. Over to the side we went, hip-deep in water. I had hoped our training on Lemnos would be beneficial, but the reality was quite different now that we had landed. The shale was slippery, and traversing through the water was difficult, slowing our advance. Bill was in front of me, and I kept him in my sight. We'd been ordered not to load our magazines when on the *Galeka.* I raised my rifle above the water: it was my only chance of defending myself, and I had to keep it dry. Others were doing the same, but fell as they tried running through the water. One man rose successfully out of the water, caught a bullet in the shoulder and fell, only to get up a second time and cop one in the head, sending him down on his back: a floating, blank mess searching the heavens for his maker.

Bill was up ahead on the beach, lying next to the platoon's officer, Captain Layh. He had been shot through the hip and through the leg when on the stern of the lifeboat, but had managed to crawl up the beach and find some cover behind one of the grass mounds sprouting from the beachhead. I ran awkwardly with a limp, intent on reaching the covering spot. As I collapsed on the ground, Bill looked over and said, 'You're bleeding, Vic. Look. Your leg.'

I looked down and saw that I had a cut about two inches long on my thigh and burn marks on my trousers around the wound. 'Bloody shrapnel!' I yelled.

'The Captain's got two. Poor bastard.'

We all looked back down the beach towards the boats. Bodies floated in the water, bodies lay inert in the beached lifeboats, and many were scattered along the beach. It was a disaster.

We had to go on.

The captain drew the remainder of the troops that had survived in and explained the next move. There were only about thirty of us left out of the hundred and forty that had initially descended from the *Galeka*—the rest we had to leave behind. More were on their way, but we were on our own for now.

We could see the Fisherman's Hut.

The captain led us up through a gully below the hut and towards a knoll that overlooked the position. The Turkish bullets were useless and flew above us, and we quickly found that there was an unused trench on the knoll overlooking the Fisherman's Hut. We took the trench for our own, noting that it hadn't been used for a long time, gauging from the established bushes that had grown on its parapet.

We held this position until it became clear that the enemy was moving in from the north-east to cut us off. Captain Layh decided to make back for the beach via another gully bed to the north of our lot.

As soon as we exited the trench, Turkish machine guns fired upon us, forcing us down on our bellies for the slow and painful retreat to the beach. They had us pinned down, and it was during this move that Bill was shot, leaving his left forearm dangling and bleeding from the elbow. He was in much pain, and I dragged him along behind me in places to the beach, the whizzing of the fluttering bird-like bullets finding their mark on half of the thirty men left from the initial assault on the beach.

I wrote a letter home trying to explain what we'd done at Gallipoli on those first few days. I was shot through the shoulder on the fifth day after the landing and repatriated to the hospital ship and then to England to recuperate. I rejoined the 7th Battalion in Gallipoli in September. We lost the best of our blood that first day and the days that followed.

That first day will be known to me as long as I live as 'Bloody Sunday.'