

HUBERT RICHARD W. MEAGER (1885-1915)

By Sherry Morris

When Britain declared war on August 4, 1914, it was assumed that Australia, as an integral part of the British Empire, was also at war. The Australian Government immediately promised to recruit, train and equip an expeditionary force of 20,000 men. So great was the enthusiasm that this target was reached by the end of August and by the end of the year 50,000 Australian volunteers were training.

One of the first to enlist in Wagga was Hubert Meager. In many ways Meager was not typical of the average recruit. At the age of thirty-one, he was older than most and he was married with one child whereas over eighty per cent were single and childless. While over eighty per cent were tradesmen, labourers or rural workers, Meager stated that his occupation was a clerk. However, in common with most of those who enlisted early in the war he was intensely patriotic - he was a proud British subject and a proud Australian.

Born in England (at Newport on the Isle of Wight), Hubert was the eldest son of an English merchant, Frederick K Bernard Meager and his wife Manuella Ellen Mary nee Harrison. He had two older sisters, Madeline and Etheldreda, and four younger siblings, Eleanor, Marguerite, Victor, Winifred (1890), Phillip (1892), George (1894) and Angela (1896).¹ He was educated at the Newport Grammar School.

In 1899 he joined the 1st Battalion Rifle Brigade and fought in South Africa in the Boer War 1899-1902. He continued to serve until 1907 and rose to the rank of Sergeant.

Two years later he joined the crew of the ship, *Waratah* as a mess room steward. It left the Port of London on April 27, 1909 and arrived in Sydney NSW on June 17, 1909.²

Though only living in Wagga for a short time, Hubert Meager did manage to make quite an impression. After several years as an accountant for Messrs T. Edmondson and Co, merchants of Gurwood Street, he acquired the Central Fruit and Refreshment Cafe, in Fitzmaurice Street in the heart of the business centre and went into business on his own account as a wholesale and retail fruiterer.³

Meager joined various clubs in Wagga including the Rowing Club and the Pirates Club. He was also one of the most enthusiastic and hard working founders of the Choral Society, serving as treasurer and vice president.

In 1912, he married into an influential local family, the McDonoughs. His bride was the thirty-one year old spinster, Maude Mary McDonough. Maude's father, the proprietor of the Advance Australia Hotel, had died when she was just nine years of age and her mother had continued to run the hotel with the assistance of the family. Maude's older brother, Frederick, eventually left the post office service to take over

the licence in 1909. Frederick was particularly well known and respected in Wagga. He was an alderman from 1908 until 1916 and Mayor in 1914.⁴

The wedding ceremony took place on Monday, September 16, 1912 at 7 p.m. at St Michael's Church, Wagga. Then a small company confined to the family and relatives of the bride was entertained by Mrs McDonough senior at her residence in Peter Street. Miss A McDonough was bridesmaid and Robert Johnston was best man. The bride's dress was a silk gown with an overdress of lace. Her travelling dress was a blue marquisette with oriental trimmings and cream lace, with white tagel hat, trimmed with pink roses and white and blue lace wings. The bridesaid dress was a champagne-colored marquisette voile with original trimmings and a grey hat trimmed with white lace and pink roses. The bride carried a bouquet of white hyacinths, snowdrops and asparagus ferns and also carried a richly bound prayer book, the gift of the Reverend Mother of Mount Erin Convent. The bridesmaid carried a bouquet of white and pink hyacinths. By 1914 Meager also had a baby daughter, Winifred.

Meager enlisted on 20 August 1915. He was described as being 5'7" tall (170 cm) and weighing 12 stone 1 pound (76 kilograms). He had fresh complexion, hazel eyes and dark brown hair.

After his enlistment Meager was sent to the Randwick Showground in Sydney. He was armed with a .303 rifle, dressed in heavy boots, khaki puttees, trousers, tunic and slouch hat and given rudimentary training in fighting and drilling.

He departed with the first expeditionary force on the *Euripedes* in the following October as Colour Sergeant in C Company of the 3rd Battalion. Originally the first expedition was destined for England and the Western Front but after Turkey entered the war as Germany's ally, the Australians were diverted to Egypt - to train and to strengthen Britain's hold on the Suez Canal.

While stationed at Mena Camp near the Great Pyramid, Meager was promoted to Company Sergeant Major of D Company.

Like the other Australians, Meager would have been exited when he learned they were to be sent to the Dardanelles to eliminate Turkey from the war, gain control of a sea route to Constantinople and open up a route for armies and munitions to Russia (then an ally of Britain and France).

According to the grand plan, the British and French forces were to land at Helles at the foot of the Gallipoli Peninsula while the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (the Anzacs) under Major General Sir W. T. Bridges were to land sixteen kilometres to the north. The two armies were then to unite and crush the Turks between them, thus gaining control of the peninsula and the entrance to the Sea of Marmara.

Meager participated in the historic landing at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915. Though not among the first battalions that landed in the early hours of the morning, the 3rd Battalion was sent into battle at 11.30 a.m. Unfortunately because of the unpredictable sea currents, the Anzacs were dropped two kilometres north of the planned landing place and the various battalions were placed too close together on the shore, mixing them all up. Although expected to advance through open country they found

themselves at the foot of a steep hill rising straight up from the beach to a height of a hundred metres. In all the confusion the men could not find their officers so formed up under the command of the nearest officer.

Meager gave his account of the landing in a letter to his wife, published by *The Daily Advertiser*:

The Turks would not face these men of the south who fought in a way quite unexpected. The genius which prompted the initial rush unrecognised at the time in the general excitement, took the Turk completely by surprise, and having got him on the run they kept him at it until by 7 a.m. they secured a footing on the ridge. This task was not to have been completed until 10 a.m. Consequently precarious indeed was the position of the first arrivals. Two companies against an army corps - but two companies imbued with the spirit of ten. Reinforcements were arriving every few minutes and as fast as they came up were thrown into the firing line on either flank.

At 11.30 a.m. we of the 3rd Battalion were ordered to reinforce the left - two platoons of "D" Company and about twenty men of "B" Company. I happened to be with the Captain when the Colonel pointed out where we were to reinforce and was detailed to go with the Captain and Lieutenant McFarlane, as guide, to save further time in explanation. We had reached a valley nearly three parts of our distance, when a staff officer diverted us to reinforce the 3rd Brigade, that portion held by "C" Company of the 10th who had made the initial rush.

The country was precipitous, the heat tropical, and weighted down without kits, the pace was a killer. At every pause for breath a frantic staff officer would urge the men on - 'Don't pause. If only 20 reach the summit, push on, as the position is precarious'.

So we went to help comrades who were sorely pushed. Twelve out of the 100 men reached the summit - Lieutenant McFarlane, myself and ten other men - and a sweet reception awaited us. Shrapnel tore us from the flank, machine guns rapped out their impatient note from the front and flank, and rifles belched at us from all sides. Frontal attack, oblique fire and enfilade. What more was wanted to drive the men from the open crest. One dared not fire in return. A surreptitious scraping with the friendly entrenching tool - a blessed weapon - provided precarious head cover.

McFarlane was shot through the chest but never lost heart. Men were dropping all round, but reinforcements were pouring in - 10 men here, 20 there - no matter what the number, they were rushed into the firing line. Battalions and brigades were inextricably mixed, but each officer, non-com and man grasped his opportunity and confusion was not apparent.

During the night they worked at their trenches under Captain Shaw of the 10th. The next day the only relief came from the navy in the form of the *Queen Elizabeth's* 15" guns.

Meager wrote:

There was a lull which presaged a storm and it broke over us at 3 p.m. For three hours we went through an inferno. Every gun was concentrated on the Australians' front. Whole trenches were blown to pieces by shrapnel.

At 5.30 p.m. three of us in a dug-out had reason to think our minute had come. Our nerves were on edge from the rain of shells during the previous couple of hours and the rifle fire of the enemy only 200 yards away. At the hour mentioned a shrapnel shell plumped into our dug-out and buried itself within a few inches of us, another hurtled through the air, pitching a foot further on, and just missing the head of the men at the nearest end of the trench next to me. The next shell wounded the two men next beyond and killed the third and the next killed the two men next to them. All this in about 30 seconds. Is it any wonder our hearts beat like steam hammers. Men live a lifetime in such a half minute.

Our aeroplane now soared overhead, and as if by magic, the din from the enemy lines ceased. The enemy charge at 11 p.m. crooning as they ran 'Allah, Allah, Allah'. Again two hours later a bugle sounds a muffled call, a drum rolls and up rises our enemy once again. They approach nearer and nearer until some undisciplined fool - or some covert traitor - blazed away, and causes the lines of rifles to crack, thus disclosing our strength to the enemy.

Meager's troops were relieved by marines at midnight the following night and made their way back to the beach in small parties. Meager himself had been reported killed and was heartily congratulated on his re-appearance. They remained there for a three-day rest, flippant words, witty quips and merry smiles hiding their fears.

On Saturday, May 1, Meager was promoted to second lieutenant. On that day he and Lieutenant McLeod (also commissioned that day) with some of the 3rd Battalion were detached to rescue some marines isolated in a trench in Wire Gully on McLauran's Hill. Meager's platoon crept out along the summit south of the gully to the isolated trench. they arrived there in darkness in sight of enemy trenches (about fifty metres from the marines). They immediately began to dig a trench down the steep slope to connect with that of the battle outpost on the far side.

For their actions, Meager and McLeod were mentioned in dispatches for 'conspicuous bravery'. They remained with their troops in the exposed trench for several days, repelling Turk attacks, until they were relieved on May 5.⁵

After all the early excitement things settled down at Gallipoli as each side dug into the sides of the ridges creating shelters, storage areas and communications tunnels. As Meager himself pointed out 'the spade is doing more work than the rifle'.

He described conditions in a letter to his wife written from the trenches 'to the accompaniment of shrapnel and snipers'. He believed the Australians had 'covered themselves with glory, paying the toll of glory in the currency of blood' and promised to tell her many a tale of 'simple heroism, of agony borne with a smile or passed over with a merry grin'.⁶

After months of holding on at Anzac and Cape Helles, a concerted attack was planned. While the British at Cape Helles were creating a diversion by launching an offensive in the south, the Australians were to attempt to capture the Turkish stronghold at Lone Pine. Before the attack he wrote to his mother showing that he feared he would be killed. He ended the letter:

During the next few days we shall be facing death every minute. If I am taken off do as the Roman matrons of old - keep your tears for privacy, steel your heart, and try and get a dozen recruits to fill my place. Pray hard for me, and if God wills it I shall see it through. I have seen the priest, and will go into action with a clean heart, and if I emerge, I hope I shall have proved myself as a man and a leader, and thereby have justified the confidence of my commanders.⁷

This attack began on August 6, 1915 and continued until August 10. Hubert Meager was killed in action on August 8 while his brigade was attacking the Turkish trenches. Clifford O'Regan, another Wagga Anzac, informed his parents that 'poor Hubert Meager' was right next to him when he was killed and he saw him fall. He wrote, 'He knew at once that his wound would prove fatal but he just called out to us not to bother about him but to pour a heavy fire into the Turks who were then only a few yards away. He was indeed a brave man and very popular'.

Lieutenant A. F. Burrett also wrote of Meager's 'pluck and bravery, self denial and thoughtfulness'. He wrote, 'he would often sit and laugh - his same old happy laugh. He would pull out the photograph of his little baby and together we would laugh and talk about the poor little kiddi''. He was also near him when he died and said he just rolled over and said 'Go on boys; don't mind me' and died soon afterwards.

According to Burrett his battalion had gone out with twenty-four officers and approximately 800 men strong and in a couple of hours only five officers and 230 men were left 'to tell the story of the slaughter'.⁸

His widow, Maude, read of his death in the city papers, three days before she received an official report. She was officially notified by Monsignor Buckley who had a message from the Minister for Defence three days later.⁹

Over 7600 Australians and 2500 New Zealanders were killed or mortally wounded at Gallipoli. This included 2277 Australians at Lone Pine between the 6th and 10th of August. Although tactically Gallipoli was a complete failure, Australian soldiers received their 'baptism of fire'. Although their illusions of war as a great adventure were shattered, these soldiers felt that they proved to themselves and to the whole world that they could fight as well, if not better, than the soldiers of other nations including the mother country. Australia, they felt, could now be considered a nation!

Meager's name is listed on the Cenotaph or Soldiers' Memorial and the Memorial Arch, Wagga Wagga.



Above: Meager's Central Fruit and Refreshment Cafe



Above: Lieutenant Hubert Richard William Meager, 3rd Battalion, standing in a front line trench holding a periscopic rifle. Source: Australian War Memorial

¹ UK, Military Campaign Medal and Award Rolls 1793-1949; 1891 England Census, Isle of Wight; England and Wales BDM Birth Index; ancestry.com.au.

² Crew List, *Waratah*, Inward, 1909,p.3; ancestry.com.au.

³ J. R. Robertson, *Progress of Wagga Wagga and District*, Sydney 1914

⁴ Jacqueline Grant, *And Olive Married Jack*, Orange, 1990.

⁵ C. E. W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, Volume 1, check. pp.xix-xxii. check

⁶ *Daily Advertiser*, Wagga Wagga, 25, 26 June 1915.

⁷ 'A Hero's Last Letter', *Isle of Wight Mercury*, 27 August 1915 p.3; see also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 23 August 1915.

⁸ *Daily Advertiser*, Wagga Wagga, 16 October 1915.

⁹ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1915.