

DAWN OF DEATH AT THE NEK
by Ross McMullin

On 7 August 1915, Australian lighthorsemen climbed out of their trenches at the Nek and attempted to advance towards the Turkish lines. They had no chance. Most were mown down straightaway. Casualties amounted to 372, including no fewer than 234 fatalities.

The ill-fated charge has become familiar to later Australians as a result of Peter Weir's celebrated film *Gallipoli*, which re-created an unsuccessful attempt to stop the carnage.

After the first two waves of the Victorian 8th Light Horse were slaughtered, it was obvious that the Western Australians of the 10th Light Horse, who were to follow, would also be annihilated. So their commander, Lieut-Colonel Noel Brazier, called a halt to the operation. But when he arrived at brigade headquarters and emphasised the futility of persisting, he was overruled by an intransigent officer, the brigade major, Lieut-Colonel Jack Antill.

Antill, who had planned the operation, told Brazier that a marker flag carried by the Victorians had been seen in the Turkish trenches, and the Western Australians should get forward to assist. Brazier knew this was preposterous and said so — he had seen no such flag, and even if someone had, any Victorian presence in the Turkish lines must have been minimal and swiftly overwhelmed. But Antill would not listen. "Push on!" he roared.

The Western Australians knew where Brazier had gone and why. Among those waiting tensely for the verdict were Wilfred Harper, a popular farmer, his brother Gresley, a talented barrister, and their friend Phipps Turnbull, the West's fourth Rhodes Scholar.

When Brazier reappeared, his ashen face foreshadowed his announcement. "I'm sorry lads, but the order is to go", he confirmed. The Western Australians shook hands with their friends, said goodbye, and prepared for the fate they felt was inevitable. A 23-year-old farmhand turned to his mate: "Goodbye cobber, God bless you" — his last words, which ended up on his headstone and, decades later, as the title of a book.

These were the moments — movingly depicted in Peter Weir's film — that would make the charge at the Nek renowned. The Western Australians expected to die, and accepted their fate. Those in the third line, when called on, ascended together. They did so because they believed that their sacrificial contribution would enable other Anzacs in other attacks to triumph in the sweeping August offensive.

Many belonged to the best-known families in their state. Some, like Phipps Turnbull and the Harper brothers, had outstanding promise. But they clambered into the open with the rest.

Turnbull was hit straightaway, and fell back gravely wounded. He lay dying on the dirt floor of the trench, preoccupied with the terrible shock in store for his loved ones.

Wilfred Harper had resolved to meet death by running towards the enemy as fast as possible. He expected to be cut down immediately, like Turnbull. But he somehow avoided the lethal torrent of fire from the Turks, as well as the bodies and scattered weaponry littering no-man's-land, and built up impressive pace across the rough and uneven terrain with its dips and holes and spiky bushes.

Gres Harper may have emulated his younger brother, despite being hampered by a severe ankle injury. A comrade wrote that Gres had "charged with them dragging his foot". Another survivor of the charge reported that he saw two dead men "lying on the Turkish parapet" who "looked like the Harper brothers".

Peter Weir had struggled for years to find a way to make a film about Gallipoli. He read widely, explored the Anzac site, and discarded numerous drafts because none was compelling enough for the special story he wanted to tell. Then one day he consulted Charles Bean's *Official History* again, and a passage jumped out at him: Wilfred Harper "was last seen running forward like a schoolboy in a foot-race, with all the speed he could compass". This was an exhilarating epiphany — he suddenly sensed that here was his story. Eventually, that Bean sentence became a motif for Weir's widely acclaimed film.

Not everyone acclaimed it, though. Some critics took a dim view of what they saw as the film's depiction of Gallipoli as blinkered British officers sending noble Australians to their deaths. At the heart of their criticism was the scene where the officer based on Antill insists to the character based on Brazier that the 10th Light Horse had to continue the murderous operation. Weir's adviser, the esteemed historian Bill Gammage, maintained that the Antill character was given an appropriate accent for an educated Australian of that era, but to the unimpressed critics he sounded British.

Antill was abrasive, aggressive and authoritarian. Empathy and perceptiveness were not prominent. Exuding self-confidence, but not as good as he thought he was, Antill was widely disliked and known as "Bull" or "the Bullant". After the Gallipoli evacuation he made

a claim of cringeworthy crassness: he observed that 90 officers in his brigade had served at Gallipoli, and he was the only one who had gone right through the campaign. It evidently escaped him that he had wiped out a lot of them himself.

What happened to him after the evacuation has become of particular interest since the recent publication of J.C. Barrie's reminiscences. John Charles Barrie, an original AIF officer, compiled an account of his war experiences during the 1930s that remained in his family's possession until his grand-daughter had it published earlier this year as *Memoirs of an Anzac*.

According to AIF records, Antill's post-Gallipoli service was limited and unremarkable. Initially he continued in the Light Horse, accompanying his brigade to the Sinai Desert, but did not see much action. Aware the Western Front was where the real action was, he welcomed his transfer to France as an infantry brigadier. But he lasted only a couple of months before being evacuated sick, and he never returned to the front. For a while he commanded training formations in England, but he was sent home to Australia and his AIF involvement concluded with the end of the war still a year away.

Memoirs of an Anzac indicates there was more to it than that. Barrie, an 8th Battalion officer, was wounded at the Gallipoli landing and did not rejoin his unit until July 1916. Antill arrived in France two months later to command the 2nd Brigade, the formation that included the 5th, 6th and 7th Battalions together with Barrie's 8th.

Barrie describes amusing vignettes, such as the new brigadier's quirky obsession with cooks' rifles and his determination to teach officers how to ride, unaware that most already could and were so offended by his obnoxious "lesson" that they pretended to lose control of their horses — "I knew you damned infantrymen couldn't ride", Antill fumed.

These episodes were trifles, though, compared to the alarm Antill instilled when the 2nd Brigade was ordered to attack in the Somme sector. Opinionated as ever, and characteristically disinclined to defer to those with more experience in France, Antill proposed to transform conventional communications: he would reorganise telephone wires, dispense with runners, and rely on marker flags — shades of the Nek! — that he would observe himself from his headquarters. This was bizarrely impractical at the Western Front, not only with modern artillery, but also, Barrie felt, with brigade headquarters well behind the front and the possibility of hills in between.

Antill's battalion commanders feared a disaster. Something had to be done. Barrie's commander, Lieut-Colonel Graham Coulter, sensed an opportunity when Antill began "coughing and spluttering" with what Barrie described as a cold. According to Barrie, Coulter devised a plan and implemented it with the assistance of Barrie and an admired 8th officer, Lieutenant Tas Mummery.

After insisting that Barrie and Mummery had to swear an oath of secrecy, Coulter arranged for them to summon the other three battalion commanders to a meeting that Coulter ensured would remain secret by stationing Mummery as a guard outside. Barrie also had to arrange for a certain doctor to attend this meeting half an hour after it began.

The preliminary meeting was brief. It was obvious that Coulter had swiftly succeeded in convincing the other colonels to adopt his plan. When the doctor arrived, Barrie ushered him in, and saw the four colonels "sitting at a table, looking very solemn". The doctor, who "had not been long at the front", was taken aback to find himself "sworn to secrecy" and then bluntly told by these grim-faced, experienced colonels that it was up to him to save the brigade by ensuring that its incompetent commander was urgently removed. It was his duty to diagnose Antill's minor cold as a serious illness.

The doctor, according to Barrie, was startled but persuaded. Barrie was subsequently told that the doctor proceeded to brigade headquarters, saw Antill, told him his illness looked perturbing (despite Antill's protests that it was just a cold), returned next morning, again took Antill's temperature — which, as before, showed normal — soberly pronounced that it was essential to have Antill evacuated immediately ("Sorry, sir, even generals must bow to a doctor's orders"), and had him taken away in an ambulance that the doctor had arranged to have waiting nearby. And, Barrie concluded, "we never saw him again".

To Barrie, writing in the 1930s, this "little drama" was "one of the epics of the war", yet only the few surviving participants knew about it. In his memoirs he preserved their anonymity by telling the story without naming names — apart from Mummery, who was killed in 1917. Barrie gave the doctor a pseudonym, "Captain Clear", and did not identify any of the colonels, even his own. (Barrie was in fact repeatedly scathing about Coulter without naming him, but praised the way Coulter had spearheaded Antill's removal).

Who were the others involved? Carl Jess was commanding the 7th Battalion, and succeeded Antill as acting brigadier until a successor was appointed. The other battalions

were led by John Walstab (5th) and C.W.D. Daly (6th). The identity of Captain Clear remains unclear.

Barrie's epic drama is not fully corroborated in the official records — for example, the date of Antill's departure with "bronchitis" is stated to have been more than a week after Coulter went on leave to London —but these records were not always chronologically accurate. Moreover, in view of the sequence of events, there were possibly other doctors besides Captain Clear who deemed Antill's illness to be more than a cold, so it may have become a more significant illness than it had initially seemed.

Still, Barrie's account has the ring of authenticity. That these experienced officers in Antill's brigade were so alarmed that they took the action Barrie describes in his lively memoirs is new and arresting confirmation of the incompetence of the main culprit in the devastating slaughter of the 10th Light Horse one hundred years ago. The final entry in Antill's Record of Officer's Service states that the reason for the termination of his appointment was "S.N.L.R." — that is, Services No Longer Required.

Ross McMullin's *Farewell, Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation*, which was awarded the Prime Minister's Prize for Australian History, includes biographies of the Harper brothers and Phipps Turnbull. Dr McMullin provided an introduction and elaborative footnotes for J.C. Barrie's *Memoirs of an Anzac*.