

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY
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1801
A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

A Double-edged Sword

Frank Butler walked out of the Randwick Army Barracks on 22nd August 1914 a very happy man. The final hurdle, his all-important medical examination, had just been passed with flying colours.¹ He was exactly the sort of fellow the army was looking for – young, athletic and well-built, with four years' experience as a lieutenant in the army cadets to his credit.² He'd heard that some people were saying the war would be over by Christmas, but as Frank strode purposefully down High Street towards the tram stop he fervently prayed that they were wrong.

He had only started his job as a shoe salesman with Edward Fay's Sydney store a year earlier,³ but Frank was confident Fay's would understand. Breaking the news to Mother and Father in Tamworth would be another matter. Father was a fiercely patriotic Englishman and would be supportive, but Mother was Irish and not so easily convinced that her 19-year-old son should have anything to do with this war in Europe.

Two months later Sergeant Frank Butler was heading down the east coast of Australia aboard Transport A19 *Afric*,⁴ feeling anything but heroic as he succumbed to the sea sickness that overwhelmed most of his compatriots.⁵ He was relieved when their troopship finally reached the sheltered waters of King George's Sound near Albany, and his morale was further boosted by the magnificent spectacle of dozens of ships anchored in the Sound, all 'packed to the gunnels' with Australian and New Zealand troops, horses and equipment. On 1st November the *Afric* was part of the first convey of 38 vessels to leave Albany bound for the Middle East.⁶

By the time the fleet reached the Egyptian port of Alexandria, Frank was well and truly ready to disembark. Further training ensued, and by April 1915 he had been promoted to corporal and reassigned to B Company, 1st Battalion 1st Infantry Brigade.⁷ The opportunity to engage in some action finally came when Frank and his company were part of a fleet of 200 ships gathered at Mudros Bay, on the Greek island of Lemnos, about 60 kilometres from the Gallipoli peninsula. The armada left the island on the evening of 24th April 1915 and arrived at dawn for the Gallipoli landings.⁸

As Frank later recounted, when the Australians first charged and the Turks ran, he thought they were going to chase them all the way to Constantinople. It was nothing more than a trap however, and when they got to the ridge at Quinn's Post they found the Turks were well prepared, with their machine guns just shaving the crown of the ridge. Casualties at this point were very heavy, particularly amongst the officers who often exposed themselves in a reckless manner to try to get a better idea of the lie of the land. Frank's own company lost three officers within five minutes of landing.⁹

Frank survived the initial onslaught unscathed and he continued to fight through the night, but at 8.45 on the morning of the second day he was seriously wounded by a machine gun bullet that shattered his left knee. He said it felt as though someone had swung a crowbar round with both arms and bashed him across the knee. Then his leg went numb for a while, but when feeling returned the pain was severe. Unable to move, he lay in Shrapnel Gully for eleven hours until he was able to be evacuated to the beach under cover of darkness.¹⁰

What followed was an uncomfortable voyage back to Alexandria on a ship so crowded with casualties that it was almost impossible to find a place to lie down.¹¹ Frank was initially

admitted to the Australian General Hospital in Alexandria for treatment. He was transferred to a convalescent camp at Helouan, 25 kilometres from Cairo, at the end of July, and two weeks later he was medically discharged to Australia.¹² After a couple of days attending to army formalities in Sydney, Frank boarded the train to Tamworth.

Much to his embarrassment, Frank was met at the station by the Tamworth Town Band, of which he had once been a member, and a large gathering of well-wishers. He was then driven from the station to his parents' home in a cavalcade consisting of the band members, several other cars, and members of the public on foot. Hearty cheers were given for him, his mother, and his father, and the band played 'Home Sweet Home'. Frank stood in the car and expressed his surprise and gratification at the welcome he was given.¹³

In the ensuing days, Frank was given another enthusiastic reception by the members of the Tamworth Catholic Club¹⁴ and a civic reception in the Theatre Royal. The hall was packed to capacity to witness the Mayor of Tamworth present Frank with an inscribed silver wrist watch "as a token of their esteem" and "in recognition of his sacrifice and devotion to duty".¹⁵ Frank was one of the first local lads to return from the Dardanelles and everyone in Tamworth was anxious to hear his firsthand account. He told them sadly that, as far as he knew, there were now only three men, including himself, alive out of his original section.¹⁶

Frank underwent a fourth operation on his knee in the following months¹⁷ but the outcome was not what he was hoping for. In December 1915, soon after his 21st birthday, he was told that his leg would always be stiff and he was to be discharged from the army as permanently unfit.¹⁸ It was a terrible blow for Frank, who made no secret of the fact that he had hoped to recover sufficiently to return to active service.¹⁹ Frank felt he was unlucky to have received such a serious injury to his leg, but on the other hand he knew he was very fortunate to be alive.²⁰ There is no doubt that for Corporal Frank Butler the events of 25th April 1915 were a double-edged sword that would change his life forever.



¹ National Archives of Australia: Australian Imperial Force, Base Records Office; B2455, First Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers, 1914-1920; Butler Francis William: SERN 558: POB Tamworth NSW: POE Randwick NSW: NOK Butler Alfred.

² 'Personal', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 1 November 1913, p. 2, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107473072>

³ 'Personal', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 1 November 1913, p. 2, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107473072>

⁴ National Anzac Centre 2018, *Francis William Butler*, accessed 19 April 2018, <http://www.nationalanzaccentre.com.au/francis-william-butler>

⁵ Department of Veterans' Affairs 2015, *Journey to Albany*, accessed 19 April 2018, <https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/about%20dva/media-centre/media-backgrounder/albany.pdf>

⁶ Australian War Memorial 2014, *Dig Deeper – The first convoy*, accessed 19 April 2018, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/dig-deeper-first-convoy>

⁷ NAA: B2455, Butler F W

⁸ Galinovic, M 2015, 'Faces of Anzac: Island paradise of Lemnos led straight to Gallipoli hell', *St George & Sutherland Shire Leader*, 18 March 2015, accessed 17 April 2018,

<https://www.theleader.com.au/story/2947503/faces-of-anzac-island-paradise-of-lemnos-led-straight-to-gallipoli-hell/>

⁹ 'First Days on Gallipoli – Corporal Butler's Adventures', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 18 September 1915, p. 3, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107502186>

¹⁰ 'First Days on Gallipoli – Corporal Butler's Adventures', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 18 September 1915, p. 3, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107502186>

¹¹ Duffy, J 2013, 'Tales of a World War I heroine', *Illawarra Mercury*, 21 April 2013, accessed 23 April 2018, <https://www.illawarramercury.com.au/story/1446493/tales-of-a-world-war-i-heroine/>

¹² NAA: B2455, Butler F W

¹³ 'Corporal FW Butler Arrives Home, Band Comrades Give Cordial Welcome', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 17 September 1915, p. 3, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107451891>

¹⁴ 'Welcomed Home by Catholic Club', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 18 September 1915, p. 2, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107451990>

¹⁵ 'Returned Hero, Civic Reception to Corporal Butler, Large Attendance', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 23 September 1915, p. 4, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107502494>

¹⁶ 'First Days on Gallipoli – Corporal Butler's Adventures', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 18 September 1915, p. 3, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107502186>

¹⁷ 'First Days on Gallipoli – Corporal Butler's Adventures', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 18 September 1915, p. 3, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107502186>

¹⁸ 'Permanently Unfit', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 7 December 1915, p. 3, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/116811889>

¹⁹ 'Returned Hero, Civic Reception to Corporal Butler, Large Attendance', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 23 September 1915, p. 4, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107502494>

²⁰ 'Welcomed Home by Catholic Club', *Tamworth Daily Observer*, 18 September 1915, p. 2, accessed 31 March 2018, <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/107451990>