

Uncle Willie

Wellington Mounted Rifles 2nd Squadron

Egypt and Dardanelles 1914-1915

World War 1

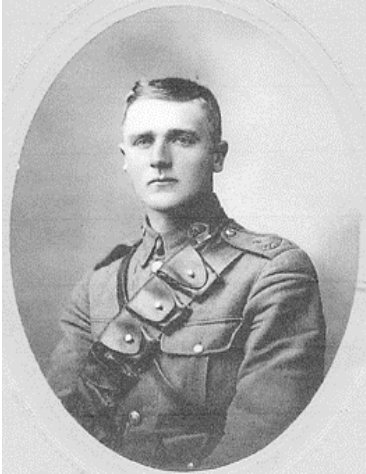


Soldiers of the Wellington Mounted Rifles 'at the foot of Chunuk Bair, going out to Hill 60', Gallipoli Peninsula, 1915. The men of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade served as infantry on Gallipoli after their landing in May 1915.



William Coombes MORGAN

11/528 Trooper W. C. Morgan, Wellington Mounted Rifles, served in Egypt and Dardenelles before being discharged medically unfit for active service in 1915.



Affectionally known as 'Uncle Willie', William Coombes Morgan was the eldest son of William Edmund (Ted) and Charlotte Mary (Lotte) Morgan¹. Born on 2 May 1888 at Turakina near Marton, he was the second eldest of seven siblings and elder brother of my grandfather Edgar Charles Morgan. Willie is a Great Uncle to my generation.

In 1894 Willies's parents moved to a farm called 'Mahuri' at Mangamahu² - an isolated, hill-country farming settlement in the middle reaches of the Whangaehu Valley. Being around 6 years of age at this time, Willie would have received his early schooling at Mangamahu School. After he finished his education Willie worked on the farm.

In 1910 his parent's purchased 'Roseville' and soon after 'Newtonlees' at Kaitoke from Charlotte's father, John Morgan³. The family moved and settled at Newtonlees. Willie, then aged 22, and younger brother Jack (John Ivo), aged 16, remained at 'Mahuri' and continued to farm it until it was sold in 1915 (by this time Willie had gone off to war and presumably Jack had intentions of doing the same).

Willie was working on the farm at Roseville when he enlisted on 15 August 1914. His military service totalled 1 year and 102 days, with 363 days being served overseas including two months at Gallipoli. His younger brother, Jack (John Ivo), also enlisted in the Wellington Mounted Rifles in 1917 and served in Egypt until the end of the war.



The Morgan family at 'Mahuri' Mangamahu circa 1910. Back row: Irene, Jack (John), Kathleen, Willie, Effie. Middle row: Lotte and Ted. Front row: Edgar (Bob) and Mary (Molly). NB: photo was taken after the death of Ted and Lotte's son Eric⁴ (1903).

This family photo has connections to four relatives who were to fight in World War 1. Brothers Willie and Jack (pictured), the future husband of Molly (Son Hughes), and future husband of Effie (Billy Roache).

¹ William Edmund (Father - William Morgan) and Charlotte Mary (Father - John Morgan) were first cousins.

² Mangamahu is approximately 50km north-east from Wanganui, off SH4 from Upokongaro (via Kauangaroa Road and Fordell).

³ John Morgan had retired from active farming in 1901.

⁴ Eric Edmund Morgan, b.1890 – d. 1903 aged 13 years [I believe he may have drowned].

Enlistment

Willie enlisted on 15 August 1914 at Wellington aged 26, not long after the outbreak of World War 1. He was a farmer, working on the family farm at Kaitoke.

His military records indicate that he was small in stature; only 5 foot 7 ½ inches tall, 132lbs (60kgs), with blue eyes and light brown hair. Because of his age, it appears that he may have missed the requirement to register for compulsory military training, but Willie had spent 10 years' service with the NZ Volunteers Maungamahu Defence Rifle Club⁵ prior to enlisting. This club had started about 1909, folded when the war started, but became very popular again when the club reopened in 1919.

On enlistment he was posted to the Wellington Mounted Rifles (WMR) – 2nd (Wellington West Coast) Squadron as a Trooper, receiving his military service number 11/528. The Wellington Mounted Rifles Regiment was one of four regional mounted rifles regiments raised to serve overseas in the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF). It served as part of the New Zealand and Australian Division on Gallipoli in 1915, and in Sinai and Palestine as part of the Australian and New Zealand Mounted Division from 1916 to 1918.

After completing his initial training at Awapuni Racecourse, Willie embarked on the troopship *HMNZT 10 Arawa* on 15 October 1914 with the main body of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, sailing from Wellington and arriving in Alexandria, Egypt on 3 December 1914 (via Hobart, Albany, Freemantle, Colombo, Aden, the Red Sea and Suez Canal to Port Said). For the first four months of 1915, the WMR trained in Egypt, but hopes of action in defence of the Suez Canal and then in the invasion of the Dardanelles were dashed.



HMNZT 10 Arawa.

In April 1915, the Australian and New Zealand Infantry Division received orders to prepare for the invasion of Gallipoli. The bulk of the New Zealand Mounted Rifles (including the WMR) and the two Australian Light Horse brigades were to remain in Egypt to continue training and defend the Suez Canal against Ottoman Turks.

WMR units remained in Egypt while the New Zealand infantry regiments and support units sailed for the Gallipoli landings. The heavy loss of men at Gallipoli meant a need for replacements, so on 5 May 1915 the NZMR received orders to move to Gallipoli as infantry for the struggle to seize the commanding heights of the Gallipoli Peninsula.

Because of the small size of the Anzac beachhead, very few horses were landed on Gallipoli due to the lack of space for them, the nature of the terrain and the shortage of water. Regiments of the NZMR are ordered to leave their horses behind so their riding horses remained at Zeitoun Camp in Egypt. The men were to fight as standard infantry units at Gallipoli. Arrangements are made to take officers' horses and a few draught horses to meet transport requirements.

On 9 May 1915, the WMR was divided into two groups that embarked from Alexandria on two transport ships bound for Anzac Cove on the Gallipoli Peninsula. *HMT Grantully Castle* with 25 officers, 453 other ranks and *HMT Kingstonian* with one officer, 30 other ranks and the horses.

⁵ Established in the mid-1840s, NZ Volunteers were a national militia system abolished in 1910, supported by an organisation of rifle clubs and cadets. It had a proven record of service in the Anglo-Māori Wars and Volunteer corps were an accepted part of communities throughout the country. New Zealand relied mainly on the Volunteers to meet any major threat to its national security in this period.

They arrived on 12 May 1915 and although the men aboard *HMT Grantully Castle* are landed, *HMT Kingstonian* anchors off Anzac Cove but returns to Alexandria on 13 May 1915 without disembarking any of the men or horses on board.⁶

Willie's military records are quite clean, in the sense that there is very little record of his active service – when and where he served. To this extent his records do not implicitly indicate that he landed on Gallipoli, however, WMR unit diaries confirms they landed and bivouacked in Reserve Gully on 12 May 1915.

On 29-30 May 1915 Willie's Squadron is involved in heavy fighting at and around No. 3 Post:

“At 9 p.m. the 6th (Manawatu) Squadron is relieved by the 9th (Wellington East Coast) Squadron (less one troop) under the command of Major Selwyn Chambers – total strength 5 officers and 93 other ranks. At approximately 10 p.m. the Ottomans begin a sustained and heavy attack on the post. At 11.30 p.m. the signal line to the post is cut, severing communication with Major Chambers and his men.

An attempt to send a troop of the Queen Alexandra's 2nd (Wellington West Coast) Squadron to the beleaguered post fails. At midnight the remainder of the 2nd Squadron under the command of Major James Elmslie tries to break through to No. 3 Post. After initial progress Elmslie's men strike strong Ottoman resistance and are held up roughly halfway between posts 2 and 3.

Fighting continues all night at and around No. 3 Post. Elmslie's squadron has advanced far enough to take some of the pressure off Major Chambers and his men, who fend off repeated Ottoman assaults on their position. At daybreak communication between No. 3 Post and the main line is restored via signal flags and two mountain guns are brought to bear on the Ottoman positions.”

Throughout June and July 1915, the WMR were either in the line, or a bivouac on the southern slopes, at Walker's Ridge, Gallipoli. Around 11 July 1915, Willie was wounded. Circumstances on how he was injured are unknown but on 11 July 1915, three casualties were diarised – two men wounded, and one reported as being sick. It is quite likely that Willie was one of these two men reported as wounded.

His injury was serious enough that on 14 July 1915 he was admitted to No. 1 Australian Stationary Hospital⁷, on the island of Lemnos⁸ - transported by the hospital ship *HMHS Devanha*⁹. Lemnos was the place where Anzac nurses and medical staff established their hospitals to treat the sick and wounded from Gallipoli.

Willie spent the next 6 weeks in hospital being treated for deafness. He was declared medically unfit for active service (MUFA) and invalided home on 1 September 1915 aboard *HMAT Ascanius (A11)*.¹⁰ The *Ascanius* departed Suez on 6 September 1915 enroute to Sydney, then transferring to *SS Maitai* to New Zealand, with 25 men and 1 officer on board.¹¹ Arriving in Wellington on 13 October 1915, Willie was officially discharged from military service on 24 November 1915.

Willie landed at Gallipoli on 12 May 1915, a day after his father's cousin (Willie's second cousin) Sapper Garland Oswald Morgan was killed at Monash Gully on 11 May 2015. It is unlikely that Willie would have been aware of this fact at this time.

⁶ This detailed timeline of activities of the Wellington Mounted Rifles Regiment is derived from the unit diaries kept during the First World War.

⁷ The No.1 Australian Stationary Hospital, originally located with the A.I.F. camp at Maadi, Egypt, then moved to East Mudros. It later moved to the Anzac sector at Gallipoli in November 1915.

⁸ Lemnos or Limnos is a Greek island in the northern part of the Aegean Sea.

⁹ P&O SS *Devanha* known as Troopship A3 at the time of the Gallipoli landing in 1915. The *Devanha* served as both a troop transport ship (HMT) and after the initial landings, a hospital ship (HMHS). It was used by 12 Battalion AIF, 3 Field Ambulance and 3 Infantry Brigade Head Quarters during the landings at Gallipoli in 1915.

¹⁰ Completed in December 1910 as steam passenger ship. 1914 requisitioned as troop transport for the Australian Expeditionary Force (AEF).

¹¹ Willie's military records indicate he was invalided back to NZ on HS *Ascania*. I believe this to be an error.

Landing at Gallipoli

In April 1915, the Wellington Mounted Rifles saw New Zealand and Australian infantry units move out of Egypt and to Gallipoli. They were keen to accompany them, but mounted troops were not required.

However, their wishes were soon answered. Heavy casualties during the landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 necessitated an urgent call for reinforcements. The WMR, along with other mounted troops were on their way. On the morning of 8 May 1915, the camp of the WMR was awake early in order to prepare for the Regiment to entrain for Alexandria, enroute to Gallipoli.

After marching from Zeitoun, they entrained in two parties – one of 25 officers and 453 Other Ranks at Palais de Koubbel, and the second of 1 officer and 30 Other Ranks, with horses, at Cairo. The former was to embark on the *HMT Grantully Castle* and the latter on the *HMT Kingstonian*. They left at 2.00am on the morning of 9 May 1915. The ships arrived at Gallipoli on 12 May 1915. After dark, all troops were transferred to torpedo-boat destroyers, and from these on to lighters so as to make their landing on the shore.



During this operation, heavy firing was taking place onshore which was quickly responded to by the warships which lay along the coastline.

As the lighters approached a temporary jetty at Anzac Cove the rifle fire from the hills above them was of such intensity that the flashes illuminated the surrounding area. Bullets occasionally splashed the water and hit the lighters, but the landing was accomplished quickly; only one man was hit.

The New Zealand Mounted Rifles Brigade then marched along the beach, past the northern point of Anzac Cove, and camped. The strength of the WMR on landing was 25 officers and 451 Other Ranks.

Meanwhile, the *HMT Kingstonian*, with the horses and first line of transport, returned to Alexandria.

On 13 May 1915, the New Zealand Mounted Rifle Brigade were ordered into the front trenches. The WMR were the first to move up the rugged face of Walker's Ridge¹² and completed the activity by 3.00pm. The area occupied by the WMR was small and in close

proximity to the Turkish line. The trenches were anything but clean and flies swarmed everywhere. Enemy snipers were active. The troops immediately commenced improving the trenches, working day and night.

The photograph above shows soldiers of the Wellington Battalion (likely 1st New Zealand Infantry Brigade) digging trenches on Walker's Ridge in the days immediately after the landing (25 April 1915).

A shortage of water was of concern, with only three litres being available for each man per day. This water was drawn from barges that were filled at either Malta or Alexandria. From the beach the water was carried by the men in kerosene tins, up the steep tracks to the trenches.

Rations were brought from the beach on mules, and consisted of bully beef, biscuits, cheese, jam and tea, but the intense heat, nauseating smells and the flies discounted their value in Gallipoli. Meat was almost entirely discarded, owing to the thirst it caused, and the cheese melted. Biscuits and jam with a tin of tea comprised the usual meal. When the jam was consumed the empty tins came in handy as emergency grenades.

¹² On 25th April 1915, Walker's Ridge was the post of command of Brigadier-General Walker, then commanding the New Zealand Infantry Brigade.

Decorations

Willie received the standard set of standard service medals awarded to all New Zealanders who embarked for overseas service during this time-period.



His medals are referred to as the Standard Trio - the 1914-1915 Star, the 1914-1918 British War Medal, and the Victory Medal. Pip, Squeak and Wilfred are the affectionate names given to these campaign medals.

King George V felt very strongly that those who fought early on in the First World War should be awarded a medal to reflect this. The 1914-1915 Star¹³ was created service in any theatre of war between 23 November 1914 and 31 December 1915. Many of these recipients were volunteers.

The British War Medal was a campaign medal of the British Empire, for service in World War 1. The medal was approved in 1919, for issue to officers and men of British and Imperial forces who had rendered service between 5 August 1914 and 11 November 1918. The medal was later extended to cover and award the services in the period 1919–20.

The Victory Medal was authorised in 1919 to commemorate the victory of the Allied Forces over the Central Powers. Each of the Allied nations issued a 'Victory Medal' to their own nationals. The Victory Medal was awarded to prescribed classes of persons who entered a theatre of war on duty between 5 August 1914 and 11 November 1918.

After the War

Not long after Willie was discharged, he married his first wife, Muriel Beatrice WILLOUGHBY, at Christ Church Wanganui on 29 March 1916.

Willie continued to work on the family farms – Roseville and Newton Lees in Kaitoke, Wanganui as a farmhand. He and Muriel never had children. Muriel passed away in 1941, and in the same year he married his second wife, Lily Ruabertha WADEY. Sadly, Willie took his own life in Wanganui on 17 October 1946 aged 58 years. Tragically, his body was found by my grandfather Edgar Charles (Bob) MORGAN, who 11 years later, was also to take his own life.



Men of the Wellington Mounted Regiment in Egypt 1915.

¹³ Not to be confused with the 1914 Star Medal which was awarded for service on the Western Front in France from 4th August to 22nd November 1914. The majority were awarded to soldiers who had been in the army before war was declared.

References

Auckland War Memorial Museum – Online Cenotaph

<https://www.aucklandmuseum.com/war-memorial/online-cenotaph/record/C10988>

Navy Museum - Troopships of World War 1

<https://navymuseum.co.nz/explore/by-themes/world-war-one/troopships-departed-nz-ww1/>

Abbreviations Used on Military Records

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/ww1-abbreviations-acronymns>

Archives NZ – Archway (Unit Diaries)

<https://archives.govt.nz/search-the-archive/researching/research-guides/war/world-war-one-1914-1918>

Wellington Mounted Rifles

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/wellington-mounted-rifles-regiment>

Wellington Mounted Rifles – Unit Diaries (timeline 1914-1919)

<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/wellington-mounted-rifles/1914>

Friends of the Hocken WW1 Transcription Project – Diary of Dr William Aitken 1914-1915, MS-1334/001 [Aitken embarked on Arawa – the same ship as Willie]

<https://blogs.otago.ac.nz/thehockenblog/friends-of-the-hocken-ww1-transcription-project-diary-of-dr-william-aitken-1914-1915-ms-1334001/>

Book - The Road to Mangamahu, M H Campion and P M Garland and J D Morris, Wanganui Newspapers LTD (1988), pages 163-164, ISBN 0-473-00560-6

Book – Lakes District of Wanganui – updated 1997, Marie White, various pages, ISBN 0-473-01016-X

Book – Gallipoli, Peter Fitzsimons, Penguin Random House Australia, 2017, ISBN 978 0 14378 635 1