



South Australians at war – transcript – D7720 (L)

Letter from John Jensen about Cairo riots and Gallipoli landing, 1915

Transcription of full document

Transcribed by Susie van der Sluys, September 2002

Aug 28th 1915

Dear Aunt Hannah

I am writing you these few lines hoping they find you quite well as they leave me. I suppose you must have been a bit worried when you read about the landing at Gallipoli. You know a letter takes such a long time to go from here to Australia & even then you can't say very much in a letter when it is written. I think the last time I wrote to you from Egypt was from Heliopolis. I was just getting over the measles then & I left a day or two after I wrote to you. When I got out to the camp they were just going away & as I had been in hospital for so long they thought I would not get out in time & they had filled up my place so I had to join the reinforcements. I can assure you it broke me up a bit when I found out that I could not join my own Battallion & had to leave my mates the ones I had joined with last August & go among strangers. However there was no get away from it so I was sent to a place called Abbasieh. A few days afterwards the troops all moved away to Alexandria except the reinforcements & we were left behind. A day or two afterwards however they picked out six of us to fill the places of some who had gone sick & I happened to be one. At first I could not get back to my own company but I managed that later on after we had landed at the Dardanelles.?

The last few days we had in Egypt I shall never forget as three nights running there were riots in & about Cairo. On good friday there was a big row in one of the main streets in Cairo. I think I told you once before that Cairo is a very immoral place in fact they say that it is the worst town in the world. Some streets there are nothing but brothels & houses of infamy where every possible vice under the sun exists. Of course some of our men had been going to these places & had got diseases of different kinds & as a (what?) our chaps had a grievance against these places. Finally to finish up with one of the Manchester soldiers who were also stationed in Egypt found his sister in one of them. She had left England as a servant to some lady who had taken her to Egypt & left her there. I dare say you have heard of that sort of thing it is called the white slave traffic here in England. Anyway this girl went from bad to worse until finally she way found dancing in what they call a Can-Can hall that is a dozen or so women dancing perfectly naked in a big hall & exposing their person to every kind of indignity both by themselves & also the onlookers. It is just as well that I cannot tell you everything that goes on here as it would only grieve you. This Manchester chap managed to have a talk with his sister & tried to get her away. She was only too willing to go but the people she was with would not let her & they threw



the brother out of a window as a result he was in hospital for nearly a week. When he got right he came in the camp & told our chaps & asked them to help him. At first they could not find the girl again but at last she was found in a particularly vile house. This was a day or two before Good Friday & that day being a holiday about 500 of our chaps & some New Zealanders & English troops went in to raid these houses. When they got in there a good many got drunk & they were joined by a great many more also drunk so the affair ended in a riot. They got the girl out first & then set fire to the houses. The affair started about four o'clock in the afternoon & was kept up until nearly midnight Shops were raided & windows broken everywhere. I was on guard that day & we were called out to go & stop it but only twenty of us could do nothing against nearly two thousand. They had a fire in the street & were throwing the furniture out of windows two & three storeys high on to it. Some of us went in & tried to put it out & a chair came out of a window three storeys high & hit one chap & nearly killed him. We carried him away & a few minutes after piano came out of the same window & fell with an awful crash on the pavement. All the strings seemed to break at once & it went off like a cannon. After that the Military Police charged the crowd on horseback firing their revolvers into them but the crowd threw broken bottles & stones at them. One policeman got badly hit & one eyecut out with a broken bottle & two of our chaps were hit by the revolver shots.

About eight o'clock five hundred Manchester troops came with fixed bayonets & were told to charge. They charged alright but they wouldn't go for our men so they gave them rifles & our chaps threw them on the fire. Then they turned & ran & our fellows followed them up with sticks A while after the South Australian Light Horse came but the horses wouldn't face the fire & smoke A little after eleven o'clock the Westminster Dragoons came. They looked all right as they were coming down the street with all their swords drawn & their horses going straight through the fire & smoke. This very soon cleared the street & then we went for the houses & took everybody prisoner that we found. We got about fifty Australians & some New Zealanders.

The girl who was the cause of all the trouble was sent to England. She was taken charge of by the Y.M.C.A. The men in camp collected over forty pounds to pay her passage & expenses back to England Of course the money was handed over to the Y.M.C.A.

Next night a riot started in the canteen of the Abbasieh camp. Somebody caught an Arab who was employed at the canteen making water in a tub of beer. The Arab was at once pulled & half killed. All the beer casks & tubs were broken & spilt & all the groceries & goods stolen & the place burned down.

The guard was called out again but by the time we got there everything was over & the camp was quiet except for the fire still burning.

On Sunday evening the New Zealanders burned down a picture show. The man had advertised a boxing match & doubled the admission & then showed just the same pictures as he usually did. So they burned his place down.

A few days afterwards I left for the Dardanelles We went straight to a Greek island called Lemnos I stayed there a few days. This was were Will had been for nearly two months. You remember when I wrote from Heliopolis I told you Will had left Egypt. We left Lemnos about April 24th & landed on April 25th at Gallipoli. The third brigade landed first at four



oclock in the morning & we landed at 6 oclock. We were lucky getting ashore as nobody was hit in the boat although shells were falling all around us a big shell dropped close to the boat & nearly upset it when it exploded.

As soon as we got on to the beach a shell fell right into my platoon & killed one & wounded six three of whom died afterwards from the wounds. The man at one side of me was hit in the stomach & the man right in front was hit in the side of the face the bullet taking his eye right out. A few yards further another shell dropped among us knocking over 9 or 10 the officer included.

About two hours afterwards when they made a count there was only thirteen left out of fifty. The sergeant who counted shook his ~~his~~ head & said he didn't like it as thirteen was a unlucky number A few minutes afterwards he was killed himself. We held that ridge for three more days until the Turks drove us out & we had to retire a quarter of a mile. During all those three days I lay in one little hole & never closed my eyes night or day or ate a bite of food. When my own water bottle was empty I crawled out to the deadones & took the water off them. My rifle was in my hand all the time & sometimes it was that hot with the shooting that I couldn't touch any of the iron part. All those three days which I will never forget I was not touched once although I had two dead men fall into my hole. One chap brought up some ammuniton to me & just as he was giving it to me a bullet hit him & he fell in on top of me. He just said, "I'm gone" & died.

On the Tuesday night we could see the Turks in front of us in a terrible big force. So we had orders to retire back on to the second line as soon as it got dark. This we did & crawled away about a hundred yards when we heard the Turks coming. They kept shouting Allah & jumped over the trenches & into the ridge were we had been. We stopped then & fired a few more shots & they lay down & started firing where they saw the flashes of the rifle. We kept on going back & stopping & firing a few shots & then going back again. After a while they got a machine gun going & kept on sweeping all over us with it but the shots were going too high. Just as we were getting near our second line which was a good trench they started to shell us & the man next to me got hit in the back. The corporal who was the other side of me got hold of one arm & I got the other & we started to half-drag & carry him into the trench. When we were quite close to it another shell burst & a piece hit me in the right thigh. I fell straight down & seemed to lose all power of my leg for a while I thought it was broke. The corporal who was a big man over seventeen stone caught hold of my hand & dragged me & the other chap into the trench I found out then that my leg was only bruised & a few day after I could walk as well as ever although I was still black for a month.

We were the last ones to leave the ridge & we were very sorry to have to do it after holding it so long. I did not get a chance to put any bayonet into any of the Turks but the corporal who was next to me bayoneted two who had nearly got into his dugout. After we got back into the trenches things were pretty quiet for a while. I only saw one other man killed although a good many were wounded. We were getting on alright just digging trenches & taking our turn in the firing line. The tucker was pretty good & we were getting a fair amount of sleep & rest. One day we got orders to move from ~~some~~ our own trenches & take up some of the fourth Battallion ones. Then our troubles started again. While we had been digging & working hard they had been resting & their trenches were no good. One of the first to go was our quartermaster who had charge of the stores. A whole shell which did not explode hit him one night & blew him to pieces. We picked up the pieces of him on a blanket & took them away & buried them. The next to go was our Captain. He was hit on



the head & died almost instantly. A few nights after I got it myself & eight others at the same time. We were all standing in a place where a big gun had been & the Turks must have thought the gun was still here as they started to shell it pretty heavy. I did not get the first one although the man alongside of me did & another man just behind me got one in the back. He fell down singing out something awful. I think a bullet hit him in the spine. Another chap & I started to take him to shelter when another shell went off & hit him again in his groin. I had hold of his legs at the time & the other chap had hold of his arms. He started singing out again that we were hurting him so we put him down & sang out for a stretcher. While we were waiting for it to come another shell went off & I got one just below the eye. I went a bit dazed & fell over backwards & as I lay on the ground another shell went off & I got one in the neck & one in the leg. That seemed to wake me up a bit & I crawled away out of the road. Just after I got away the chap who was hit at first got another one. I saw him afterwards but he died on the hospital ship. After a little while the Turks stopped their shelling & then they started to take the wounded away. I was about the last one they took. They just dressed me & then let me lay down & have a rest. I was able to hobble down to the first field hospital in the gully but when I got there I was feeling too weak to go any further & I was still bleeding a good deal from the throat so they carried me down to the shore on a stretcher & spent one aboard the Hospital ship. They had just put a dressing on me & had not washed me or anything & I was all covered in blood.

They had also put a bandage over my eyes so that I could not see anything. When we got to the ship they just hoisted me on board & put the stretcher on the deck & left me there. It must have been about midnight & I stopped there for an hour or two. Then one of our officers who was on board wounded came walking along & nearly fell over me. He asked me who I was & where I belonged & I told him. He asked me if I could walk & I told him I thought I could so he gave me a hand & took me along to a bed. Then he took my clothes off & washed me & got me a clean shirt. I asked him to only put the bandage over one eye so that I could see out of the other one & this he did. In the morning an Australian nurse came along & looked at me. "Hullo", she says "when did you get here." I told her. "Who put you in this bed", she says. So I told her again "Oh the cheek of him", she said "I'll speak to him about it." I asked her for a drink of water & she told me there was plenty of water in the filter just on the other side of the ship. Another chap got up & went across & got me a drink. An Indian doctor came during the morning & dressed me again but after that I had great trouble to swallow as the bullet had gone through my throat & I used to keep vomiting up the blood I had swallowed. At first I had great trouble to get anything soft to eat but at last the Indian doctor said I was to get milk so then I was all right.

The ship stayed there two days after I got aboard & then went down to Alexandria. When we got there the doctor asked me if I could walk & I told him I thought I could. I got down the gangway alright & into the ambulance & away to the Greek Hospital. When we got there I got out of the ambulance & walked to a seat & sat down. Presently they called me to come into the receiving room & as soon as I got up I collapsed & fell down. Two Greek boy scouts ran & got a stretcher & put me on it & carried me inside & put me to bed. The next day they put me under the X Ray to locate the bullets & the next day they operated. They took the one bullet out of my leg easy enough & the other one out of my mouth but the one in the throat was too deep to get at. They took all the blood & stuff out of my throat & I could swallow quite easy after that.

Of course they kept me on milk & light food for a while but I soon got better & in about 10 days was out of bed. The Greek people were very good although some of them could not



speaking English at all. There was one old woman on at night & if ever I wanted a drink I just used to point to my mouth & she would run away & get me a cup of milk. There were some Greek ladies who used to come every day or so sometimes in the morning & sometimes in the afternoon. They could speak English very well & I always used to ask them if I wanted anything. The Sultan of Egypt came & had a talk with us one day & brought cigarettes & chocolates. He seems a very decent one to speak to & he can talk English very well. After I was there about three weeks they came and told me one day that I was going to England. They didn't say when or how but one morning I felt someone doing something at my wrist so I woke up & looked at it & I had a label tied on with my name & number & regiment & the extent [of] my injuries written on it. After one who could speak English came in & I asked her what it was & she told me then that I was going to England that day & sure enough before dinner I was on the Hospital ship & by evening we were on our way. We stayed a day in Malta & a day at Gibraltar finally getting to England on June 21st. We landed at Southampton & got a hospital train from there to Manchester. It is a six hours ride from Southampton to Manchester & we got there at half-past two in the morning. It was long summer days then & it was coming light by three o'clock. I was taken to Ducie Avenue which had been a school but was turned into a hospital soon after the war started. Of course they were all English nurses there but they are far better than our own Australian nurses. The people in Manchester treated us very well. We were not allowed to go outside the hospital & there was an iron railing all around, so we used to go out & sit by the fence & the people used to bring us all sorts of things I used to get on an average a dozen eggs every day & any amount of cakes & fruit & lollies. I used to keep all the chaps in bed with cigarettes that I got at the fence. I also made any amount of friends & a lot of people wanted me to come & stay with them as soon as I got convalescent.

I stayed in Manchester three weeks & then got a move on to Accrington Convalescent Home. The nurses there were all voluntary they used to come & work a week or so & then the next week some different ones would be there. Some of them were very well off but they used to come & work away scrubbing floors etc & washing dishes & doing all sorts of things. Every day when it was not raining we used to go over mills & factories. I saw the cotton there from where it went in rough to where it came out cloth. Then I was in the dye & printing works where they dye all the cotton stuff & make the prints. Another time we went to a factory where they make mangles & wringers & carpet sweepers. They employ a lot of women & girls in the mills especially in the weaving sheds. They always talk about the poverty of the people in England but I'm hanged if I can see it. In Lancashire the people all wear clogs but this is not a sign of poverty. They do it on account of the very wet weather they always have. The women & girls usually wear shawls over their heads when they go to work but I think that is mostly for the cold.

Of course the girls in the towns here do not always have their best clothes on like the town girls in Australia. They always remind me more of the country girls. One thing they are always tidy & clean. All the best of the men here have enlisted now & those that remain do not like to speak too much to us in case we might ask them to enlist. Another day while I was at Accrington we went to a dairy farm. You know here in England they have to keep all their cows in big byres during the winter on account of the snow & of course they must be all hand fed. They make big stacks of turnips & carrots & marigolds. This goes with the hay & grain for cow feed during the winter.

I stayed at Accrington for a little over a fortnight & then I got my discharge & was sent to Weymouth. When I got there I was not feeling very well & when I went up before the



doctor he marked me unfit & said I was to go before a board & I would most likely be sent back to Australia. A day or two after I got 14 days furlough & a railway pass to Edinburgh. I went up to London & stayed one night at a Soldiers Home called the Union Jack Club & next day I left London at 2 o'clock in the afternoon & got to Edinburgh at half-past eleven that night. I stayed in Edinburgh a few days & had a good look round. I went to see the old castle. It is very interesting to see it & the crown jewels & all the old armour & cannons & dungeons. It is also very interesting to see Holyrood Palace where Mary Queen of Scots lived. You can see her bed-room & books & a lot of other things I also went out to see the Forth Bridge. This bridge cost about three million pounds to build & is considered to be one of the greatest engineering feats of the world.

After that I went down to Glasgow & had a few days there. I went out to Loch Lomond & had a trip on that. Then I crossed to Belfast in Ireland. Belfast is a very nice place it is nearly all new & a nice clean city. It is mostly factories & mills. There are great ship building yards there too & some of the biggest ships in the world are built there. I saw the Olympic & the Britannic lying in the docks & they are two of the biggest in the world. This is the part of Ireland they call Ulster & the people are half protestants & half Catholics Sometimes they meet & have terrible fights.

There is one street which divides the two different quarters of the town & each side comes half way along it & then start to pelt one another with the cobble stones out of the street. These stones are big round ones & they call them kidneys in Belfast. The chap who was taking me around told me that before the war started a soldier dare not walk down that street if he did he would soon be chased out of it with stones but when I went down along it everything was quiet enough. Then I went down to Dublin & stayed a few days there. I did not care much for it. Some

of the back streets are nearly as dirty & narrow as the Cairo streets Dirty women & children are everywhere & at night the streets are full of drunken men & women.

You see the women come out of public houses with the jugs of beer in their hands & dirty ragged children following them. Some parts of the city are all right. There are very nice public gardens & the River Liffy runs through the centre of the town. You can see dirty women selling fruit & apples & fish in the dirty back streets. I have heard them calling out six herrings for a penny but I would not like to eat them. I went down to Killarney from there I had a few days on the lakes. Killarney is a very pretty place. You go & see Muchcross Abbey & Bors Castle & had a row out on the lakes to Innisfallen Island & got a bit of Irish holly off it I will send it to you some time later on. There are a lot of poor people about there. It was fair week while I was in Killarney & every day people were coming in with pigs & cattle & poultry selling & bargaining them in the streets.

There are a lot of men knocking about there too doing nothing but they would never speak to me. They won't enlist & they don't like talking any soldiers in case they might ask them to join. I did not care much for Ireland The people always think they are hardly done by & are always complaining about something. Just now they are all for the Home Rule & while everyone else is doing their best just now the Irish people as a whole are just going along in their old way making all the trouble they can.



I came back to Dublin & then crossed over again to over again to Manchester I had a few days there. I think Manchester is my favourite place but I suppose that is because I was in hospital there so long. Most of the men in and about Manchester who are fit & able have joined the army. A lot of them landed at the Dardanelles the same time as we did & of course there was a lot of them killed and wounded & this makes them very good to us when we go there wounded.

After I left Manchester I went on down to London & stopped there for a few days. London is a big place but I cannot say that I care much for it. You notice in London a good deal of the slums like Dublin only the children are not quite so dirty. You also notice a lot of women drinking but I did not notice so many lying drunk in the streets as in Dublin.

There are lots of sights to see in & about London but every body is on the make & even the boys in the streets chase you for pennies like the Arab boys in Egypt. They all know the Australians & Canadians & they know that we get more money than the English troops who only get a 1/— a day.

I left London & got down here to Weymouth last Saturday I was eleven days over my furlough as I had 25 days altogether. Weymouth is a nice little place on the South Coast of England where all our chaps go when they get out of hospital. Our camp is all wooden huts with a stove & electric light in them. When I came down here I went before the doctor & told him I was fit & well so he put me into a fit platoon. I cannot see out of my eye very well as yet but it is getting better & I hope to be alright & able to see as well as ever very soon. If the doctor doesn't examine me again for eyesight I will get away with the next draft to the Dardanelles. I would not like to be sent back to Australia before the war is over. You see so many going about who will not enlist & the excuses they give would make your hair turn grey. One young chap who was asked to join said what had he got to join for. He had no wife no children & no parents depending on him so why should he fight let those fight who had something to fight for. These sort of men make you feel ashamed & you want to get away to your own men again. Of course the prospect of getting wounded again or killed is not very pleasant but I have seen some of my best mates killed & they died like men & if I can do the same I will be quite satisfied to go now. We all know we must die some time. If I am wounded again I will be able to bear it as I did the last time & if I am crippled I shall have to bear it as many another young chap is doing & I shall know at least that I have done my duty to the country which I have got my living in. If I have the good luck to get through it all I will be able to go back to Australia contented knowing that I have done my best.

If I do not write too often you need not worry as when we get in the trenches we are kept working & are glad to get all the rest we can & sometimes writing materials are hard to get as we often have to leave all our things behind & only take food & ammunition. If you watch the papers you will see the casualty lists in them & if I get hit again it will be in the papers long before a letter can get there. You know my number 955 & my name J Jensen & my regiment 1st Battallion New South Wales so you will be able to pick it out. In case I should get killed I would like you to let a friend of mine know. His address is

Mr. R. Colverwell

Queanbeyan.



N.S.W.

If anything happens to me don't worry at all. If we are not too meet again here I trust we shall meet in the next world. But don't think I am trying to frighten you at all only now that I have been there once I knew what I have to expect & I am fully prepared for anything but I can see my duty & I know you would not wish me to do anything else. Before I left Australia I made over 2/- a day to the old lady & she will get it every week or fortnight that is 14/- a week as you know doubt know that we are paid for seven days a week.

I told you last time that I would send you some post-cards to keep for me until I got back but I think I will send them to Wasleys along with my old tunic & cap & a few other things. I think that is all I have to tell you this time I will write again when we a going away so hoping this finds you well

I remain

Your Loving Nephew

J Jensen