



A TRIBUTE TO MY FATHER GORDON FAIRHALL.

It is Anzac day 25th April 2007, and I have been watching a documentary on the meaning of the day. What I have seen has prompted me to write this. My father only talked about his “war” to me once – when I came back from travelling in 1967. We talked until 2am – I was so entranced by what he told me of his life. I will now try and give a small picture of the man who was my father.

He was born in February 1895 and was the son of a pioneering family in Nelson. His father was Edward Fairhall arrived on the *Lord Auckland* in 1842. His mother, Annie Florence Palmer, came from Victoria, Australia. They had 8 children, the second son Stewart Linwood Fairhall would become Gordon’s father. I know little about Gordon’s early life apart from being a Mum’s boy and very sensitive, but a bit about his life when the family moved to Murchison. During that time my father went to Nelson Boys College while boarding with an aunt in Hope. He travelled to school on the train, and on school holidays went to Murchison by Cobb coach. A few snippets of his experiences of that time – having to retrieve his cap after someone threw it out of the train window... He managed to grab it and get back on the last carriage...!!! (the train was struggling up the hill just outside the city). Another was when he went home for the holidays and had to get out and help push the coach, when the horses became bogged down...!

He succeeded well at school – gained his U.E. in 1911 at the age of sixteen and played in the First XV rugby team for the Nelson College. When war broke out in 1914 he put his age up in order to go away with his mates and was put in the artillery division on one of the big guns, which required a crew of five I believe. At the time he was 19 yrs. old and 65kgs.! They left from Wellington in the first echelon, on the 16th October 1914 to Egypt, where they had the first few months, then on to Gallipoli in 1915. As Dad was a gunner he wasn’t required ashore for three days, so was very lucky to miss the absolute fiasco that ensued in those first few days. One needs to see the documentary to understand the hell it must have been. It was total chaos with enormous loss of life. When seeing the beach

as it is today, one cannot imagine how they managed to climb up the cliffs, let alone lug those huge guns and re-assemble them up the hill...! Here is part of a letter he wrote to his sister when in his eighties.

43

Sixty one years ago today I was at Gallipoli in an old louse infested ship waiting for word to go ashore. But I was a bit lucky as my presence was not required ashore for another three days - and a memorable journey it was by R Navy destroyer from transport to Anzac Beach. I still retain a file of memories of my 7½ months at Gallipoli till evacuation Dec 12th - what a place! what a life! and only by the grace & mercy of God did I survive when most others failed to do so. I landed there a raw beginner, and left there a full blooded gunner - having not only personally fired the big big banger myself on various occasions, but was offered promotion en route as well (but being naturally a bit "diffident", I asked to be excused). Twice in France I was

offered promotion but declined with thanks as it took me all I knew to look after one - Fairhall - without having others to supervise.

When my father recalled what it was like - living in trenches with the dead, rats crawling everywhere and the smell - at the same time as eating their meagre rations of rice and bully beef to keep alive, it defies imagination. (He was only 65kgs when he left N.Z.) This morning I saw for the first time, actual photographic footage of life in the trenches. One can't imagine how they "relieved" themselves – diarrhoea was rife, or how they coped with injuries and sickness? He described to me some of the actions they endured. One that sticks in my memory is when their gun received a direct hit when all his four mates were killed in a "flash" - he survived without injury being in lee of the gun...! He somehow even managed to fire the "gun" by himself - and was later offered decoration and promotion for this, which he refused. I have such admiration for that man who became my father.

It was still early in my father's war – having survived Gallipoli, he was one of the few who were sent on to the Western Front. After 3 months in a camp in Alexandria, he went to France and spent the next sixteen months fighting there before having his first leave - two weeks in England..! He missed the train connecting with the transport back to France (accidentally) thereby forfeited a weeks pay...! Apart from a three month tour of duty in England, he remained in France until January 1919, when he was repatriated home and finally discharged in the May. His war service of 4 years 227 days shows more than two and a half years were spent on the Western front when most Gallipoli veterans were repatriated home in 1915. His records (from the Defence Dept.) show no physical injuries, no misdemeanours, no promotions, no medals (apart from just being a participant) –only the numbers and names of where he spent his time away. The horror of it all doesn't show as an injury - only my mother and his family knew of his awful psychological injury. The effects of post traumatic stress were unknown back then. I am in awe of a person who can survive so much. They were a very special generation having such skill, guts, and spirit to survive such trauma. I can't imagine what the outcome would be, if the current young generation were faced with those circumstances?

My father went on to do a lot with his life. On returning to N.Z. he trained as an engineering surveyor, then worked in Canada for three years, then Peru for another three years where he was involved in the building of dams and bridges for the highest mountain railway in the world. In 1930 he returned to New Zealand. It was the time of the great depression. He married my mother, Esther Florence Colbran, in 1931, moved to Wellington and worked on the railway tunnels being built at that time just north of the city then in 1933 was requisitioned for roading survey work in the King Country.

This reminiscence was written as a tribute by Mary Preiss about her father.

No. 45013



**NEW ZEALAND EXPEDITIONARY FORCE.
CERTIFICATE OF DISCHARGE.**

N.B.—(1.) This certificate is issued without alteration or erasure of any kind.
(2.) Any person finding this certificate is requested to forward it to Headquarters, N.Z. Military Forces, Wellington, N.Z.
(3.) Should this certificate be lost or mislaid no duplicate of it can be obtained.

No. 2/596 Rank: Gunner Unit: N.Z. Field Artillery
Name: Gordon Stewart Fairhall
is discharged on the termination of his period of engagement.

Service abroad: 4 years 183 days.

DESCRIPTION OF SOLDIER ON ENLISTMENT.

Age: 20 1/2 years Height: 5 feet 8 1/2 inches
Complexion: Fair Eyes: Brown
Hair: Dark Brown Trade or occupation: Draughtsman

Signature A. Boyd Lieut.
Lieut. Major-General,
Commanding New Zealand Military Forces.

WELLINGTON, 14th May, 1919