

Hartley Valentine Palmer (6/320)

Hartley was born 14 February 1891 at Para, Marlborough (between Koromiko and Tua Marina, Marlborough)

Originally from Brightwater, Hartley's parents left Marlborough and returned to Brightwater when he was 16. They bought an orchard and sheep farm, along with a farm in Aniseed Valley. In lieu of wages, his father bought him a farm at Six Mile in Murchison.

Hartley was a Volunteer and a member of the Waimea Volunteer Rifle Club when the compulsory military territorial training came into force. Although he had completed his training, he was asked to stay on with the Territorials and given the rank of Sergeant.

When war was declared in August 1914 the Territorials were ordered to their respective headquarters. When his Sergeant Major called for volunteers Hartley and a friend, Ted Baigent, responded immediately, going to the Spring Grove Drill Hall, his war service starting on 15 August. "I hurried home to pack my military gear and catch a train leaving at 8am the following morning for Nelson headquarters. On arriving I was ordered by Quartermaster Bates to load the city carriers with tents and proceed to Victory Square, where, with help from others, I pitched the three officers' tents, the first military preparation."

Once the Nelson Company reached full strength, it received orders to depart for Lyttelton, where it entered camp at Addington. Hartley was attached to the No. 9 Platoon under the company command of Colonel Brereton.

As there was an excess of sergeants, Hartley opted to drop rank to private rather than wait behind for a second draft of men. On 16 October 1914 he departed Lyttelton for Wellington on board the *Athenic* along with 1300 troops and 400 horses. In Tasmania the ship was joined by 37 other Australian and one Japanese troop ships and four battleships, which set off in convoy around Australia bound for Colombo.

The convoy came under fire from German battleship *Emden*, damaging two of the allied ships. After Colombo, the convoy made its way through the Suez Canal to Port Said. There the troops were transported to Zeitoun, on the outskirts of Cairo, where tents were pitched in the desert and pipes laid for water supply.

When the troops weren't doing route marching, bayonet fighting or holding mock battles with the Australians, the men had evening and weekend leave passes. They visited the pyramids and Cairo, and took boat trips on the Nile to visit Luxor, buying and collecting souvenirs to send home. Hartley recalled visiting a burial area near Zeitoun where beads and scarabs could be found by moving sand from the walls on which bodies were laid to rest. "I filled a matchbox with these trinkets and sent them back to my sister Ruth...I also found a child's embalmed foot..."

The troops spent five months in Cairo before receiving orders to move to Ismalia because the Turks were marching on the Suez Canal. It was February 1915. "In the

middle of the night they arrived just about opposite the Nelson Company and right in front of the No.10 Platoon, the Motueka boys had their first real taste of rifle fire...We had one casualty, Bill Ham who was shot in the neck and died before daylight.”

After the Turks retreated the allied troops received orders to take trains to Alexandria where they boarded ships to take them to the Dardanelles, where Hartley’s ship, the *Itonis* was partnered with an Australian troop ship. Sitting in pairs the convoy began pulling out on the night of 24 April, although the *Itonis* did not leave until daylight of the 25th after its propeller became fouled in the anchor rope.

“We made for Anzac Cove, where a battle was raging and on arriving there, boats were lowered, packed with men and pulled ashore. We stepped onto a beach strewn with dead and wounded men. Our company took up a position to prevent the enemy getting around our men who were on top of a hill: bullets and shellfire were raining down on us.”

At the end of April Hartley’s platoon was released to embark on a destroyer at Cape Helles, where it was to replace the English “Tommies”. They were sent about three miles from the enemy lines and, “crammed into the Tommies trenches”...”told to go over the top one platoon at a time. It was open fire for the Turks....it was suicide for us and my most vivid recollection was lying down side by side with five dead men. My best pal, Ted Baigent, was ahead of me and still alive...Bullets were spraying the ground around me, one hitting my fingers and another hitting the cover over my head.”

A roll call several days later showed a loss of more than 30 men of the 200 strong platoon. Shells from Turkish fire continued to fall around the men and Hartley recalled one shell “going through a water cart, blowing the driver and horse to pieces. A few minutes later, another hit the Indian mule lines and as they were all tethered by a long rope, over half of the 28 mules were killed or had to be destroyed...The French, who were living on horse meat, set to work skinning them. A mate of mine, Rodger Martindale, thought the flesh looked rather good and procured several pieces of ‘rump steak’. We took it back to our lines and with some fat saved from frying bacon, had steak for our evening meal.”

Hartley went on to fight at Quinn’s Post, a front line trench about 20 yards from enemy trenches. “The dead from both sides lay between the lines and no one could get out to bury them...Because of the dead bodies nearby, the flies were about in hundreds and the lice were as thick as the flies. We were unable to get drinking water and could not wash. We would stay this way for eight days...”

In August 1915, after four months at Gallipoli, Hartley became sick and was ordered by doctors to Lemnos, where he was taken to a hospital ship the *Neuralis*. He was taken to a temporary hospital in Alexandria where he was found to be suffering enteric fever and moved to another hospital. A number of patients on his ward died as dysentery ravaged the men’s bodies but after two weeks Hartley was able to be transferred to the hospital ship *Esturias* bound for England.

At the end of August he was sent from Southampton to the London 3rd Hospital for treatment and then to Addington War Hospital, where he joined about 300 men

recovering from enteritis in a convalescent ward. However, there he was also found to be suffering from a weak heart and sent to yet another convalescent hospital at Littlehampton.

In mid-October he was given his furlough and found a large bundle of mail waiting for him at the depot. "I learned I had been reported killed in action and sent a cable home. The mistake had been made when a Hector Volca Palmer was killed and my number put to his name." It wasn't until he arrived home that he discovered his family had held a special memorial service for him. The local church bell ringer "reprimanded me for wasting his time by being mistakenly reported killed, as a special service had been held and he had had to toll the bells."

When his furlough was over he reported to a convalescent hospital in Hornchurch and was posted to the enteric ward "with instructions that no enteric patients were to return to the trenches for six months". It was January 1916 and although his pay didn't allow him to travel too far away, he used the time to visit family and travel to Glasgow.

After his leave was finished Hartley reported for service and put on light training. As he was still receiving medical treatment he was sent to Sling Camp in Salisbury, where he sorted mail and was batman to an officer. He stayed at the camp for several months until a general medical examination in November 1916 classified him as 'general disability' and he was listed to return to New Zealand. His medical record states he was "very emaciated and debilitated", a condition that was deemed to leave him permanently weak. On 8 March 1917 he left England on board the *Marama* which, on its way to New Zealand, stopped to pick up survivors of the torpedoed ship *Brooklyn*.

When the ship reached Wellington on 5 April 1917 a large crowd, including Hartley's mother and sister Floss, was waiting.

Hartley was discharged from the army the same day and given a free railway warrant for three weeks to travel anywhere in New Zealand, a medical certificate and a six-month invalid pension. After a visit to Rotorua he returned to Brightwater and took a building job as builders were hard to come by, with so many men still at war.

"It took 12 months for me to settle down and become really fit again. About this time I thought I should be thinking of marriage and, as my former girlfriend had gone and got herself married while I was away, I had to acquire another. I duly did so and became engaged, after which I took the young lady to Murchison to show her my future plan. She promptly decided she was not living way up a valley like Six Mile and handed me back my ring."

I sold the Murchison farm and returned to my father's place, where I settled down and began to court a farm girl who lived nearby. Her name was Annie Eden and 12 months later we were married. I obtained a Rehabilitation loan and took over the farm, which I converted to dairying.

When his health returned to normal he sold the farm and bought an unimproved farm in Westport before entering a partnership on a farm on river flats of the Buller River. He built up a herd of Fresian cows, bought the first tractor on the West Coast, tried

his hand at flax milling and commercial fishing. He and Annie had three daughters and lived through the 1929 Murchison earthquake which damaged his farm. The Palmers moved to Richmond in 1950 after 30 years in Westport. In 1965 he joined 60 Gallipoli veterans to return for the 50th anniversary of the Anzac Cove landing. Annie died later that year and Hartley married Ruby, and wrote a book about his life which incorporated the diary he wrote while at war (*The Trail I Followed*). Hartley was a life member of the Buller RSA and the Richmond-Waimea RSA and was the latter's welfare officer for many years. He was proud of having never missed an Anzac Day service since his return from Gallipoli and died in Nelson at the age of 96 on 13 May 1987.

The researched Biography was compiled by Karen Stade, Nelson Provincial Museum, in 2014.

Sources:

Hartley Palmer, *The Trail I Followed*, Nelson:

Gallipoli veteran dies at 96, *Nelson Evening Mail*, 20 May 1987, p.6.

Military Record