

Lt Rodney Vernon Franklin C de G

People looking at Gawler's War Memorial on the left while approaching the main street of Gawler from Adelaide will see the name Lt RV Franklin C De G among the list of Gawler's fallen soldiers. The same name also appears on the memorial in Saddleworth, with the additional letters RFC. There is also an honour board for him in St George's Anglican Church.

Known to his family as Vernon, he was born in Mt Barker in 1896. His father, Mr Charles Rudolph Franklin was Station Master at Mt Barker at the time, and later served as such at various other stations, including Saddleworth (1900 to 1917) and Gawler from 1917 until his retirement in 1921.

Vernon was the youngest of a surviving family of 2 boys and 3 girls and was a keen scholar, excelling at mathematics and physics at the Gawler School of Mines before apprenticing as an engineer at Messrs James Martin and Sons engineering works at Gawler.

When war broke out he was one of the earliest volunteers, being allocated army number 414 as a Lance Corporal in the famous 10th Battalion, which was later to win 3 Victoria Crosses in France, and he was in the first stages of the Gallipoli landing. After a few days he became ill and was evacuated to hospital in Egypt.

From there he wrote to his parents of the landing.

On the 24th we made a move and landed successfully on Gallipoli Peninsula at daybreak on Sunday 25th. The 3rd Brigade were the covering party, so we had the honour of landing first and by jove, didn't the Turks hop into us. Of course we had to get into little rowing boats to get ashore, and the bullets were splashing about our boats like fun, but none of us got hit. When we got ashore, the beach was only about 10 yards wide, and then up the cliffs, with the Turks lined along the top. When we got $\frac{3}{4}$ way up, they must have got a bit frightened of our bayonets, because they made a hurried departure. When we reached the top there were no Turks in sight (except a few wounded ones).

Then we went on to the next ridge and got the word that the Turks were preparing to make a counter attack, so we started digging ourselves in, but couldn't get deep enough before they started to attack. Jack Waller (the boy in the photo with me) got shot through the right shoulder about $\frac{1}{2}$ hour after. He was beside me at the time and went down without a groan.

After that we had a pretty hot time all day and at night it rained and of course we had to lay and get wet through. In the morning (26th) they started stronger than ever, but our boys managed to keep them back. On Monday p.m. I got $\frac{1}{2}$ hours sleep and on Tuesday a.m. some of us were sent to reinforce the left flank. It was hotter than ever. We had been in before, and I don't know how we managed to stick there and come out of it alive.

Well on Tuesday p.m. the officer in charge sent us fellows (reinforcements of morning) down to the beach for a sleep (about 10 of us). When we got down there one of the boys got too far out to the water's edge and got shot with shrapnel.

All of this time my throat was absolutely closed up and had nothing to eat from Sat p.m. On Wed a.m. the boys told me to see the doctor and he ordered me back to the boat, so here we are back in crook old Egypt.

In a later account he wrote

By Jove, if I was ever proud to be an Australian, it was on that Sunday morning when we landed against that absolutely galling gun and rifle fire. You can have no conception of what it was like!!! When the Queen Elizabeth started firing her big guns, it made the earth tremble, and the scream of her shells going over our heads was as sweet music in our ears.

While we were landing, the enemy had a gun in such a position as to bring a raking fire along the beach. The old Queen Lizzie got to work and put it out of action second shot. I saw that shot strike and you ought to have seen the flare and explosion!!!

While we were being towed ashore in little boats, we had to sit huddled together and couldn't move and, of course, they had us at their mercy. I could tell you that until we got out of that bally boat, I was in a Devil of a funk, but as soon as we got a foot ashore it all seemed to be different, as then we had a chance of doing something ourselves, and we didn't half forget to do it either.

We took up our position in the enemy's line of trenches and gradually advanced down the hill during the first day. The enemy took up their position in their third line. It was a terrible job getting the wounded back to the beach.

These letters are now in the Australian War Memorial. Vernon returned to Gallipoli but after a few more weeks he fell ill again and this time was evacuated to London where he spent a few weeks in hospital.

After release in late 1915 he went to re-join his battalion, but in London found himself in the wrong room, a recruiting office for the British Army. The British were desperately short of manpower and offered him a commission after interviewing him, if he joined them, which he did. In fact the regiment he joined was the Kings Own Royal Lancaster Regiment, and he continued there in what became the Royal Flying Corps as a pilot.

He served in France in 1 Brigade of the Royal Flying Corps, under Brigadier General Duncan le Geyt Pitcher (later an Air Commodore in the newly formed RAF). 1 Brigade supported the 37th Division under Major General Lord Edward Gleichen.

In November 1915 he commenced as 2/Lt in the Regiment and started training soon after in Sydford, Devonshire. In June 1916 he had his first flight training as pilot and in July was in Royal Flying Corps 46 Squadron, training at Sedgeford, Norfolk. In August 1916 he transferred to 16 Squadron, Merville, in France and later Bruay, and commenced combat flights on 11 August.

On most days from then until December 1916 he was up in the air over German lines, sometimes with an observer behind him. On several occasions they were engaged in combat, to return sometimes with injuries, sometimes with bullet holes in the plane.

On 2 November 1916 he was flying a BE2c, with an observer, when both airmen were wounded, and the aircraft damaged, presumably by ground fire. In this incident he was the principal man behind a stunt at Vimy which resulted in the rout of 2,000 German soldiers by machine gun fire. His aeroplane was riddled with holes, but he managed to fly behind the British lines to land his observer, who was wounded. A French general who saw the action recommended him for the Croix de Guerre, being granted only for signal valour on the field in presence of the enemy.

In December he was given sick leave and returned home in Gawler for a few weeks with his family, but when he returned by ship to re-join his squadron he was intercepted in Alexandria and told he had been transferred to 58 Squadron in Egypt as a test pilot.

Lt Franklin was killed in Egypt on 24 June 1917, while testing a Martinsyde S.1 (Scout), a single seater, for adjustment. He had taken the machine to 10,000 feet and looped-the-loop at each 1,000 feet level to test the strength and reliability of the machine. It seems at this point the plane malfunctioned, he glided the plane to a crash landing and died a few hours later.

When killed (at the age of 20), Lt Franklin had just been given the command of a flight squadron and been recommended for a captaincy.

Lt Franklin is buried in the Egypt 15-19 Suez War Memorial Cemetery, plot A. 56.

Apparently he was recommended by commanding generals for a Military Cross, but this was never presented. It is thought likely that the Military Cross at that time was not available posthumously.

However the Croix de Guerre was presented by a French General in a rousing function in Gawler on 11 February to Mr Charles Franklin. The Bunyip gives a long description of the event, which starts

Gawler accorded a most enthusiastic welcome to the French Mission, led by the hero of Mulhausen, General Pau, when it reached the town during the morning. Murray Street made a brave show of bunting and before 10 a.m. the populace had assembled in large numbers before the Town Hall. The crowd was further augmented by the attendance of the children from the several schools; and at 10.15 all traffic was blocked by the crowd.

The Municipal Council were to do honour to France's representatives, and patriotic residents were prepared to show their loyalty and appreciation to the people of that gallant nation. The Cheer-up ladies were loaded with posies of flowers and as the cars drew up before the Town Hall the visitors were showered with the fragrant blossoms. Souvenirs of the occasion were presented to the guests, and were also made available to the public on payment of a small sum.

Mr E.A. Smith, the Town Clerk, was responsible for this production, which compressed in tabloid form the statistics of the district and the industries engaged in. Messrs May Bros and Co Ltd supplemented this souvenir by having on show the harvester designed and manufactured by the firm to the order of the Federal Government, and was to take its place in the Panama Exposition as indicative of Australia's means of harvesting. Unfortunately, through freight difficulties the harvester did not reach the Isthmus.

General Pau and other members of the Mission were received by the Mayor and introduced to the Councillors. Col. Price-Weir and the Hon E.A. Anstey (Minister of Repatriation), and Mr Victor Ryan (Tourist Bureau) accompanied the visitors. The guests were escorted to a raised platform, and General Pau's appearance was the signal for uproarious cheering.

The Bunyip's article continues to report the event in the same way, with speeches by Mr Smith, General Pau and Mr Franklin and school children singing *The Marsaillaise*.

This article has been written by Lt Franklin's great nephew (grandson of one of his sisters) Professor Peter Taylor AO.