

Private Charles Robert James Diggins

May 4th 1915 – July 21st 1919

27th Infantry Battalion – 2nd Reinforcements

SN: 1689 Private



2023 Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize

Rhys Heinrich

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“With a runner, it was merely a question of how long he would last before being wounded or killed.”

(Lt. Allan L. Dexter, 1931)

Charles Robert James Diggins was a South Australian Serviceman who fought in World War 1. Born to Charles and Alice Diggins on September 26th, 1896, in Willowie, 281kms north of Adelaide, he lived with his older sister Elsie, before moving to Solomontown in Port Pirie. Tragically, his mother died when he was 2 years old. His father re-married Alice’s sister Mary, who was his housekeeper at the time, and together they brought 4 more children into the household (F. Love, 2023).

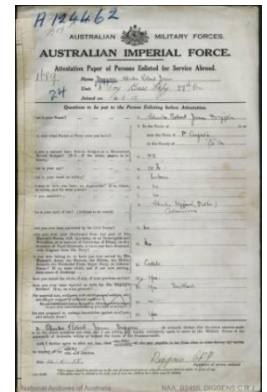


Figure 1 : Attestation Paper from Dave Love’s personal artefacts.

Charles completed his schooling at the Solomontown Primary School. Prior to enlisting, he was a labourer on the wharves at the Broken Hill Associated Smelters in Port Pirie. This was hard, physical, and labour-intensive work for a young man on the smaller side. When not working, Charles enjoyed gardening, which was an interest that continued after the war (D. Love, 2023).

On May 4th, 1915, aged 18 years and 8 months, Charles enlisted at Keswick, South Australia, in the Armed Forces, 2nd Division, 7th Brigade, 27th Battalion, with approximately 1,000 other men (see Figure 1). He was motivated to sign up when he saw that Australia had landed at Gallipoli (F. Love 2023). Charles was previously rejected twice for being too young and then too short (161cm), as a result this would classify him as unfit for the duties of a soldier (D. Love, 2023).

Charles embarked from Adelaide, South Australia, after basic military camp and rifle training, on the HMAT A61 Kanowna, 2nd Reinforcements on June 23rd, 1915, to Egypt, for the adventure of a lifetime (see Figure 2). The voyage took 4 weeks to cross the Indian Ocean and was described as the longest journey to war in the history of the world (Preprod Memories, 2023). After months spent training 8 hours a day, 6 days a week, Charles and his Battalion disembarked at ANZAC Cove, Gallipoli on September 12th, 1915. Here, the 75th Brigade, which included the 27th Battalion, reinforced the weary New Zealand and Australian Division (AWM, 2023). Three months after landing, Charles and the 27th Battalion were evacuated from Gallipoli due to the failure of the August offence (AWM, 2023). Leaving the peninsula meant leaving behind the bodies of mates who had been killed and buried there (Sydney News, 2015).



Figure 2 : HMAT A61 Kanowna that Charles embarked on to Egypt.

Charles was admitted to hospital multiple times in December 1915 with back, arm and head injuries containing shrapnel sustained from the battle at Gallipoli. He was hospitalised in France and Egypt with bronchitis, myalgia, and general sickness throughout 1916 (G. Diggins, 1990). For the remainder of his life, Charles had a large blemish on his upper forehead due to a shrapnel wound (F. Love, 2023).

After additional training in Cairo, Egypt, Charles and the 27th Battalion, were sent to France in March 1916, as part of the 2nd Australian Division. Alongside the 28th Battalion, the 27th were the first Australian troops on the front line of the infamous Somme Battle, which was the turning point of WW1 and was one of the most tragic battles in Australia's military history (VWMA Units, 2023). Australia suffered 23,000 casualties in 7 weeks at Pozieres Ridge (AWM, 2023), including 6,800 deaths (UK Embassy, 2023). Due to Charles' stature, he was given the dangerous role of a runner taking messages through the front-line trenches at the bombardment of Pozieres. "It was here the soldiers suffered fearfully and their worst memories of the war were here" (L. Carlyon, 2007).



Figure 3 : 27th Battalion's AIF original flag at the Army Museum of South Australia.

In early 1917, the 27th Battalion partook in attacks during the German retreat to the Hindenburg Line. They launched a major attack on September 20th, 1917, when they were part of the 2nd Divisions first wave at the Battle of Menin Road. This was followed by the capture of Broodseinde Ridge on October 4th.

In April 1918, the 27th Battalion fought to repel the German spring offensive, later taking part in a series of offensive battles that pushed Germany closer to defeat (Prepod Memories, 2023). The Battalion launched an attack near Morlancourt on the night of June 10th, played a supporting role in the Battle of Hamel on July 4th, and was part of the first wave in the Battle of Amiens, 1000 yards from Villers Bretonneux, on August 8th. Here, the battalion captured 9 artillery pieces, 25 machine guns and over 200 prisoners (AWM, 2023). Charles was part of the attack and capture at Mont St Quentin, regarded as the finest thing Australians did in the great war. The Battalion fought its final battles during the first week of October 1918 as part of the push to breach the Beaurevoir Line.

Charles was a typical Australian showing a cheeky nature, often reprimanded for back chatting, and going AWOL, resulting in docked pay. He didn't fit the typical authoritarian discipline as it wasn't part of the Australian culture at the time.

Charles returned to Australia, disembarking at Port Macquarie on May 21st, 1919, and was officially discharged from the Australian Imperial Force in South Australia on July 21st, 1919, after serving 4 years and 79 days. For his service he received the 1914/15 Star, British War Medal, and Victory Medal (see Figure 5).



Figure 4 : Map of the battles that Charles fought in. Charles served overseas at the Gallipoli Peninsula, Middle East, France, and Belgium.



Figure 5 : Charles' medals set; medals from Dave Love's collection. (1914/15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal).

Charles returned to Port Pirie and resumed labouring at the smelters where he was popular among his work mates. His jobs involved driving and loading trucks, wheelbarrowing, and moving ore and ingots (F. Love 2023). He met local barmaid, Alma Scheller, and after courting her by riding his bike 29kms between Port Pirie and Crystal Brook, he married her on December 7th, 1922. They had four children in the following 8 years but sadly, one daughter passed away aged 6 months from a lung condition. Seeing their father's contribution to war, both his sons, Leslie, and Kevin, followed their father's footsteps and joined the Royal Australian Air Force and Navy in World War 2 (D. Love, 2023).



Figure 6 : Charles with his son Kevin.

Charles kept things to himself and rarely spoke about the war, yet when he began to bring things up, his family would redirect the conversation, now something they all regret (D. Love, 2023). He was a happy man who enjoyed a drink and a game of Two-Up but was a very proud father who loved his children (D. Love, 2023). Charles was a respected RSL member who wore his badge with honour and proudly participated annually in the Port Pirie ANZAC marches. Every week he would buy a Smelters raffle ticket, putting his details down as '1689' after his AIF number. He took pride in all that he did and was very community minded. Charles

was part of a social group, helped to build and maintain a playground for families and assisted in building a meeting hall where women would go and play Beetles. "He put his heart and soul into that playground" (F. Love, 2023).

The time spent at war had a profound effect on Charles. Things he had seen and experienced, such as witnessing death daily, and dodging bullets through enemy gunfire, had affected him greatly. In his final years, he spent time intermittently at a sanatorium in Enfield (Enfield Receiving House), Adelaide. Tragically, he took his own life on June 1st, 1964, at the age of 67. He is buried in the Port Pirie cemetery with his wife and three of his children (see Figure 8).



Figure 7 : Charles aged 67, taken the year before he passed away.



Figure 8 : Charles' grave at the Port Pirie cemetery.

The two main characteristics that symbolise the ANZAC Spirit are perseverance and mateship which Charles displayed during and after the war. Friendship was important throughout the war as often no family would be nearby, and the comforts of home would be a distant memory. When billeted in Belgium, Charles was a keen team-player with the football, soccer and rugby played between soldiers, showing mateship, and bringing a sense of normality to life. Charles would show camaraderie, equality and when things were tough, he was there for others. Mateship today means to stand by friends, but at war, it means to risk your life to protect those by your side and back home. He showed mateship with the contributions to his Port Pirie community and his commitment to fellow servicemen and women by participating annually in marches.

Prior to enlisting, soldiers like Charles would spend time with family, only to find themselves within weeks sleeping in cramped, uncomfortable dugouts, surrounded by the sounds of wounded soldiers' screams and gunshots landing dangerously close above their heads. Suffering physical and mental challenges, along with minimal food, fresh water, and lack of basic hygiene, the ANZAC's continued fighting for a brighter future.

It can be concluded that due to Charles persisting to enlist at a young age, that he was eager to fight and not let the previous two rejections stop him, showing bravery beyond his years. Medical records show he suffered multiple injuries and diseases but re-joined his unit after his wounds and illnesses had sufficiently recovered. Runners at war had the role of delivering messages and commands between units, doing all they could to help their comrades, disregarding any consideration for personal safety. The average life of a runner, being in full view of the enemy and their fire, was about twenty-four hours (J. Hazlitt, 1992), so for Charles to come home to loved ones from the war, showed incredible endurance and determination.

“It was here, in the shadow of the pyramids, that the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps would be first grouped together under the now hallowed acronym “ANZAC”.

(Preprod Memories, 2023)



Figure 9 : Training at Egypt.

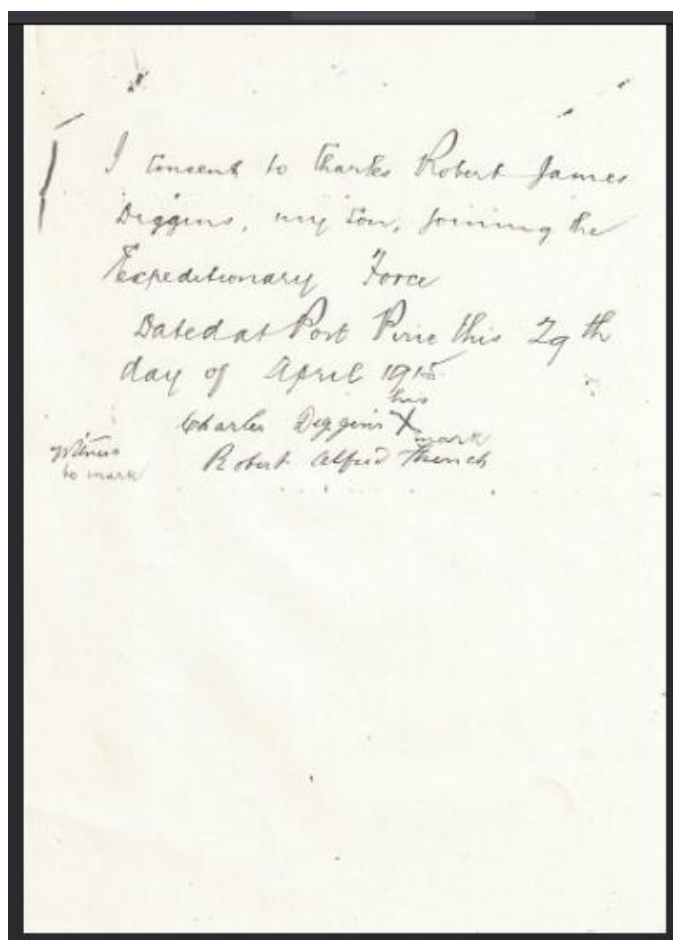


Figure 10 : Letter from Charles' father consenting to his son joining the Armed Forces.



Figure 11 : Photo of Charles in uniform.

(Part A : 1500 words)

Part B



Figure 12 : Myself presenting a book at the Maitland War Memorial, ANZAC Day 2023.

After visiting the Australian War Memorial in Canberra on a school trip last year, it sparked the inner history side of me wanting to learn more about Australia's involvement in the war, which in turn inspired me to participate in this challenge.

Going about finding a suitable person to research was a little difficult to begin with. I wanted to research a family member to have a close connection with, but the Servicemen from my family had already been researched so I had to look further in my community.

I contacted the grandson of Charles, a former teacher at my school, and he was more than willing to meet and discuss what he knew, then let me borrow hugely sentimental and prized possessions of his family being medical records, enlistment forms, maps, and photos. I was also able to pass on some questions that Dave (Grandson) could ask his frail and elderly mother Fay in her nursing home. He has told me he really enjoyed his time with me as he has learnt more and had many un-answered questions, resolved.

I did struggle to find large amounts of information on Charles due to his descendants being of the age they cannot remember much about him, have passed away, and the fact he didn't want to talk much about the war. After finding all the information I could about Charles, I decided to watch two movies about WW1 to gain an insight into what Charles' life would have been like at war. The movies I watched were "1917" (1917, 2019) and "Gallipoli" (Gallipoli, 1981), both movies were immensely helpful.

Earlier this year, I attended a Premier's ANZAC Spirit Prize workshop run by Kathleen Johnson and Bob Kearney from the Virtual War Memorial Australia. They guided us through some very helpful websites including TROVE and the Australian War Memorial site and how to gather additional information. Following this, I walked around the Adelaide Commemorative Precinct and viewed multiple plaques of WW1 and WW2.

I have used a range of primary and secondary resources to gather my information. I have used websites, had verbal in-person discussions and written questionnaires with Charles' family, viewed plaques, original war documents and read books on the war. I found and listened to some voice recordings of soldiers that had survived The Great War to gain a deeper insight into their time at war. I visited the Army Museum of South Australia where I spoke to volunteers and viewed WW1 displays as well as artefacts recovered from the 27th Battalion. This was a real highlight as I now consider it to be a hidden gem in Adelaide.

I have enjoyed completing this challenge as it has extended my knowledge immensely on Australia's history at war. I feel this competition is so important for everyone to participate in as it gives Charles, and other servicemen and women, a voice and to have their stories and memories live on, as without the past, there would be no future.



Figure 13 : 27th Battalion artefacts from the Army Museum of South Australia.

(Part B : 494 words)

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Figure 5 : Attestation Paper from Dave Love's personal artefacts.

Charles' Attestation Papers (May 1915). Taken By Rhys Heinrich (January, 2023).

Figure 6 : HMAT A61 Kanowna that Charles embarked on to Egypt.

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Figure 7 : 27th Battalion's AIF original flag at the Army Museum of South Australia.

27th Battalion's AIF Flag at the Army Museum of South Australia (1919). Taken by Rhys Heinrich (April, 2023).

Figure 8 : Map of the battles that Charles fought in. Charles served overseas at the Gallipoli Peninsula, Middle East, France, and Belgium.

Map of the battles that Charles fought in. Charles served overseas at the Gallipoli Peninsula, Middle East, France, and Belgium (1990). Hand drawn by Glen Diggins. Scanned by Rhys Heinrich (April, 2023).

Figure 5 : Charles' medals set; medals from Dave Love's collection. (1914/15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal).

Charles' medals set; medals from Dave Love's collection (July, 1919). Taken by Rhys Heinrich (January, 2023).

Figure 6 : Charles with his son Kevin.

Charles standing with his son Kevin (1954). Scanned by Rhys Heinrich (April, 2023).

Figure 7 : Charles aged 67, taken the year before he passed away.

Charles aged 67, taken the year before he died (1963). Scanned by Rhys Heinrich (April, 2023).

Figure 8 : Charles' grave at the Port Pirie cemetery.

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Figure 9 : Training at Egypt.

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Figure 10 : Letter from Charles' father consenting to his son joining the Armed Forces.

Letter from Charles' father consenting to his son joining the Armed Forces (1915). Scanned by Rhys Heinrich (April, 2023).

Figure 11 : Photo of Charles in uniform.

Photo of Charles in uniform (1915). Scanned by Rhys Heinrich (April, 2023).

Figure 12 : Myself presenting a book at the Maitland War Memorial

Myself presenting a book at the Maitland War Memorial on ANZAC Day (April, 2023). Taken by Linda Heinrich (April, 2023).

Figure 13 : 27th Battalion artefacts from the Army Museum of South Australia.

WW1 Artefacts at Army Museum of South Australia (1919). Taken by Rhys Heinrich (April, 2023).

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I would like to acknowledge the Narungga people, the traditional owners of the land on which I live and have completed this task on, and pay respect to their Elders past, present and future. I would also like to pay respect to the Narungga service men and women who have served their country.



A special thanks to Dave and Fay Love for their time and sharing of precious family pieces throughout this process.

"We must look forward one hundred, two hundred, three hundred years, to the time when the vast continent of Australia . . . will look back through the preceding periods of time to the world-shaking episode of the Great War, and when they will seek out with the most intense care every detail of that struggle; when . . . every family will seek to trace some connection with the heroes who landed at Gallipoli Peninsula, or fought on the Somme, or in the other great battles in France."

Winston Churchill, 16 December, 1918

(The Age, 2013)