



# Ray Bishop

## A Hero from Fromelles

by Dr Douglas Parbery

On 19<sup>th</sup> July 2010, the President of France officially opened a memorial cemetery near the village of Fromelles in the north west of France, between the city of Lille and the town of Armentier to its west. The cemetery contains the recently re-interred remains of Australian and other allied soldiers whose bodies had to be abandoned in no-man's-land when, in the heat of the battle of Fromelles on 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> July 1916, the fight turned against the allies who had to retreat. At the time, relatives of the soldiers stranded in no man's land were advised that their loved ones were missing presumed dead. Ray Bishop was one of these lads; one of four Bishop cousins, whose grandmother, Thalia Bishop had



lived in a cottage at 10 Murray Street, Moruya, from the time it was built by her first husband Henry Parbery in 1850 until her death in 1910. Three of the four cousins grew up on the Far South Coast. Harold and Ray were the sons of Thalia Bishop's eldest son William. Her youngest son Herbert was Bert's dad. The fourth cousin, Billy Bishop hailed from the North Coast, his father being Thalia's middle son Edwin. Arnold Herbert Negus (1897-1972), eldest son of Thalia's youngest daughter, also enlisted, but the war ended before his unit was to be sent overseas.



**Harold McKay Bishop** (1893-1916) who born at *Bonny Doon*, a farm near Moruya, moved with his family to another farm, *Sunny Brae* at Eurobodalla at about ten years of age. A year or so after the death of his father in 1906, he went to live

with his uncle and aunt, Charles and Mary Parbery at *Yarranung* in Bega, where after leaving school he worked as a wheelwright and coachbuilder, and where he became a very popular member of the community. He had been a member of the 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion of the Citizen Forces for three years prior to enlisting. He enlisted on 30<sup>th</sup> August 1914, four weeks after the outbreak of war. He sailed on the *Euripides* on 20<sup>th</sup> October 1914, going first to Egypt, then to Gallipoli and thence to France where he was killed on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1916, the second day of the Battle of Flers. At the time of his death, he was a Lieutenant in charge of a

platoon and greatly admired by his men for his bravery and the manner in which he guarded their interests.



**Raymond Charles Bishop** (1895-1916) was Harold's younger brother, also born at *Bonny Doon*, and grew up on *Sunny Brae*. The Duncan family lived across the Tuross River about two miles from *Sunny Brae*, on a farm called *Tyrone*.

The two families of children went to school together and spent much of their spare time enjoying each other's company. They were fun loving, hard working devout folk like the Bishops and the two families enjoyed being together. In time, there were three marriages between the Bishops and Duncans and there would possibly been a fourth had Ray returned from the War.

**Walter Herbert [Bert] Bishop** (1897-1991) grew up in Wasson Street Milton, where his father was editor of the *Milton Times*. Bert spent many holidays with Bishops and Duncans at Eurobodalla, where he and Ray became good mates. It was because of this close friendship and their shared war experiences, that we have the background to this account. Bert experienced, endured and survived two and a half years of violent war in the north of France. He never spoke about his experiences to his family, but 73 years after the end of the war, he wrote *The Hell, the Humour and the Heartbreak – A Privates View of World War 1*. Much of this story is taken from his book.

**William Harold [Billy] Bishop** (1893-1916) was born at Coraki near Casino on the north coast, where his father was farming. He was in a different battalion to his cousins Ray and Bert, and unknown to them at the time, sailed with them on the same ship. He spent the same period in Egypt and sailed with them to France and fought in the Battle of Fromelles.

Three of the cousins fought in the Battle of Fromelles, in which Ray was killed, Billy was mortally wounded and died two days after being evacuated to a hospital in Epsom England, and Bert who survived Fromelles, and many other

futile but bitter battles after that. Although he sustained serious wounds when buried by a bomb blast, in time his wounds healed, the mental anguish of the loss of his best mate Ray and much admired cousins Billy and Harold stayed with him all his life and was possibly not relieved until he wrote about his experiences and published his book at the age of 93. In it he described the terrible events, which robbed him of his greatly loved cousins and much of the joy of life. Writing the book perhaps expunged some of the grief from his soul. He died peacefully a few months after it was published.

### The Fun and Innocence of Youth

Of these four young men, only Harold had had previous experience of military life and warfare. Harold had been a member of the Citizen Forces, 43<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Battalion for three of years before enlisting. He then had six months in Egypt, and experienced the Gallipoli campaign, before finding himself in the holocaust of northern France. His brother Ray and cousins Billy and Bert had experienced only the peace, hard work and fun of happy rural life, before spending some relatively enjoyable months in the army in Egypt where they had no serious confrontation with the enemy Turk, so that they arrived in France with feelings of foreboding and excitement, but no real idea of what to expect. Ray and Billy died only 10 months after enlisting and three weeks after arriving in France.

To provide some idea of the contrast between their lives at Eurobodalla and their confrontation with the reality of war in France, we need to know a little of the life they lived at Eurobodalla. After their father died in 1906, the boys, the eldest of whom was only 16, had to help run the dairy farm with help from their sisters who had also to help with running the home. The youngest brother Alan was one year old. Thus their lives were busy but their spare time allowed time for horse riding, playing tricks on each other and picnics. Their relatively innocent lives were full of simple pleasures and lots of fun and freedom. They were fun-loving larrikins. On his last leave Bert suddenly realised just what he was leaving behind. He could see what he was going to miss, but had no idea at all of what he would have to confront in the Somme. Bert Bishop's description of his home leave before embarkation gives an insight into his feelings, which were probably shared largely by his cousins. On returning from Long Bay where they had gone for their final musketry test, they heard the newspaper boys touting "British evacuated from Gallipoli", they were about to take four days home leave before embarking for Egypt.

*"Our happy camp life was ending. We were to have sailed before the end of December. Now it was January [1916] and our company got four days' leave for Christmas. Back to camp for about a week and then four days' final leave. They were not happy days. Even a picnic on a lovely beach [possibly either Mollmook or Narrawallee] could not cheer me up. Most of the picnickers were girls. Boys were practically all in camp. We swam, we played about on the big sand hill, we lunched under bottlebrush trees, and I realised what I was leaving behind me to go to the wretched war. They were lovely, healthy country girls, so clean, so wholesome, so full of life and fun, and modesty was in-built in them. It seemed at times that they understood and sympathised with me in my non-happy state of mind and did their best to cheer and jolly me into the boy I had been before the Kaiser went mad.*

*When the service car came to pick me up, I was not far from crying. I had already said goodbye to my motorbike, it had been a faithful pal for two years and had given me great enjoyment. Then the pony on which I had learned to ride, Dolly, nuzzled my shoulder to wish me well. And old Timmy the cat, a good friend for many years, rubbed his head on the side of my face as he straddled my shoulder to wish me well. And then my family. A lump came into my throat, I could hardly speak."*

Once back in camp, Ray and Bert were detailed off to Board the passenger liner *Runic*, now a troop ship, which was tied up at Pymont. Their detail was to prepare accommodation arrangements and sailing kit for the 15,000 troops embarking at No. 6 Wharf Woolloomooloo the next morning, and to guide them to their respective quarters, and keep them there until embarkation was completed. All troops, including Ray and Bert's 9<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements, 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion, were embarked in one hour and by a little after 7am they sailed out of Sydney harbour.



HMAT Runic

AWM

On 26<sup>th</sup> February 1916, the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion disembarked at Alexandria where they were soon transferred into the 55<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Their experience in Egypt included heat, 140°F [60°C], sandstorms, frequent swims in the Suez Canal, a sex show in Cairo, which left them flabbergasted, standing to against expected Turkish raids, which did not eventuate, and rescuing a Company sent on a desert march without sufficient water. During this rescue, Ray and Bert discovered their cousin Billy among those rescued. When they found him he was too stressed to stand to greet them, but was very happy they were there. They were surprised to discover that his unit had sailed with them on the *Runic* from Sydney.



Camp at Ferry Post, Suez Canal

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Swimming at Ferry Post, Suez Canal

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On 6<sup>th</sup> June, they embarked on the *Caledonia* at Alexandria for France. Initially they enjoyed the voyage as part of a convoy of transport carrying 16,000 troops.



Deck of SS Caledonia

AWM

Several destroyers fussed around them, keeping them together and watching for trouble. The weather was balmy, the sea calm and the company enjoyable, so they were enjoying their holiday abroad. A little more than half way they dropped

anchor in St. Paul's Bay, Malta where they were given permission to go swimming. One of the troops became very excited because his parents lived ashore. However, he was too poor a swimmer to reach shore and was close to tears of frustration. An Officer, who had been watching and listening, quietly stole away, and soon returned with the battalion's Colonel and a senior ship's Officer. They sympathised with the man's dilemma and within a few minutes a ship's boat was swung out over the side, a rope ladder dropped and the Maltese soldier scurried down. He was given an hour's leave and the boat's crew was told to wait and bring him back. They returned to great cheers from the ship's company. The Bishop boys were greatly impressed by the compassion shown by their commanding officers and felt there was still much good in the world.

### The Erosion of Innocence

After leaving Malta the three cousins found a hideaway on the boat deck, where they had some personal space to themselves to talk, reflect and enjoy each other's company. One evening Billy began talking of what they would do once they got home. Eventually they agreed that they would each have a holiday at each other's homes. Then, just as they were beginning to plan the details of their holiday, they suddenly became quiet. Bert described how a cold clammy feeling came into the air and the fun and joy disappeared. They gathered up their blankets and gear and left their nest.

On Friday 13<sup>th</sup> June they berthed in Marseille, were loaded on to trains and headed north. After the harsh desert, they were delighted by the green, neat countryside and when their train shunted into a loop awaiting a path to proceed, all troops piled out just to roll in the fresh green grass and pick wild flowers.



Troop train stopped on Journey from Marseille AWM

They enjoyed the train ride, passing Lyon, Chalon, and the outskirts of Paris with the Eiffel tower clear to all. By midday on the Sunday they had

reached Amiens where they were pulled up again awaiting their turn to proceed. Beside them was a Red Cross train crammed full of British wounded. Most of them, the lightly wounded were happy enough, but there were many whose eyes spoke of suffering and sadness and an expectation to meet more of both. Those eyes sent Bert's thoughts back to that clammy night on the *Caledonia* after leaving Malta and seemed an omen of threatening change. Their happy carefree youth receded yet further.

On Monday 16<sup>th</sup> they reached Calais and took a branch line to Hazebrouck, about 50km south west where they detrained and were marched a short distance to Thiennes. Here they spent 10 days on route marches, learning to use gas masks, and getting used to the sound and smell of war; the front line was only 12 miles away. They then left Thiennes and as they marched through Merville, a large town, their band struck up the Marseillaise and within minutes the whole population thronged the street and little and not so little girls joined the marching soldiers, holding their hands, raising their morale and taking their minds off their blistered feet. That night they bivouacked in Estaires and the next night, under cover of darkness, moved up to Sailly. They were held undercover during the day among the rear British heavy artillery, which Bert claimed, sounded like the crack of doom.



Lewis Machine Gun

AWM

Ray had joined a Lewis Machine Gun crew, Billy's Battalion was deployed some distance away from the 55<sup>th</sup> and Bert's platoon was given the job of maintaining the supply of water and ammunition to their mates in the forward trenches. So the three cousins were separated, although Bert was able to visit Ray. When he visited him on the evening of the 18<sup>th</sup> July he found Ray distracted and unlike his usual cheerful self. They talked of home and happy times as they returned to Bert's Platoon. Orders to fall in were issued, and preparation for the relief of the battalion holding the front line was under way.

## Grim Reality of War

During the first week they were there, there was little action from either side. They were then relieved for a week's rest after which, under cover of darkness early on 19<sup>th</sup> July they returned to the front line, where their Brigade was ordered to attack the German front line and hold it. The 55<sup>th</sup> Battalion being in the middle of the push, and after fierce fighting, the 55<sup>th</sup> Battalion took possession of 100 yards or so of the German front line, and took many prisoners. Ray's unit succeeded in getting beyond that and was in possession of a section of the German second or support line trench. Bert's last meeting with Ray was when he delivered a supply of ammunition for the Lewis gun. Bert and his mates had no protection from enemy fire as they scurried across open ground with their loads of ammunition and water to the new front line positions. They had to dodge machine gun fire as they ran among many dead, cruelly wounded and dying comrades.

Unfortunately, the other units in the Brigade were not as successful at the 55<sup>th</sup> Battalion and by the second day of the battle, German units were fighting back hard and threatened to surround and isolate them. Thus Ray's unit was caught in a peninsular-like formation surrounded on three sides by German units, and was in danger of being captured with their valuable weapons. Thus they were ordered to withdraw. To give the rear-guard gun crews a better chance of getting back to base with their weapons, the next morning Ray's commanding officer called for two volunteers to go forward and lodge hand bombs into a German machine gun nest which was seriously hampering the withdrawal. If this were successful it would allow the other men and their guns to get back to their own lines. Ray and a mate volunteered, they were loaded up with bombs, scrambled out of their position onto open ground and headed for their target.



War abandoned German trench.

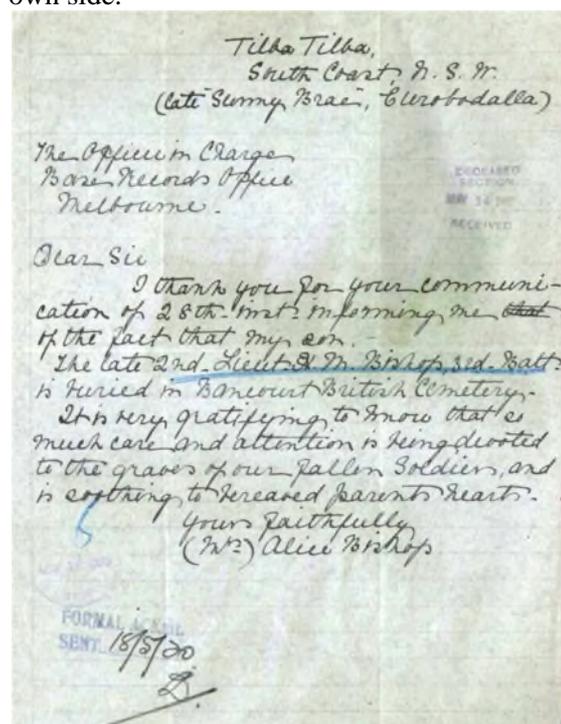
AWM

Almost immediately, Ray's companion was shot dead and Ray suffered a leg wound. However, he continued to crawl forward and lodge all his bombs into the German machine gun post. He then turned and tried to crawl back to his lines. But he was fatally wounded and cut off from his retreating unit by the advancing German troops, preventing any hope of his rescue.

## The Endurance of Grief

That evening a tearful mate found Bert and told him what he had seen and that Ray was dead. Bert was grief stricken. Later he went to find Billy, only to find that he had been seriously wounded and had been evacuated to the Epsom hospital. He wrote immediately to enquire about Billy. The next day, Bert was called to the Quarter Master's office and told to look through Ray's kit and remove anything personal. Among his personal affects were several photographs. Among them was one that broke him up. It was a lovely photo of Margaret Duncan and it evoked memories of the lovely days spent at Tyrone and of tender scenes he had witnessed between Ray and Margaret. His sorrow was profound but not ended. Two days later he received word from Epsom that Billy had died of his wounds. He then addressed the difficult task of writing to Harold and giving him the sad news of his brother and cousin's deaths, as well as detailed letters to his Aunt Alice, Uncle Edwin and his own parents.

Four months later, he learned of cousin Harold death. Harold was standing in a trench with several other Officers and a group of soldiers, when a shell burst among them, killing 16 and wounding many. The circumstances surround his death were confused. Initial reports suggested the shell was fired by allied artillery and had fallen short. Later, following the recovery of the nose cone of the exploded shell it was found to be a German shell. It made no difference to the boys killed, but perhaps slightly relieved the anguish of those left to know that the deaths were not cause by their own side.



From National Archives World War 1 Records

Sometime later, Ray's mother was notified officially that Ray was missing in action presumed killed. Bert also sent a detailed account of what he knew. Ray's death was confirmed on 29<sup>th</sup> March 1917 when AIF Headquarters notified the family that he had been killed in action. Five years later, however, the family was notified that as the War Graves Unit had been unable to find where he had been buried, he might have been placed in a grave under the heading, *An unknown Australian Soldier*. This, however, renewed the hope held by his mother that he had been picked up and saved by the Germans, and that one day he would come home. Alice died in 1932 never having given up that hope but still grieving Ray's absence and the death of Harold.

On 5<sup>th</sup> November 2006, the Bishop family held a reunion in Canberra to mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the deaths of Ray, Harold and Billy as well as



the memory of Bert, and with wonderful co-operation of Australian War Memorial staff, each family member present was invited to place a red poppy around the tomb of the unknown soldier, in specific tribute to Ray, on the actual date of his brother Harold's death on 5<sup>th</sup> November 1916. The following year, the family learned of the discovery of mass graves near Fromelles containing the remains of Australian and other allied soldiers killed in the battle and buried by German units. Family members were invited to provide DNA samples in the hope that their unaccounted for relatives might be identified. It so happened that early in 2010 Ray's remains were identified and re-interred in the newly established cemetery at Fromelles. Thus in one sense, his mother's hope, that he had been rescued by German soldiers and would one day turn up, has been fulfilled.

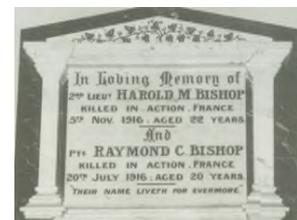
### Further Reading

Anon. (1996) *A Congregation of Bishops*. Published by the Bishop Family, ISBN 0 646 27635 2 180 pp.

Bert Bishop (1991) *The Horror, the Humour and the Heartbreak – A Private's View of World War 1*. Kangaroo Press, ISBN 0 86417 3741, 268 pp.

### Photographs

War Photographs from the Australian War Memorial. Family photographs Douglas Parbery.



Memorial in Moruya Methodist Church