



Private Edward James Ryan, No. 4635, 51st Infantry Battalion, AIF

Douglas Newton, *Saving OUR Private Ryan*

This book tells the story of one Australian soldier's rebellion against the protracted catastrophe that was the First World War – Private Edward James Ryan. It also puts his denunciation of the war in context. The book weaves together his story and two neglected elements of the 'big picture' story – the constant inflation of war aims, and the deliberate evasion of promising opportunities to end the war by negotiation.

Private Ted Ryan joined the AIF in September 1915. He was the last of three brothers from the Ryan family to join up. His two younger brothers fought at Gallipoli. The three boys had grown up in Broken Hill, absorbing its strong Labor politics.

By the time Ryan joined the AIF, Britain had already struck secret diplomatic deals with its allies over war aims, most notably the Straits and Persia Agreement (March 1915) and the Treaty of London (April 1915). Both underpinned Gallipoli. Next, the secret Sykes-Picot Agreement (May 1916) planned a partition of the Ottoman Empire. The 'Paris Resolutions' (June 1916) publicly threatened Germany with a post-war economic boycott. Thus, Britain's war aims went far beyond those noble goals for which men like Ryan had enlisted. Meanwhile, during 1915-16 the war-makers stifled various peace initiatives, most notably American offers to mediate a negotiated peace.

In France in June 1916, Ryan was injured when a shell burst very near him. He suffered shell burns and abrasions to the face. Injured again, he was invalided to England – as a shell-shock case. In October 1916, at the large Australian depot at Perham Downs, Ryan wrote a fierce letter to the anti-war MP Ramsay MacDonald. He denounced the war. He condemned British leaders for prolonging the war, by escalating war aims and rebuffing American mediation. Soon after, in December 1916, Britain and her allies did indeed swiftly reject both German and American Peace Notes, misrepresented their war aims, and kept their imperial deals secret.

Disgusted with this, and possibly inspired by Broken Hill's radicalism, Ryan broke with the war. Three times he went AWOL in the UK. In May 1917 he missed a parade for France, and faced a court martial for 'desertion'. Sent back to France in July 1917, he walked away from his unit. Charged with 'desertion', he repeated his principled political objections to the war. He spent almost a year in prison. Returned to the front in August 1918, he walked away and received Field Punishment. Was Ryan unique? Not at all. AIF statistics show that courts-martial, AWOL, and desertion were rife.

During 1917-18, many developments highlighted the truth of Ryan's denunciation of the war. War aims continued to escalate: for example, the Franco-Russian 'Left Bank of the Rhine' Agreement of March 1917. Opportunities to end the war by negotiation also proliferated in 1917: the Russian Revolution of March, the Stockholm Conference Proposal of the summer, the Papal Peace Note of August, and the German peace initiative of September 1917. The Western Powers shunned all these chances. Australia's government asked for no light on war aims or peace terms – and got none.

Ryan's story highlights little known aspects of our war story. Looking beyond the trenches, as Ryan did, we see the tragedy of the war anew: in imperial escalation, in thwarted peace opportunities, and in the folly of an Australian government so committed to war that its troops and people were urged to fight on – in darkness.

Private Edward James RYAN, 4635, Service Summary

1915: [Brothers Harry enlisted Sydney, Sept. 1914; Tom enlisted Perth, Jan. 1915]
Sept: Ted enlists Perth; trains Blackboy Hill Training Camp, near Perth

1916:

12 Feb: Embarked Fremantle on HMAT "Miltiades", for Egypt
March-April: training Heliopolis, Serapeum, Habieta, Tel-el-Kabir, Egypt
5 June: 51st Battalion 'Proceeds to join BEF' – arrives Marseilles
29 June: into the trenches, Pétilion: wounded: '**Shell Burns and abrasions, face**'
4-23 July: Hospitals, Boulogne, Étaples – rejoins 51st Battalion, 23 July
8 Aug: Admitted Casualty Clearing Station with '**Crushed Left Hand**'
26 Aug: 'Embarked for England' – Hospitals, London '**with Shell Shock**'
2 Oct: 'Discharged to **PERHAM DOWNS** ex 4th London Gen. Hosp. **Shell Shock**'
18 Oct: **writes from Perham Downs to Ramsay MacDonald denouncing war**
15 to 19 Dec: OFFENCE: AWOL (5 days) – (he returned voluntarily to camp)
19 Dec: **PUNISHMENT: 7 days CC (Confined to Camp) & forfeits 4 days' pay**

1917:

21 Jan to 23 Feb, OFFENCE: AWOL (40 days) until apprehended Perham Downs, No. 2 Camp (he returned voluntarily to camp); prison, awaiting trial, 45 days
9 April: DISTRICT COURT MARTIAL: Pleads GUILTY. PUNISHMENT: 42 days detention, & forfeits 100 days pay, £25.

8-9 May: OFFENCE: DESERTION – refused parade for departure overseas without new pay-book (surrendered next morning, at Perham Downs).

22 May: DISTRICT COURT MARTIAL: Pleads NOT GUILTY;
PUNISHMENT: 30 days detention (prison, awaiting trial, 13 days)

27 June-1 July: OFFENCE, AWOL (5 days), from 'Overseas Training Battalion', until apprehended by Military Police, Kempton Park, near Richmond.

9 July: SENTENCE: 14 days FP No. 2, & forfeits 26 days pay

12 July: Proceeded to France, via Southampton

12-25 August: OFFENCE: DESERTION (arrested Le Havre, 25 Aug - imprisoned)
12 Sept: FIELD GENERAL COURT MARTIAL: pleads NOT GUILTY.
SENTENCE: DEATH, commuted: 5 yrs prison (24 Sept.), + 5 years/1 month pay.

10 Dec: Admitted No. 10 Military Prison, Dunkirk

23 Dec. Sentence of 5 years prison, commuted: 2 yrs 'Imprisonment Hard Labour'

1918:

18 Aug: Released from No 7 Military Prison, Vendroux, Les Attaques (Calais)

6-16 Sept: OFFENCE: AWOL (11 DAYS)

15 Oct: FIELD GENERAL COURT MARTIAL: pleads NOT GUILTY, arguing debit in pay-book unfairly kept; **SENTENCE: 50 days Field Punishment No 2**

19 Oct: Anzac Corps Field Punishment Compound; released 30 Dec. to 51st Battalion

1919:

Jan-Apr: with 51st Battalion, Belgium; shipped to England via Le Havre, 22 Apr.

21 June: Left England for return to Australia on HMT "Königin Luise"

2 Aug: Disembarked Fremantle; ship to Adelaide; returns Broken Hill, late August.

No 3 Camp
Perham Downs

18/10/16

Dear Mr McDonald [*sic*]

I am writing to you as I really think you are one man among many, but one of the few who lives for Humanity and not for self under the veil of Patriotism. You are not one of those bitter-end fighters, or one of those who believe in fight to the last man & at the same time stops at home, far away from danger yourself.

Now Mr McDonald I want to tell you my reason for writing to you, that is, to let you know the feeling of most of the Australians who have been in [the] firing-line (or, as a lot of our fellows called 'The Somme', The Abbitors [Abattoirs]) & how much they relish the glories of war. So far I have not spoken to one man who wants to go back to the firing-line again. [E]very man I have spoken to is absolutely sick of the whole business. I have just been speaking to two Anzacs who said they would rather be shot than face another bombardment like we received at Poziers [Pozières]. I have saw [*sic*] pictures of how the Anzacs come from the Somme out of the firing line bright & cheery, hurraying [hooraying] etc.

Now I am going to tell you what they do feel like.

I saw the second division of the Australians come out from the Somme. They had been in [the] firing line about a fortnight, & of course they had practically no sleep & I suppose less than 15 per cent of each battalion answered the final roll call.

I went up to one of the Sergeants to ask him how he felt, & the reply I got was – for God's sake, cobber, don't talk to me to [*sic*] now, if you want to ask me any questions call round in about another 48 hours & I will do my best to answer you & it will give me time to realise that I actually came out of it alive. To every man its frightfulness was beyond their imagination.

I am a very poor hand at this corresponding business & no doubt my education could stand a lot of improvement, so I ask you to excuse mistakes in my spelling & grammer [*sic*].

Of course Mr McDonald I think you can imagine what the horrors of war are like but surely will us [use] your best to pull to their senses such men as Mr Asquith and Mr Lloy[d] George who are going to sacrifice hundreds of lives, rather I should have said thousands, make thousands of orphans, make thousands of cripples, make thousands face this hell.

I often wonder if Lloyd George thinks when he his [is] turning into his nice spring bed at night, that if the man in [the] trench who is exposed to all weathers, perhaps had no sleep for over [a] week & has his nerves strained to the ut[t]ermost, thinking that the next shell will most likely be the death of him, perhaps the sight of his chum who has had his brains blown out is a picture of horror in his brain, & the smell of his dead comrades is next to unbearable, agrees with (him L. George) that we don't want Peace, but we are out to crush Germany? No, that man doesn't say "hands of [off] Neutrals" & of course it is impossible for him to sing.

Now Mr McDonald why shouldn't we know what terms of Peace we are fighting for, why shouldn't we discuss what terms we are supposed to accept?

Has England still got her old ideal that of Conquer & not the supposed new ideal one of Peace?

Surely is anything that we are going to gain, worth such a human sacrifice as L. George is prepared to make [?]

Tomorrow is voting day for the Australian Forces and we have had Patriotic circulars handed to us from Gen. Birdwood & Premier Hughes asking us to vote Yes.

The majority of the soldiers who are in England have not yet been out to face the "music", & I think it is a good job for the "Yes es" that they haven't.

I suppose Mr L. George classes me in with that Group known as the German Peace Agents.

Our family consists of three boys & the three of us are on Active Service. One Brother is in the 13th battalion & was wounded once, (in Gallopoli [Gallipoli]). The other Brother was in the first reinforcements of the 11th Battalion & has been wounded twice. I have been slightly wounded twice. My Mother & Father are both dead, so I don't think our family has done much for Germany. But I am dreading the day when I will have to go into that hell again.

Now Mr McDonald, I hope you will do everything possible in your power to bring about a Peace & save this slaughter of Human Lives. Thanking you for what you have done, & thanking you in anticipation for what you are going to do.

I remain, Yours Peacefully
4635. Pte. E. J. Ryan
51st Battalion Australian Forces

The back of the final sheet has:

(Present Address)

C/o No 3 Camp, Perham Downs, Ludgershall, Hants

(Active Service Address)

A Coy, 51st Battalion, 13th Brigade, 4th Division, A I Forces

P.S. If at any time you may want to use my name or address you may do so. EJR

Source:

Ramsay MacDonald Papers (The National Archives, Kew, UK)

TNA: PRO/30/69/1160, f. 108

Private E. J. Ryan's Statement to his Court Martial, 12 September 1917

A Coy 51st Battalion, France

The following statement is my consciencous [*sic*] [reason] for my past conduct being such as it is.

Previous to enlisting as a soldier in the Australian Army [I believed] that Germany intended to crush her European enemies and by so doing had accepted the policy of might-is-right which is opposed to the ideals of Humanity and Civilisation.

About eleven months ago, England to my mind adopted the same policy [these words underlined in blue by his prosecutors] towards Germany. England's policy at that time consis[ted] of no peace-conferences until Germany was crushed so as to teach them a lesson of virtue. When the war had reached this stage, it was no longer a war of resistance.

Statements like the following – hands off Peace-makers – hands off America: We must crush Germany now, once and for all, proves that England's policy was one of aggression. Our Premier Mr Lloyd George gambled with Human lives to obtain those ends. The Premier's statements goes to prove that it was only a gamble, instead of telling America now to keep her hands off, he is telling us that America is the balance of power.

I enlisted to fight for a Peace without conquerors or conquered, as a Peace under those conditions as [does?] nothing to justify another war, either as a war of revenge by the Conquered, or a war of Glory and Patriotic land-grabbing by Conquerors.¹

¹ Item A, Court martial papers, Ryan, E. J. (Private), 12 Sept. 1917, NAA: A471, 10237, underlining in original (National Archives of Australia).