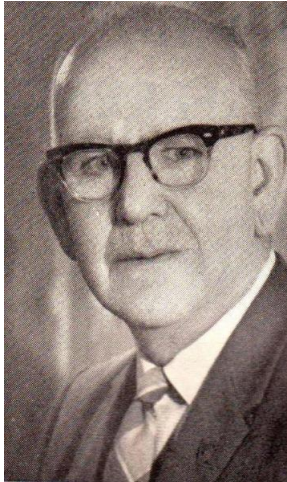
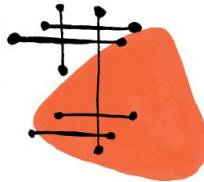


CHURCHES OF CHRIST NSW

Occasional Papers in History and Theology, No. 8.



HARRY PALMER



AND HIS FELLOWSHIP OF
SUFFERING



WILLIAM HENRY (HARRY) BOSWELL PALMER

AND HIS FELLOWSHIP OF SUFFERING

A meditation for Anzac Day

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May 2014

(Originally released in 2011)

The Churches of Christ in NSW will consider for publication short papers on historical and theological topics relevant to the development of Churches of Christ. The publication of a paper does not constitute an official endorsement of the views expressed therein.

William Henry (Harry) Boswell Palmer (1897-1991)

The Dardanelles campaign, of which the Gallipoli landings formed a part, was strategically brilliant but an operational disaster and a great human tragedy.

The aim of the campaign was to open the waterways to Russia, relieve pressure on the Western Front, and ensure the loyalty of the Balkan states to the Allied cause. The landings by the Anzacs at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 were in support of a joint British-French invasion at Point Helles, further to the south. The military action followed the failure of naval attempts to open the way to Constantinople, the Turkish capital.

For reasons that are not clear, the soldiers of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps came ashore at the wrong place. Whatever the cause of the mistake, the soldiers who landed in the early morning of April 25, 1915, came within the range of Turkish guns with good sight lines. The result was a massacre with around 1000 killed on the first day. The narrow beach, which became known as Anzac Cove, was a cluttered mess of men, munitions and other material. As the campaign settled down, the Commonwealth Department of Defence was faced with the logistical nightmare of finding 5000 replacements and reinforcements per month (all volunteers).



Image: Gallipoli landing site (photo in public domain)

Among the reinforcements was the eighteen-year-old William Henry Boswell (“Harry”) Palmer of Sydney. Sergeant Palmer landed at Gallipoli in August 1915. With casualty rates running high, he was promoted quickly to the rank of Company Sergeant Major and, shortly after, to Lieutenant.

However, in November he succumbed to the dreaded enteric (typhoid) fever and was sent to hospital in Alexandria, and later repatriated to Australia where in 1916 he was discharged as medically unfit.

However, by 1918 Harry’s health had improved sufficiently to allow him to re-enlist. He was reappointed as lieutenant to his old regiment, the 17th battalion, and left Australia in April 1918 to join it on the Western Front. During that time the 17th had been involved in bitter fighting in the Somme and Flanders.

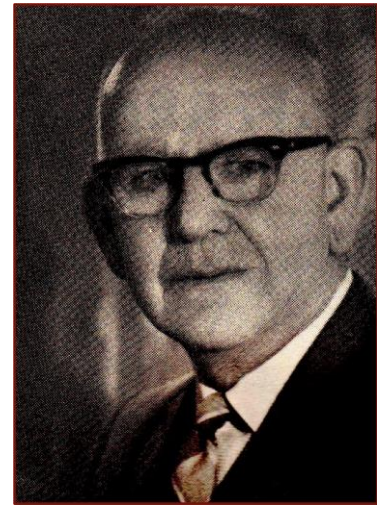


Image: W.H.B (“Harry”) Palmer, 1960

Palmer completed his First World War service in England 1919. However, he remained deeply affected by his Gallipoli experiences which he said, “... awakened in him a spiritual depth he never knew existed.” After returning to Australia, he became associated with City Temple Church of Christ, then a flourishing city church in downtown Sydney. He served as a deacon there for many years.

In dark days of 1940, with the Axis powers sweeping all before them in Europe, Harry re-enlisted again – this time becoming a major in the Sixth Field Hospital, a posting more suited to his gentle nature. In 1941, the Sixth Field Hospital was in Greece along with a reconstituted Anzac unit when the country was overrun by the invading German army. Even hospital units, it appears, were not safe from the wrath of screaming Stukas.¹ Grave concerns existed for Harry’s safety and the church at City Temple was much in prayer for him at that time.

In the event, Harry returned to Australia after the cessation of hostilities, resumed his association with the church but transferred his membership to Burwood (NSW) Church of Christ. There, he served as an elder for many years and was greatly respected for his kindness and good counsel. Harry became NSW Conference President for 1961–1962 after chairing the key Home Missions Committee for several years.

Following the death of his wife Jean, Harry moved to Sydney’s North Shore and took up membership at the Northside Community Church at Crows Nest where he played an active role and was made “emeritus elder”. Northside further acknowledged his contribution in 1990 by naming its Crows Nest refuge, “Palmer Peace House”. Until a few weeks before his death in 1991, the ex-major could be found at the refuge doing gardening and weeding. Harry was indeed a man of peace.

Though he never talked about it much, Harry never forgot his Gallipoli experience. In a passing comment to the writer, he once wistfully said of it: “Ah! The comradeship had to be experienced to be believed”.

Suffering in a worthwhile cause binds people together. There is a comradeship in suffering. This is perhaps what the Apostle John was referring to when he wrote: *John, your brother and companion in the suffering and kingdom and patient endurance that are ours in Jesus...* (Rev. 1:9) Paul was aware that in suffering for the faith he shared with the Lord in the *fellowship of suffering* (Phil. 3: 10).

Australia suffered over 8,000 killed, with more than twice that number wounded. New Zealand suffered worse, with over 2,000 killed and more than twice that number injured out of a total of around 7000 troops. Monuments to both the New Zealand and Turkish soldiers stand at Chunuk Bair on the disputed high ground. Most Australian dead are buried at Lone Pine where many were killed also trying to secure the heights. Turkish deaths exceeded 87,000. But that suffering helped forge a nation and in the “fellowship of suffering” Australia and Turkey bonded together.

The cross on the memorial at Lone Pine derives from the cross of Christ. Christ reconciled people to God and to each other. Those who struggle in the cause of righteousness are bound together with Him in the fellowship of suffering.

¹ A ‘Stuka’ is the name given to a type of German military aircraft (the Junkers Ju 87) designed for dive-bombing, much used in the Second World War.