

SOMME MUD

*An Australian
Teenager in the
First World War*

Private Edward Lynch

EDITED BY WILL DAVIES

ABRIDGED EDITION

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GOOD-BYE, SYDNEY TOWN, GOOD-BYE

HIGH IN THE CLEAR MORNING AIR RING OUR MARCHING songs as we step out through flag-bedecked streets. The windows and roofs of shops are gay with bright flags and pretty, laughing girls. The crowds line the footpaths happy in the *bon camaraderie* of their farewell to us. Here and there are silent women in black, mute testimony to what has befallen others who have marched before. We swing cheerfully on.

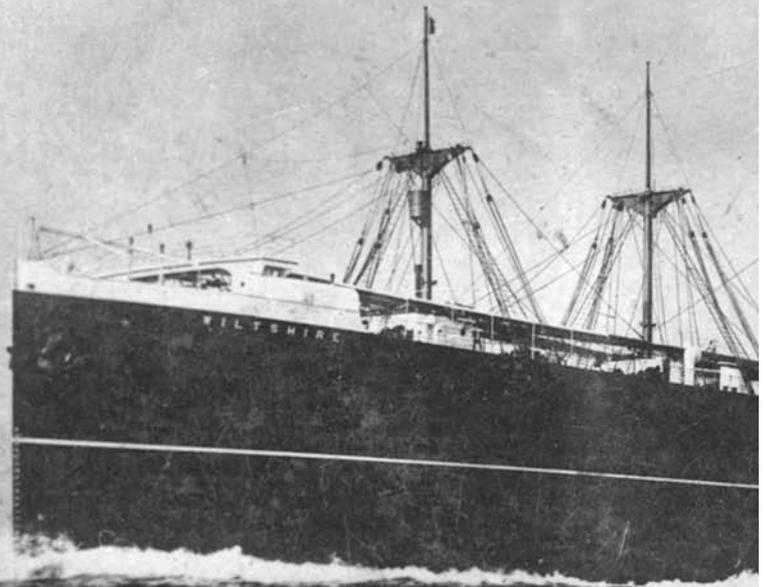
A woman breaks from the crowded footpath and arm in arm with her soldier husband, marches on with us. *Ping, ping*, and a shower of half pennies lands amongst us, thrown from the roof of a big verandah. We break step as we battle for the coins for glued to each is the address of a girl. Most of us collect girls' addresses as a hobby these days. We seize the coins, wave to the roof of girls as we fall into step with our mates and forward again as the girls wave and *coo-ee*.

We are nearing the wharves. The crowds march along with us till the big gates loom in front. We pass through, but the crowd is held back as we get our first view of the great

liner that is to carry us 'On Active Service Abroad'.

Along the wharf: 'Halt.' We come to a stop and answer a roll call, our last roll call in Australia. Up the gangway, our officers scrutinise each of us to make sure none has turned into a stowaway or an enemy spy. We're told that we are to be quartered on B Deck, but we're more concerned to secure a vantage point from which to see all we can of our send-off. Our gear is dropped anywhere and we climb like monkeys all over the ship.

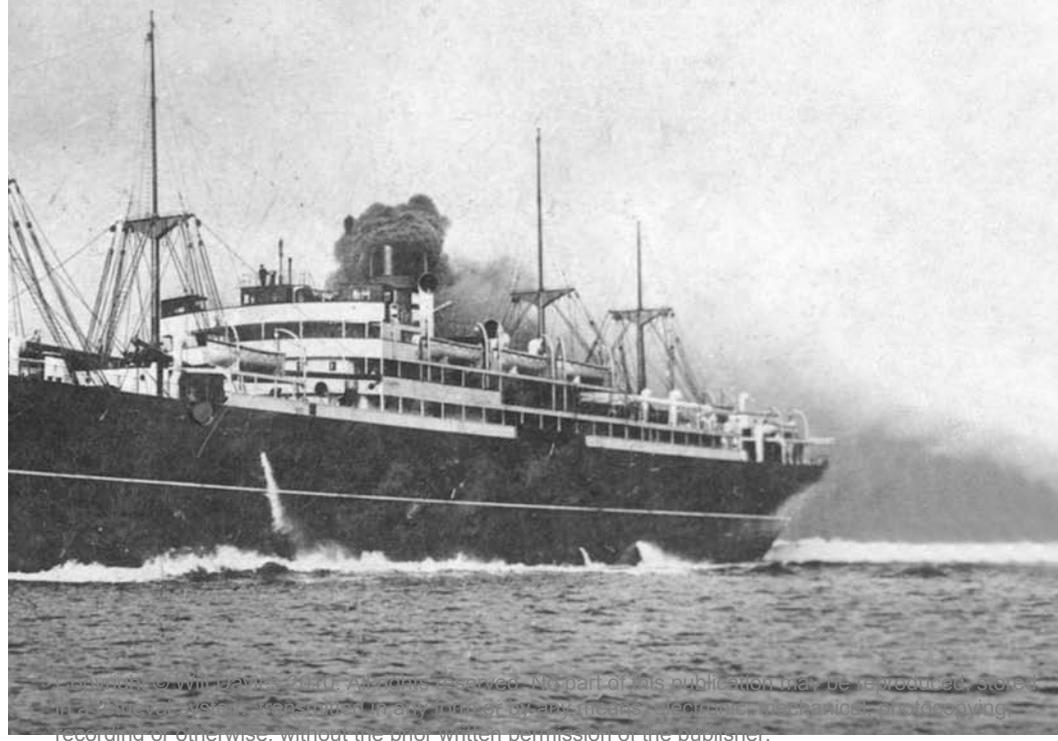
Streamers are thrown from the wharf and we catch them. We're a happy-go-lucky, carefree lot. Down on the wharf we see the girls who've caught our spirit. We see two older women with eyes ever searching for a last glimpse of a loved face. They're the mothers and wives, the silent sufferers amongst the seemingly carefree throng. Men are there too, brothers and pals calling and cheering to us and dads proudly erect and calm.



The gangways are removed. Seamen free the great ropes, the streamers straighten, stretch and snap as the lane of be-ribboned water between the ship and the wharf slowly widens. We're on the first stage of our great adventure. Cheers, *coo-ees* and the *cock-a-doodle-do* of harbour craft intermingle in a grand finale. Men, perched high in the rigging, commence to sing and soon the whole ship unites in a last song of farewell to old Sydney.

The transport noses for the Heads and the open sea, followed by small craft loaded with relatives and friends determined upon keeping touch to the very last. We look ever backward to what we're leaving; leaving for the first time, most of us; maybe for the first and last time others of us.

Lynch travelled to England aboard HMAT *Wiltshire*, a steamship requisitioned by the Australian Government for troop transport.
Australian War Memorial negative no. A04186



A dozen days roll by and we're well on our way – Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Fremantle lie far behind and now there are two thousand men aboard. Great anticipation as our ship turns from the Suez route and we're making for South Africa. Must be submarines ahead – rumours are rife everywhere. Furphies fly left and right.

Life is one long monotony now. Days roll on. We run into a heavy swell and into a great storm. Portholes are screwed down. The sea is heavier and the ship is lurching. A few more days and the coast of South Africa looms up.

Interested in a new land, we constantly watch the changing panorama as we make on down the coast and run into Durban. We're to take in coal here so draw in against a dirty, sooty-looking coaling wharf.

The wharf is black with coal dust and niggers. Across the water – Durban. We're interested in it, but more interested in the niggers down below on the wharf.

The niggers yell and call to us. They want pennies so we throw some down and a great struggle goes on. Every time a penny hits the wharf a black, seething, grunting, pushing scrum packs down around it till some coon secures the coin. Then they call for more and we oblige again. Out of a scrummage for a brown, two fellows rise fighting. We cheer them on and they stop fighting, thinking some more pennies are coming.

Someone holds a bob up and signals to the two big coons to fight on again. They understand and tear into each other once more and a good snappy round is staged. A couple of bob pieces are thrown to them, but they're too slow and other coons collect instead. Niggers begin to belt and bash each other everywhere, hopeful of earning a silver coin.



This photograph of Lynch was probably taken after a stint in hospital in England in 1917. *Courtesy of family archive*

A two-bob piece floats down from the officers' deck and the coons almost tear each other to pieces in their mad haste to get it. They know silver when they see it so we give them silver, plenty of it – pennies wrapped in silver chocolate paper.

'Look out! Let us to the rail.' And a bloke rushes forward with a red-hot two bob in a tobacco tin lid he's been busy heating up to almost white hot. The coons jump for the two bob. One tall nig catches it and, screaming, drops it. Another grabs it, another scream and the coin bounces on the boards. A third fellow thinks his luck's in and lands on to it, but jumps back yelling like blazes and the two bob lies there on the wharf with twenty niggers ringed round it, waiting for it to cool. A move, and with one accord they dive together for the coin, the thud of thick skulls meeting in an awful bash brings joy and delight to us.

Out of the scrimmage a long, lean Zulu breaks. Flat out along the wharf he races, juggling the burning coin from hand to hand as he runs and disappears from sight.

A big boss comes on the scene and gets these coons to work carrying basket after basket of coal up the gangway to be tipped into our ship. We mooch around for a couple of hours watching them and wondering if we're to get ashore.

Towards dark our ship leaves the wharf, just as we have it all worked out how we can scale down onto the wharf for a private inspection of Durban. She anchors out in the harbour where she spends the night to our great and profane discontent.

Morning breaks clear. A scorching day ahead. We do a route march through Durban and ten miles around it, but early the next morning the ship pulls out and we run on to

Cape Town. Another route march and a visit to the town and a friendly little pub. We return to the ship and towards dusk it moves out into the harbour and we spend the night looking at the town and wishing we were in it.

Morning comes and we are just about to leave. A pretty little motorboat of the harbour master is *chug-chug-chugging* away over at the wharf. Officials enter it and just as they do, an Australian soldier runs hard across the wharf to climb aboard to get out to the ship. He gets one foot on the little craft when an official gives him a push and *plonk*, into the water he goes with a splash. A whistle blows on the motorboat and three sailors run up from along the wharf, yank the cove out of the water and march him off to the clink.

We roar at the motorboat, but can't be heard as it comes straight for us. We arm ourselves with everything we can find and wait for the boat. Men rush and get armfuls of spuds from the bags of potatoes on deck. A born soldier jumps up and roars above the din, 'Get quiet! No firing till he's right alongside or you'll spoil everything. Wait till I give the word.'

The harbour master stops a dozen hard clouts and water from a hundred splashing spuds drenches him.

We wait. The motorboat comes up fast, its engine shuts off and it glides up gracefully with the big harbour master, clad in a spotless white uniform, all braided, standing on it gracefully waving his cap and smiling at us.

Right under he comes, still smiling when the morning is split with a mighty 'Give it to the floppin' blankard!', and five hundred spuds whistle through the air. Onto the dapper little boat they crash, smashing and breaking all over the men. The

harbour master stops a dozen hard clouts and water from a hundred splashing spuds drenches him.

Whilst the spuds fly in an unbroken stream, the boat gets its engine going, wheels and goes straight out, fifty yards from the ship's side. Then it turns and glides into the gangway that is out of range of the spud throwers. We see the drenched harbour master climb up the gangway as the C.O. of our ship, red with rage, descends to meet him. They salute and shake hands, not very friendly like.

For days and days we plug northward through the Atlantic. As we are now in submarine-infested waters, we get plenty of practice in what we're supposed to do if we get torpedoed. Early morning and we wake with a start. The ship has stopped and the sudden shutting off of the vibrating *thud, thud, thud* of her engines has roused us. We rush to the portholes and look out to discover we are at St Vincent in the Cape Verde Islands.

Soon a swarm of native boats come out to us. They have oranges for sale; green-skinned oranges so we put money in a bucket and with a rope, lower it to the boats. The natives put oranges in the bucket and we haul it up, eat the oranges and get a few more bucketfuls. But Longun drops a bucket which sinks to the floor of the Atlantic. The ship's bosun rushes up with an officer and demands Longun's name saying he will have to pay for the lost bucket.

Longun yells and begins pushing his sleeves up. Unable to get Longun's name from him, they turn and leave, but have only gone a short distance when the bosun stops a hard green orange fair in the ear. Exasperated, they wheel on us again and are earnestly assured that the orange must have come from the deck above. None of us pelted it.

‘The deck above be blowed. I’ll get you fellows for this!’ And again they make off, when *bang*, and this time it’s the officer who stops an orange – stops it hard and solid on the back of his head. His pretty cap is knocked flying and he grabs at his head to make sure it hasn’t gone bowling across the deck with his cap. Then straight for our group he charges and props in front of Dark who stands with his two hands behind his back.

‘Here you. Show me your hands. Come on, I saw two oranges in them a minute ago. Come on, show me your hands! You threw it!’ I slip an orange into Darky’s empty hand and like a flash he shoves his two hands, with his two oranges, right under the officer’s nose and grins hard. The officer comes the biggest gutser he ever came.

Speechless, the two merchantmen leave us and climb up the ladder that leads to the next deck. As they reach the top rung, ‘Them bleedin’ Orstralyuns’ floats up after them, and we’re happier still, but they don’t come back to join in our fun.

We leave St Vincent and head for England. Three days from England now and early in the morning we see away on the horizon ahead three black smudges of smoke. Ships coming our way. After breakfast, we find three British torpedo boats circling about us. We’re proud of them and cheer as they close in and the sailors wave and cheer back. We’re safe from submarines with three watchdogs of our great British Navy guarding us.

Great cliffs of old England show up ahead and we anchor in Plymouth Harbour. We are mustered on deck and checked over a dozen times in case someone’s jumped overboard to walk home. Then we shoulder our kit bags and climb down

into a big barge which sets off through the fog towards the lights of a wharf. The barge drifts into a wharf and we in turn jump on it. With a clatter, our boots land on the decking of the wharf, decking that looks uncommonly like good old Australian ironbark.

Our sea voyage of twelve thousand miles is over and we're in England at last.

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When the men arrived in England, they were sent for training in camps near Salisbury, some within sight of Stonehenge. After this, they were ferried to France and went into a special training camp near Boulogne called the 'Bull Ring', where realistic training began to prepare them for the front line.

From there, men travelled by train to what were called 'nursery areas': quiet sections of the line where they could get experience of trench warfare, shelling, but without the likelihood of a German attack.

Private Lynch missed this soft introduction to the war and was sent as a reinforcement directly to his battalion close to the front. His introduction to the war was to be thrown into the front line on the Somme, at a tiny village called Gueudecourt, where he was to stay for some time.