

Death of Laurence Whistler Street: 100 Years Ago on Gallipoli

Note: This memorial piece is part of a series commemorating lawyers in the First World War.

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The 19 May 2015 is the 100th Anniversary of the death in action on Gallipoli of Laurence Whistler Street – the son of the then Justice (later Chief Justice) Philip Whistler Street of the Supreme Court, brother of former Chief Justice (Sir) Kenneth Whistler Street and uncle of the former Chief Justice of New South Wales, Sir Laurence Street.

According to his service record, 21-years-old Laurence Whistler Street went ashore in command of B Company of the 3rd Infantry Battalion on 6 May. This date may be incorrect, as his battalion was landed on 25 April. He had a torrid time and his actions in battle over the following two weeks earned him some recognition in divisional orders for “acts of conspicuous gallantry or valuable services.” On 19 May he was commanding his men in their defence against a powerful Turkish attack which began around 4.00 a.m. At one stage the Turks were standing over Street’s trench and shooting directly into it, while Street and his comrades blazed away back at them from a range of only a few metres. CEW Bean described the moment as one of ‘tense excitement’ with the Australians under Street and his major ‘standing their ground.’

As dawn came the Australians repulsed the Turks, often sitting high above the trenches to gain a better shot at the fleeing enemy. In the early light, this courageous, but unwise, Australian practice made them targets for other Turks who had crept forward in the scrub.

Street had bravely kept his men steady to repel the attack but left himself exposed on the edge of his trench and was shot down at around 4.30 a.m. Thirty-three men from his battalion were killed on that night and he was interred with them in Shrapnel Gully.

On enlistment, the District Commanding Officer, Colonel Wallack had suggested Laurence Street be appointed a Lieutenant. Colonel Wallack's son, Gordon, had travelled to war with Laurence Street and was killed in the same action on the same day in remarkably similar circumstances, only a few hundred metres away. Colonel Wallack obviously took a keen interest in the men he had chosen for command and was well connected with the Street family. He had made a special effort a few days before his own son was killed to send a telegram to Geoffrey Austin Street, Laurence's cousin who was wounded in action, 'hope quick recovery love from all ends.'

Gallipoli was a place that was geographically confined in the extreme, and in the claustrophobic atmosphere news of friends and relatives travelled fast. Thus Laurence Street's death was communicated to another cousin, Captain (later Lieutenant Colonel) Alan Humphrey Scott, on a nearby position soon after the event. Scott would have heard the cacophony of battle engulfing his young cousin on the next ridge. He wrote to Justice Street within a week of Laurence Street's death. "My Dear Uncle Phil, It is with deepest regret I am now able to write to you to give what few details I have been able to gather about poor Laurence's death . . ." Scott, of Wahroonga in the northern part of Sydney maintained his family's reputation in battle. He was famous for his willingness to expose himself to enemy fire, including one time when his unit was under attack - he stood out in the open to see where the Turkish bullets were coming from. Sydney solicitor, Charles Macnaghten, dragged

him back under cover and saved his life. Scott constantly exposed himself to danger and was killed, 1 October 1917 in Belgium, while scouting forward of his men.

Condolences for Laurence's loss flowed to the Street family from a range of sources, including his fellow officers and eventually the King and Queen. Fellow soldiers praised Street's skill and courage in battle. Unfortunately the family suffered a not uncommon added burden of the bereaved, in that the various notifications and letters concerning their son were inaccurate. Their home address was not correct, nor was Laurence's date of death. Judge Street's name was mangled to be *J. Street. Esq.* It took a great deal of effort to make sure all records were amended to be correct and no doubt added to the family's grief. Such stressful mistakes were not uncommon.

Nineteen 1915 was a bad time for the New South Wales legal community. Colonel Henry Normand MacLaurin had been killed on 27 April. On 17 May, John Stanser Rich, the son of High Court Justice, George Rich, and nephew of the President of the New South Wales Law Institute, H Ellison Rich, was killed at Festubert, fighting with the British Army 17 May 1915 around the same time as Laurence Street was killed, and in remarkably similar circumstances – leading his men from the front. Both boys had been to Sydney Grammar School. Justice Street was the Chairman of the Trustees of the school during the war. As such he was a regular attendee at a variety of functions for Old Boys and students.. Justice Street would regularly address the assembly, often exhorting them to enlist¹. He led by the example of his own sons. This sense of public service through support for the war permeated the Supreme Court and the High Court at the time. Mr Justice Rich was one of four Justices

¹ Details of these occasions are taken from the archives of Sydney Grammar School, especially its magazine, *The Sydneian*, which has multiple references to the Street and other families. Information is reproduced here courtesy of Sydney Grammar School.

of the High Court of Australia who lost a son in action². He had been a Judge on the New South Wales Supreme Court from 1911 to 1913.

Sydney Grammar school lost many promising young men in the First World War. They lived up to the exhortation, from Luke 12:48, which they often heard at their assemblies: 'To whom much is give, much is expected.' On occasion, the names of those Old Boys killed in the war, referred to as *Fallen Sydneians*, were read out to the assembled students. John Rich was the eighth name read out. Laurence Street was the ninth.

Sir Laurence Street remembered that, as he was growing up there was a 'sad silence' in the Street family, regarding his fallen uncle.

² Justices to lose sons in the war included Justices Gavan Duffy, Richard O'Connor (deceased), George Rich and Henry Bournes Higgins. There were a number of Supreme and District Court Judges to also have sons involved in the fighting. Many were killed, many were wounded.