

PLOD ESSAY: Wonthaggi-Lone Pine Connection



On a plateau overlooking much of the Gallipoli peninsula stood a hill topped by a solitary pine tree. To Australian soldiers at Gallipoli in August 1915 it was known as the Lone Pine or the Lonesome Pine, and where it grew became known as Lone Pine Ridge. The tree was distinctive in that most of the trees in the forest originally surrounding it were of a different species and were felled to provide shoring or roofing for the trenches and tunnels of the Turks in anticipation of English/Australian invasion. The lone tree was left standing as it was not good for use in the enemy trenches. Standing alone as it was provided both sides of the opposing forces with a distinctive marker from which measurements could be made that enabled artillery to range guns. This made it a tree to protect and conversely a tree to destroy. Its existence became a symbol of the “enduring ANZAC spirit.”

In August 1915 the battle for the Gallipoli Peninsula was at a stalemate and the allies decided to assault the Lone Pine feature in a diversion while the main force would attempt to capture the entire plateau. The Australian 7th Battalion began the assault on 6th August and it lasted for three days. The opposing forces were so close to one another that hand grenades thrown by one

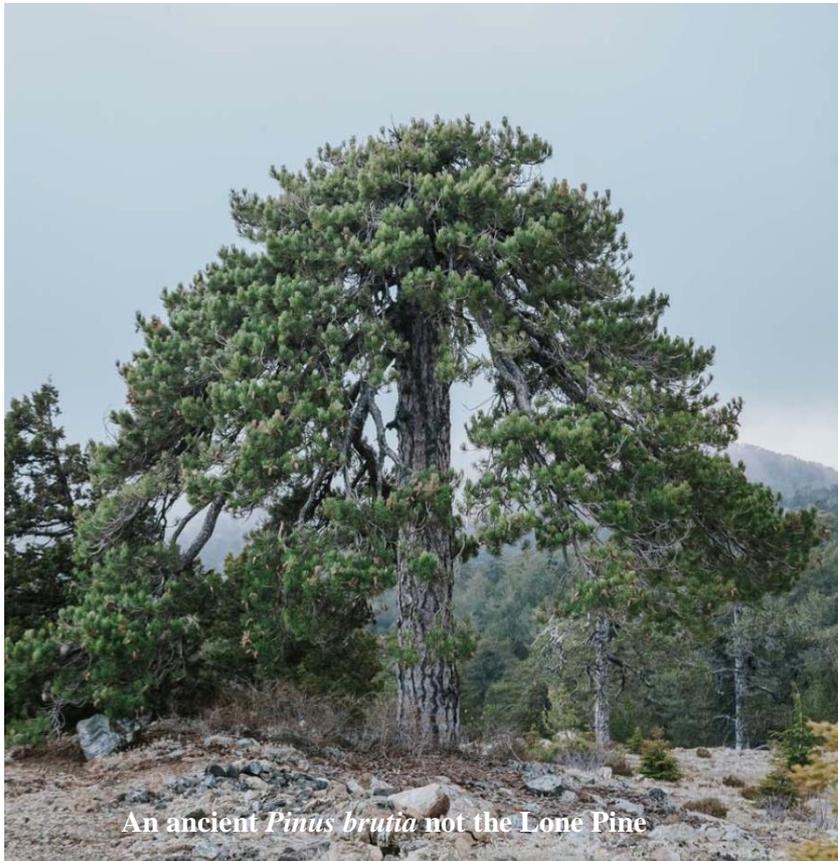
side could be caught by the other side and thrown back. Many Australians were killed or lost hands or eyesight in this dangerous game. During the ferocious battle, the Diggers won the position but had to defend it on a daily basis. The 7th Battalion was finally relieved on 6 September when the 23rd and 24th Battalions, led then by Capt. Stan Savige (later Lt General Sir Stanley Savige the founder of Legacy), took it in turns to defend it.

Ultimately, the Lone Pine fell, blown to pieces by the constant artillery, but it wasn't lost forever.

Before the battle in Gallipoli and the fame of the lonely tree on the ridge had spread far and wide, the species was known as the Calabrian pine so named after a naturalised population of the tree in Calabria, where it was first collected, botanically described and named *Pinus brutia* in 1811 by Michele Tenore (1780 to 1861), an Italian botanist with a medical degree from the

University of Naples (1800). The bulk of the *P. brutia*'s range is now in Turkey and thus it is also called the Turkish Pine.

For this story it is important to know the features of the *Pinus brutia*: It is a medium sized tree, reaching 20-35 metres tall with a trunk the diameter of one metre, rarely up to two metres. The bark is orange-red,



An ancient *Pinus brutia* not the Lone Pine

thick and deeply fissured at the base of the trunk and thin and flaky in the upper crown. The leaves are slender needles in pairs, mostly 10-11cm long, bright green to slightly yellowish green. The cones are stout, heavy and hard about 6-11cm long and 4-5cm broad at the base when closed. They are green at first and ripening to glossy red-brown when 24 months old. They open slowly to 5-8 cm broad in the next year or two to release the seeds.

Finally, in December 1915, with the battle at a stalemate, but casualties overwhelming, the decision was taken to evacuate the peninsula by stealth. The 23rd and 24th Battalions were left until last to maintain the pretence that the Allies still occupied Gallipoli and finally on 20th December, these last soldiers quietly retreated and got away.

One of the last soldiers to leave was Number 929 Sergeant Thomas Keith McDowell, a former miner from Wonthaggi. Before he left Gallipoli, he managed to souvenir a pinecone from the lone tree, whose branches lay prone, splintered and burnt. He carried the cone in his rucksack throughout the rest of his service until he got it home intact.

Although the handwritten State Coal Mine employment lists are a challenge to read, Thomas Keith McDowell, appears to have been working as either a clipper, a wheeler or a hewer at the mine when he enlisted in the Australian Forces. We know for sure that he joined up on 14 January 1915, that he had never before tried to enlist, that he was willing to undergo small pox and enteric fever inoculations, that his next of kin was Mrs Lillian Watt from Camperdown. The examining medical officer determined that he was 25 years old, 5feet 11inches in height, 150 pounds in weight, had blue eyes, light complexion and "light" hair. He was declared in good health. He was appointed to the 23rd Battalion on 29 March 1915. After training at Broadmeadows he embarked in Melbourne "per H.M.A.T. 'Euripides'" on 5 August 1915, one day before the battle for Lone Pine Ridge began. One month later, he and his comrades in the 23rd were in the thick of it. By June 1916, he was in hospital in England, and in September he was headed for Melbourne where he disembarked in

October. All the while he was carrying the Lone Pine cone.

He took it to his aunt, Emma Gray, who lived in Grassmere near Warnambool. Mrs Gray extracted five seeds from the cone and produced seedlings. One of them died but, she tended the rest and in the end, she was able to give a healthy twelve-year-old juvenile to the Warnambool Botanic Gardens and another to the 'Sisters' in Terang. The remaining young trees were given to Sir Stanley Savige who planted one at Wattle Park in Victoria where the 24th Battalion parade grounds were, and the other to the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne on 11th June 1933.

Now, the story shifts somewhat. The *Pinus brutia*, the Lone Pine, was far from a prolific tree in Gallipoli. The *Pinus halipenus* or Aleppo Pine was the most prolific and was the species used for the Turkish trenches. Our Wonthaggi miner wasn't the only soldier to salvage pinecones from Lone Pine Ridge, but he was the only one to collect one from the remains of the Lone Pine itself. Corporal Benjamin Charles Smith, of the 3rd Battalion collected a pinecone from one of the roofing logs used in the trenches. The seeds from this cone provided the seeds for the descendant trees propagated and grown in New South Wales, ACT and New Zealand. These trees are not necessarily native to the Gallipoli Peninsula. Their features do not match the *Pinus Brutia*, but they are easy to propagate and are more plentiful. The *Pinus halipenus* is now known as the Gallipoli Pine and its descendants are often used to commemorate Gallipoli at ANZAC ceremonies, especially in New South Wales.

Because of a Wonthaggi Miner, however, we can be confident that the descendants of the Lone Pine, symbol of some of fiercest fighting in Gallipoli and of the 'ANZAC spirit', are authentic.

- c.r.landon

