

Stories from the Honour Boards

Stories of those who served and are remembered on the Honour Boards in the Merrington Anzac Memorial Peace Chapel at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church

Booklet Number 4

FRANCIS LEOFRIC ARMSTRONG 1880–1915



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Please see a Guide if you would like a copy.

Lieutenant Francis Leofric Armstrong

Francis Leofric Armstrong, usually known as Frank, was born at Mt Perry, just inland from Bundaberg, on 25 October 1880. His parents were Octavius and Jessie Armstrong and in 1890 when Frank, who was the ninth child in the family, was ten years old, his father was appointed relieving Police Magistrate in the Brisbane District. This was a prestigious position and the family settled into an elegant three storey house in Edmonstone St, South Brisbane where Octavius and Jessie lived for the rest of their lives. Frank attended a private school but for the last year of his schooling (1897) he went to Brisbane Grammar School, where he was in the Football 1st XV and an officer in the School Cadet Corps.

His service in the cadet corps must have given him a taste for military life because he served for a year as a volunteer with the Queensland Volunteer Rifles. This unit was disbanded at Federation and became part of the Australian army, but Frank volunteered for service in the Boer (South African) War. It is not certain exactly where he enlisted for this war. His family thinks that he joined overseas and his name certainly does not appear on any of the lists of volunteers recruited in Australia. There were a number of irregular units raised in South Africa and it appears that Frank joined the Prince of Wales Light Horse (a unit composed mainly of Australians) in Durban on 29 April 1901. He served with this unit until he was discharged at Pietermaritzburg on 1 November 1901 and during this period he was promoted to the rank of Corporal.

Then he joined the 3rd N.S.W. Imperial Bushmen, another regiment raised in South Africa and served with them until discharged (possibly through ill health), returning home on the ship *Australasian* in June 1902. ²

He was awarded the Queen's Medal, with five clasps (each clasp represented an action in which his unit had fought) and apparently settled down to what must have seemed a rather humdrum life as a Bank Officer with the Queensland National Bank.

We know little about the next few years of his life, except that he met Annie Endeavour Munro Mackay and was married to her. This may explain his connection with Saint Andrew's. Unfortunately membership lists for Saint Andrew's are missing for this period and we cannot know whether he was a member of the church before his marriage or even whether he was a regular attender. He may have met Annie Mackay through the church as two of her brothers who also served in World War 1 are listed on the Church Roll of Honour. Or it may have been that he was drawn to the church after he had met Annie. Certainly Frank and Annie were married by the Rev E Merrington in Saint Andrew's on 1 June 1914, by which time the war clouds were probably gathering.

Frank was one of the early volunteers when recruiting began in Australia, enlisting on 19 October 1914. He served in "E" Company, 15th Battalion (Infantry) which was raised from late September 1914, six weeks after the outbreak of war. Three quarters of the battalion were volunteers from Queensland, the rest were from Tasmania, and with the 13th, 14th and 16th battalions they formed the 4th Brigade under John (later Sir John) Monash. Frank's Attestation Form gives his religion as "Presbyterian" and his address as Kinnell, Wharf Street, Kangaroo Point, Brisbane. Frank applied for a Commission and the details on his application form show his height (5' 6") his weight (11 stone 5 lbs) his chest (35" - 41") and his eyesight (perfect).

Those of us who were educated before metrication will understand these measures perfectly - others will have to look them up. The Commission was granted and Frank became a Lieutenant. No doubt there was a great shortage of recruits with military experience and Frank's service in the Boer War would be a great advantage. By this time his wife Annie was pregnant so it must have been with mixed feelings that he contemplated the future.

The battalion trained in Victoria and embarked just before Christmas. With a brief stop at Albany, West Australia, they arrived in Egypt early in February 1915 (there is a picture of Frank riding a camel) and here they underwent further training until at last they were flung into one of the worst possible positions in the First World War - the Gallipoli Peninsula.

The situation at Gallipoli is well known to most Australians. The British Fleet had tried to force the Narrows of the Dardanelles to put pressure on Turkey, but had failed to destroy the Turkish forts and could not make the passage. The British then decided to land a force on the Western side of the Peninsula, the idea being that they would overwhelm the Turkish defenders, cross the Peninsula and occupy the high ground directly opposite the forts, thus gaining the opportunity to destroy them and permit the passage of the Fleet. To do this they assembled a multi-national force including ANZAC troops.

Unfortunately they failed to take into account the bravery of the Turks and the terrible jagged broken ground. The first landings at Anzac cove were made on 25 April 1915 and Frank's regiment went in later in the afternoon of that day. After terrible losses the landing was consolidated but no advances could be made.

Quinn's post, where his battalion was posted was one of the worst positions, right on the front line with Turkish trenches only a few feet away and subject to intense bombardment and machine gun fire.

In his last letter to his mother, Frank Armstrong called it "a death trap". Nevertheless senior officers felt that an attack must be made across No-Man's land against the advice of officers on the ground who felt that the attack would be doomed to failure, and on 9 May the orders came through.

Frank Armstrong, as a veteran of the Boer War knew well what would happen. In the tense minutes spent waiting for the order to advance, he scribbled his will, which was witnessed by his friend, Saint Andrew's member Graham Wareham, also at Quinn's Post, and wrote a last letter to his wife.

The attack reached the Turkish lines but was badly cut up and had to retire. Frank, the last to reach Quinn's was greatly distressed. "All my boys are killed or wounded out there" he said and attempted to climb out of the trench to rescue the wounded. Other men tried to hold him back, but it was no use - he fell, riddled with bullets.

Graham Wareham was also killed later that day and Frank's letter was found among his effects. Frank Armstrong was buried the next day by the Rev Power in a temporary grave but the site has now been lost. His name is inscribed on the Quinn's Post Memorial "thought to be buried in the vicinity". He was twice mentioned in despatches for his conduct at Gallipoli and was posthumously awarded the "Victory" medal in 1922.

Frank Armstrong's son, Francis Mackay Armstrong was born on the 22 February 1915 at Kangaroo Point. Frank never saw him. His wife was awarded a pension on 20 July 1915 of ninety-one pounds per annum for herself and thirteen pounds per annum for her son (later increased to one pound per fortnight). She married in 1918 a Robert McEachran Montgomery but does not appear to have had any more children. Her son Francis Mackay Armstrong lived until 2002 but did not marry or have children so Frank Armstrong has no direct descendants.

Frank Armstrong died bravely. He lived up to the motto on the Honour Board of Brisbane Grammar School on which his name is also inscribed: "*Dulce et decorum est pro patriot mori*" - *It is sweet and beautiful to die for one's country*. But those who remember the lines from war poet, Wilfred Owen's bitter poem of the same name:

'My friend, you would not tell with such high zest,
To children ardent for some desperate glory,
The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est*
Pro patria mori.'

may wonder whether such sacrifice was, in the end, worthwhile.

Bibliography

Anglo-Boer Website—Prince of Wales Light Horse
Armstrong family records
Australian Government National Archives
Australian War Memorial—Roll of Honour
Queensland Marriage Certificate
Story of Anzac CEW Bean

Armstrong, Francis Leofric

Born Mount Perry October 1880

Attended BGS February to December 1897

Football 1st XV, 1897. Officer in School Cadet Corps

Occupation—Officer in QN Bank

Married June 1st, 1914 Annie Munro

Daughter of the late Captain John Mackay. ISO

Son. Francis Mackay Armstrong

Served in South African War 1901-02

as Trooper in NSW Bushmen

Promoted Corporal in Prince of Wales Horses

Queen's Medal with Clasps

Enlisted WWI October 19th, 1914. Lieutenant 15th Battalion.

Took part in landing at Gallipoli on afternoon of April 26th, 1915.

Killed at Quinn's Post, May 10th, 1915.

Mentioned in Despatches

Greta Jarvis. April 2014





Lest we forget