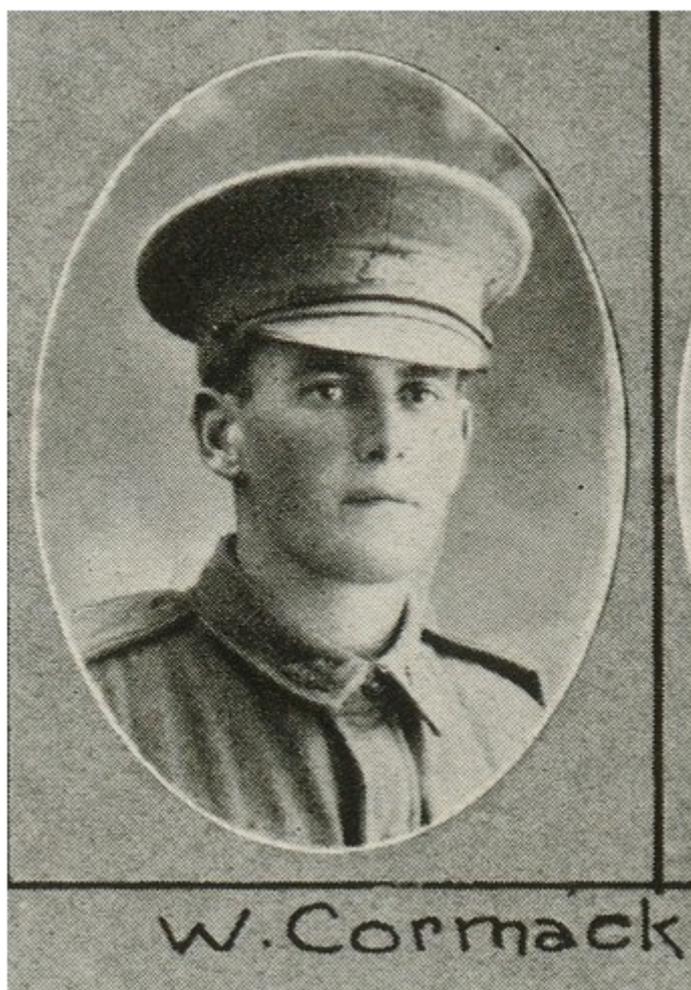


Stories from the Honour Boards

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 180

WILLIAM CORMACK 1892-1970



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Corner Ann and Creek Streets
Brisbane QLD 4000
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Private William Cormack

The eldest son of Gavin Cormack, a railway employee, and Eleanor née Moulder, William Cormack was born in Rockhampton on 9 August 1892. William had three younger brothers and three sisters though only one of the girls reached adulthood. Gavin and Eleanor Cormack and family moved to Clermont when Mr Gavin Cormack was appointed a railway porter then to Bundaberg where he was a guard on Queensland trains. He lived in retirement in Bundaberg and died there in 1938. Mrs Eleanor Cormack died in 1950. Both were buried in the Bundaberg Cemetery.

Bill Cormack would have attended primary schools in Rockhampton and Clermont before obtaining labouring work where it was available. He was working as a labourer in Brisbane when at the age of 23 years he enlisted on 16 September 1915 to serve overseas in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the Great War. Private Cormack, regimental number 4105, was allotted to reinforcements for the 25th Battalion at Enoggera Camp and embarked from the Brisbane River on 28 March 1916 on board HMAT *Commonwealth* A73, bound for Egypt.



His Majesty's Australian Transport Commonwealth

The 25th Battalion had joined the 2nd Division in France when Private Cormack's unit arrived via Marseilles on 16 July, just before the major battle at the site where the village of Pozières had stood. To be led by General Legge and his staff, the new battalions of the 2nd Division took over from the tired and worn out 1st Division on 27 July 1916. Pozières had become an open space, marked vaguely by tree stumps but with no other sign that a village had been there.



The main street of Pozières after the German bombardment of July-August 1916

Between 25 July and 7 August the 25th suffered 785 casualties at Pozières. On the night of 28th July, the 25th was given an impossible task according to an ill-devised attack plan that couldn't work; all the junior officers on the battle field could do was try to get their men back to safety. An officer who went out in command of 250 men from Paton's 25th Battalion 'through a perfect hell of fire' described his own experience: *"I went with the first line myself & my word my men fought well."*

*“They fell around me like flies, but on we went as if in a dream, while the smell of powder & din of guns, bombs etc, nearly turned my head. I reached the German barb-wire with some of my men, but could not get through & the Hun brought his maxim guns on us, & we were forced to retire. I gave the order to retire much against my will, and what remained of my men got back that night, but I had to see all my men from the German lines before I could leave & when day broke I found myself about 30 yards from his trench. What I did was to lie still and imagine I was dead from 4 am on one day (the 29th) to 12.10 am on following day = 20 hours and 10 minutes. I had no water & it was very hot & there (were) hundreds of dead and wounded lying all around me. It seemed years that 20 hours. The Germans came out and bound up our wounded & passed me for dead and eventually I managed to crawl to our own lines under cover of night. I was almost off my head ... I had to be under a most terrific bombardment but somehow God watched over me ... I received several scratches but none serious. The doctor says I can go to hospital but I am going to hang on.”*¹

Private Cormack was one of the wounded in action that night – gunshot wound left hip. He was admitted to the 26th General Hospital at Étaples next day, embarked on Hospital Ship *Brighton* from Calais to England on 4 August and admitted to the Military Hospital, Silver Street, Edmonton but was not able to rejoin his battalion in France until 18 December. It was winter. While both Allies and Germans on the Somme found their time and powers fully occupied in battling against mud, rain and frost-bite, Bill Cormack was troubled with Trench Feet.²

1. From the diary of Captain Walter Boys of Maryborough, Queensland, quoted by Les Carlyon in The Great War, page 180

2. Many soldiers fighting in the First World War suffered from trench foot. This was an infection of the feet caused by cold, wet and insanitary conditions. In the trenches men stood for hours on end in waterlogged trenches without being able to remove wet socks or boots. The feet would gradually go numb and the skin would turn red or blue.

In January 1917, he was admitted to hospital in France and transported on Hospital Ship *St Andrew* to England for treatment at 1st Birmingham War Hospital. He was transferred to 3rd Auxiliary Hospital and after a period on furlough and repatriation at Perham Downs Training Depot, returned via Southampton to the Front in August. The 25th was about to take part in another major battle, the battle of Menin Road in Belgium. Victory here was followed up with the capture of Broodseinde Ridge but Private Cormack was wounded in action here on the second occasion. It was necessary for him to return to England per Hospital Ship *Pieter de Conick* with gunshot wounds to face and neck. He was admitted to Eastbourne Military Hospital, 3rd Auxiliary Hospital and a period of furlough and repatriation at Weymouth Depot. It became clear however that with severe wounding and defective hearing he would be unfit for return to the battlefield. He returned to Australia per *Dunvigan Castle* and was discharged in Brisbane on 25 June 1918.

One wonders how William Cormack coped with civilian life after his ordeals on the battlefields of Europe. His marriage to Ethel McCormack took place on 22 February 1919. They lived at Freswick in Tennyson Street, Norman Park while William was employed as a labourer before moving to Rosewood where Bill and Ethel Cormack managed the Royal Hotel in John Street. Unfortunately the hotel was destroyed by fire in October 1933. A resident died as the result of burns and Mr W Cormack, the licensee and his family escaped in their night attire. In May the following year, Mr and Mrs Cormack decided to leave Rosewood. At a farewell evening in their honour, friends and well wishers presented a dinner service to them. They referred to the esteem in which Mr and Mrs Cormack were held by the people of Rosewood and to the excellent way they had conducted the Royal Hotel.

In responding to the speeches, Mr Cormack thanked the many people who had loaned furniture and household requirements for his temporary premises after the fire.

The Cormacks moved to The Esplanade, Manly where they conducted a small business. Sadly, William Cormack experienced yet more loss and grief when his wife Ethel died suddenly at St Kilda Private Hospital in Manly on 20 July 1935 at the age of 38 years. She left a daughter, Mavis and son Gavin, aged five years. Her private funeral was conducted at the Toowong Cemetery by Rev Arthur Edmonds of Wynnum Presbyterian Church.

At the age of 43 years, Bill Cormack faced the years ahead as a widower with two young children. At this time of writing, little is known of the remaining years of his life. He died in the State of Queensland, probably in Brisbane, in the year 1970.

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Lest we forget