

# 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 76

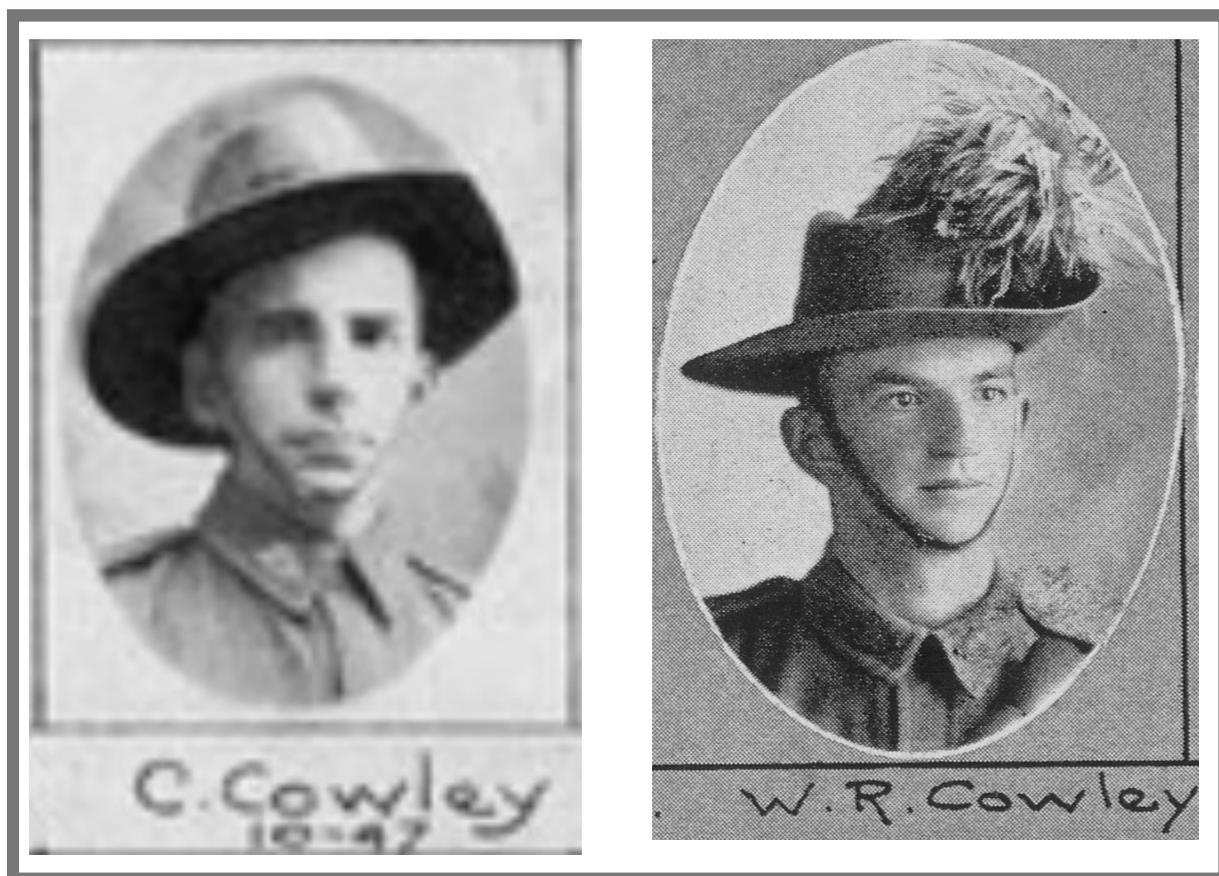
## **COWLEY BROTHERS**

### **CAMPBELL**

**1881 - 1919**

### **WILLIAM ROY**

**1889 - 1942**



C. Cowley  
18-97

W. R. Cowley

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## **Trooper Campbell Cowley (1881-1919)**

### **Gunner William Roy Cowley (1889-1942)**

Campbell and William Roy ('Roy') Cowley were the eldest and the youngest sons respectively of a prominent Queensland family, but they had quite different experiences when serving in the First World War, and lived different lives.

Campbell was a Kiplingesque figure who was a Lieutenant in the Boer War, did intelligence work and hunted elephants in Africa, had a coconut plantation in Papua, and fought in the 11<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment in Palestine. In that arid country the terrain and lack of water were a great strain on the troops, and conditions were often primitive with medical evacuation difficult. Campbell died in an apparent suicide in a remote part of Papua in 1919.

Roy served as a gunner in the 7<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade. In France and Belgium he faced dangers such as quagmires of mud, gas attacks, and thunderous barrages from massed artillery firing huge numbers of shells (with opposition artillery a desirable target). He was wounded twice. Roy made a successful return to civilian life, but without any apparent warning or reason, he committed suicide in 1942 when aged 53.

#### **Family background**

Their parents – Sir Alfred Sandlings Cowley and Lady Maria ('Marie') nee Campbell - were prominent in Queensland public affairs. Sir Alfred was born in England in 1848 but his Baptist lay missionary father took the family to Natal in South Africa in 1859. Alfred did an apprenticeship and specialised in the installation of sugar cane machinery, but then became a sugar cane and coffee planter.

Alfred migrated to Queensland in 1871, where his expertise was valued, and he entered into public life. From 1888 to 1907 he was the member for the North Queensland seat of Herbert in the Legislative Assembly, as well as secretary for public lands and secretary for agriculture 1890-93, and Speaker of the Assembly 1893-99 and 1903-07. He was knighted in 1904.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, Sir Alfred and Lady Cowley became heavily involved on the domestic front. Sir Alfred was an 'ardent recruiter and conscriptionist' and chairman of the Queensland Patriotic Fund. Lady Cowley was a vice-president of the Queensland division of the Red Cross Society, founder and president of the Queensland Soldiers' Comforts Fund, and vice-president of the Sock Fund (which she also helped to establish). For her war work she was made an Officer of the British Empire (OBE).



*Lady Cowley OBE*



*Sir Alfred Cowley*

One of her nieces in South Africa, Edith Campbell was known to the Australian diggers as 'the Angel of Durban' for her warm welcomes and farewells by semaphoring with flags, gifts of fresh fruit to their ships, hosting of large tea parties in the grounds of her parents' home, and supervision of hospitality at the Durban Young Men's Christian Association building. She was enthusiastically greeted by returned servicemen throughout a five-month tour of Australia in 1923.

Beyond the war years, Lady Cowley was recognised as someone who gave considerable service to the community and ‘innumerable acts of kindness for those around her and for charitable causes’. Among other things, she was a committee member of the Young Women’s Christian Association, and president for ten years of the Women’s Auxiliary of the Presbyterian Children’s Homes (the Blackheath Home at Oxley for boys and the W R Black Home at Chelmer for girls). She devoted time to transcribing books into braille. A regular attendee at services in Saint Andrew’s Church on the corner of Creek and Ann Streets in Brisbane, she was also a willing worker at the annual Anzac Day lunches for returned service personnel.

## **Campbell Cowley**

Campbell Cowley – the eldest child in the family - was born in Townsville on 4 May 1881. He was a student at Brisbane Grammar School (BGS) from February 1895 to June 1897, and was the School’s champion rifle shot 1895 and 1896, a member of the Rugby first fifteen 1896-97, and winner of the 1896 Cadet championship prize, finishing his schooling at the King’s School in



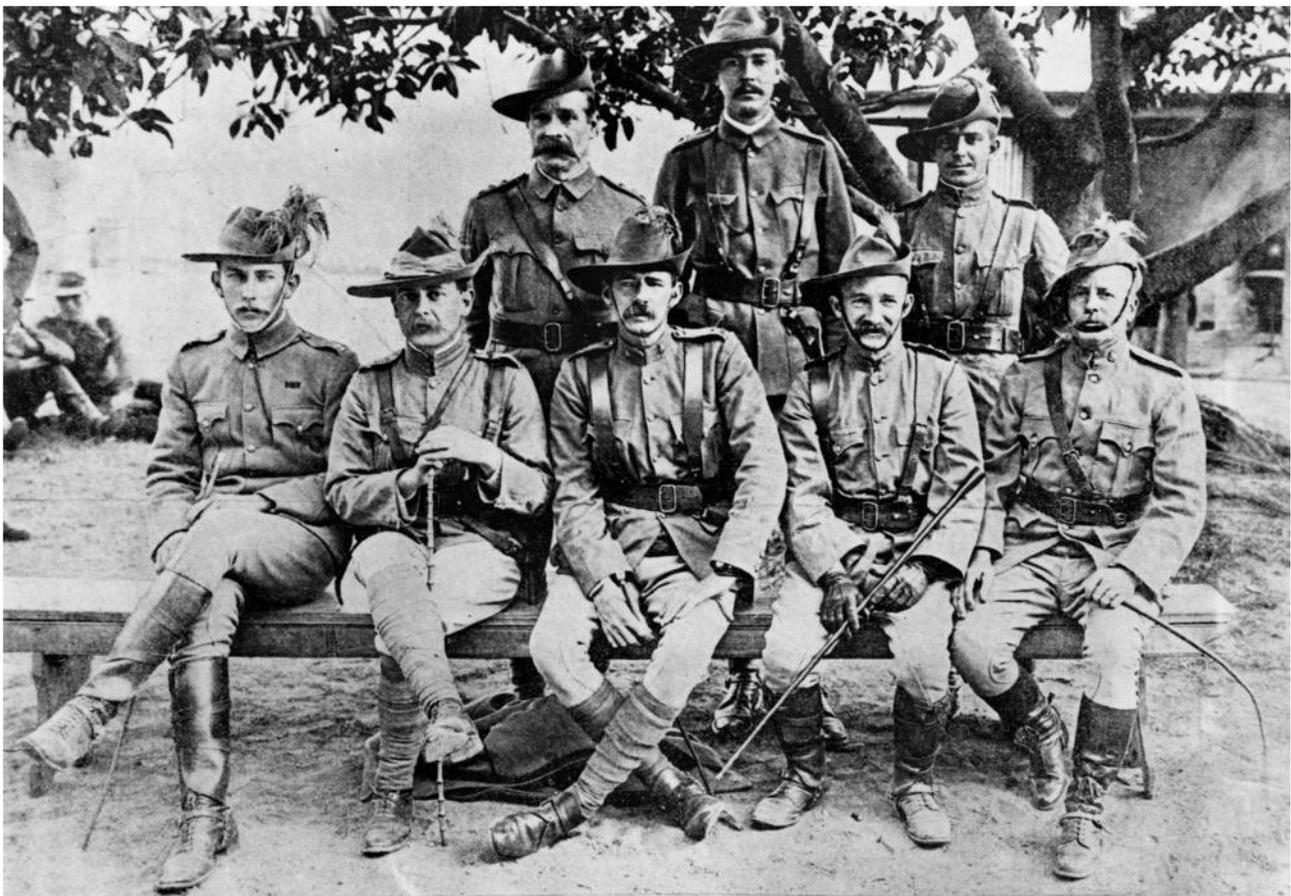
Sydney 1897-98, where he was again in the Rugby first fifteen and a member of the rifle team.

*Campbell standing next to a goat and cart at Hamleigh, near Hinchinbrook, Queensland, ca 1887.*

*John Oxley Library, SLQ*

He was then apprenticed with the Colonial Sugar Refining Company Ltd, working in the machine shop at the sugar refinery in New Farm, Brisbane and studying at the Technical College.

With Cowley and Campbell relatives engaged in the war with the Boers in South Africa, it is not surprising that in March 1900 Campbell Cowley enlisted in the Fourth (Queensland Imperial Bushmen) Contingent, in which he was made a Lieutenant.



*Officers of the Fourth Queensland Contingent who returned from the Boer War, August 1901. Lieutenant Campbell Cowley, standing, rear right. Lieutenant Colin Philp, seated, front left.* John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

He was not impressed by the British Generals or the conduct of the war, writing home that: 'Here we have the biggest army that the world has ever produced on active service, but we cannot subdue a few ignorant but brave and determined farmers who have no homes left standing or crops left unburned'.

After that Contingent returned to Australia, perhaps somewhat surprisingly given his earlier comments, Campbell joined the Sixth Contingent and returned to South Africa, finishing his service in 1902.

In 1903 Campbell was - in the words of the Queensland Governor in 1919 - 'detailed for special duty by the Imperial Government with the rank of acting-captain, and made a tour through Nairobi, Abyssinia, and Uganda. He pioneered country which had not been previously visited by a white man. His tour occupied three years'. Other newspaper reports were less coy and refer to him exploring Central Africa and 'making valuable plans for the British Intelligence Service'.

From 1907 Campbell hunted elephants and traded in ivory in Uganda, Abyssinia, Kenya and probably Sudan. At one time he drafted an unfinished manuscript entitled 'Hunting the mighty Atom' - 'Atom' being a local name for elephant - and a copy of this is in the State Library of Queensland.

Campbell returned to Australia in 1911 and then took up a coconut plantation named Mogubo, on the edge of Amazon Bay on the south coast of Papua, nearly two thirds of the way from Port Moresby to Samarai.

When the war started in 1914 Campbell returned to Brisbane with thoughts of enlisting. However, it seems that when told he would not be given an officer's commission, and with the not uncommon presumption at the time that the war would not be a prolonged one, he returned to Papua.

After the early optimism of a short conflict evaporated, recruit numbers fell and the first of two referendums proposing the introduction of conscription was defeated, Campbell travelled to Brisbane and enlisted in the ranks of the AIF on 17 April 1917. He was one month short of his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday. He was recorded as 5'7" (170cms) tall, weighed 130lbs (59kg), with grey eyes, brown hair and a medium complexion. Placed as a trooper in the 19<sup>th</sup> reinforcement for the 11<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment, Campbell embarked in Sydney on the *Port Sydney* in May 1917, and reached the Regiment in Palestine on 3 August 1917.

When Campbell arrived in Palestine there was something of a stalemate, with two earlier frontal attacks on Gaza having failed. However, a successful wide outflanking move led to the well-known cavalry charge to take the town of Beersheba. At the time the 11<sup>th</sup> had a flank protection role and was not directly involved in the charge itself. The 11<sup>th</sup> did take part in a charge on 7 November against Turkish positions at Sheria, but heavy fire forced them to dismount and withdraw.

In December Campbell had an attack of malaria – something he had first suffered in the Boer War – and was hospitalised for a little over a month. In April the 11<sup>th</sup> moved into the Jordan Valley and took part in the Es Salt operation at the end of April and early May. Crossing points over the Jordan then had to be defended and determined Turkish and German assaults on 14 and 15 July 1918 were repelled.

In August the 11<sup>th</sup> was issued with swords and trained in traditional cavalry tactics – historian Jean Bou has charted how by the end of the war most of the light horse had been converted from mounted rifles to fully effective cavalry.

In the last cavalry charge of the war in Palestine, the 11<sup>th</sup> stormed the Turkish defences around the town of Semakh with swords drawn, and then dismounted and using rifles and bayonets cleared the town on foot. Campbell was wounded during this action, with a gun shot wound to his left leg.

The Turks surrendered on 30 October 1918, but before they returned home the 11<sup>th</sup> was called on to defend European civilians, suppress public disorder and protect transport in rural areas during a civilian revolt that broke out in March 1919. Campbell embarked on the *Essex* in June and arrived back in Australia on 28 July 1919, being formally discharged on 29 August 1919.



He became engaged to Isabella Mary ('May') Philp, the eldest daughter of Sir Robert Philp, who had been Premier of Queensland 1899-1903 and 1907-08. The Philp and Cowley families had had a strong social connection over the years, and May's brother Colin had been a fellow officer with Campbell in the same Contingents during the Boer War.

Campbell was apparently anxious to see the state of his plantation, and no doubt conscious of the need for a sound financial position with marriage looming, he returned to Papua as soon as practicable.

On 26 November 1919 Campbell died in the village of Doi-labi in the Iomedi district, Upper Musa. A magistrate took evidence from eight natives that while on a recruiting expedition Campbell became very ill, and after a shot was heard one night, Campbell was found dead in his sleeping quarters with a gunshot wound to his throat. It was said that his carriers and the villagers including a village constable had buried Campbell the next day, along with most of his belongings. A diary kept by Campbell was also tendered, which showed that he had fallen ill on 8 November and on 19 November had written that 'I am too ill to walk and the situation is becoming serious'.

The magistrate concluded: 'That the cause of the deceased's death was a bullet wound, inflicted by himself, that the deceased was in a very weak state of health at time of death, that the deceased could not obtain the necessary medicine and attention, being in the centre of Papua, and that there is no evidence to show that the wound was not the result of an accident.'

It seems unusual for a suicide using a firearm to involve a shot through the throat, and frontier Papua New Guinea could be a violent and dangerous place, but the magistrate was satisfied that the accounts given by Campbell's native bearers and by the villagers were the same. Importantly, it seems that Campbell had developed blackwater fever - malarial haemoglobinuria - a complication of malaria which even today can prove fatal in up to 50% of cases. Symptoms include urine that is black or dark red in colour as extensive destruction of the patient's red cells by malarial parasites releases large amounts of haemoglobin. In a remote place without medical care Campbell would have known his chances of survival were negligible.

A description from the coroner of the gravesite was relayed to Sir Alfred – it was said to be a bleak desolate spot in grass country, on a low ridge, fenced and very clean all around, with a cross of Bandilla wood into which was burnt ‘CAMPBELL COWLEY Died 26.11.1919’. For a man who had spent his adult life journeying, hunting, fighting and working in remote and wild places, it seems a suitable resting place.

## **Roy Cowley**

The youngest of the five Cowley children, William Roy was born in Gairloch on the Herbert River, north of Ingham on 22 December 1889. Roy attended BGS for the two years 1903-04 and moved to the King’s School, Sydney for 1905. He then left to be apprenticed at the railway workshops at Ipswich.

When Roy enlisted in the AIF on 15 December 1915 his occupation was given as jackaroo. He was 5’8” (173cms) tall, weighed 135lbs (71kg) and had brown hair with dark eyes and complexion. Appointed a gunner, he was attached to the 9<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade (FAB), and embarked for the UK on the *Argyllshire* on 11 May 1916. After arrival in July, most of the rest of 1916 was spent training with the rest of the newly formed 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Division. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Division moved to France during December 1917, and there Roy was transferred to the 7<sup>th</sup> FAB (to its howitzer battery, the 107<sup>th</sup>).

The 7<sup>th</sup> FAB saw action in the Battle of Messines and later Ypres. Roy was promoted from gunner to temporary bombardier on 21 August 1917, but between the Battles of Polygon Wood and Broodseinde, Roy was wounded by a shell on Westhoek Ridge on 28 September 1917. He sustained injuries to his back and left elbow, and had fractured ribs.

He returned to the Brigade from hospital in England late in December 1917.

When the German Army unleashed a major offensive in March 1918 the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division including the 7<sup>th</sup> FAB was rushed to the Somme region to confront the advance there. Fierce fighting eventually halted the Germans at Morlancourt and Villers-Bretonneux. It was near Villers-Bretonneux on 20 April 1918 that Roy was wounded for the second time, also by a shell, with a badly broken jaw. Repairs attempted in France proved unsuccessful, and further work was needed in hospital in England.

Roy returned to Australia on the *Ulysses* arriving March 1919, and was formally discharged two months later in May.

On 16 March 1920 Roy married, with Presbyterian rites, Brisbane born Robina Cochran Robertson at the home of her parents in Mowbray Terrace, East Brisbane. He gave his occupation as grazier at Tambo, but he subsequently worked as a fitter and turner for the Brisbane City Council.

He and Robina had two sons (Robert Alfred and Richard Roy) and one daughter (Lucy Sophia). Both sons served in the Second World War – Alf (Robert Alfred) in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Anti-Tank Regiment and then the RAAF, and Dick (Richard Roy) in the RAAF – and both were Mentioned in Despatches.

Roy went missing on Sunday 25 October 1942, aged 53. He was seen by his wife Robina reading a book late that evening in the sitting room of their home in Whitmore Terrace, Taringa, but was not in the house the next morning.

Police conducted inquiries and searches, and on Sunday 1 November articles appeared in the newspapers appealing for anyone who might have seen Roy to come forward. Later that day a Volunteer Defence Corps search party led by Captain Bill Allan (also recorded on the Honour Boards at St Andrew's Church) found Roy's body in a timbered gorge at the foot of Mt Cootha, some three miles from his home.

**HAS ANYONE SEEN THIS TARINGA MAN?**  
The family of Mr. William Roy Cowley, of Whitmore Street, Taringa, who left his home at 10 p.m. on October 25 to post a letter, and who has not been heard of since, are anxious to trace his whereabouts.



Mr. Cowley, who is a son of the late Sir Alfred Cowley, of Silky Oaks, Toowong, is 53, married, and a returned soldier.

Mr. Cowley

He had apparently shot himself in the head with a walking stick shotgun (used by his wife for shooting pigeons).

An inquest was held on 16 December 1942 and Robina gave evidence that 'He had far more to live for now than ever before in his life...he had no financial worries, no enemies and our family life was always very happy'. The day before, Roy had invested 500 pounds in the War Austerity Loan. The police could not offer any reason why Roy would have taken his own life. He was not apparently unduly bothered by the four-inch scar on the left side of his face extending to his mouth, or the deafness in his right ear, from his war service. But not all scars are visible.

Roy was cremated at the Brisbane Crematorium, with Presbyterian rites, and his ashes interred with his parents in Toowong Cemetery, near Mt Coot-tha.



*The headstone in the Toowong Cemetery for Sir Alfred and Lady Cowley and their son Roy*

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Compiled by Ian Carnell. December 2015



*Lest we forget*