

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

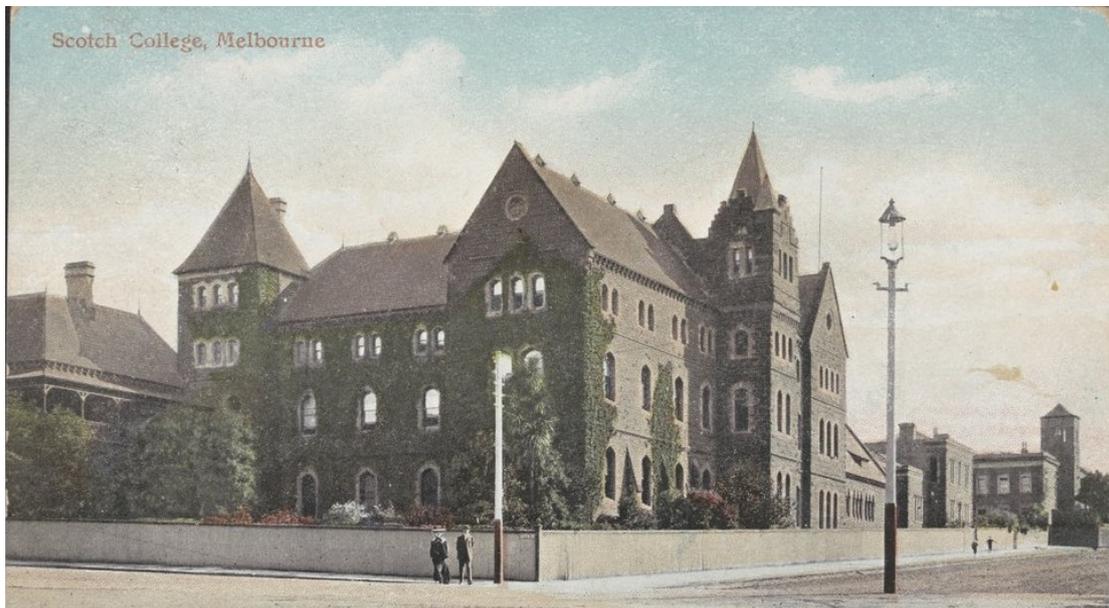
Booklet Number 202

WILLIAM ANGUS FRASER 1884—1945



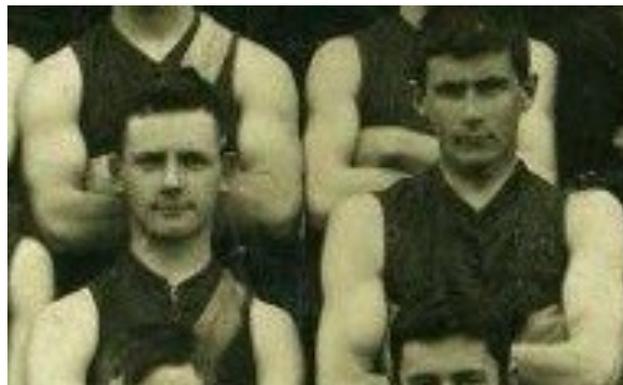
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Cover Illustration: *The photograph of William Angus Fraser on the front cover is from the collection of Scotch College in Melbourne which William attended from 1899 to 1902.*



Scotch College, Melbourne

While a student there, William and his younger brother Alexander played for Scotch College in the First XVIII in 1902. Alexander is on the left and William on the right.



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Corner Ann and Creek Streets
Brisbane QLD 4000
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Lieutenant Colonel William Angus Fraser MID DSO

Dr William Angus Fraser, the son of a country Presbyterian Minister, served in the 2nd and 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulances - reaching the rank of Lieutenant Colonel and being made a Companion of the Distinguished Conduct Order (DSO) in June 1917.

The DSO was awarded in particular for his efforts in December 1916 and January 1917 'carried out in the face of great difficulties, and under the most fatiguing and trying conditions' and his display of 'consistent coolness under fire'.

A passing reference was made in the DSO recommendation to his 'continued good work' – something of an understatement. He had earlier distinguished himself calmly attending to mass casualties and exercising effective command in the primitive, risky conditions of Gallipoli, and then through the gruelling dangers of the Sinai and Palestine.

Post-war he and his wife Ruby settled in the Queensland country town of Boonah for 27 years, where they were warmly and highly esteemed for their many contributions to the welfare of the community and ex-servicemen. Both had busy lives of dedicated service to others.

Family background and early life



Terang Presbyterian Church

William was born on 12 February 1884 in the town of Terang in the Western District of Victoria, where his father the Rev. Samuel Fraser was the Presbyterian minister for 43 years. An obituary said of Samuel that 'He was a strong personality...but his genial temper and quick sense of humour saved him from the aspect of domineering, even when he was most masterful'.

There were other Presbyterian clergymen in William's family tree – his mother Jane was the daughter of the Rev. William Hamilton, and a granddaughter of the Rev. James Clow (noted for conducting the first Presbyterian service in 1837 in what became Victoria, and being moderator of first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in Victoria 1859-1861).

Two of William's three brothers also served in 1st AIF. His younger brother Major Alexander Clow Fraser, MID graduated from the University of Melbourne medical school in 1915, and served on the Somme with the 6th Field Ambulance. An older brother Private Donald James Fraser, a bank clerk prior to enlistment, served with the 22nd Infantry Battalion and was gassed.

William attended Scotch College in Melbourne from February 1899 to December 1902, and matriculated for Melbourne University where he studied medicine 1906-1911 while residing in Ormond College - graduating MB BS in 1911.

The following year he was appointed as one of two new resident medical officers at the Lady Lamington Children's Hospital in Brisbane.



He also joined the Citizen Military Forces (CMF) and was posted as a Captain on 22 April 1912 in the 2nd Field Ambulance. Electoral rolls from this period give his residence as Harrisville (a small country town south of Ipswich, halfway to Fassifern).

Enlistment and marriage

Given his professional qualifications and CMF experience it is no surprise that William was successful with his October 1914 application for an Officer's Commission – nor that the 185cm tall, 73kg William passed the medical examination by Major David Gifford Croll (booklet no.90). William was assigned as a Captain to the 2nd Light Horse Field Ambulance (2nd LHFA), where Croll was initially his Major and later Commanding Officer (at Lieutenant Colonel rank).

The two men became friends, socialising outside of official duties and messing together on Gallipoli, and it is apparent from his diary that Croll respected William's general abilities and surgical skills. William was promoted to Major under Croll's command and later received his own command (of the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance).

Between receiving his commission (effective from 19 October 1914) and entering the Enoggera Camp in Brisbane on 18 November, William married the Matron of the Boonah Hospital, Ruby Joan Clark-Kennedy, in St Colomb's Church (Church of England) in the Brisbane suburb of Clayfield.

Ruby's nursing career

Ruby had been born in Toowoomba in 1877 - the second daughter of John Charles, a squatter (and later a shipping clerk in Thomas Brown and Sons Ltd) and Lucy née Archer. John was born in Madras, India in 1849 (a son of Major-General Alexander Clark-Kennedy of the Madras Native Infantry) and he and Lucy were married in Longford, Tasmania in 1874.

After three years of study at the Brisbane General Hospital Ruby

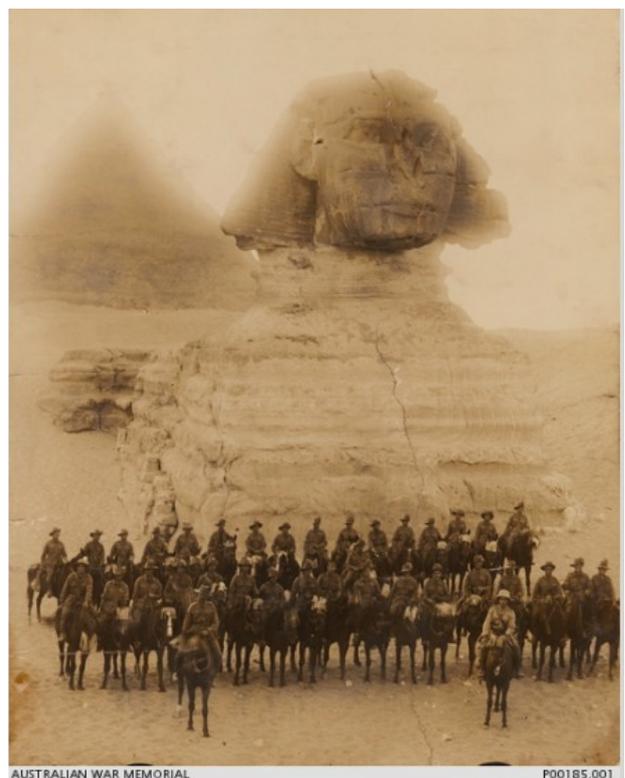
received her certificate as a registered nurse in 1901, and then worked at the Hospital until 1905 - being promoted to Sister, and given charge of the operating theatre for 18 months.

She must have been highly regarded because she was made Matron *pro tem* August-October 1905 when Matron Bell was recovering from an injury received when alighting from a tramcar.

Ruby moved on to be Matron at the Casino Hospital in NSW for two years, leaving there in January 1908. She was warmly thanked for her work at a social farewell evening and a presentation made - reported to be 'a massive gold cable bangle set with pearls and amethysts', with a bannerette and a cheque to be forwarded later. She next accepted a post at the Launceston Hospital in Tasmania, but the Hospital was an unhappy workplace and Ruby was appalled at the unhygienic conditions, handing in her resignation because of this. No record of what she did next seems to be available - we do know that in January 1912 she took up the position of Matron at the Boonah Hospital (with the Hospital Committee commenting that she had 'splendid credentials').

Egypt

With the rest of the 2nd LHFA William embarked in Brisbane on the HMAT *Borda* A30 in December 1914, and arrived at Suez on 28 January 1915. Ruby must have sailed to the Middle East ahead of or around the same time as William - in the embarkation roll that includes William, the address column says that his wife was at the 'Anglo-American Hospital, Geiza, Egypt'.



*Second Light Horse Field Ambulance
in Egypt 1915*

William's unit then trained in Egypt until mid-May 1915, after which he had two periods on the Gallipoli Peninsula, with a month on hospital ships in between. His first period on the Peninsula ran for five weeks from May to June 1915.

Gallipoli May-June 1915

The Light Horse did not go ashore at Gallipoli initially in April 1915, but were sent to fight as infantry the following month. The 2nd LHFA went aboard a captured German transport, the *SS Lutzow*, in Alexandria on 16 May – a ship from which a short time earlier William and a party from the 2nd had disembarked wounded, many with advanced cases of gangrene – and the 2nd landed at Anzac Cove on 20 May 1915.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

PS1491

Shrapnel bursting over the piers at Anzac Cove

William and a group of his men had an early experience of how luck would be needed to remain unscathed. They had just formed up on the beach ready to carry off twenty loaded stretchers when a shrapnel shell burst above, spraying shrapnel fragments all around them, but remarkably none of the men was hit.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P10522.005.001

*William Fraser in White's Gully,
Gallipoli*



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P10520.008.001

William Fraser (R) with David Croll

Dangers from almost continual artillery fire and frequent rifle fire did not abate as after a few days the unit moved to Razorback, to a location they called 'Back stop alley' – the position had their artillery all round and the Turkish shells that missed those artillery emplacements would land near or among the 2nd LHFA. Croll's usually phlegmatic diary recorded that 'our gully has been a pretty hot place'.

Outside of their medical duties distractions were few – on 14 June, Croll wrote, 'Really I shall have to give up keeping a diary until there is something to write about – even shrapnel gets monotonous when you get it every day' - but two days later recorded that William set off a 'new amusement' of designing houses – 'Fraser started it & it caught on like anything. Whenever a design is completed and drawn to scale it is submitted to the court & criticised – freely you can imagine'.

Visits from the Chaplain the Rev. Dr Ernest Merrington from Saint Andrew's Church (booklet no.2) were also very welcome.

Hospital ships

The 2nd embarked for Mudros on the Island of Lemnos on 26 June and treated casualties there - many of whom came from Helles at the foot of the Peninsula as the British and French tried to press forward incrementally despite high casualty numbers.

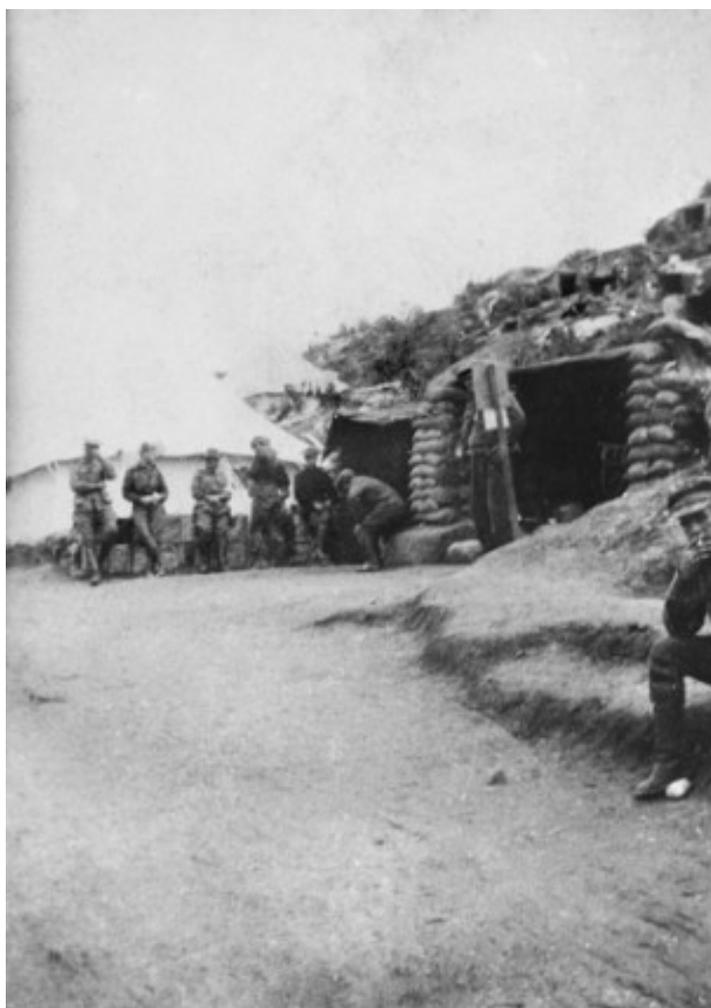
William and 12 others from the 2nd LHFA were transferred to treat wounded on the SS *Saturnia*, a transport ship filled with ammunition at the time that was ill equipped to deal with the number of casualties that were brought on board - the excessive numbers being due in part to administrative blunders elsewhere. Like the gangrenous cases William and his men had seen in Alexandria before embarking, these were but some illustrations of organisational incompetence on the part of some senior British medical staff against whom Official Historian Charles Bean and others like (then Colonel and later Major General and Sir) Neville Howse, VC railed.

Aboard the *Saturnia* William and another medical doctor worked unceasingly but the task was huge and when Admiral Wemyss came aboard and viewed the situation, he immediately signalled for every available naval surgeon to come and help.

William returned from the *Saturnia* on 4 July and the 2nd LHFA went back to Alexandria in Egypt – allowing brief re-unions for William and Croll with their wives – before sailing on the *Ausconia* with a shipload of wounded to Malta. After two weeks in Malta the unit returned to Alexandria, disembarking there on 1 August, and the officers went to a camp at Carlton, with Croll bemoaning in his diary that William was lucky to have Ruby living only one train station away. However, the stay was short and the 2nd embarked again for Gallipoli on 6 August 1915.

Gallipoli 9 August-12 December 1915

The 2nd LHFA was back on the Peninsula again on 9 August 1915 and was immediately thrown into tending to casualties from the major August offensive (an unsuccessful attempt to break out of the confined area in which the Anzacs had been contained) at a dressing station in Victoria Gully. Towards the end of the month the Turks conducted a heavy bombardment of the Lone Pine position, and at their dressing station the personnel of the 2nd LHFA worked for 18 hours continuously to deal with the rush of casualties.



Dressing station 2nd L.H.F.A.
were 2,000 cases were put through
in 30 hours during Lone Pine
attack 6th August 1915. Anz

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01 336,007

Victoria Gully dressing station

William was temporarily transferred to the 6th Light Horse Regiment on 31 August to serve as medical officer for that Regiment. From August to December illness and disease from poor food, difficulties in maintaining proper hygiene and exhaustion took a large toll on the remaining Anzacs. With the 6th Light Horse William would have been pre-occupied with hygiene and disease prevention as much as treating the sick and wounded over this time - perhaps this experience contributed to his being a determined advocate for preventative health measures after the War.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P10522.003.004

Soon after William's return to the 2nd on 5 October there was a reminder of yet another one of the dangers at Gallipoli – on the night of 7 October a sudden squall blew up and his dugout collapsed with the sandbags burying his bed. Croll noted 'luckily he was out or might have been killed'. The next morning they got a good haul of timber that had been blown onto the beach by the storm and re-built the dugout – with Croll wryly noting that William 'took elaborate precautions against sandbags falling in'.

The interior of William Fraser's dugout

In that month William and Croll were visited by Chaplain Merrington, and the two of them also sought out (then Captain) Andrew Martin of the 2nd Light Horse Machine Gun Section (booklet no. 185), who was a member of the Saint Andrew's congregation and from the Brisbane suburb of Sherwood – disappointingly he had little news for Croll from their old suburb.

The situation on the Peninsula became relatively quiet, as neither side launched any major offensives, although the artillery and machine guns on both sides were still active. Croll recorded on 8 November that 'This morning the Turks got a maxim onto our camp – howitzer fashion – accidental I'm sure but they gave us a lively morning although no one was hurt. Fired it in bursts about every 10 minutes'.

Later that month cold weather with snow, ice and high winds descended and the absence of proper winter clothing made it tough for the Anzacs.

William was again detached to the 6th Light Horse, this time for just a few days (29 November-8 December). Three days after he returned to the 2nd the unit quietly left the Peninsula for Mudros – where Croll and William relished a walk to the hot spring at Therma and a bath there. The general evacuation from the Peninsula was completed in the early hours of 20 December 1915.

By 27 December the 2nd LHFA were all back in Egypt and William was promoted to Major with effect from 1 January 1916.

The Sinai and Romani

Early in 1916 the Egyptian Expeditionary Force pushed out to positions in the Sinai desert east of the Suez Canal, and undertook a series of reconnaissances. The men quickly experienced the brutal conditions of the desert – in this theatre of war the terrain and climate would impose as much strain on the troops as the enemy.

One example involving William was in May 1916. The 'stunt' was towards the Turkish outposts of Bayud and Mageibra, and the heat was extreme (15 May was said to be the hottest day for over 20 years - in Croll's tent at Romani the thermometer measured to its maximum of 120 degrees F, 49° C, and the sands were 'unbearable to the naked touch'). After finding that the two posts had been abandoned by the Turks, two of the three parties started to return to link up at Sagia. However, many of the 6th Light Horse Regiment men started to suffer severely from dehydration and heat exhaustion, and at Sagia William and his bearers treated about 65 of them for three hours.

Many recovered sufficiently to be able to mount up for moving on to Katia, but 13 needed to be loaded on sandcarts and transported by

William and his men. The mounted troops struggled back, presenting 'the appearance of a disorganised and retreating army, little knots of almost exhausted men and jaded horses toiling in a long skein, over the heavy sands, irrespective of Unit formation or regularity, only intent on making the shade of the palms'. Croll took some of his men from Romani to Katia with water and rations and his party was gratefully welcomed. After further medical attention the troops staggered back to Romani – where men and horses rushed the troughs, drinking side by side. Thirty-nine men including five officers had to be admitted to the Casualty Clearing Station, with 35 subsequently evacuated.

Less than a week later, William was off on another reconnaissance, this time to Hod Gedadia, where in one location they observed a large body of Turks. This was part of a very large Turkish Army which in late June overran the outposts at Oghratina and Katia and made a major but unsuccessful attack on the British and Dominion forces at Romani in early August.

After the battle Croll wrote to his superiors about what seems a super-human performance by William:

He was in charge of the Tent Division of the Ambulance for 60 hours from 0600 on August 4th till 1800 on August 6th. He worked almost continuously in the operating tent with only two intervals of two hours each. While at work there he received messages and issued orders for the conduct of the hospital during my absence in the field, admitting in that period 381 wounded and 230 sick and handled them in a most efficient manner.

3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance

William didn't receive an award for his efforts at Romani, but there was some recognition in the form of a posting as Commanding Officer of the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance (3rd LHFA), with the rank of temporary Lieutenant Colonel (this was later made substantive from 8 November 1916).

William's new command supported an unsuccessful attack at Bir-el-Abd on 9 August 1916 – this was one of several dogged rear-guard stands by the Turks as they retreated to their outposts on the Palestine border. Those border outposts at Magdhaba and Rafa fell to the British and Dominion forces on 23 December 1916 and 9 January 1917 respectively, and it was in this context that William was awarded the DSO.

To support the attacks on Magdhaba and again at Rafa, William organised the effective running of a receiving station at El Arish in difficult and at times dangerous conditions. For this he was Mentioned in Despatches along with 13 of his men by General Sir Archibald Murray in March 1917 – but this combined with his previous outstanding actions and his general example finally led to a high level of recognition when in June 1917 he was awarded the DSO.

The recommendation read:

For continued good work, and particularly for his devotion to duty during the actions at Magdhaba and Rafa. He was responsible for the collection and transporting of all wounded men and his work was carried out in the face of great difficulties, and under the most fatiguing and trying conditions. This officer has shown consistent coolness under fire and has set a fine example.

The British and Dominion forces moved into Palestine, but the Turks' defensive line from Gaza to Beersheba was a strong one, and the British and Dominion forces made two unsuccessful attacks on Gaza in March and in April 1917. William's unit was in support for these attacks - in the 1st Battle of Gaza some of his unit were lucky to escape in the withdrawal.



An advanced dressing station near Gaza (PO0373.005)

In the following months the 3rd LHFA supported several reconnaissances, including towards Beersheba – and ultimately there was the famous charge at Beersheba at the end of October and the capitulation of Gaza shortly afterwards - but William left the 3rd LHFA on 13 October 1917 to return to Australia. His service record has almost nothing on what precipitated this departure, but the most likely hypothesis is that he was completely debilitated, and had more than done his duty.

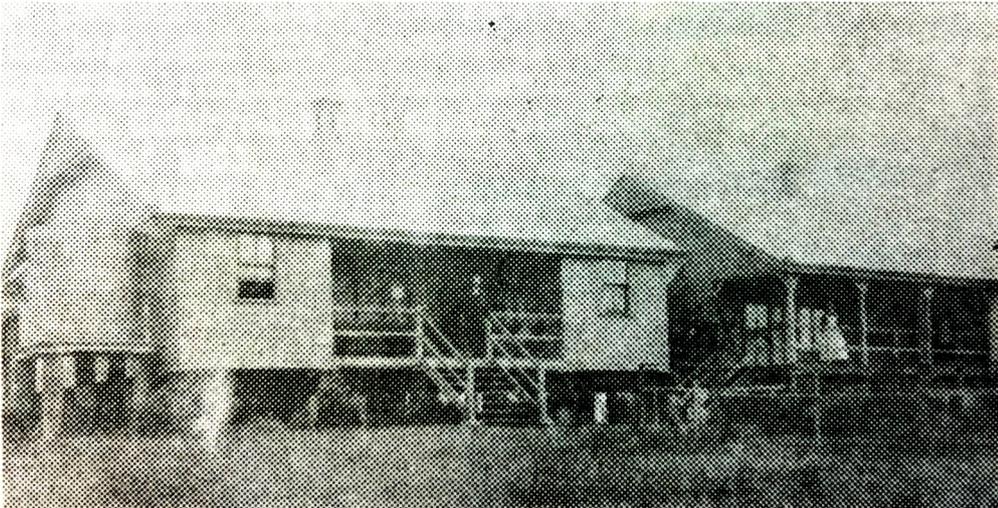
William embarked as the Senior Medical Officer on the HMAT *Wiltshire* A18 in November 1917 and arrived back in Sydney on 20 December 1917. His appointment was then formally terminated on 4 January 1918 but he was placed in the Australian Army Medical Corps Reserve from 5 January with the rank of Honorary Lieutenant Colonel.

There was one last recognition of his contributions – he was ‘specially mentioned’ in Sir Douglas Haig’s despatch of 7 April 1918.

Boonah

Post-war William and Ruby settled at Boonah and for nearly 27 years worked unceasingly for the health and welfare of ex-service personnel

and the people of the district. When ill-health forced William's retirement in 1945, farewell functions were organised by the RSL and the Shire – and what is particularly striking in the reports of these events and in the tributes when William passed away a short time later, was the warmth as well as the respect and appreciation expressed towards William and Ruby. A common sentiment was that their good work had 'endeared' them to all.



*Boonah
Hospital,
early 1900s*

William started at Boonah acting as the locum from May 1918 for Dr Harold South – the doctor and hospital superintendent at Boonah, who went to serve in the Medical Corps but died from pneumonia in England – and from October 1919 to 1929 William was the medical superintendent for the Boonah hospital as well as having his own private practice. After 1929 William still assisted the hospital, being for example the anaesthetist when surgery was needed. For all his time in Boonah he was the medical officer for the Boonah Shire Council and for the Boonah Friendly Societies.

William was also for many years the President of the Boonah sub-branch of the Returned Soldiers League, as well as an Elder and Chairman of the Committee of Management of St Thomas' Presbyterian Church in Boonah, Vice-President of the Shire Patriotic Committee, Treasurer of the District Scouts and Cubs Committee and a member of the School of Arts Committee. Ruby was also busy in these local activities and especially so the Red Cross, and helped William with supporting individual ex-service personnel.

The new RSL President said in 1945 that 'The keen interest taken by Dr Fraser in all the returned men of the district had been a factor in putting the branch on such a sound footing', and made special mention of Ruby as well. One of the old members commented 'Not one of them knew the extent of the assistance given by Dr Fraser to the distressed Digger. He saw that he was clothed and fed, and did everything in his power to find him employment'.

William's response says much about his modesty and approach in life - 'the speakers had been over-generous in their remarks, but he felt they had meant everything they said. He had always felt it was his duty to do what he did, and it was a labour of love'.

At the Shire farewell the Chairman of the Shire Council spoke of William's 'exceptional help' to the Council, and an MLA said that his 'outstanding modesty, his ability as a doctor and a surgeon, his capacity for work and his many acts of human kindness had endeared him to almost everyone in the shire'. Other speakers said he was 'as straight as a die', 'quiet, unassuming and remarkably efficient' and 'a man of transparent honesty and integrity'. Ruby was also praised - 'They also appreciated the part played by Mrs Fraser in public affairs. She had lived a life anyone could be proud of'.

William's response is again revealing – the speakers were 'no doubt sincere but had been a little extravagant' he said – and then most of his following comments were on the gains made in public health in the district but the need for more progress - diphtheria had practically disappeared, but 'many men would be returning suffering from malaria and council's good work needed to be continued', measures against fly breeding must also be maintained, and he stressed the need for a water supply and sewerage in the town. Perhaps in time his urgings helped progress – there were town drainage works in the early 1950s to eradicate mosquitoes, Boonah and Kalbar had a reticulated chlorinated water supply from 1956 and eventually sewerage arrived in Boonah in 1969, Kalbar in 1971 and Aratula in 1988.

Finale

Shortly after leaving Boonah William died on 25 April 1945 at Labrador, Southport, where his son John Clow Fraser (born in December 1919) was practising as a doctor.

William's remains were cremated at Mt Thompson, with Presbyterian rites administered by the Rev. William Young from Saint Andrew's Church in Brisbane. Ruby passed away 18 months later and her remains were also cremated at Mt Thompson, with Baptist rites.

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Buderim
August 2017



Lest we forget