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 116

ERIC BRENTNALL HARRIS
1896 - 1918

This booklet remains the property of Saint Andrew’s Uniting Church.
Please see a Guide if you would like a copy.
Bombadier Eric Brentnall Harris

Despite a cardiac condition and a ‘quiet retiring’ nature, 19 years old Eric Brentnall Harris was determined to enlist, and was accepted into the 1st AIF on 2 August 1915. He was placed with the Light Horse but later chose to be transferred to the 14th Field Artillery Brigade.

Eric served on the Western Front in the second half of 1916 and throughout 1917 until he was gassed at Hellfire Corner on the Menin Road on 2 October 1917. He was repatriated to Australia, but his health never really recovered and he passed away in a private hospital in New Farm, Brisbane on 24 November 1918.

He was buried with Methodist rites in his grandmother’s (and later his grandfather’s) grave plot in the Bulimba Cemetery, Brisbane (grave 103, portion 11).

Family background
The ‘Brentnall’ in his name came from his maternal grandfather – Frederick Thomas Brentnall (1834-1925) – a Wesleyan minister, journalist, company director and member of the Queensland Legislative Council.
Frederick was one of the founders of the Telegraph newspaper in Brisbane and for many years was a director and chairman of The Telegraph Newspaper Co Ltd.

Frederick’s wife Elizabeth (1830-1909) was also a prominent figure in early Queensland as an educator, feminist, suffragist and philanthropist. Flora - one of her two daughters – was Eric’s mother. Flora inherited the energy and passion for social justice of her parents, being very active throughout her life in many organisations connected with women and with the welfare of children.

Eric’s father was English-born Edgar Bridal Harris, a shipping agent when he and Flora married in 1893. He later became a director and vice-chairman of The Telegraph Newspaper Co Ltd. For many years the family lived in ‘Kaleden’ in Sinclair Street, East Brisbane, and later in Clayfield (Adelaide and Milne Streets).

Eric was born in the suburb of Wooloowin in Brisbane on 30 June 1896.
Enlistment
Eric travelled down to Brisbane from a cattle property in the Gladstone district where he was a stockman, to enlist in the 1\textsuperscript{st} AIF on 2 August 1915. He had previously been exempted from the compulsory military training scheme because of a ‘weak heart and valvular disease’. However, he was accepted for the 1\textsuperscript{st} AIF and placed with reinforcements for the 5\textsuperscript{th} Light Horse Regiment. Eric was aged 19, his religion was Congregational and he was 170.2cms tall, weighed 57.2 kgs, and had brown hair and eyes with a fresh complexion.

Egypt
He embarked in Sydney on the SS \textit{Hawkes Bay} on 21 October 1915, and after disembarking in Egypt spent time training with the Light Horse. However, in late March 1916, like a significant number of others, Eric volunteered for transfer to the rapidly expanding artillery. There was a view that the Light Horse would be stuck in Egypt and not be properly utilised.
In the artillery Eric was made a gunner (first gunlayer in his sub-section) in the 53rd battery, 14th Field Artillery Brigade, 5th Division artillery. His unit sailed for the Western Front in June 1916.

**Fleurbaix/Fromelles**
Following his death a tribute in the newspaper said that Eric’s unit went ‘straight into action near Fleurbaix. He became an expert artilleryman, doggedly stuck to his gun through all the subsequent actions, no matter how worn out and exhausted he was, and did consistently good work right through to the end’.

![Eric Harris, left, with gun crew](image)

The physical demands on the artillery were indeed extreme, and the endurance of the men extraordinary.

After Fleurbaix 19-20 July 1916 (now generally referred to as the Battle of Fromelles) the 5th Division artillery remained in the sector until mid-November. It was kept very busy supporting raids and minor offensives on the enemy lines as well as firing frequent heavy concentrations of shells onto the enemy front lines.
The Somme and the Hindenburg Line
The 5th Division artillery then moved to the appalling quagmire of the Somme, going straight into the front line on 20 November, and remaining there over the bitter winter - firing even on Christmas and New Year’s days. There were further artillery engagements over January and February.

In March and April the German Army staged a withdrawal to the Hindenbergh Line and in the fighting as the Allies followed them and the Germans engaged in counter-attacks, Eric suffered shell shock near Morchies.

The 5th Division artillery then fought at the Hindenbergh Line near Bullecourt in May 1917, before being given a brief rest towards the end of June.

Third Ypres
The 5th Divisional artillery then moved to the Ypres area, arriving in mid-July 1917. Eric was made a temporary bombardier on 1 August. They were part of the artillery supporting major Allied assaults on Passchendaele Ridge on 31 July and 16 August – with the 5th Division history recording that in the long struggle up the Ridge ‘our artillery was forced to seek battery positions in ground utterly devoid of cover and under constant enemy observation’.

On 8 September 1917 the 5th Division artillery was withdrawn from the line to Saint Momelin for a proper rest. The Commanding Officer of the Allied Fifth Army telegraphed that ‘They have had a most strenuous time and have earned the admiration and praise of all. Please thank them for me’.

They returned to the line in late September 1917, to join Allied forces gathering for the attack at Broodseinde on 4 October.
However, movement forward involved the danger of Hellfire Corner, so named because that location and all the roads and paths leading forward from it were kept under persistent enemy shelling, including the new mustard gas. At this risky location Eric was caught in a gas attack on 2 October 1917.

After spending time in several hospitals, he embarked on the TSS *Euripides* at Plymouth on 30 January 1918 and arrived back in Melbourne on 21 March.

Formally discharged as medically unfit on 24 April, Eric was visiting friends in the bush when severe heart trouble occurred. He returned to Brisbane on 15 November but nine days later, and 13 days after the Armistice came into effect, his heart failed.

*Eric Harris, in 1918, after his return to Australia*
Postscript
Flora was devastated by Eric’s death, and his young sister Noela was also deeply affected.

Eric and his brother Donald had planned to go into partnership in the cattle raising industry, but with Eric’s death Donald turned to other pursuits. He worked in several businesses and when his father stepped down from the Board of the Telegraph, he became a director and was later the chairman. In 1926 he married Doris Briggs and they had two children.

Noela completed a Bachelor of Science (Geology) at the University of Queensland. She married Alan Knox Denmead, and they had three children. Alan worked for the Queensland Government Geological Survey and when he was posted to Cracow in Central Queensland in 1932 funds were extremely limited, so Noela worked as an unpaid assistant to her new husband. Alan rose to be Chief Government Geologist 1956-1967.

As well as the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra, Eric is commemorated in Saint Andrew’s Church (on the corner of Ann and Creek Streets in Brisbane City) on a brass plaque that lists 41 people who made the ultimate sacrifice in the First World War.
Select bibliography

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The Week (Brisbane) 29 November 1918 p22.


Information and photographs from family.

Written by Ian Carnell
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llest we forget