

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 107

JOHN MCKINNON **1894 - 1916**



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Corner Ann and Creek Streets
Brisbane QLD 4000
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Corporal John McKinnon

John ('Jack') McKinnon was a tall, strong farmer and sawyer from the hinterland of the Sunshine Coast north of Brisbane - a man 'well-liked and respected by all, nothing of cold feet or shirker about Jack'.

He enlisted on 19 July 1915 in Brisbane and was made a machine gunner. Later promoted to Corporal, Jack saw service in Egypt and France, and was killed in action at the Battle of Fromelles in July 1916.

His remains rest in the Rue-Petillon Military Cemetery, Fleurbaix, France (grave reference I. K. 31).

Early life and enlistment

Jack was born at Gordon Brook, NSW (on the Clarence River upstream from Grafton), on 15 December 1894. He was the eldest son of Alexander McKinnon, a farmer, and South African born Alice Gravener nee Atkins. Jack attended the Chatsworth Island Public School – still operating – not far from the mouth of the Clarence River.

By 1915 the family had relocated to Queensland, and on enlistment Jack gave his address as Obi Obi via Nambour. He was aged 20, 184cms tall, weighed 81.7kg, had brown eyes, dark hair, a fresh complexion, and his religion was Presbyterian. Initially Jack was placed with the machine gun component of the 31st Infantry Battalion.

In September Jack was given a farewell by Obi Obi and Mapleton residents in the Obi Obi Hall.

It was reported that:

'Having a good floor, good music, good singing and willing dancers, every one appeared to have a good time. On behalf of Mr McKinnon's many friends, Mr Slack presented him with a wristlet watch, expressing the hope that on his return from Europe he would not only be wearing a watch but also the V.C. Mr McKinnon thanked one and all for their kindness and good wishes.'



Obi Obi Hall. Built in 1913

Jack embarked from Melbourne on 9 November 1915 aboard the HMAT *Wandilla* A62.

Egypt

On arrival in Egypt in December 1915 the 31st Battalion was posted to the vast camp at Tel-el-Kebis. In early 1916 the 1st AIF underwent major re-organisation – one of the changes was to merge Battalion machine gun units into larger units under Brigade control. As part of this process, in early March 1916 Jack was placed in the 8th machine gun company, the machine gun company of the 8th Infantry Brigade, which was in turn part of the 5th Australian Division.

Late in March 1916 the 8th Brigade moved to a front line sector of the Suez Canal defences, about eight miles east of the Canal. They remained for two months, alternating between the front line and relief periods in Ferry Post on the Canal. On 15 April Jack was promoted to Corporal.

Despite some intelligence indicating attacks were imminent, nothing eventuated. The greatest challenges for the men were the limited supply of water, the increasingly scorching temperatures, and some raging winds.

Then in late May the 5th Division including the 8th Brigade started moving to Alexandria, from where they embarked for France. Jack boarded the *Tunisian* and arrived in Marseilles on 23 June 1916.

France

The 5th Division travelled by train up through France, and according to the Divisional History:

There may be more beautiful places in the world than the south of France, but few of the 5th Australian Division had seen them, or will see them. And after so many months of the Egyptian desert or the barren horror of the Gallipoli Peninsula, the revelation was the more startling, the charm the more potent. The beauty of the countryside went to the men's heads as its wine would have done. Thrilled and intoxicated by it, they crowded around the windows, laughing, cheering, and admiring, their spirits on the very crest of exuberance.

Eventually the 8th Brigade detrained in the north at Morbecque, east of Calais on 26 June 1916. The men were billeted in what was an agricultural area - often in barns or other outbuildings.

Jack was probably one of the many Australians who observed with interest the agricultural methods employed, initially thinking them primitive, but changing this view as they realised the good results achieved.

On 10 July 1916 the 5th Division including the 8th Brigade went into the front line. Within a few days it took part in the Battle of Fromelles, the first major battle on the Western Front in which Australians were involved.

Late in the afternoon of 19 July 1916 an attack was launched against a well placed and fortified German position, and highly effective German artillery and machine guns caused horrendous casualties. Some parts of the German trenches and beyond were captured - Jack was among those in the 8th machine gun company who reached the captured area in front of the 8th Brigade.

In his diary another member of the 8th machine gun company described taking a Vickers gun, tripod, ammunition boxes and belts across to the new front line:



The ground we covered was one mass of explosions and the shrapnel bursting above us, and flares continually going up lit the whole place as bright as daylight. Time after time I fell, got hooked up in the barb wire, or fell into a shell hole, but each time managed to scramble together and start again.

Then there was the desperate fighting to try to consolidate. Fierce enemy fire and counter attacks went on throughout the night and in the early hours the Australians were forced to withdraw. Jack was among the casualties in the early hours of 20 July, either in the attempt to hold ground or in the fighting during withdrawal.

There were nearly 2000 Australian dead and 3500 wounded – 5500 casualties in total out of the 7000 Australians who had been engaged in the attack.

Jack was buried in what was referred to as the Eton Hall Cemetery - now the Rue-Petillon Military Cemetery - at Fleurbaix. Chaplain FG Ward officiated at the burial.



**In Memory of
Corporal John McKinnon**

**8th Company Australian Machine Gun Corps
Australian Infantry, A.I.F.
who died age 21
on 20 July 1916**

Son of A McKinnon, of Obi Obi, via Nambour, Queensland.

Remembered with honour

RUE-PETILLON MILITARY CEMETERY, FLEURBAIX





Postscript

Jack's mother Alice wrote to the Army on 20 September 1916 asking to be sent their son's 'papers and effects, even the smallest thing, and can you tell me where he was buried?'. She sent a reminder on 30 October, and in December was advised of where he was buried, but nothing was said in that advice about the return of Jack's personal effects.

Alice was determined to pursue the question – she wrote courteously again on 13 August 1917 and 15 February 1918. A response on 20 February 1918 said that no personal effects had been received. Alice persisted and wrote yet again on 9 September 1918. This time the response was that:

In the circumstances of the present war, it is unfortunately not always possible to recover the personal effects of deceased soldiers.

In view of the length of time that has elapsed since your son's death it is not considered likely that any effects will now be received. However, in the event of any articles coming to hand later, they will be promptly forwarded to you.

On 27 September 1918, in conjunction with Arbor Day, four hoop pines were planted in Mapleton to perpetuate the memory of four men with local connections – including Jack McKinnon - who had made the ultimate sacrifice. Three of the trees still stand near the Mapleton community hall.



Jack was also commemorated on several of the district Honour Boards.



Relatives of Jack were members of the congregation of Saint Andrew's Church on the corner of Ann and Creek Streets in Brisbane, and Jack was included on an Honour Board and a brass plaque in that Church. Also listed on an Honour Board and the brass plaque – and for whom one of the Mapleton trees was also planted - is James John Logan (booklet no. 27).

On 21 November 1922 the Governor of Queensland visited Mapleton, where in addition to presenting medals to 28 local men and women who had served, he unveiled tablets on the tree guards of the four memorial trees.



Select bibliography

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Lest we forget