

# 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 2

## **ERNEST NORTHCROFT MERRINGTON 1876-1953**



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Corner Ann and Creek Streets  
Brisbane QLD 4000  
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## **Chaplain Colonel Rev Dr Ernest Merrington MA (Syd), PhD (Harvard)**

Born in Newcastle, New South Wales on 27 August 1876, second son of James Mayfield and Frances Maria (née Jenkins), Ernest Northcroft Merrington attended Sydney Boys' High School. At 16 he was apprenticed to a jeweller. On hearing the call to ministry he began studies at the University of Sydney in 1897 graduating BA two years later. He gained an MA in Philosophy while studying theology, was ordained in 1902 and graduated in 1903.

He married Flora Livingston at St Stephen's Church, Phillip Street, Sydney on 1 July 1903 and they embarked soon afterwards to enable Ernest to undertake post graduate study at Edinburgh and Harvard where he gained a PhD in 1905 the year he was called to be minister at Kiama in New South Wales. He served in that parish until 1908 and then at Haberfield before being called to Saint Andrew's in 1910. Ernest and Flora had three children – Agnes Edina, born in Edinburgh in 1904, Frances Flora born in Kiama in 1907 and Harvard Northcroft born at Toowong in 1911.

While at Saint Andrew's, Dr Merrington was active in the development of the University of Queensland and a prime mover in the founding of Emmanuel College, the first residential college within the University of Queensland. The one hymn Dr Merrington wrote for Saint Andrew's Jubilee in 1912, "God of eternity" is still sung throughout the world.

Rev Dr Merrington interrupted the service on the morning of Sunday 4 August 1914 to announce that Britain had declared war on Germany. Dr Merrington soon afterwards was serving as Senior Chaplain to the Australian and New Zealand Division, as well as the 1st Light Horse Brigade in Egypt and Gallipoli.



He wrote to his people at Saint Andrew's on 25 June 1915 from Gallipoli Peninsula, Turkey:

"Dear Friends,

Since writing my last letter to you, a great change has come over my position. I have now been at the Front more than six weeks, and have experienced the full and terrible meaning of war. With my comrades I have been in the danger zone and under fire all the time, sharing the rigours and perils of war...

"We landed under shrapnel fire on 12 May 12, and, after a day in reserve, proceeded to the trenches. I accompanied the men and have been living in a dug-out near my regiment all the time...

"We draw rations, all alike, and bivouac, sleeping on our blankets on the ground. It has been my privilege to live and work among our heroic soldiers, and to help some of them in their time of suffering, as well as to perform the last rites for the dead.

“The sights I have witnessed during this time of fierce strife I shall never forget; and the burials under fire and in darkness make an impression which I cannot describe. Our services on Sundays, with the Communion following, have been very precious.



*Chaplain Ernest N Merrington addressing a group of soldiers of the 1st Australian Light Horse during a religious service.*

“Imagine a deep gully with men lined along the ground on either side following the service reverently, while the voice of the chaplain is interrupted by the cracking and whizzing of bullets or the boom of artillery. Imagine further, the men kneeling around the communion table, made of two Red Cross boxes from the Dressing Station, while the little silver platter with bread and the little silver cup with wine are passed round by the chaplain, and eagerly received by our Christian lads...

“In conclusion, I have ascertained to the best of my ability, that all our young men from Saint Andrew’s are well, except those to whose relatives I have written, and for those dear ones my heart bleeds still. But ‘from the ground there blossoms red, Life that shall endless be’. Their death was most heroic, and more in value than any other life or death could be. I am glad to hear of the good work at St Andrew’s, and assure you that my thoughts and prayers are ever with you till we meet again.

Sincerely your Pastor,  
*Ernest N. Merrington*  
Chaplain to the Forces”<sup>1</sup>



*Divine Service for the 1st Australian Light Horse Brigade and other units, conducted by the Reverend EN Merrington in the Pope's Reserve Gully at Anzac.*

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<sup>1</sup> Copy of Dr Merrington’s letter dated 25 June 1915, held Saint Andrew’s Uniting Church Archives



*Gallipoli, Turkey, 1915. Chaplain Ernest Northcroft Merrington (right) conducting a communion service for members of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade at the "Apex". For an altar, Padre Merrington is using two biscuit boxes with a cloth spread over the top of them.*



*The Communion vessels used on Gallipoli by Chaplain Merrington, still used in Saint Andrew's Church on Anzac Day*

*Photo Philip Johnson*

On 6 August 1915 while Chaplain Merrington was still at Gallipoli, a fierce bombardment on the Turkish lines began from sea and land at 4.30 in the afternoon. He noted, "At 5.30 we saw the thrilling sight of Australians advancing through the dust and smoke towards Lone Pine trenches. They rose and fell as they came on, the drill of advancing attack in waves, and they reached the parapets of the enemy positions. There they clung like bees, just outside the hostile ridges. With my binoculars I could watch the battle from our high position on Pope's. We wondered at the delay; but the reason for it was afterwards revealed. The enemy trenches were heavily boarded over, and the trajectory from the ships was too flat to break up the timber, and the attacking force of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division could not readily find entrance. But ere long, the men began dropping in through holes in the covering, and we could see the flash of bayonets like knitting needles as they worked their way along the Lone Pine trenches... Men fell, wounded helped their fellows as they could, the Lone Pine victory was gained by nightfall, but at a heavy cost."<sup>2</sup>

The next day a new push into other trenches was attempted. Chaplain Merrington entered the fire trenches with a first aid kit. He pulled wounded men out on stretchers. That raid failed and retreat was ordered. He went to the beach to visit and tend the wounded.

"Many great friends were there," he said, "and as I spoke to them words of comfort and handed out cocoa and cigarettes, I felt the horror of war as perhaps I had not realised it previously, even when burying scores of dead."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Memoirs*, (unpublished), Rev Dr Ernest N Merrington, page 89

<sup>3</sup> *Memoirs*, page 90



*The first funeral service of the Australian Light Horsemen in Egypt being conducted by the Chaplain the Reverend E N Merrington at the Cairo Protestant Cemetery.*

Dr Merrington conducted four services each Sunday at Gallipoli. "I had innumerable narrow escapes from bullets, bombs and shells. Walking from place to place as I did was more dangerous than staying in trench or dugout."<sup>4</sup>

Five and a half months after landing and with his health suffering, including malarial fever and rheumatism, Chaplain Merrington was given permission to leave and return to Australia. On 27 October, he walked to the landing-stage in morning darkness. "The familiar sounds of bullets could be heard," he said afterwards, "and I think for almost the only time I was over there I felt some real fear. What if one of those bullets found its mark now on the eve of departure! It would be just too bad."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Memoirs*, page 95

<sup>5</sup> *Memoirs*, page 96

Rev Dr Merrington returned to Australia early in 1916. In Brisbane he was elected to the committee of the Returned Soldiers' Association, one of the first to be started in Australia.

He received notices from Army Headquarters of fatal casualties in order for him to break the news to next-of-kin in Brisbane and suburbs. Letters would come in the morning containing the names and particulars for Dr Merrington to follow up with the heartbreaking duty of informing the relatives of the sad tidings from the Front.

His parish work went on and grew; new appointments were made at Emmanuel College. Experiencing heavy strain during those early months after his return to Brisbane, Ernest with Flora and their children left their home at Hill End for a rest at Coolangatta. "The seaside change was however only partially beneficial,"<sup>6</sup> he said, as he did not have the opportunity to escape the claims upon his time and attention. The war and military training, recruiting and hospital visitation were very live issues and his recent service and senior rank meant he was deeply involved.

The first Anzac Day was observed with solemn parades and services in Saint Andrew's and other churches while a public meeting was also held in the evening at the Exhibition Hall. He took his turn at Camp Services on Sunday mornings at Chermside, Enoggera and other centres. And in addition to all these duties, Rev Dr Ernest Merrington was elected to be Moderator of the Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Queensland in 1916-17.

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<sup>6</sup> *Memoirs*, page 98

He served again as Senior Chaplain in France in 1918. Reflecting years later, he wrote of his work at the Australian Infantry Base Depot at Le Havre, "One of the important features of our life and work at the Depot was the farewelling of the drafts of men leaving for the front line. We gathered as many as possible in the Cinema Hut and Gault (another chaplain) had them singing community songs and hymns. The other Protestant Denominational groups were then invited to remain for a brief communion service. We took particulars of their names, units and home addresses and later wrote to their next-of-kin informing them that so-and-so had taken part in the communion service before proceeding to the front line.

"We knew that many of the lads would become casualties and our messages were very comforting to the relatives in Australia. During my first week the drafts going out were 600, 120, 30, 120 and 850, on successive days. Big events were in preparation near Amiens which had been threatened by the German advance, and within a month we were to learn of the mighty forward drive of the Australians under Sir John Monash from Villers-Brettoneux, so gallantly held by the Army until the time came for the beginning of the end for our foes. When the men were marching out in full kit from our Base we used to give them comforts and reading matter..."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> *Memoirs*, page 112

*A chaplain, Reverend Ernest Northcroft Merrington, conducting the funeral service of an Australian soldier in France. A military band is preparing to play at right, and an Australian flag is draped over the coffin on the artillery wagon at centre*



In his memoirs, Padre Merrington refers to the Australian flag given to him by the women of Saint Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Brisbane. "On 11<sup>th</sup> November came the great news for which everybody was waiting: 'The Armistice has been signed.'

"The commandant borrowed my Australian flag, which had been given to me by the ladies of my Church, and it proudly flew over the largest depot of Australian soldiers in France at 11 o'clock on that eventful day. (On my return to Brisbane I presented it to Emmanuel College). After the news was confirmed I went into town and saw and heard the signs of remembered bereavement by widows in black, and thankfulness overcoming memories of tragic sufferings in the past. At night the crowds went mad with delight. I was spotted and placed in the centre of a huge ring of dancing soldiers, Waacs and French lads and lasses. Everybody shook hands and sang songs of rejoicing. The War was over. It was Victory Day."<sup>8</sup>

Dr Merrington resumed his duties at Saint Andrew's Brisbane on 1 August 1919. He officiated at the celebration of the church's diamond jubilee in 1922 along with the dedication of the mural brass with its solemn list of 41 names of soldiers who paid the supreme sacrifice, the honour rolls and the war memorial stained glass windows in the northern wall.

In 1923 he was called to be minister of the First Presbyterian Church, Dunedin, New Zealand. He was appointed Master of Knox College, University of Otago in 1929. He served there until 1941 when he was called to be minister of Seatoun Presbyterian Church in Wellington. He retired in 1945 and died in Wellington in 1953.

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<sup>8</sup> *Memoirs*, page 116

A close friend and colleague of Dr Merrington, Rev Professor S F Hunter delivered occasional memorial addresses in Ernest Merrington's honour at First Church, Dunedin and Knox College, University of Otago in 1955.<sup>9</sup> He said it was fitting we should "praise famous men through whom the Lord has wrought great glory".<sup>10</sup> He included Dr Merrington among such men. The Merrington Anzac Memorial Peace Chapel at Saint Andrew's Uniting Church also honours Chaplain Colonel Merrington, a courageous and patriotic Australian who gave himself freely to the service of the Church and to all people, in war and in peace.



*Four chaplains, accompanied by two Egyptian guides, mounted on donkeys and camels at the base of a pyramid at Giza. Wearing a slouch hat, second from right, is Chaplain Ernest Northcroft Merrington, of the 1st Light Horse Brigade, and seated third from right is Chaplain Alfred Charles Plane.*

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Fess Hunter, "In Memoriam – Dr E N Merrington", *Memoirs*, Appendices 3 & 4, 1955

<sup>10</sup> Sirach 44: 1 - 4

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Compiled by N E Adsett, Brisbane, November 2014



*Lest we forget*