

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 195

GEORGE MAURICE TRAVERS

1881–1946



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Corner Ann and Creek Streets
Brisbane QLD 4000
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Lieutenant George Maurice Travers MC

English-born George Maurice Travers was a married farmer and fruiterer who enlisted in January 1916 and served with notable bravery as a Lieutenant in the 52nd Infantry Battalion. He distinguished himself at Broodseinde Ridge in October 1917, was awarded the Military Cross for his courage and leadership in the desperate but successful defence of Dernancourt in early April 1918, and later that month was wounded during the successful re-taking of the village of Villers-Bretonneux.

He also served in the Second World War as a Corporal in the Australian Army Ordinance Corps in Brisbane 1940-1943. Discharged for medical reasons, he attempted to return to farming but died in Tamworth in 1946, aged 66.

Early life

George was born to William, a farmer and Sarah (née King) near Lovington in Somerset on 18 January 1881. Details on his activities when young are scanty, but on his 1916 enlistment form in responding to the question on previous military experience he wrote "6 years S. African War – S.A. Police". Presumably he then left South Africa because in June 1908 he married Kitty (also given as Kate or Katie in some documents) King in Cochrane, Alberta, Canada. She too was of Somerset origins, having been born in Wasley, Somerset around 1885. In 1901 she and a sister were assisting their mother with laundry work.

Kitty and George had a farm in Canada but for reasons not known, they arrived in Queensland in early 1915. In November of that year Edwin, the youngest of their three boys, died.

At that time the family was living in Bourbong Street, Bundaberg, with George being described as a fruiterer and there being some connection to the Palace Café.

Enlistment

George gave his occupation as farmer when he enlisted in Brisbane on 1 January 1916, and his religion as Church of England. His physical description was 166.4cms in height, solidly built at 81.7kg in weight, with a fair complexion, blue eyes and fair hair. As his experience and qualities became clear he was promoted through the ranks and then commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in November 1916. The next month he embarked with the 8th reinforcements for the 52nd Infantry Battalion in Sydney aboard the HMAT *Demosthenes* A64 – leaving behind a pregnant Kitty and his two young sons Denvers and Cecil.

Broodseinde Ridge

Soon after being taken on strength with the 52nd Battalion in September 1917, George was at Broodseinde Ridge, where his actions lead to the following recommendation:

During a heavy bombardment, a shell burst about 6 feet from him killing 3 men and wounding another, also setting fire to a Lewis Machine Gun, the fire spread and men's clothes had caught when 2/Lieutenant TRAVERS smothered it with earth. He then removed two dead men who were lying on a wounded man with a smashed knee, and no stretcher bearers being available, he carried the wounded man to a place of safety.

Later in the night, whilst in charge of a wiring party in front of No.3 Post, by his cheeriness under a heavy barrage fire, he set a fine example to all and kept his party working until the task was completed. He then took charge of a Lewis Gun Post in a trench half filled with water and which had been

badly knocked about by enemy shell fire, remaining there until it was quite clear that the reported attack by the enemy was not going to be delivered.

An award was not approved - not an uncommon decision - but perhaps there was some recognition in his promotion to Lieutenant on 13 November 1917, made effective from 1 October 1917.

Dernancourt

In the Spring of 1918 the German Army made strenuous and major assaults aimed at achieving decisive breaches of the Allied lines.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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The Battlefield at Dernancourt. May 1918

This time George's actions led to the award of the Military Cross, based on the following recommendation:



For gallantry and devotion to duty whilst in command of a platoon, and later when he took command of an adjoining Coy. after the O.C. had been wounded, during the operations near DERNANCOURT on 5th April, 1918. Under very heavy shell fire during the earlier hours of the day, and later when subjected to severe Machine Gun fire, this

Officer moved about amongst his men controlling and directing their fire, and inspiring all those under him with confidence. When the exposed flank of his Coy. was suffering from heavy enfilading M.G. fire during the afternoon, Lieut. TRAVERS handled his command, which included a number of details of other units, in a masterly manner, steadying them during the Withdrawal from the railway to the support trenches, and then, when the counter-attack against the enemy had developed, he led his men back to their original position and assisted in bringing heavy fire to bear on the enemy falling back on DERNANCOURT.

Captain Baron von Richthofen's death



Baron von Richthofen



His plane

Late on the morning of 21 April 1918 George was very close to where the famous German flying ace Captain Baron von Richthofen – referred to as the 'Red Baron' because of his preferred plane colour - was shot down. George went over to the wreckage with other officers and two days later completed a report on the incident, the central part of which was:

I was lying on the ground accompanied by my runner about 50 yards from Brigade H.Q. setting my map and having a general look around with my glasses. I heard a plane or planes coming at a tremendous pace from the direction of 26 central, a Vickers Gun was firing from a spot situated at J.25.a.8.9. the first plane, which came into view, was one of our own and less than 20 paces behind was an enemy plane painted red, the red plane was overhauling our plane fast

and both were flying so low that they almost crashed into the trees at the top of the hill almost directly over the spot where I was lying; the enemy plane swerved to the right so suddenly that it seemed almost to turn over, our plane went straight on, from that moment the enemy plane was quite out of control and did a wild circle and dashed towards J.19.b.3.4. I went over with other officers and had a look at the plane and also the driver, who was dead.

Over the years there has been debate about who fired the shot that was fatal for the Red Baron – with claims made for various Australian, Canadian and British servicemen – but on all the evidence now available it is beyond reasonable argument that the shot came from the ground, leaving the two claims with any real credibility as that for Vickers Gunner Sergeant CB Popkin or that for Lewis Gunners WJ Evans and R Buie.

George Travers' view in his report is unequivocal: 'The Vickers gun mentioned was the only Gun firing at the time the driver first lost control of his machine. I made enquiries and found the gun was handled by No. 424 Sergt. Cedric Basset POPKIN, 24th Aust. Machine Gun Company.'



As a 'souvenir' George took 'one of the big black crosses, about 4ft by 4ft, painted on the red paint which was over the fabric of his plane'. Later he gave this to the Australian War Records Section - today it is held by the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

Villers-Bretonneux

Despite holding Villers-Bretonneux and Dernancourt in late March and early April 1918, later in April the Australians were called on to re-take Villers-Bretonneux after the Germans overwhelmed tired British troops there.

In a successful night attack on 24-25 April the Australians succeeded – but paid a significant price. George was one of the 15 officers who led the 52nd men forward, and of those officers four were killed or died of wounds, with George being among seven other officers who were wounded in the attack.

Along with George's name, the Honour Boards in Saint Andrew's Uniting Church in the Brisbane CBD list three others who took part in that night attack, and two of these were wounded – Private WM Kyle (booklet no.3) and Corporal Chas Soutar (booklet no.187). Only (then Lance Corporal) AC Carvosso (booklet no.20) survived unscathed - or at least didn't need to be admitted to a Casualty Clearing Station.

Final WW1 service

George's severe wounds were in his left arm, neck and left side. He was invalided to the UK and admitted to the 3rd London General Hospital in Wandsworth, during which time some AIF unpopular re-organisations saw the 52nd Battalion 'nominally withdrawn' (avoiding the term 'disbandment' because of the sensitivities) and George was transferred to the 49th Infantry Battalion. Declared fit again in July, George proceeded to France where he was formally taken on strength with the 49th Battalion, but then seconded to the Australian Corps School for a month. From 23 September 1918 he was back with the 49th and the Armistice came into effect on 11 November of that year.

A week after Armistice Day George was seconded to the 13th Light Trench Mortar Battery and that remained the case for four months. In March 1919 he was formally recorded against the establishment of the War Records unit - but went on leave with pay and subsistence from 1 April to 11 October to study cheese manufacture (a number of Australians undertook vocational studies and experience while waiting for repatriation to Australia).

George left on the HMAT *Nestor* A71 on 1 November 1919 and once he was back in Australia his appointment was formally terminated on 31 January 1920.

Post-war

In 1920 George took up a dairy farm under the *Closer Settlement Act (NSW) 1904* at Wyndham (in the Eden district of NSW). His family of five now included a daughter, Phyllis, as well as sons Denvers and Cecil. The difficulties that confronted soldier settlers included the Australian climate and the markets – from 1920 prices in the UK for dairy products kept falling, and much of Australia suffered serious drought 1922-23 and 1926-29. At some point (the exact timing and circumstances aren't known to their descendants) George left his family, perhaps to try and find some paid work, and didn't return. They never heard from him again, a matter of great sadness to (at least) the children throughout their lives.

Clearly Kitty didn't lack resilience or determination – she made a success of the dairy farm at Wyndham, and in 1931 obtained a divorce from George due to desertion. In later years she had a grocery store in the coastal town of Merimbula, built retail property there, and was the Inaugural President of the Ladies Bowling Club.

George seems to have moved to Yandina, Queensland - also the place of residence for Norma Maude Bridge (who had been born in Baan Baa, NSW to Alfred John Bridge, a farmer and Caroline Edna née Francis). The couple married in the Mission Hall, Brunswick Street, Brisbane in December 1934 according to the rites of the Joyful News Mission. The couple and their growing family - three sons (Colin, Mervyn, Maurice) and two daughters (Norma and Pamela) - seem to have subsequently spent time in Narrandera, NSW and then Toowoomba in Queensland.

World War 2



Stating that he was 11 years younger than his actual age, George enlisted in December 1940, giving his occupation as clerk, and his address as Station Road, Sandgate. He was placed in the Australian Army Ordnance Corps that month and worked at the depot in the Brisbane suburb of Gaythorne, being promoted to Acting Corporal in November 1941.

During this time Norma and the children stayed in Wendorah, Curlewis, NSW - presumably with family. George's health declined and in March 1943 he was assessed as having kidney problems - as a result he was discharged the following month.

He is then listed as a farmer at Oakhampton, Upper Manilla, Mandowah Shire, NSW. However, his health cannot have been good and his death certificate shows that he died on 26 October 1946 in Tamworth Base Hospital.

The next day his remains were buried in the General Cemetery, West Tamworth with Church of England rites (although the grave and headstone location is now apparently in the Presbyterian section, near the row B21/15 sign).



Tamworth Cemetery

Photo by Graeme Carnell

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Buderim

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Lest we forget