

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 87

CYRIL NORMAN WOOD 1893—1969



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Corner Ann and Creek Streets
Brisbane QLD 4000
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2nd Lieutenant Cyril Norman Wood

Cyril Norman Wood, a 21 years old station hand when he enlisted in Longreach, served at Gallipoli and then in Egypt and the Sinai Desert with the 5th Australian Light Horse Regiment of the 1st AIF. On the Gallipoli Peninsula he was among the last to leave when the Anzacs evacuated in December 1915.

Severely wounded in August 1916 in the Battle of Bir-el-Abd in the Sinai Desert, Cyril was fortunate to survive – but the post-war years were very difficult for him. After some initial recovery he was a Captain in the Citizen Military Forces, and had some prominence as the official informant in various court cases, but the health effects of his injury brought that to an end early in 1920, and made employment hard to sustain in the 1920s and part of the 1930s. Following some improvement in his symptoms from the mid-1930s, he worked for the Postmaster-General's Department (PMG) 1939-1956.

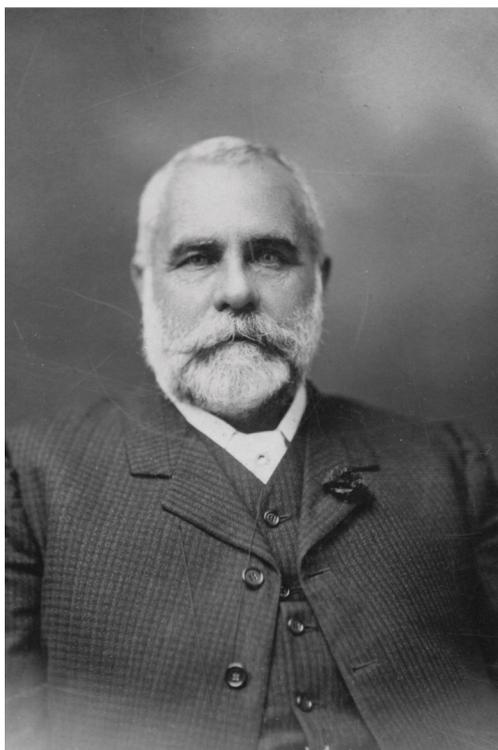
Cyril's brother Maurice Christopher served as a Lieutenant in the 41st Australian Infantry Battalion and is the subject of booklet no. 203.

Family background

Cyril was born in Brisbane on 13 September 1893, the fourth and youngest son of Charles Frederick and Ellen Elizabeth (née Dodwell) Wood. Cyril's parents were English-born, and married in St Mary's Church, Kangaroo Point, Brisbane in January 1886. At that point Charles was a farmer at Tingalpa - later he owned and operated a steam laundry.

The family of six lived in *Amersham* on the corner of Bradley Street and Gregory Terrace, Spring Hill, and attended Saint

Andrew's Presbyterian Church on the corner of Ann and Creek Streets in Brisbane, where Charles was a member of the Board of Management.



*Cyril's father
Charles Frederick Wood*



*The family home Amersham on the corner
of Bradley Street and Gregory Terrace, Spring Hill.*



"Four Jolly Tars"

The Wood brothers, left to right, Theo, Cyril, Maurice and Jack



Cyril (left) with his mother Ellen and brother, Maurice

The two eldest brothers – Charles Theodore and Jack Stephenson – won State Scholarships and attended the Brisbane Grammar School. Despite a hearing impairment, Theo worked as a journalist, qualified as a barrister and had a career with the Queensland Parliamentary Reporting Service, rising to be the Chief Reporter 1933-1954. Jack pursued a career as an accountant.

Enlistment

When Cyril enlisted in Longreach on 12 November 1914 his occupation was station hand. He was aged 21, 5'5" (166cms) tall, had brown eyes and dark brown hair, a dark complexion, and weighed 129 pounds (58.6 kg). He was appointed to 'A' Squadron in the 5th Light Horse Regiment, and was among those who embarked on HMAT *Persic* A34 in Sydney on 21 December 1914, arriving in Egypt on 1 February 1915.

Gallipoli

The 5th Light Horse were landed at Gallipoli on 20 May 1915 to fight as infantry, and from late June occupied a position on the right flank, from the beach to Machine Gun Ridge, including Chatham's Post, where Cyril's Squadron had its dugouts. There was no rest, with sapping or tunnelling continually going on, the arduous work of carrying rations and water up from the beach, as well as night patrols and occasional raids. Enemy artillery shelling was frequent. The men were pressed to their limits and sometimes beyond, in unhealthy conditions with poor food and sanitation, limited water, multitudinous flies and disease prevalent.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Chatham's Post, looking back from Wilson's Lookout. These were among the positions held by the 5th Light horse at Gallipoli.



Cyril was promoted to Lance Corporal on 9 August, but succumbed to dysentery on 20 August and was sent to hospital in Heliopolis, Egypt, where he was also diagnosed with jaundice and catarrh. He re-joined the 5th at Gallipoli on 14 November.

*Cyril in 1916
at the time of his promotion ⁷
(photo courtesy of the family)*

A few days earlier the 5th had advanced their position to Wilson's Lookout on Harris Ridge, but the Lookout was a major challenge to hold. Enemy trenches were only 22 yards away – according to the Regimental history, broomstick bombs 'rained upon us day and night' – and the location was very exposed to enemy artillery and machine guns.

On 26 November 1915 the 5th was shifted to Ryrie's Post and was there – in snow and bitter cold - until the discrete evacuation of the Peninsula 18-20 December 1915. Various ploys were adopted by the Anzacs to try to deceive the Turks in the lead up to the evacuation, which was carefully staged over two nights. Cyril, by now promoted to Corporal, was in the small group of 28 in the 5th who stayed until the very last.

The general expectation was that a large part of the rear-guard would be killed or captured. Official historian Charles Bean recorded that from late on the night of 19 December, only 1500 men in total were spread along the Anzac frontline of 11 000 metres, with no hope of impeding any sort of serious attack. The tension for the rear-guard stretched over the next four and a half hours. In the event, no Turkish attack occurred and they got off safely in the early hours of the morning of 20 December, but it must have taken titanium-strength nerves.



Egypt and The Sinai

The 5th returned to Egypt and on 28 December 1915 Cyril was made a temporary Sergeant. On 3 February 1916 he was promoted to Lance Sergeant and then Sergeant on 21 February. The 5th was quartered at Dueidar from April to August 1916 – and despite extreme heat, extensive patrols and reconnaissance were undertaken. On 22 July 1916 Cyril was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant.

A Turkish attack on Romani was unsuccessful and the retreating force was tracked by Allied forces looking for a chance to attack. They did so on 9 August 1916 near Katia, despite the Turkish force being twice as large, holding well-constructed trenches and redoubts, and supported by mountain artillery and howitzers.

In the fighting – known as the battle of Bir-el-Abd - Cyril suffered a severe head wound and fractured skull from a shell explosion. He was noted as dangerously ill – with treatment involving ‘Flap made and holes in skull joined; metal and loose bone removed’ - and his parents were alerted, but remarkably the worst did not eventuate.

Return to Australia

Cyril was sent back to Australia on HMAT *Ascanius* A11 and arrived in Melbourne on 29 September 1916. He was assessed as unfit for active service and totally unfit for work for at least three months, and his AIF commission was formally terminated with effect from 25 October 1916.

Later he was appointed as a Captain in the Citizen Military Forces (CMF), and was an intelligence officer in the 1st Military District (which was Queensland) from 1917 to March 1920.

On 18 October 1917 Cyril married Brisbane-born Nesta Muriel Harkness, the daughter of a hide and skin expert, James McNaught Harkness and his wife Flora née Faulkner. The wedding took place in St Colomb's Church (Church of England) in Clayfield, and the couple lived at Denham Street, Clayfield in a house Cyril named Bir-el-Abd.

Cyril and Nesta had one son in 1919 – Kenneth Ronald – who enlisted in the RAAF in the Second World War, was captured by the Japanese, and was presumed dead after a Japanese transport was torpedoed by an American ship in September 1944. In a sad parallel, one of Cyril's nephews – Ian Milne Wood, the second son of Jack – joined the Canadian Air Force in World War 2 and was subsequently posted missing in action in Europe in 1943 and presumed dead.

Combat in the courts

As a Captain in the CMF 1917-19, Cyril had some public profile as the 'official complainant' in a number of court cases. After the complaint, police would investigate, lay charges if justified, and Cyril would sometimes be called to give evidence in court.

The cases reported in the newspapers included charges against individuals for making statements likely to prejudice recruiting, exhibiting a red flag in contravention of War Precautions regulations, misrepresenting themselves as a returned serviceman, illegally wearing an AIF uniform, and wearing a military medal that had not been awarded to them.

Cyril was the official complainant in two particularly prominent cases at the time. One concerned a charge of prejudicing recruitment against the then Queensland Premier, T J Ryan. The second involved Defence documents stolen from the intelligence unit in Brisbane and an attempt to defraud.

Ryan conscription case

Ryan was a leading opponent of conscription. During the second conscription referendum campaign in 1917, some public statements by Ryan that he also repeated in Parliament, were controversially censored by the Commonwealth. Cyril wasn't involved with the censorship, but was the formal complainant alleging that on 28 November 1917 Ryan 'did verbally make a false statement of fact of a kind likely to affect the judgement of electors in relation to their vote at the said Referendum namely a statement to the effect that 109 000 men are left for the purposes of reinforcements'.

The criminal charge was heard in the police court the following week. The Commonwealth case was weak, seeking to rely on figures from General Legge that there were only 21 050 men available as reinforcements. These had been put into the public domain on 22 November 1917.

However, figures used in Ryan's calculations were similar to ones publicly stated earlier by the Minister for Defence and the Assistant Minister for Defence (prior to the release of General Legge's estimates). The Commonwealth case also looked rushed, and Cyril and General Legge had an uncomfortable time in the witness box. Given the criminal standard of proof and confusion over the statistics, the magistrate probably had little difficulty in deciding to dismiss the case.

Stolen documents/fraud case

The stolen documents case was against a solicitor, Phillip Holzberger and Johannes Tilaanus, a returned serviceman employed as a translator of German in the intelligence section at Victoria Barracks, Brisbane.

They were charged in December 1919 with conspiring to steal correspondence held by the intelligence section between the German Consul in Brisbane, the German Consul-General in Sydney and the German Imperial Government, and then seeking to defraud the wife of the former German Consul, Dr Eugene Hirschfeld. In offering to sell her the documents, they suggested that the material would assist her husband, then in detention, to fight deportation from Australia. She reported this approach to the authorities and Tilanus and Holzberger were charged. Tilanus pleaded guilty and Holzberger was found guilty after a trial in which Cyril gave convincing evidence.

Later years

Cyril was discharged from the CMF in early 1920, suffering headaches and giddiness which were not relieved by drugs. He



was sent to Sydney for an operation in April 1920 but after this was also subject to seizures which would come on without warning, and during which he could suffer injuries.

A photo of Cyril in about 1940, the scars of his head wound still visible.

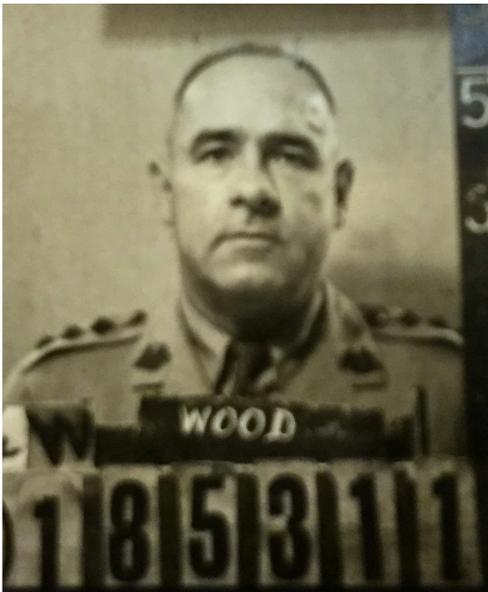
His repatriation files reveal that the 1920s were particularly difficult as he went through periods of hospitalisation and treatment in Sydney, including further surgery on his wound site, and fluctuations in the severity of his symptoms. Employment was sporadic as employers would come to realise the extent of his health problems and terminate his employment – in 1924 he had some temporary work with Customs, in 1925 he managed some part-time work as a commercial traveller, and he did a little work as a mechanic.

Work was close to impossible for Cyril to find during the Great Depression. His work efforts in the first half of the 1930s included supervising the transfer of stock from Townsville to New Guinea for four and a half months, and some poker work (decorating wood or leather by burning a design with a heated metal point).

His marriage relationship with Nesta ended in the 1920s, although they did not divorce and she continued to be allocated part of the repatriation financial assistance for which he was eligible. From the middle of 1928 he lived in a de facto relationship with Lilian May Giess, who became known as 'Mrs Wood'.

In the middle of the 1930s Cyril's seizures essentially ceased, and he seems to have had some work as a commercial traveller. In Brisbane he and Lilian built a house in Pine Street, Newmarket, and in August 1939 Cyril joined the Postmaster-General's Department (PMG), working as a stores assistant in the engineering branch in Brisbane.

During the Second World War he had a period of full-time duty (as adjutant at the Grovely and Redbank training camps and in



*Cyril in 1940
Serving in Brisbane
during World War II*

charge of Northern Command administrative staff in Brisbane) with the rank of Temporary Captain from 16 July 1940 and then Temporary Major from 30 March 1942 until 8 November 1942.

Cyril then returned to his position in the PMG and remained there until headaches and other health issues made work impossible from late 1956. He left the PMG in 1957 and was granted a Totally and Permanently Incapacitated (TPI) pension.

In retirement Cyril lived in Loder Street, Labrador, at the northern end of the Gold Coast. When his first wife Nesta died in 1969 he married Lilian, and on 11 December of that year Cyril died, aged 76. He donated his body to the School of Anatomy at the University of Queensland - later his remains were cremated at the Albany Creek Crematorium in October 1971.

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Buderim

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Lest we forget