

# Percy William Steel

By Vicki Purnell

At 51 years of age, Percy William Steel (Service Number 1140)<sup>1</sup> served 4 months in Egypt during World War 1 as a member of the 4<sup>th</sup> Squadron of the 1st Australian Remount Unit.<sup>2</sup> Percy's official service record doesn't document any incidents of a remarkable or noteworthy nature. However, closer inspection of the events leading up to and following his war time service primarily through the conduit of his own writings paint a very different picture. Percy's story is one of determination, stoicism, service to the community, staunch patriotism and heartbreak that impacted the family patriarch until his dying day.



Figure 1, Vicki Purnell, *Percy Steel*, 2017, Digital Copy of Photo, Private Collection

Percival (Percy) Steel was born on the 28 November 1864,<sup>3</sup> the eldest of eleven children born to John and Frances Steel. Originally from England, the Steel family were early settlers of the Falmouth region on the East Coast of Tasmania. Aged 13, Percy commenced two years of education at the elite Horton College near Ross.<sup>4</sup> Leaving school, he honed his extensive farming skills on local family holdings as well

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<sup>1</sup> Service Record of Percy William Steel, p. 1, B2455, National Archives of Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Service Record of Percy William Steel, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Birth Certificate of (Given Name Not Recorded) Steel, born 28 November 1864, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, RGD 37/1/50, No 37.

<sup>4</sup> 'Horton College', *The Mercury*, 8 July 1937, p. 15.

as in the Wimmera district in Victoria.<sup>5</sup> He was listed in 1902 as having a retail butchery business at Lottah.<sup>6</sup>

Percy married Jessie Johnston on 21 January 1891<sup>7</sup> and their son Roy was born in 1892<sup>8</sup> but passed away just days after his birth.<sup>9</sup> They had eight more children, Gordon, Thelma, Stewart, Norman<sup>10</sup>, Alan, Mabel, Eleanor and Hector.<sup>11</sup>

Percy entered public life in June 1898 when he was elected to the Gould's Country Road Trust.<sup>12</sup> In 1908, as one of the founders of the Local Government System in Tasmania, he was appointed inaugural Warden of the Portland Municipality and by virtue of that position was made an honorary recruiting officer upon the outbreak of World War 1. With the tide of patriotism sweeping Australia as described by Gammage,<sup>13</sup> Percy was quick to pen the first of what would be many contributions to newspapers over the ensuing years. In his article titled "The Tenor of Our Times,"<sup>14</sup> he urged that "we respond to that call in which the impulses of the heart demand the actions of our hands."

With his father's very active recruiting duties and strong patriotism it is not surprising that Gordon was the first of Percy's sons to enlist in September 1914 as a member of the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade<sup>15</sup> which landed at Gallipoli.<sup>16</sup> He was followed in March 1915 by his 15 year old brother, Alan, who enlisted in the Royal

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<sup>5</sup> 'Wardens of North Eastern District', *North-Eastern Advertiser*, 11 November 1932, p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> Findmypast, 'Tasmania Post Office Directory 1901' (Wise), Accessed 23 April 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Marriage Certificate of Jessie Johnston and Percy Steel, married 21 January 1891, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, RGD 33/1/42, No 439.

<sup>8</sup> Birth Certificate of Roy Steel, born 10 January 1892, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, RGD 33/1/74, No 1946

<sup>9</sup> Death Certificate of Roy Steel, died 13 January 1892, Tasmanian Archive and Heritage Office, RGD 35/1/61, No 586

<sup>10</sup> Family Search, Birth Certificates for Alan Steel, Mabel Steel, Eleanor Steel, Hector Steel, Australia, Tasmania, Civil Registration of Births, 1899-1912, The Tasmania Department of Justice, Hobart, Accessed 23 April 2017

<sup>11</sup> Birth Certificates of Gordon Steel, Thelma Steel, Stewart Steel, Norman Steel, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages, TAHO, RGD33/1/76 no 2017, RGD33/1/80 no 2005, RGD33/1/82 no 1995, RGD33/1/86 no 1995

<sup>12</sup> 'Gould's Country Road Trust', *The Mercury*, 24 June 1898, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years Australian: Soldiers in the Great War*, Canberra, Australian National University Press, 1974, p. 4.

<sup>14</sup> 'The Tenor of The Times', *North-Eastern Advertiser*, 14 August 1914, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Service Record of Gordon Malcom Steel, p. 1, B2455, National Archives of Australia

<sup>16</sup> Service Record of Gordon Malcom Steel, p. 23

Australian Navy.<sup>17</sup> Alan joined the HMAS Tingira, a dedicated training vessel for boys.<sup>18</sup>

Percy was proactive in his writings to the print media at the time.<sup>19</sup> <sup>20</sup> His poetry and prose articles encouraged young men to not “stay at home and rust when your country calls, and the causes of humanity tremble; but hopefully smile in assurance of a triumphant issue.” <sup>21</sup>

In early September 1915, the Ministry of Defence announced the formation of two Remount Units with specialist knowledge of horses and charged with the task of caring for horses and mules of the Light Horse Regiments based in Egypt.<sup>22</sup> With eligibility criteria relaxed and the maximum age limit lifted to 50, Percy seized the opportunity to enlist on 19 October 1915.<sup>23</sup> Warden of the Portland Municipality at the time, he also occupied the roles of Justice of the Peace, Coroner and Special Magistrate.<sup>24</sup> He initially reported to the Claremont Army Camp and undertook further training at the Maribyrnong Remount depot in Victoria. The 4 squadrons of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Remount and 2 squadrons of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Remount Units embarked from Melbourne on board the HMAS Orsova A67 on 12 November 1915.<sup>25</sup> The voyage to Egypt was incident free with the ship arriving at Suez on 8 December 1915. Disembarking on 9 December, the troops travelled by train to camp at Zeitoun, a district of Cairo, before marching 16 miles to Maadi to form a depot.<sup>26</sup>

Percy penned a letter on 3 March 1916 to the readers of North-Eastern Advertiser in which he not only describes the surroundings but also praises the men of the Remount Units “whose knowledge of equine ways would not play second fiddle to any such equal numbers hailing from any other land.” <sup>27</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Service Record of Alan James Steel, p. 1, A6770, National Archives of Australia

<sup>18</sup> Navy' History' <http://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/tingira-boys-part-4>, Accessed 24 April 2017.

<sup>19</sup> 'Anti German Union', *Daily Telegraph*, 5 June 1915, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> 'Australia's Patriotism-Response to the Nation's Call', *Daily Telegraph*, 13 February 1915, p. 11

<sup>21</sup> 'Enlist', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 June 1915, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Australian Remount Depot Unit Diary, AWM4 28/1/1, September 1915. P. 1.

<sup>23</sup> Service Record of Percy William Steel, p. 1.

<sup>24</sup> 'Personal', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 November 1915, p. 4.

<sup>25</sup> Australian Remount Depot Unit Diary, p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> Australian Remount Depot Unit Diary, p. 5.

<sup>27</sup> 'With the Australians in Egypt', *North-Eastern Advertiser*, 18 April 1916, p 3.

In early March 1916 Percy met up with his son Gordon in Maadi. Gordon was returning to his unit after spending many months in England convalescing from wounds he received in Gallipoli.<sup>28</sup> Coinciding with Percy's arrival in Egypt, the decision was made to evacuate troops from Gallipoli and consequently the full contingent of 2 Remount Units was no longer needed to care for the horses.

With the disbandment and reorganisation of the remount units and due to his age, Percy's service was no longer required and he departed for Suez on 22 April 1916.<sup>29</sup> Percy returned home on board the HMAT Seang Bee A48<sup>30</sup> arriving 31 May 1916. He was discharged on 17 June 1916<sup>31</sup> and almost immediately was appointed Recruiting Sergeant at Penguin on Tasmania's North West.<sup>32</sup> In August, while wife Jessie was travelling to join Percy<sup>33</sup> she received the news that Gordon had been killed in action at Mouquet Farm in France.<sup>34</sup>

With enlistment numbers dropping and the conscription debate raging within Australia at the time, Percy took the opportunity to put his strong views into words and have them published.<sup>35</sup> <sup>36</sup> Percy unhesitatingly again enlisted for active service on 8 January 1917.<sup>37</sup> He travelled to Claremont with his 18 year old son Norman<sup>38</sup> who had enlisted in the 40th Australian Infantry Battalion. Percy had lowered his age to 44 years on his attestation papers but one week later was discharged as being medically unfit due to a cardiac irregularity.<sup>39</sup> Yet another son, Stewart answered the call and enlisted in March of the same year serving in the 15<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance.<sup>40</sup> Percy's third and final attempt to enlist for active service was made on 29 May 1917. Stating his age as 48 years old he was once again medically discharged.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> 'Tasmanian Casualties', *The North West Post*, 18 September, 1916, p. 3.

<sup>29</sup> Australian Remount Depot Unit Diary, p. 8.

<sup>30</sup> Service Record of Percy William Steel, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Service Record of Percy William Steel, p. 4.

<sup>32</sup> 'Penguin', *The North West Post*, 26 August, 1916, p. 2.

<sup>33</sup> 'Tasmanian Casualties', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 September 1916, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup> Service Record of Gordon Malcom Steel, p. 3

<sup>35</sup> 'Conscription or Not', *North-Eastern Advertiser*, 9 July 1915, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup> 'The Referendum', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 1916, p. 8.

<sup>37</sup> Service Record of Percy William Steel, p. 13.

<sup>38</sup> Service Record of Norman Percy Steel, p. 1, B2455, National Archives of Australia

<sup>39</sup> Service Record of Percy William Steel, p. 19.

<sup>40</sup> Service Record of Stewart John Steel, p. 1, B2455, National Archives of Australia

<sup>41</sup> Service Record of Percy William Steel, p. 5.

Tragedy again visited Percy and his family when they received word that Norman had been accidentally killed at Morlancourt in France in August 1918.<sup>42</sup> Of the five Steel family members who embarked for war, only three returned home.

Following the war Percy resumed his farming and retail butchery business at Gould's Country. He and son Stewart took up adjoining soldier settlement land grants at Anson's Bay.<sup>43 44</sup> Percy re-entered public life as Warden of the Portland municipality and was appointed a land valuer<sup>45</sup> a role in which he undertook valuable work after the floods of 1929.<sup>46</sup> He was also instrumental in establishing branches of the Returned Sailor's & Soldier's Imperial League within the region.<sup>47 48</sup>

Percy seized the opportunity on numerous Anzac and Remembrance Days to have his written work published in newspapers of the time.<sup>49 50 51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60 61 62</sup> One of his published books which he titled *Eight Bob a Day*, was for the benefit of the Overseas Comfort Funds.

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<sup>42</sup> Service Record of Norman Percy Steel, p. 27.

<sup>43</sup> Percy William Steel, Soldier Land Settlement Scheme Application, World War 1 Soldiers and Nurses, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, LSD166/1/19.

<sup>44</sup> Percy William Steel, Soldier Land Settlement Scheme Application, World War 1 Soldiers and Nurses, Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, LSD166/1/141.

<sup>45</sup> 'General News Items', *The Mercury*, 13 January 1928, p. 4.

<sup>46</sup> 'Flood Relief', *The Mercury*, 20 July 1929, p. 7.

<sup>47</sup> 'Pyengana', *The Daily Telegraph*, 24 July 1920, p. 2.

<sup>48</sup> 'A New Sub Branch', *Daily Telegraph*, 3 December 1919, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> 'Story of a Deserter', *Daily Telegraph*, 20 June 1917, p. 2.

<sup>50</sup> 'To the Memory of Our Comrades', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1924, p. 5.

<sup>51</sup> 'Australia To Britain', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 November 1924, p. 3.

<sup>52</sup> 'The Glory That Was Theirs' *Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1925, p. 13.

<sup>53</sup> 'Fair Australia', *Daily Telegraph*, 7 November 1925, p. 12.

<sup>54</sup> 'An "Anzac" In the Making- A Tribute to the Memory of Our Comrades', *Daily Telegraph*, 23 April 1926, p. 2

<sup>55</sup> 'Greetings- Come to Australia', *North Eastern Advertiser*, 11 June 1926, p. 3.

<sup>56</sup> 'The Guardians of The Race -Lines Dedicated to the Mothers of Australia', *Daily Telegraph*, 2 October 1926, p. 19

<sup>57</sup> 'Remembrance 1915', *Daily Telegraph*, 11 November 1926, p. 4.

<sup>58</sup> 'A Christmas Day in Egypt `1915', *Daily Telegraph*, 18 December 1926, p. 10.

<sup>59</sup> 'Australia's Natal Day-To the Memory of Our Fallen Comrades', *Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 1927, p. 7.

<sup>60</sup> 'Anzacs', *North Eastern Advertiser*, 25 April 1933, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> 'My Home in Australia', *Advocate*, 23 December 1933, p. 9.

<sup>62</sup> 'The "Billies" of Last War', *North Eastern Advertiser*, 5 October 1943, p. 2.

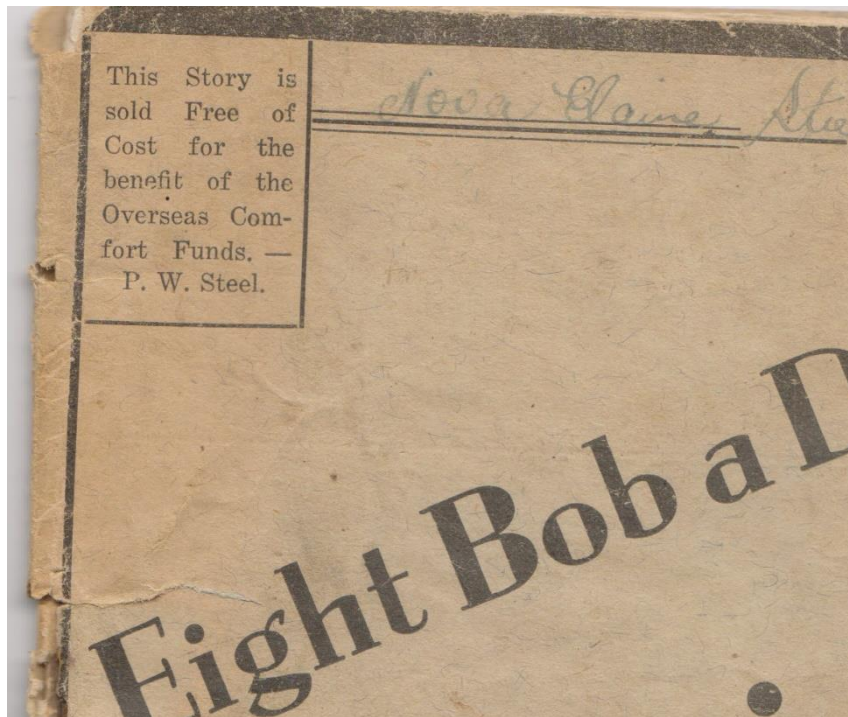


Figure 2, Vicki Purnell, *Eight Bob a Day*, 2017, Digital Image, Personal Collection

The incalculable heartache the family endured after the loss of Gordon and Norman is seen in the numerous communications with the military authorities enquiring as to the whereabouts of the resting places of their “bleaching bones” and personal effects.<sup>63</sup>

At 83 years of age Percy retired in May 1948 as a member of the Portland Council after serving 27 terms as Warden.<sup>64</sup> He was found hanging on the verandah of his home at Gould’s Country on June 24, 1948. The coroner concluded he had died from self-inflicted strangulation “while the balance of his mind was disturbed.”<sup>65</sup>

It would not be an overstatement to say that Percy had dedicated his life to his community, both locally and in service to his country. Four of his children had predeceased him, with two of his sons at rest in unmarked graves on the Western Front. Percy Steel, the family patriarch had been a steadfast and unwavering patriot

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<sup>63</sup> Service Record of Gordon Steel, p. 33-39.

<sup>64</sup> ‘27<sup>th</sup> Term as Warden’, *The Mercury* 22 May 1946, p. 5.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Former Warden Found Hanged’, *The Mercury*, 26 June 1948, p. 5.

but the inner turmoil he experienced from the events of World War 1 haunted him until the day he chose to end his own life.

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