

Lieutenant Harold Harthacnut Herbert Locke

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'Harthacnut' is a very unusual name. It originated in Denmark, and was the name given by the legendary King Canute (Cnut) to his eldest son in the eleventh century. Whether Harold Locke's parents had any meaningful connection with Danish history is not known but, by giving their son this somewhat incongruous second name, they ensured that it would be the subject of much discussion and a lot of misspellings! On his application for a commission in the AIF in 1915 his name was written as 'Harold Harcanute', 'Harthacnut' on his record of service, 'Harthacanaute' on his statement of service and 'Hardacanute' on a newspaper report of his divorce in 1914. Another spelling used elsewhere is the Anglicization of the name into 'Harthacanute'. Other documents, such as a record of the men of Essendon who fought in the Boer War, leave the name out altogether. Perhaps their writers found it just too difficult to cope with!

The man with the distinctive 'moniker' of H. H. H. Locke was born in Essendon on 8 February 1880, the son of Charles, a merchant, and Elizabeth Locke. After leaving school, Harold became a clerk and, on the outbreak of the Boer War in 1899, travelled to South Africa and joined Lord Kitchener's recently raised Fighting Scouts in March 1900. A year later, he transferred to the Second Scottish Horse, and finished the conflict as a member of the Bush Veldt Carabineers (a cavalry organization), in which he achieved the rank of corporal. While with the Scottish Horse, Harold was involved in a number of skirmishes with the Boers, one resulting in likely dysentery and a possible wound, causing him to end up in hospital for a period of time.

Harold returned to Australia, bearing an exemplary record, when the war ended in 1902 and settled again in the Essendon district. In October 1906 he married Florence Cornish Reed, a working class girl from the same area. By that time, he had taken up possession of a property at Branjee, near Euroa, and we assume that the newlyweds settled there, as subsequent news of Harold's activities list him as living in that area until 1914 and calling himself a grazier. The marriage was short-lived, however. By 1914, the property had been sold and Florence was suing Harold for divorce on the grounds of ill-treatment and desertion. She claimed that he had threatened her life and caused her to flee on at least one occasion. She also implied that his brutality may have been responsible for her giving birth to a stillborn child in 1908. There is no evidence that Harold disputed her claims, and he was ordered to pay her alimony of ten shillings per week on a permanent basis. .

While living as a married man at Branjee, Harold maintained a part-time involvement with the militia forces. This may have been a reason for the collapse of his marriage. When he applied for a commission in the AIF in 1915, he indicated that, in addition to his service in South Africa, he had spent six years in the Australian Light Horse, and had passed the examination for appointment as a second lieutenant in 1912. By July 1915, he held the rank of first lieutenant in that organization. Just why he waited until 1915 to join the AIF is not known. It may be that his domestic problems were too much of a distraction when war

broke out in August 1914. It may also be the case that, as an experienced officer and horseman, he was involved in training early recruits here in Australia. Eventually he may have felt the need to respond to the increasingly desperate calls for more volunteers when numbers began dropping off after the disasters of the Dardanelles hit home. Whatever the reason, he was ready for action in 1915. He was granted a commission as a second lieutenant in July of that year and appointed to 4 Light Horse Regiment.

Being an experienced officer, Harold left for the front just two months later, served at Gallipoli from October to December of that year, and was part of the final evacuation from the peninsula. Along with the rest of the AIF he then spent a period of time in Egypt (part of it in hospital at Heliopolis suffering from heart trouble) before being sent to the Western Front in March 1916.

The records indicate that, prior to leaving Egypt, Harold volunteered for the newly-formed 1 Division Cyclist Company, and was promoted to the rank of lieutenant. The company had been created as part of a reorganization of the AIF before it headed to France. The purpose of the cyclists would be to provide mobility for transport, scouting and communications on a battlefield where horses – and cavalry - were proving to be of limited value. The company comprised 201 personnel, divided into six platoons. Harold was one of eight officers appointed, and took up the role of platoon commander.

Historian Graham Wilson tells us that most of the recruits for 1 Division Cyclist Company came from 4 Light Horse Regiment: reinforcements who had not fought at Gallipoli, who felt that the Middle East was to be a sideshow and believed that the only way for light horsemen to get to the 'real' action on the Western Front was to swap their horses for bicycles. This may have been Harold's motivation as well. However, it may also be the case that he saw it as the opportunity for promotion. Wilson notes that officers for the companies were harder to come by than were NCOs and privates. There was also a belief held by a number of the men that, as the ranks of the Light Horse veterans on the Western Front were reduced by attrition, they would then be able to transfer back. Quite a few did. Whether Harold thought this as well is not known. If so it was probably the case that he was wounded and repatriated before he had a chance to decide.

Soon after arriving in France, Harold's company was located at Becordel-Becourt, not far from Albert in the Somme region, in preparation for the upcoming offensive. It was then combined with 2 Cyclist Company and reorganized, along with the whole AIF, into a corps battalion. As part of that organization, he was involved in mounted patrols, reconnaissance, ammunition fatigues, salvage work, assisting with local harvests and burying the dead. He also spent several days in July participating in traffic duties.

While some consider the cyclist battalions to be incongruous failures, and while they never served in the front line as fighting units, their members were nevertheless exposed to regular bombardments by artillery and aircraft, as well as the occasional sniper, and a number of men died or were severely wounded as a result. 1 Cyclist Battalion's war diary records the fact that two to three men per day were being evacuated to hospital. Eventually, Harold was included in this group. He was hospitalized in November 1916, suffering from shell shock (this was classified as being wounded in action). His signs and symptoms were

headaches, tremors, vomiting and swollen feet. He was evacuated to England in early December and admitted to a hospital in London where he spent more than two months recuperating before being moved to Cobham Hall convalescent centre in Kent and then Fort Pitt and Mont Dore hospitals nearby.

It would appear, however, that Harold's injury was quite serious. In mid-March, upon being discharged from hospital, he was placed on the supernumerary list and based at Wareham. If this move was made because it was felt that he had not fully recovered from shell shock, then his doctors were prescient because, in June, he was again admitted to Cobham Hall. He was quickly diagnosed with neurasthenia: a form of mental exhaustion that would probably be classified today under the heading of 'post-traumatic stress disorder'. He was judged unfit for general service for six months and plans were made to send him back to Australia 'for change'. He sailed on 22 July, arriving back in Melbourne on 24 September. On 17 December that year, his appointment with the AIF was terminated, presumably as a result of further medical examinations.

This was not the end of Harold's association with the military, however. In 1918, he was provisionally appointed as a lieutenant in his old militia unit, 16 Light Horse Regiment. When the Light Horse section was reorganized in 1921, he was allotted to 8 Light Horse, and was promoted to the rank of captain in 1922. In February 1930, after he had turned fifty, he was placed on the retired list and given the honorary rank of major. It was noted on his record that he was given permission 'to wear presented uniform', even though he was henceforth a civilian. In later years he referred to himself as 'Major Locke'. As in the years before 1914, Harold was in reserve in the 1920s. His address on returning from the war was Essendon, and his stated occupation was grazier. Eventually, he received a Colonial Auxiliary Forces Officer's Decoration for his long service with the militia. This entitled him to put the letters 'VD' (volunteer decoration) after his name. One can understand it, however, if he decided not to pursue that course! In the early 1920s he purchased another property in the Euroa district and in 1929 moved to a new one near Violet Town. In the 1940s he moved to yet another one in the same area, and he probably stayed there for the remainder of his life.

We do not know if Harold recovered fully from neurasthenia and the physical effects of shell shock. It would seem, however, that despite possible infirmities he led an active life in the north-east. We know from a report in the *Argus* that he played cricket for many years, both pre- and post-war. He was described as a hard-hitting batsman and played for the Diggers team in Euroa. When he retired in 1935 he donated his much-used and -loved bat to another local team.

It is apparent that Harold was also something of an amateur naturalist, contributing information about insects and birds to the nature notes section in the *Argus* during the 1930s.

Harold Harthacnut Herbert Locke died at Violet Town in 1955 at the age of seventy-five and is buried in Euroa Cemetery. He left no known direct descendants.

SOURCES

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