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# JOHN FREEMAN MURRAY BROOKER

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My chosen service person is John Freeman Murray Brooker. John was born in South Australia and lived in Rose Park and Kent town, Adelaide where he enlisted at the age of 19 ½ years old and served for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in World War 1. I have chosen John Brooker as my service person because he is my Great Great Grandfather and I have always wanted to learn more about my family history. I think family history is really important and interesting because it shows how small or big choices shaped your family into what they are today. I will focus on the ANZAC Spirit traits, perseverance and mateship, both of which John Brooker demonstrated in his life and service.

This biography explores the service and legacy of Private John Freeman Murray Brooker and demonstrates how his actions reflect the ANZAC Spirit through perseverance and mateship.

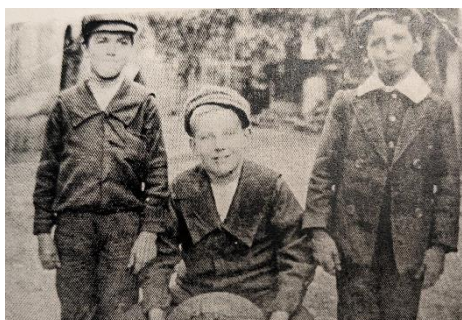


Figure 1 – Young John Brooker (left) Clem Holder (middle) and Felix Pavia (right)

## Early Life

John was born in Adelaide, SA on the 9<sup>th</sup> of July, 1896 and was the 4<sup>th</sup> youngest son of seven children to parents John Hill Brooker and Mary Brooker (nee Henderson). As a child John was mischievous and loved playing pranks with his friends Clem Holder and Felix Pavia (figure 1). These three were a tight knit group, causing general mayhem amongst the locals. The Brooker family lived in 33 North Terrace, Kent Town but then moved to Rose Park where John and his younger sister Joan attended Miss McDonough's Briarworth School. The family then moved again to Trinity Street, College Town where John enrolled in East Adelaide Primary School, then graduating to Norwood Highschool.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January 1911, when John was 14 ½, he attended part time training for the Senior Cadets due to the Commonwealth Of Australia Defence act requiring every "able bodied man" aged 14-18 to join. At 17 years of age he began working for Mr and Mrs Marma J Wray on a farm called *Wanthrope*. On the farm John maintained and installed fences (which according to Mr Wray were made with the fenceposts closer together due to Johns small height and feet).

## WW1 Service

On the 3/02/1916, after being rejected a year earlier due to a "chest weakness", John finally successfully enlisted in the A.I.F aged 19 ½. John was now Private J.F.M Brooker No. 5054 of the 10<sup>th</sup> battalion, training for combat in the Mitcham Military Camp. Roughly 5 weeks later he boarded the *Shropshire* and



Figure 2 - John Freeman Murray Brooker

was bound for Egypt to complete desert training (this was normal for A.I.F troops). He landed in Tel-e-Kabir 27/4/1916 with the 16<sup>th</sup> reinforcements to the 10<sup>th</sup> battalion. After only 6 weeks training his battalion was withdrawn and moved to England for reinforcements on the 12/6/1916.

While at sea John wrote many letters home about his experiences. In a letter to his mother, Mary, he complained about his *'usual attack of seasickness'* but was thrilled to be *'treated like kings'* with ample food and comfortable hammocks. John engaged in active service in France and Belgium, fighting in the following battles: Passchendaele, Flanders, Westlock Ridge and Amiens. He also fought at Armentieres (France) in the battle of the Somme and the 3<sup>rd</sup> battle of Yrpes in Belgium.

The physical, mental conditions and hardships that John and his fellow infantry soldiers had to endure are nearly unfathomable to people today. Constant, unrelenting marches for days on end, from one frontline to the next, hoping and praying to survive, only to be thrown into more fighting if you survived the previous battles and endless marches. Trench warfare was also a tactic heavily used in WW1 and usually required soldiers to not only dig them, but also live, sleep and fight in them. Aside from the physical pain and stress the mental horrors left much deeper scars, especially on surviving soldiers. Death was a constant shadow on all the battlefields, soldiers were always being slaughtered and wounded, and also fearing being captured by enemies.

While John was serving in Belgium a gas shell detonated in his trench and he was severely injured with burns, then moved to Menin Rd Dressing Station, lucky to survive. He had no recollection of being injured or moved for a week until he woke up on the 16/11/1916 in a hospital in Birmingham, once again lucky to be alive. Many months later once he was fit and healthy again, he was returned to the frontlines. John suffered many injuries during his active service including leg wounds from a grenade, more leg and arm wounds, and whole-body wounds from shrapnel (some of this shrapnel only reappearing from his body after the war). Every wound he received was severe enough that he had to be shipped to England for further treatment, giving him a much-needed reprieve from the frontlines.

At the signing of the Armistice in Compiègne on the 11/11/1918 John was in Belgium, living with the Bidoul family in a small town called Chatelet in Hainault. He was there because while the peace terms were being negotiated the Allied and British forces waited in Belgium and France. Whilst staying with the Belgium family John became very close friends with the son and daughter of the family, Francois and Emilie. After the armistice was signed in May 1919 John arrived in England and left on the *Nestor* which docked in Australia on the 20/05/1919. After returning John was honourably discharged from service on 14/08/1919. Throughout John's whole service career he remained a private, never receiving any promotions. This was most likely because he frequently disobeyed orders, receiving heavy penalties. Some of his crimes were *"Playing cards with prisoners (fellow soldiers)"*, *"A.W.L. (absent without leave) from 10 pm 5/2/1918 to 6:30 pm 8/2/1918"* and again *"A.W.L. 1 day"*. These crimes resulted in punishments such as forfeiture of pay, detention hours and extra duty days and would not have made him a trustworthy candidate worthy of serving among higher ranks.

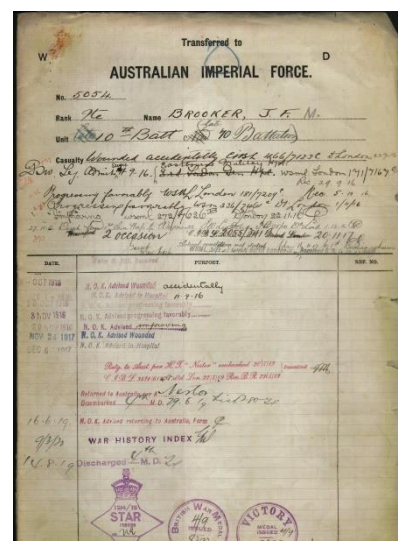


Figure 3 - Papers showing injury, progression, discharge, and travel.

### Life After War



Figure 4 – Adult John  
Freeman Murray Brooker

After being discharged from the A.I.F John began working as a clerk at the Keswick barracks, in the hope that he would be provided a Soldier Settlement Block, sadly he didn't receive one. Later in October 1921 he was part of the Soldier Settlement Scheme, working again as a clerk. It was around this time when John met his wife, Flossie Estella Pounsett (figure 5). John and Flossie were married in a "tastefully decorated" West Hindmarsh Methodist Church. They had four children, Estelle Alison, Audrey Margaret, Kathleen Rosalie, and Murray Ian Hill Brooker. John



Figure 5 - Flossie Estella  
Brooker (Nee Pounsett)

didn't suffer too badly from his battle wounds, with no lasting scars except some shrapnel removing itself from his body. He was heavily involved in the community after the war, joining the Westbourne Park Returned Sailors & Soldiers Imperial League (what is the R.S.L today). John worked dutifully for the League, befriending many returned servicemen/sailors, attending dawn services, marching in ANZAC day parades, and even building a to scale model of the Cenotaph (in Whitehall, England) and displaying it in the R.S.L headquarters. When WW2 arrived in 1939 John's R.S.L friends encouraged him to re-enlist but didn't because he was an essential worker (a Taxation Investigator) needed to fund the war. After Flossie's death in 1982 John became lonely, eventually becoming diagnosed with terminal cancer and dying on October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1985, aged 89. John and Flossie were cremated at the Centennial park Crematorium and remembrance plaques were placed on the Tranquillity garden wall. Their plaques remain on wall 76, row D, number 19 & 20, right next to each other, remaining together, in life and in death.

### Connection to ANZAC Spirit

My chosen ANZAC spirit traits are mateship and perseverance. Private J.F.M Brooker may have broken some rules and disobeyed some orders but during his whole service he constantly and reliably demonstrated the above traits. John reflected the ANZAC spirit trait mateship whilst living with the Bidoul family in Belgium he not only shared rations and befriended the family's children, but also kept correspondence one of the children, Francois Bidoul. Francois wrote '*...we received your parcel*' because John was still sending them '*...a keepsake*' and (presumably) food rations because Francois also wrote to John he was '*I am 78 kg. so that's not bad*'. John's continued support of his friends, family, and community demonstrated his exemplary mateship. The second ANZAC spirit trait John demonstrated during his service was unwavering perseverance. Perseverance to continue despite physical and mental harm, perseverance to return to the front after severe wounds, and perseverance to continue living happily post war. As mentioned before living conditions in WW1 were horrific and traumatic, causing lifelong physical and mental injuries if the soldier even survived service. There wasn't much family knowledge surrounding John's wounds after the war but luckily, he was spared from WW2 by being an essential worker.

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## Part B

My research of John Brooker began when I asked my family if we had some relatives who fought for Australia. Records of my Dad's side of the family didn't go back that far so I looked within my Mum's. Next thing I know she brings out a 335 paged book going back generations, within that book I discovered John Freeman Murray Brooker. The family book, *Reading Between the Lines* (see figure 6), was the source of the majority of my information. This book was written by Alison Samuels, my Great Grandma who with the help of my Mum compiled a book with information from first- and second-hand accounts, letters, documents, diaries, photos, postcards, and records. The primary sources within the book were useful to verify the information and read personal accounts (letters/postcards) of how John experienced the war. This family book was such an important source as it provided me with a more detailed, personal life story of John Brooker as it included little stories like his "small feet" and seasickness which really provided a different perspective of who he was not only as a soldier, but as a brother, father and son. The pictures within the book also were a very useful visual source as "a picture tells a thousand words" and shows unwritable things like war conditions and expressions. The other sources like ration books, greetings cards from family, food coupons and even a ticket to see the tower of London gave me specific dates of what John was doing when and where. This book was one of the most useful sources I found but because it was a secondary source, I used other sources like the [National Archives of Australia](#) and the [National Library of Australia](#) to support the information. These sources provided documents like Oath of Attestation papers, injury/casualty records and inventory records, which are all primary sources and show another, more formal account of John's life. I also found some newspaper articles written about their wedding and social life. The articles were descriptive and informative and gave information like the appearance of the wedding, its location, date and who attended (all important information). But with there was still gaps that weren't filled, which led me to read the letters included in my family book. These letters showed correspondence between John Brooker and Francois Bidoul detailing their friendship and even language lessons. The letters provide more insight into John's personality and how he displayed the ANZAC spirit traits. Some of the challenges I faced whilst finding research about John Brooker was deciphering mostly illegible handwriting and filling gaps in family knowledge, but my Great Grandma is the one to who I give thanks, for putting all the family knowledge into one book. Yet, it still made me sad that John's story was left untold on the Virtual War Memorial website, his mateship and perseverance unknown.

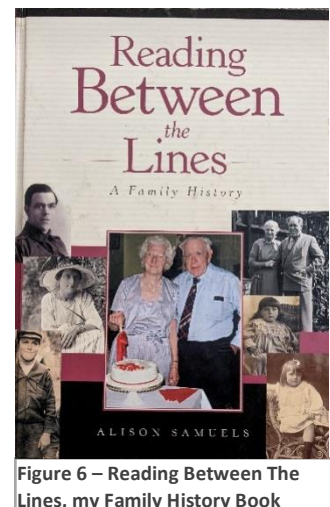


Figure 6 – Reading Between The Lines, my Family History Book

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