

Biography

Donald Alexander McRae

Private Donald Alexander McRae, (Don), served in the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, Australian Imperial Force.¹ The 2nd Pioneer Battalion was heavily involved in action on the Western Front including the Battles of Bullecourt and the Third Ypres in 1917.² Don 's friendliness and extraordinary fighting spirit were attributes which earned him the utmost respect from his fellow soldiers and officers.³

Don, the third of seven children, of William Alexander and Annie McRae, was born on 16 August 1886 at Mitchells Flat near Singleton NSW.⁴ Don was a lovable larrikin, well-known for his fighting antics in Cessnock, NSW.⁵ He was a labourer for most of his working life, however, his love for boxing set him apart. He pursued his natural talent to eventually compete in the local boxing tournaments and was lauded as a popular, decent and loyal fellow with a wild trait.⁶ While in the ring Don was relentless and always popular amongst the crowd with his "*wild swings and jump crow antics*".⁷

It is feasible to believe that his fighting spirit motivated Don to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force. Don could not resist a fight, this time for his King and Country. He was a single man, and his six siblings would care for his widowed mother. A consideration of the continuing downturn in the mining industry,⁸ as well as the prospect of a steady income of six shillings a day⁹ may have also been an influence. A minor factor was the enlistment standard requiring a man to be a minimum of 5

¹ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), 1916 – 1917 p. 2, B2455, National Archives of Australia.

² RSL Virtual War Memorial, '2nd Pioneer Battalion 2nd Division, AIF', <https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/units/62> Accessed 25 April 2017.

³ Trove. "Cessnock", *Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 2 March 1918, p. 10.

⁴ Birth Certificate of Donald Alexander McRae, born 16 August 1886, Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages New South Wales, 32464/1886.

⁵ Trove. "Pithy Pars About People", *Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, 22 December 1936, p.1.

⁶ Trove. 'Pithy Pars About People', *Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder*, p. 1.

⁷ Trove. Boxing, *Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 3 April 1915, p. 15.

⁸ Trove. 'The Mining Industry- Depressed Coal Trade ', *Maitland Daily Mercury*, 19 February 1916, p. 7.

⁹ State Library of Victoria, The Rush To enlist, <http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/australia-wwi/home-wwi/rush-enlist>, Accessed 7 May 2017.

foot 6 inches tall.¹⁰ A mere 5 foot 5 inches tall,¹¹ Don appeared taller on the day with a recorded height of 5 foot 6¹/₂ inches.¹² Don initially joined the Australian Imperial Force on 28 October 1915, at West Maitland, and was assigned to the Depot Battalion.¹³ However, this was short-lived, as he was discharged on 13 December 1915, under Paragraph 23, Australian Imperial Force Regulations, as being unsuitable for a soldier.¹⁴ Paragraph 23, provides for the power of Commanding Officers to discharge men prior to embarkation based on illness or injury sustained on duty.¹⁵

Jobson believed that the Government call for reinforces to cover the losses of Gallipoli and the sinking of the *'Lusitania'* would have been contributing reasons for the increase in recruitment in 1916 with the highest number in July 1916.¹⁶ Don enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force for a second time at Broadmeadow on 14 June 1916.¹⁷ He cited "teeth" as being the reason why he had been rejected earlier as unfit for His Majesty's Service.¹⁸ His Regimental Number was as previously assigned, 3154, his Unit, the Newcastle Depot Battalion.¹⁹ After he had been given a hearty send off by friends including those in the boxing fraternity,²⁰ Don departed Broadmeadow, Newcastle, on 6 July 1916, with the Miner's Reinforcements, for the Seymour Army Camp in Victoria.²¹ He was subsequently transferred to the 7th Reinforcement, 2nd Pioneer Battalion.²² According to Walsh many reinforcements were derived from other units to the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, particularly of the 2nd

¹⁰ Australian War Memorial, Enlistment Standards, <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/enlistment/> Accessed 7 May 2017.

¹¹ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p. 12, B2455.

¹² Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (1), 1915 – 1915, p. 3, B2455, National Archives of Australia.

¹³ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (1), p.1, B2455.

¹⁴ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (1), P.4, B2455.

¹⁵ State Library of Victoria, 'Orders for Australian Imperial Force', <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/112474> Accessed 25 April 2017.

¹⁶ K.H. Jobson, *'First AIF Enlistment Patterns and Reasons for Their Variation'*, Australian Defence Force Journal, No. 132 (1998), p. 61-62.

¹⁷ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p 1, B2455.

¹⁸ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p.1, B2455.

¹⁹ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p. 7, B2455.

²⁰ Trove. 'Boxing', *The Sydney Sportsman*, 12 July 1916, p. 2.

²¹ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p. 7, B2455.

²² Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p. 7, B2455.

Division.²³ Pioneer Battalions were identified by the wearing of a purple and white patch with the diamond shape signifying as being from the 2nd Division.²⁴

Don embarked at Melbourne, Victoria, on the H.M.A.T. A20, *Hororata*, on 23 November 1916 and disembarked at Plymouth, England on 29 January 1917.²⁵ The long voyage at sea was unlike anything that Don had ever envisaged, and on one occasion, a charge of being drunk produced a consequential payment of a fine.²⁶ Don departed overseas to France from Folkestone England on 26 April 1917 after extensive training with the Pioneer Training Battalion.²⁷ He marched to the Etaples Army Training Camp where he remained for a few weeks before being marched out for active service on 12 May 1917.²⁸ As there is no surviving correspondence relating to Don there is no way of knowing what he was feeling during this time.

Lieutenant W. L. Murrell joined with Reinforcements to the 2nd Pioneer Battalion, 2nd Division at Aveluy, France on 12 June 1917.²⁹ Don served with Lieutenant Murrell's platoon, fighting on the front line.³⁰ The 2nd Pioneer Battalion trained to fight as infantry men as well as to perform engineering tasks.³¹ The 2nd Pioneer Battalion was involved in action around the Pozieres Heights, the Battle of Mouquet Farm, the Second Battle of Bullecourt and the Third Battle of Ypres.³² The 2nd Pioneers suffered significant losses, as evidenced by Walsh, who identified the small number of soldiers who returned home on disbandment on 19 May 1919 and noted that many more were invalided home due to wounds or severe illness/disease.³³ Bean

²³ Leo Walsh, *The Nominal Roll, 2nd Pioneer Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, Australian Imperial Force, 1916-1919 (2nd Edition – 2000)*, Brisbane, Victoria Barracks Historical Society, Brisbane, Inc., 2000, p. A-1.

²⁴ RSL Virtual War Memorial, '2nd Pioneer Battalion 2nd Division, AIF.

²⁵ Australian War Memorial, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 1914-1918 War, <https://www.awm.gov.au/images/collection/bundled/RCDIG1066894.pdf>, Accessed 7 May 2017.

²⁶ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p. 7, B2455.

²⁷ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2). P. 7, B2455.

²⁸ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p. 33, B2455.

²⁹ 2nd Pioneer Battalion, Item Number, RCDIG1009281, 12 June 1917, 2nd Pioneer Battalion Unit Diary, AWM4 14/14/13, p. 1.

³⁰ Trove. 'Cessnock', *Maitland Weekly Mercury*, 2 March 1918, p.10.

³¹ Wikipedia, '2nd Pioneer Battalion (Australia)', [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Pioneer_Battalion_\(Australia\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2nd_Pioneer_Battalion_(Australia)), Edited 18 March 2017, Accessed 8 May 2017.

³² Wikipedia, '2nd Pioneer Battalion (Australia)'.

³³ Walsh, *The nominal Roll, 2nd Pioneer Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division, Imperial Force, 1916-1919*, p. 11.

asserted that a major achievement of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion during the Battle of the Second Bullecourt was the digging of a communication trench, which stretched from the railway to the Hindenburg Line 1.150 yards, at significant cost of the lives of the pioneers who made it, a feat described by Bean as “one of the finest achievements of the Australian Pioneers”.³⁴

Don was mortally wounded in action in Belgium on 21 October 1917 from wounds to his legs and thigh.³⁵ An informant from the 2nd Canadian Casualty Clearance Station reported that Don was admitted on 21 October 1917 with wounds to both legs and thighs, diagnosed as compound fracture to legs and right thigh, and died at 10.00 pm, 21 October 1917.³⁶ A witness, Private A. A. R. Heffer advised that Don was wounded by a “whizz-bang”, in the cookhouse near Ypres and that he had erected the Cross on his grave in a Cemetery at the 2nd Canadian Casualty Clearance Station, just behind Poperinge, adding that a sketch of the cross had been sent to Don’s mother.³⁷ Private J. Willis provided a description of Don dated 8 April 1918, which advised that Don had a few teeth out in the front.³⁸ A later statement provided by Lance Corporal George Evans on 10 April 1918, described Don as previously being a boxer, nick-named “Don”.³⁹

A letter dated 19 July 1920 was sent to Don’s mother, Annie McRae asking if she was willing to pay for a personalised inscription on the headstone adding that it must be no more than 66 letters, further that the Government would cover the costs of the military details.⁴⁰ Don’s mother, Annie, responded with many more letters than required, and perhaps as a plea, these words were penned on the page;

In life we loved you dearly,

In death we do the same,

A young life nobly ended;

³⁴ Bean, C E W (1941) *First World War Official Histories. Vol IV – The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1917, (11th Edition). Chapter XII – The Second Battle of Bullecourt.* ID RCDIG1069502, AWM, p. 485.

³⁵ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p. 37, B2455.

³⁶ Australia War Memorial, WW1 Red Cross Files, <https://www.awm.gov.au/images/collection/pdf/RCDIG1046929--1-.pdf>, p. 1, Accessed 9 May 2017.

³⁷ Australia War Memorial, WW1 Red Cross Files, p. 4.

³⁸ Australia War Memorial, WW1 Red Cross Files, p. 7.

³⁹ Australia War Memorial, WW1 Red Cross Files, p. 8.

⁴⁰ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae, (2), p. 17, B2455.

*Inserted by his loving Mother, Sisters and Brothers.*⁴¹

Don is memorialised in the Lijssenthoek Military Cemetery at Poperinge, Belgium, Plot 25, Row J, Grave Number 16. The personalised inscription reads, *“In loving memory of my dear son, A young life nobly ended”*. He is memorialised in Australia by being placed on the Honour Roll of the Australian War Memorial.⁴²

The integrity of Private Donald Alexander McRae was captured in the most appropriate of terms in the words contained in a letter to his mother. Don’s Platoon Officer, Lieutenant Munell, wrote; *“He was always out with my platoon and myself. In fact, during the recent terrible fighting, I hardly think he missed a day, and the work in which he took part has proved one of the greatest factors in the Australian’s recent success. His manliness made him very popular amongst the rest of the boys. Personally, I felt that in Donald I had a reliable and fearless soldier, and more than that he was a staunch friend.”*⁴³

A fitting honour in memory of a loving son, Cessnock’s boxer and friend, Don.



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⁴¹ Service Record of Donald Alexander McRae (2), p, 18, B2455.

⁴² Australian War Memorial, AWM 145 Roll of Honour Cards, <https://www.awm.gov.au/people/rolls/R1648270/>, Accessed 9 May 2017.

⁴³ Trove, ‘Cessnock’, *Maitland Weekly Mercury*, p.10.

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