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MAJOR GENERAL JOHN KEATLY FORSYTH, C.M.G.

A Biographical Sketch of one of Australia's pioneer General Officers.

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Stand still  
Let me review the scene,  
And summon from the shadowy Past,  
The forms that once have been.

LONGFELLOW.

Major General John Keatly Forsyth was one of the original officers of the Australian Military Forces as we know these forces to-day and have known them since Federation. Like his great contemporary, General Sir Harry Chauvel, he was an officer of the Permanent Staff of the Military Forces of Queensland at the time of Federation and, on the 1st March, 1901, he became, as did all other officers on the Active Lists, Reserve of Officers Lists and Retired Lists of the various former Australian colonies, an officer of the military forces of the newly created Commonwealth of Australia.

General Forsyth was born in Brisbane on the 9th February 1867 and was educated in that city. He became a Militia officer on the 18th July 1892, that is at twenty-five years of age, and later, on the 22nd September 1896, he attained the rank of Captain. But in the following year he decided to make the Army his profession and, on the 1st August 1897, he was appointed to that Colony's Permanent Military Staff with the rank of Lieutenant. Soon after Federation, on the 1st February 1901, but while the military forces were still in fact under State control, he became a Captain again.

Forsyth came to the Department of Defence in Melbourne in 1905 when, on the 13th November 1905, he became Staff Officer and Secretary to the Inspector General of the Forces, Major General Harry Finn. Forsyth's arm of the service was Mounted Infantry or Light Horse and Finn was a cavalry Officer and ex-ranker of the British Army who was on loan to the Australian Army. Finn had been, at the time of Federation, the Commandant of the Military Forces of Queensland where he had probably met Forsyth and got to know his capabilities.

Captain Forsyth served in the 3rd Military District of Victoria on the Instructional Staff from the 1st February 1907 to the 30th November 1910. It was during this time that he received further promotion. On the 23rd May 1908 he became a Major in the Administrative and Instructional Staff. He was reposted to the appointment

of D.A.A.G. (for Instruction), on the 1st December 1910 vice Major J.H. Bruche, but remained on Headquarters, 3rd Military District at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne. He held this appointment for only a short time. He was reposted on this headquarters again on the 1st January 1911 to the General Staff as a G.S.O.(II) and he held this appointment until the 30th June 1912. By the time he vacated this appointment Forsyth had acquired considerable training and experience as a staff officer.

On the 1st July 1912 Major Forsyth became the Director of Equipment at Army Headquarters in Melbourne. It was on this date too that Universal Training began in Australia for Trainees of the Citizen Military Forces. It had begun a year earlier for Junior and Senior Cadets. On the 1st March 1914 Forsyth was promoted, and retained the appointment of Director of Equipment, to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Administrative and Instructional Staff.

On the eve of the outbreak of the War of 1914-18 Lieutenant Colonel Forsyth was reposted to a more senior appointment. On the 1st August 1914 he became the Quartermaster General of the Australian Forces and 3rd Military Member of the Military Board. On the same date Colonel J.G. Legge became the Chief of the General Staff and the 1st Military Member of the Military Board. But Forsyth did not remain in this new appointment long. The War of 1914-18 began on the 4th August 1914 and Forsyth was swept up in the many changes which immediately followed.

The A.I.F. came into being, officially, on the 15th August 1914 and on that date Forsyth was appointed to command temporarily the 1st Light Horse Brigade of the A.I.F. He sailed with this brigade, which formed part of Major General Bridges' 1st Contingent of the A.I.F., on the 1st November 1914 from Albany in Western Australia. When he arrived in Egypt he handed over the command of the brigade to Colonel Chauvel who had left Australia in July 1914 for England to take up duty at the War Office.

Lieutenant Colonel Forsyth's next command was that of the 4th Light Horse Regiment, A.I.F. to which he was appointed on the 13th December 1914. He commanded this regiment until, on the 19th May 1915, he was appointed to the post of A.A. & Q.M.G. of the first Australian Division which was then in action in the Gallipoli campaign. He remained in this appointment until, on the 26th July 1915, he became the Commander of the 2nd Infantry Brigade, A.I.F., vice Brigadier General J.W. McCay who had been evacuated wounded. Forsyth commanded this brigade at Gallipoli, he took it back to Egypt after the evacuation and later he took it to the Western Front in Europe. But from there he was invalided himself to England and relinquished command of the brigade on the 1st October 1916.

In England Forsyth became, on the 2nd October 1916, the G.O.C., of B Group, A.I.F. Depots in the United Kingdom. He returned to Australia later that year. He arrived in Melbourne on Sunday 31st December 1916 and the following day his name was promulgated in the King's New Year's Honours' List as having been created a Commander of St. Michael and St. George. On Saturday evening 13th January 1917 he was entertained at dinner in Melbourne by friends to mark the occasion of his return to Australia.



Forsyth served for the remainder of the war in Australia. On the 16th February 1917 he became the Commandant of the 4th Military District in South Australia and he held this appointment until, on the 20th July 1918, he was re-appointed Quartermaster General and 3rd Military Member of the Military Board with the rank of Brigadier General vice Major General Stanley. Stanley had been recalled from the Retired List in 1914 to fill this appointment when Forsyth had vacated it to go on active service.

This appointment of Quartermaster General was General Forsyth's last posting although he retained it for the next four years. His task during this period was not an easy one. After hostilities ceased in November 1918 facilities had to be provided for the efficient reception of members of the A.I.F. as they returned home from overseas. Almost concurrently military establishments in Australia and overseas of the Australian Army began to close down and surplus supplies, equipment, stores and transport had to be disposed of either by returning to stores or by sale. A little later the Australian Military Forces were completely re-organised to meet the changed conditions which had been brought about by the war. Then in 1922 the Federal Government announced plans to retrench within the Australian Military Forces. Forsyth was one of the general officers to be retrenched.

Major General Forsyth relinquished the appointment of Quartermaster General on the 31st July, 1922 and, on the following day, he was placed on the Unattached List. This marked the close of his military career on the Active List although he was not placed on the Retired List, officially, until the date of his 58th birthday which was the 9th February 1925.

General Forsyth was still a relatively young man and it was reasonable to expect at the time that in retirement he would continue to do much useful work. In 1928 he became one of the selected Nationalist candidates for election to the Senate but during the political campaign, which was being conducted for the Federal Government by the Prime Minister, Mr. S.M. Bruce, and for the Federal Opposition by Mr. J.H. Scullin, General Forsyth contracted pneumonia. After a short illness he died on the 12th November 1928, at the age of 61 years, at his residence at 6 Hepburn Street, Auburn, Victoria.

His friends were surprised and distressed by his unexpected and untimely ending. The Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Harry Chauvel, who had known General Forsyth for almost forty years said:

"Major General Forsyth and I first became associated in 1891 in Queensland where we served in the Queensland Mounted Infantry. His sudden death is a great shock to me. We had had almost a lifelong friendship and I regarded Major General Forsyth as an organiser of exceptional ability, and one who had given valuable service to the Australian Military Forces."<sup>1</sup>

1. See "The Argus", Melbourne, Tuesday 13th November 1928, p.7.

Mr. W.A. Watt, a wartime Acting Prime Minister, commented at this time, in the course of the political campaign for the coming Federal Elections, on the untimely death of General Forsyth in these words:

"It is my regrettable duty to announce the death of Major General Forsyth. This sad event throws a pall of sadness over the elections. Those of us who knew him knew what a splendid character he was. Apart altogether from his gallant career as a soldier, he was a public-spirited citizen of high ideals."<sup>2</sup>

Another tribute came from the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia's Victorian Branch. It issued the following statement on the 13th November 1928:

"The League stands to-day in the shadow of a great loss. Major General Forsyth was Chairman of Anzac House, a position that brought him into close touch with the League's work and furnished opportunities for service to old comrades. He always maintained that the chief work of the League should be the upholding of the good name of the A.I.F. and the strengthening of the feeling of comradeship among those who served, and the adoption of this view by many branches and branch officers is undoubtedly due to the influence exerted by him during his travels through the State."<sup>3</sup>

The remains of General Forsyth were buried with military honours. The funeral cortege left the Methodist Church in Oxley Street, Auburn, where the deceased general had been a prominent member of the congregation for some years, after a service there which had commenced at 11 a.m. on Wednesday 14th November 1928. Among those present were the Federal Attorney General, Sir John Latham; the Chief of the General Staff, General Sir Harry Chauvel; the Quartermaster General, Major General W.A. Coxen; the former Chief of the General Staff, Major General Sir Brudenell White; Brigadier General C.H. Brand who had also been commissioned originally in the Military Forces of Queensland; and another former Chief of the General Staff, Major General G.H.H. Irving; and the Secretary of the Military Board, Major George Maxted, D.S.O. The service at the graveside at Booroondara Cemetery at Kew was conducted by Senior Chaplain A.T. Bladen.

It is probably remembered by few to-day that two years after General Forsyth's death a tablet was unveiled in his memory in the Methodist Church in Oxley Street, Auburn. This ceremony took place on Sunday afternoon 28th September 1930 at a special service which was conducted by Chaplain-Colonel Snell in the presence of General Forsyth's widow, his son, and his three daughters. This service included an address by the Rev. J. Thomas.

2. Ibid, p.7.

3. See "The Argus", Wednesday 14th November, 1928, p.7.