



Robert Macdonald in uniform

Abstract

This document elaborates on the official record of the military service of Robert Bruce Macdonald (Serial Number 5005) by including information on the localities where he saw service and the momentous military operations in which he and his parent units participated.

Robert served in South Africa with the Australian Light Horse during the last year of the Boer War. Robert in 1914 enlisted with the AIF for service abroad in WWI and served initially in Egypt as a Sergeant with the Third Light Horse Brigade Train. In 1916, associated with the formation of the Fifth Division Train, he transferred to that train and was taken on the strength of the 29th Company of the Australian Army Service Corps (AASC). In June 1916, the horse transport company moved from Egypt to France as part of the move of the Australian divisions to the Western Front. Robert spent most of the remainder of the war in the 29th Company of the AASC throughout its operational deployment as part of the 5th Divisional Train around the Somme battlefields of Northern France and Belgian Flanders near Ypres.

The 5th Divisional Train, in which Robert served, supported the illustrious Fifth Division of the AIF through many of the biggest actions on the Western Front involving Australian troops from mid-1916 to the end of hostilities in 1918. These include the battles of Fromelles (July 1916), Polygon Wood (Sept 1917); Villers Bretonneux (April 1918) and Peronne (September 1918).

Robert was a senior Non Commissioned Officer and attained the rank Warrant Officer Class I (WO1). He is mentioned in Sir Douglas Haig's despatches on 9 April 1917.



Boer War

11 February 1902 - Aged 20 Years and 10 months, Robert signed up for service in South Africa (S/N 2349). 1902 was the last year of the Boer War. Robert subsequently served with the 4th Battalion Australian Commonwealth Horse (Vic) in the Remount Section until the termination of hostilities, attaining the rank of Lance Corporal.



Robert (3rd from Right) with the Light Horse.

The Remount Section of the Australian Light Horse was staffed by expert horsemen (horse whisperers) who undertook the breaking of horses and oversaw their health and fitness.

The most famous member of the Remount fraternity was Major Andrew Barton (Banjo) Patterson, the famous poet. Banjo served with the AIF's 2nd Remount Squadron as its commander in Egypt beginning in late 1915. His unit was responsible for controlling the quality of horses supplied to the AIF's Light Horse Regiments — the mounted infantry — in the Middle East. Paterson's own detailed description of his role was: "To take over the rough, uncivilised horses from all over the world by the army buyers; to quieten them and condition them and get them ready for being heel-roped; and finally to issue them in such a state of efficiency that a heavily accoutred trooper can get on and off under fire if need be." Moran (2011).

Enlistment for WWI

1 November 1914 – At the age of 33 years and 7 months, Robert signed up with the AIF for Service abroad in the 3rd Light Horse Brigade Train with the rank of Sergeant. At the time, Robert was already serving as a soldier in the militia.

2 February 1915 – Embarked at Melbourne on HMAT A51 Chilka.



Pictured is HMAT A51 Chilka

Source: alh_research.tripod.com/ships_lh.htm



Egypt

10 March 1915 - Robert arrives at **MENA** camp near **HELIOPOLIS** in Egypt with the 3rd Light Horse Brigade Train and training of the light horsemen commences.

20 May 1915 - The dismounted 3rd Light Horse Brigade lands at Gallipoli and sees continuing action over the next eight months, including the ill-fated four-wave charge on Turkish forces at the Nek in August 1915. Over this period, elements of the Brigade, including Robert, remain in Egypt looking after the horses and undertaking the training of reinforcements.

28 December 1915 - The survivors of the Gallipoli contingent rejoin the Brigade at **HELIOPOLIS**.

3 January 1916 – Robert is promoted to rank of Warrant Officer, Class I.

27/28 March 1916 – Robert is transferred to the newly formed Australian 5th Division Train while located at **SERAPEUM** in Egypt and is taken on the strength of the 29th Company of the Australian Army Service Corps (AASC) from the 12th Company. The timing coincides to a transfer of experienced Non-Commissioned Officers to the new Divisional Trains being formed in Egypt.

29 March 1916 - The 5th Division is moved to train in **ISMAILIA** in Egypt prior to serving in the **SUEZ CANAL** defences for two months until 25 May 1916. The period saw no fighting. (Ellis).

30 March 1916 - Formation of 5th Divisional Train completed (Ellis).

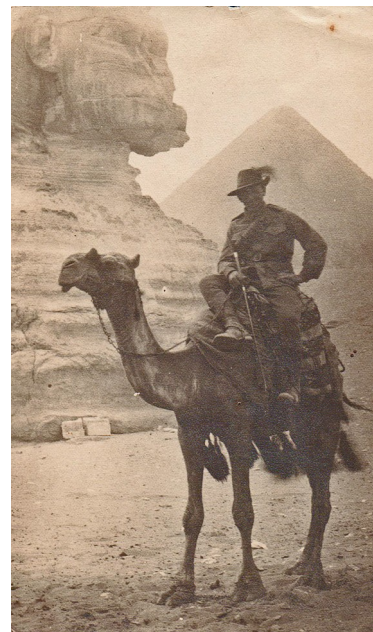
Note: The 29th Company was one of four (4) horse transport companies assigned to the train. The Divisional Trains operated immediately behind the front line drawing one to three days supplies from the refilling points and distributing these to the frontline brigade/divisional troops. The Transport companies moved baggage, food, forage, fuel, ammunition, construction materials and casualties, often under atrocious conditions and under enemy fire and gas. The transport personnel were usually fine types of up-country Australians accustomed to horses and generally operated two horse per wagon General Service Wagons (see picture at page 12).

20 June 1916 - Robert embarked in **ALEXANDRIA** in Egypt to join British Expeditionary Force in France.

Move to France & Western Front

30 June 1916 - Robert disembarked in **MARSEILLES** in France after a sea voyage under conditions which were generally described by Ellis as ideal.

23/30 June 1916 - Disembarkation and entrainment of the Division in **MARSEILLES** continued over the period.



Robert in Egypt in 1915.



Colour Patch - 5th
Division Train



The train journey took the Division through the enchanting French countryside to **HAZEBROUCK** near the Belgian border as shown in the below sketch from Ellis, 1919.



The Somme Campaign and the Battle of Fromelles

1 July 1916 - Arrived **ABBEVILLE** in Northern France on the day of commencement of the **SOMME** campaign.

2 July 1916 - Left **ABBEVILLE** for **HAZEBROUCK**

5 July 1916 - Balance of the 29th Company of the AASC marched in to the pretty French village of **BLARINGHEM** where Divisional HQ had been established since 25 June 1916.

8 July 1916 - At **BLARINGHEM**, the 18th & 29th Companies of the AASC were ordered to join up with their Brigade formation and march to a forward position, billeting in the vicinity of **ESTAIRE**.

10/11 July 1916 - The Fifth Division takes over a four mile section of the front line about three miles south of **ARMENTIERES**. Some units including the Divisional Train move into billets near **SAILLY SUR LYS**.

16 July 1916 - Vehicles of the train impressed into nightly transporting ammunition and engineers stores to the front line preparatory to the attack at **FROMELLES**



Like all other transport and supply units, the Divisional Train found the road communications in the area trying to the extreme. LT COL Francis's HQ were at **BECORDEL** and as the railhead was **ALBERT**, supplies were drawn from it by horse transport and conveyed to the brigade dumps, where they were collected by the first line transport of the fighting units. (Ellis)

19 July 1916 - FROMELLES, seventy kilometres north of the battle of the Somme, was the site of the first major Australian operation on the Western Front. The attack there on 19 July 1916 by the 5th Division and the British 61st Division was intended to discourage the Germans from withdrawing troops from this area and sending them south to the battle raging on the Somme. The attack failed to achieve its tactical objective of capturing the German trenches but did serve to delay the redeployment of German troops south to the Somme for several weeks. The attackers suffered a disastrous defeat with 7000 killed and wounded. 5533 of these were Australians, making 19 July 1916 the bloodiest day in Australian military history.

The division remained in the vicinity of **ARMENTIERES** for nearly three months following **FROMELLES** and was reinforced in September. The railhead for supplies was at **BAE ST. MAUR** about three miles from the frontline and the transport units of the Divisional Train were deployed on collecting rations and forage and distributing them to the Brigade refilling points (Ellis).

14 October 1916 - The Divisional Train, including the 29th Company of the AASC, entrained for **ESTAIRE**

17/18 October 1916 - The Division moved to **AILLY LE HAUT CLOCHER**, a charming village on the lower Somme.

Winter 1916 on the Somme

20 October 1916 - Winter was spent on the **SOMME** with the Division holding the line in the vicinity of **FLERS** and **GEUEDECOURT** without undertaking any major operation (Ellis).

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An insight into the terrible conditions prevailing on the Somme front around **FLERS** in November 1916 is provided in the following observation by Cotterill:

“... no pen could ever adequately describe the misery and privations of the men holding the line. The trenches were ghastly ditches full of water and mud, and the decomposing remains of heroes of already forgotten battles ... Rain fell nearly every day, there was no drainage, and the weather was too cold for anything to dry ... mud was the God of this sector ... in looking back the troops have only one horrible memory of Flers, and that is of the mud. It was as if the whole region had wilted under the terrific strain put upon it, and as if the backbone had gone out of the land, leaving only a soft, viscous mass for the troops to die in,” (Ref: Cotterill, in Walter Belford, *Legs–Eleven, Being the Story of the 11th Battalion (AIF) in the Great War of 1914–1918*, Perth, 1940, p.360–1)



January 1917 - LT COL Francis's HQ remained at **FRICOURT** throughout the whole of January and February 1917. The Divisional Train horses continued to suffer severely. During the absence of the Division in the back areas, the animals and vehicles of the Divisional train were utilised on road repairs. On the return of the Division to its old sector on 18 January, the railhead for supplies advanced from Edge Hill to **QUARRY SIDING** and the supply sections moved to **QUARRY SIDING** accordingly. The remainder of the train was kept on road maintenance. (Ellis)

While in **FRICOURT**, the Division encountered nightly bombing and machine gunning by aircraft as well as enemy shelling with High Explosive, shrapnel and gas rounds.

Advance to the Hindenburg Line

16 March 1917 - The Division commences a general advance in response to the enemy withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line. (Ellis)

17 March 1917 - Units of the Division liberate the French market town of **BAPAUME**.

18 March 1917 - LT COL Francis, the Divisional Train commander, and his men, recognising that maintenance of the forward fighting forces depended on their efforts, were working might and main to deliver food and forage to **BAPAUME** (Ellis)

23 March 1917 - The 28th Battalion of the 5th Division defeats a German counter-attack at **BEAUMETZ**.

28 March 1917 - As the advance guard of Division pursues the enemy forces retreating to the Hindenburg line, LT COL Francis details 50 wagons to supply the advance guard in its early operations. From the railhead at **QUARRY SIDING** to **BAPAUME** is a far cry. An advanced supply dump is established at **BAPAUME** a day or two after the German withdrawal and is admirably managed by LT C W Laity of the 5th Divisional Train. On 29 March the railhead changes to **BAZENTIN** and the Deauville Railway is utilised for carriage of supplies to **BEAULENCOURT**. CAPT Rodd too establishes an advanced ordnance dump, first at **BERNAFAY** and then on 1 April at **BAPAUME**.

30 March 1917 - The Divisional Train is operating around **BERNAFAY** where an ordnance dump has been established.

2 April 1917 - The French villages of **DOIGNES & LOUVERAL** are captured in successful sequential attacks by a Brigade of the 5th Division. The action which incurred 474 casualties is later cited as a major action for the period by Sir Douglas Haig, the British commander-in-chief.

7 April 1917 - The railhead for supplies advances to **BAPAUME**. This action enabled LT COL Francis to increase still further the number of his vehicles detached for the work of road construction. No fewer than 40 wagons of the Divisional Train are diverted to this all important work and the essential communications of the Divisional area progresses rapidly. (Ellis)

Early April 1917 - The train moves to **BEAULENCOURT** and enjoys success in establishing a series of supply dumps along the **BEAULENCOURT – BAPAUME Road**. The War Diary notes that the supply system works well.



9 April 1917 - WO Macdonald is mentioned in the British commander-in-chief, Sir Douglas Haig's despatches. The recommendation signed by Lt-Col F.H. Francis, the Commanding Officer of the 5th Division Train, and the Commander of the Australian 5th Division, Major General Talbot Hobbs, included the statement below about the action for which Robert was commended.

“ He joined the A.I.F. on 1st October 1914. He served in Egypt from 26th September 1915 to June 1916 and in France July 1916 to February 1917, including four months on the Somme front. He has always carried out his duties with distinction and been an example to his men.”



Pictured above is the then Major F H Francis (left). Source: Australian War Memorial C04995



Pictured above is Major General Talbot Hobbs (left). Source: Australian War Memorial C00857

15 April 1917 - While at **BEAULENCOURT**, the Division receives reports of heavy enemy attacks on the 1st and 2nd Divisions of the AIF. Orders are given to stand by to move. Subsequently the Division is informed that the attack has been beaten back.

20 April 2017 - The 29th Company of the AASC is ordered to **MAMETZ**

9 May 1917 - The Division is again deployed in the front line area in the vicinity of **BAZENTIN**. The 29th Company of the AASC is amongst the companies ordered to **BAPAUME**.

9 May 1917 - The Division enters the fray at the **2ND BATTLE OF BULLECOURT**. This battle in two weeks of heavy fighting over the period 3 - 17 May 1917 resulted in the Australian and British Forces, in the face of intensive artillery bombardment, forcing the Germans to retreat from this part of the **HINDENBURG LINE**. The cost was about 1500 divisional casualties for the month.



11 -15 May 1917 - The 29th Company AASC is reported as carting Gas Guns to **NOREUIL**

25 May -15 June - The 5th Division deployed as Corps Reserve in **BANCOURT/BAPAUME** area. (Ellis)

15 June 1917 - The Division is withdrawn to the **RUBEMPRE** area for rest and training remaining there until 17 September 1917. (Ellis)

13/14 June 1917 - Move of the 29th Company AASC from **BEAULENCOURT** to **SPRING GARDENS CAMP** and then to **CONTAY**

25 July 1917 - Move of the Division to 2nd Army area in vicinity of **BLARINGHEM**. The 29th Company of the AASC is reported as operating in the vicinity of **BELLE EGLISE**

Belgian Flanders 1917

26 Sept 1917 - A significant victory is achieved by the 4th and 5th Australian Divisions in the action at **POLYGON WOOD** (near **YPRES** in the **FLANDERS** region of Belgium) that saw a one kilometre advance and the taking of two lines of German trenches. Casualties numbered over 3700 for the 5th Division.

After the war, the veterans of the 5th Division chose Polygon Wood as the site of the Division's memorial.



Pictured is the plaque on Fifth Australian Division Memorial at Polygon Wood, Zonnebeke, Belgium

1 October 1917 - Move of the 29th Company of the AASC to the **SCOTTISH LINES**, a hutted camp between Reninghelst and Poperinge in Belgium

4 October 1917 - The Battle of **BROODSEINDE** was fought on near **Ypres** in Flanders, at the east end of the Gheluvelt plateau, by the British Second and Fifth armies and the German Fourth Army. The 5th Division Artillery supported the successful attack by 1st and 2nd Divisions of the AIF. The Australian Divisions suffered 7433 casualties at Broodseinde with some from the 5th Division.

9 November 1917 - 5th Division moving to the **DRANOUTRE** area in the **MESSINES – WYTSCHAETE** sector in Northern France

15 November 1917 - Move of 29th Company AASC to **BULLER CAMP** near **BRULOOZE**



1 December 1917 - 29th Company AASC at **BEAUCORRY**

9 January 1918 - Robert on leave in the UK.

24 January 1918 - Robert rejoins the 29th Company of the AASC in France.

28/29 January 1918 - The Divisional Train moved from **ELNES** through **RENESECURE** and **STRAZEELE** to **KEMMEL**

21 March 1918 - Great German offensive (Operation Michael) launched.

25 March 1918 - Orders received to move the Division to the Somme District as reports came in of “English soldiers retreating” in the face of the German offensive.

29 March 1918 - 29th Company AASC detrained at **MUNDICOURT** and marched to **BUS**, then on to **FRANCVILLERS**, **ZONNEBKE** and **BEHENCOURT**. Dumps moved in association.

1 April 1918 - Move of 29th Company AASC to **PONT NOYELLES**

4 April 1918 - The 5th Division is ordered to proceed immediately to the **BLANGY TRONVILLE** area and relieve the British Divisions located there.

Battle of Villers Bretonneux

24/25 April 1918 - German attack on the French village of **VILLERS BRETTONEUX**. The Division launches a successful counter-attack and succeeds in recapture of the town. The Division's casualties of around 150 were wonderfully light (Ellis). The decisive victory at **VILLERS BRETTONEUX** denies the Germans the chance to cut off the combined British Forces supply line and marks the end of the German advance towards **AMIENS**.

The April period saw the Divisional Train being exposed to shelling, aerial bombing and gas attacks and suffering casualties.

The enemy's offensive action in the Somme salient ended with the month of April 1917.

30 April 1918 - Robert appointed Temporary Warrant Officer Class I in the Regular Forces of the British Army while in the field.

1 May 1918 - Robert's unit, the 29th Company of the AASC, is reported as operating in the vicinity of **PONT NOYELLES**.

May/June 1918 - The months of May and June 1918 are in the history of the Division the period of the greatest defensive activity (wiring, trench digging and the construction of strong points) and passed without any very noteworthy fighting by the Division.

29 July 1918 - When the Allies took to the offensive again, the 29th Battalion of the Division fought in a minor attack at **MORLANCOURT**.

Divisional Train reported moving forward near **AMIENS**



August 1918 - Division reported as reconnoitring around **VILLERS BRETONNEUX**

Battle of Amiens

8 August 1918 - The **BATTLE OF AMIENS** involved the Division as a key player in the second phase of the allied attack and saw the Division exploiting the initial breakthrough. By the end of the day, the Allies had punched a hole 20 kilometres wide and 11 kilometres deep in the German lines. The Allied victory at Amiens was described as a "Black Day" for the German forces by the German senior commanders.

9 August 1918 - The day after the Battle of Amiens, the 5th Division, which was meant to have been relieved by the 1st Division, continued the advance with the 15th Brigade supporting the neighbouring advance made by the Canadian Corps and the 8th Brigade taking **VAUVILLERS**.

10 August 1918 - The 5th Division is withdrawn from line and rests in the vicinity of **VILLERS BRETONNEUX**

26 August 1918 - The 5th Division brought back into the line and continued the advance towards **PERONNE** in the vicinity of **FOUCACOURT** as the Germans retreated.

Battle of Peronne

1 September 1918 - In a coordinated attack with the 2nd Division of the AIF, which assaulted and took the formidable German strongpoint on **MONT ST QUENTIN** on 1 September 1918, the 14th Brigade of the 5th Division captured the woods north and followed up by taking the main part of the nearby town of **PERONNE**. The town had been turned into a fort and was the last major German stronghold before the **HINDENBURG LINE**. The 15th Brigade captured the rest of the town the following day.

7 September 1918 - All companies shipped to neighbourhood of **BOIS de MORCACOURT**

27 September 1918 - Robert is posted to the 10th Company of the Australian Army Service Corps which was another unit in the 5th Divisional Train & also known as the 1st Reserve Supply Park.

Breaching of the Hindenburg Line

29 September 1918 - The **BATTLE OF BELLICOURT** took place over the period 29 September to 5 October 1918. The 5th Division followed up the initial attack made by the American 30th Division and by 1 October 1918 had broken through and captured the first two **HINDENBURG LINE** trench systems.

31 September 1918 - The Division was instrumental in the 31 September 1918 capture and clearing of **JONCOURT**, a village situated in the north-western corner of the Department of the Aisne, 12 kilometres north of St Quentin & immediately west of the German fortification called the **BEAUREVOIR-FONSOMME LINE**. The Division suffered 1516 casualties in these battles associated with breaching the **HINDENBURG LINE**.



1 October 1918 - The 5th Division was withdrawn from the line after three days of intense fighting and moved to a reserve position near **HERVILLY**.

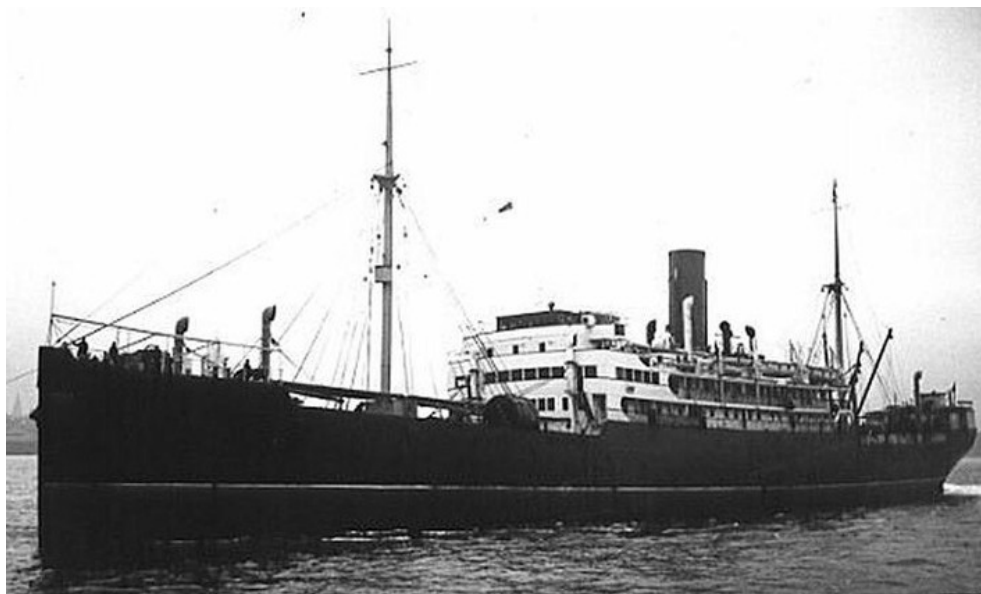
9 October 1918 - The 29th Company of the AASC arrived at **DOUDELAINVILLE** and moved on to **MAREUIL**.

1 November 1918 - Returned to **ABBEVILLE** depot.

11 November 1918 - Armistice signed

19 – 29 October 1918 – Robert on leave in Paris.

30 December 1918 - Robert and other 1915 personnel embarked in England for Australia on the troop transport ship “Burmah”.



Pictured is the Burmah, the ship on which Robert returned to Melbourne

Return to Australia

29 January 1919 - Robert disembarked in Melbourne.

30 March 1919 - Robert discharged by 3 Military District.

15 November 1919 - Married Elizabeth Isabella Nimmo of Gnotuk in Camperdown. Robert and Elizabeth subsequently had five children: Isobel, Bruce, Marion, Malcolm and Marie.

Post-war, he lived in Riddell and worked as an employee of the railways.

21 June 1930 - Robert is accorded a full military funeral by the Kyneton Branch of the Returned Servicemen's League with the last post sounded. His remains are interred at Kyneton Cemetery.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P00037.005

Pictured is a General Service Wagon at Heliopolis, Egypt circa 1915
Courtesy: Australian War Memorial P00037.005

Medals

1. 1914/1915 Star
2. Victory Medal
3. British War Medal
4. Mentioned in Despatch emblem—Two oak Leaves (one large and one small)

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2. Ellis, A.D. *The Story of the Fifth Australian Division; Being an Authoritative Account of the Division's Doings in Egypt, France and Belgium.* Houghton & Stodder, London 1919. (Note: Robert referenced in Appendix III)
3. Lindsay, Neville: *Equal to the Task.* Vol I. The Royal Australian Army Service Corps. Historia Productions 1991. ISBN 0 646 06707 9 (Note: Robert referenced in Appendix 2)
4. Moran, Rod: "Poet Banjo gave more than words", *The West Australian*, 11 Nov 2011