

## Trooper William (Michael) Breheny (Regimental No. 109)

### 13<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment

Born c. August 1893 in Rushworth, Victoria, Trooper William Breheny enlisted on 4 January 1915 at Melbourne, Vic, aged 21 years 5 months. He stood 5ft 4.5in high and weighed 10st 10lbs.

Prior to enlistment, he worked as a labourer for Mr P. Cashen in Goornong, Vic. He'd worked for Mr Cashen for around seven years and apparently considered the property "his home". (*The Bendigo Independent 14 Jan 1916 p.3*)



*Above: Trooper William Breheny c.1915 (The Bendigo Independent 14 Jan 1916 p.3).*

Trooper Breheny arrived at Broadmeadows Camp in January 1915 (which was still a fairly basic tent city at that stage) to undertake his basic training as a Light Horseman/Infantryman.

The Light Horse were not considered to be cavalry by the Army. They were in fact designated as mounted infantry and they would generally be expected to ride to their destination, before dismounting to fight.



*Above: Recruits arriving at Broadmeadows Camp in late 1914*



*Above: A Light Horse Regiment (8<sup>th</sup>) training around Broadmeadows Camp in early 1915.*

After completing basic training, the 13<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment embarked from Melbourne on 28 May 1915 on board HMAT A34 *Persic*, disembarking in Egypt on 29 June 1915.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Above: HMAT A34 Persic c. June 1916*



*Above: The Colour Patch of the 13th Light Horse Regiment.*

The Light Horse, being mounted troops, were initially considered unsuitable for the operations and terrain at Gallipoli, however as the campaign progressed and the infantry casualties mounted, they were subsequently deployed without their horses.

Trooper Breheny and the 13th Light Horse Regiment landed at Gallipoli on 11 September 1915. For most of its time there the regiment manned the trenches at Lone Pine, one of the most heavily contested parts of the ANZAC front line.

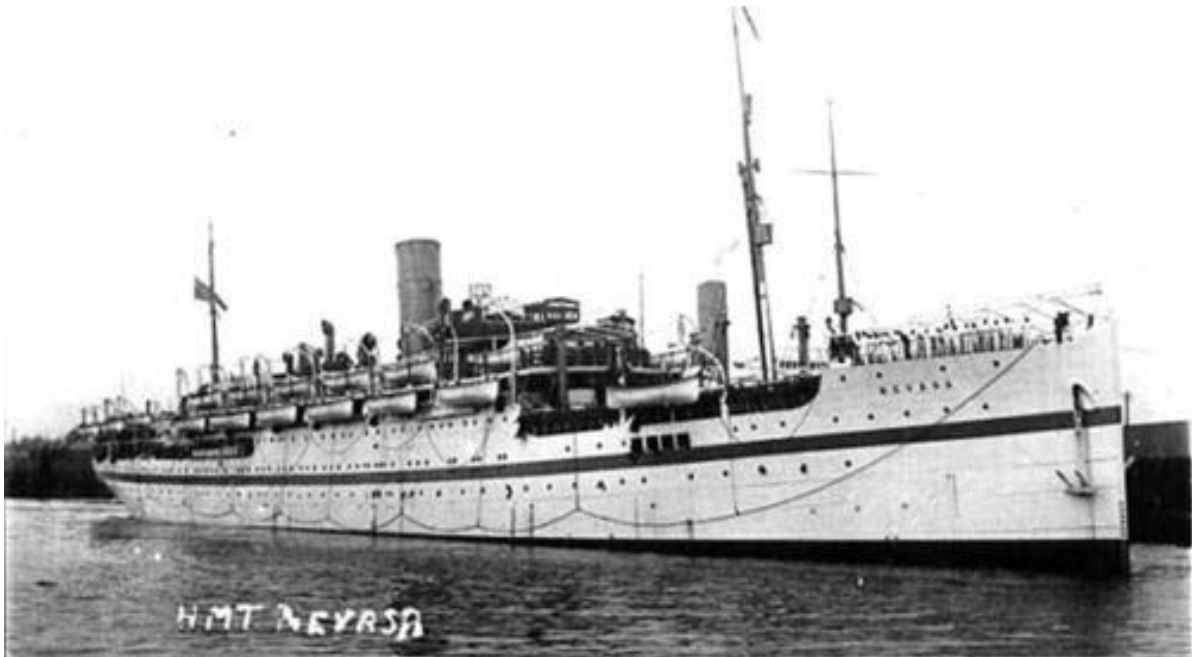


AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Above: Light Horse troops in a typical Gallipoli front line trench (note the periscope in use) where the threat of sniper fire was always present.*

On 1 November 1915, Trooper Breheny became ill with appendicitis and colic and was evacuated on the hospital ship *HS Nevasa* the next day.



*Above: HMHS Nevasa*

He arrived in Heliopolis, Egypt on 7 November 1915 where he was admitted to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Auxiliary Hospital (near Cairo) for treatment.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Above: Soldiers from Gallipoli recovering at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Auxiliary Hospital, Egypt 1915 (formerly the Heliopolis Palace Hotel).*

At one stage during his treatment, he was pronounced as “dangerously ill”, however he eventually overcame his illness and was deemed fit enough to return to duty on 23 January 1916.

The February to April 1916 period was one of wholesale expansion and re-organisation for the AIF in Egypt, with many new units being formed and others reinforced with new recruits from Australia.

As part of these changes, Trooper Breheny left the Australian Light Horse, becoming Private Breheny of the Cyclist Company of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Infantry Division. As a member of this group he embarked for France from Alexandria on 19 March 1916, arriving in Marseilles on 30 March 1916.

It appears Private Breheny spent the period April to July 1916 at Marseilles undertaking general duties at the AIF Kit Depot and Base Details Camp, probably on work details supporting AIF front line supply requirements.

He fell ill again (nature of illness not stated) on 9 August 1916 and over the next three months spent his time in numerous hospitals from Etaples, France to Dartford, England.

He was discharged for a return to duty on 10 November 1916.

From 18 November 1916 to 20 April 1917, he underwent further training at the AIF No.2 Command Depot at Perham Downs, on Salisbury Plain, where reinforcements and/or recuperating soldiers honed their skills and physical fitness before embarking for overseas service.



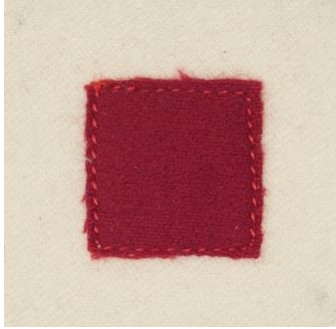
Above: Perham Downs Camp c.1916

On 21 April 1917, he was transferred to the Australian Cyclists Training Battalion at Chiseldon Camp, Swindon, UK (below).



At the completion of his cyclist training, Private Breheny embarked for overseas service in France on 5 July 1917, arriving at Rouelles the next day. He was marched out to his unit on 19 July 1917 and was formally taken on to the strength of the 1<sup>st</sup> Anzac Corps Cyclist Battalion on 22 July 1917.

The cyclist battalions were organised like the infantry, and were mainly used as despatch riders. Other tasks performed at various times included laying communications cabling, traffic control, unloading stores from railway wagons, harvesting crops, and even burial of the dead.



*Above: Colour patch of the 1<sup>st</sup> Anzac Corps Cyclist Battalion*



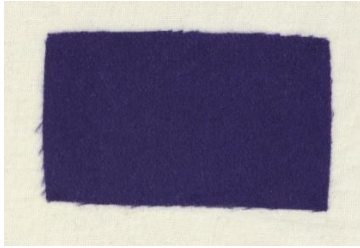
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Above: Two members of the 1st ANZAC Corps Cyclist Battalion in France, c. July 1916*

On 8 September 1917, Private Breheny was attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division Signals Company in Belgium. It was about this time that the cumulative effects of high battle casualties and lower recruitment were having a significant impact on the AIF. As a result, any trained soldiers from “non-combatant” units that could be “spared” for front line duty were re-allocated where possible.

All Divisional Signals Companies belonged to the Royal Australian Engineers and were tasked with providing overall communications. In the case of 1<sup>st</sup> Division, this meant the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigades, plus all the ancillary units like Field Artillery, MG Companies, Pioneers, etc. This could be via a combination of electronic and/or physical means (like despatch riders).



*Above: Colour patch of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division Signals Company*

By far the most important means however, was the field telephone. This entailed thousands of metres of wire cable and thousands of handsets. To create the network, telephone lines had to be laid all over the landscape. Lines were buried where possible however they would often be cut or broken by artillery fire. They would of course then have to be re-laid.

Laying line was one of the most hazardous jobs in the front line as the layers had to move above the ground carrying a reel of wire. They could often be the only moving thing on the battlefield and thus regularly attracted enemy fire, both small arms and artillery. Hence the task was often performed at night, although that brought with it the added risk of becoming disoriented on the battlefield.



*Above: Sappers laying telephone cable in the Menin Road, Belgium area, September 1917*



Sapper Breheny (his new rank upon joining the engineers) saw action with the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division Signals Company during the Battle of Menin Road on 20 September 1917, when the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Divisions captured 1.5km of enemy territory east of Ypres, Belgium. Hailed as a resounding success, the Australians nevertheless sustained over 5,000 casualties.



*Above: Australian casualties waiting to be moved to dressing stations at Menin Road, 20 September 1917.*

Sapper Breheny was again in action only a fortnight later at the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge on 4 October 1917, when the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Divisions, and the New Zealand Division, attacked on a 4.5 km front and captured the high ground above the village of Broodseinde. Once again considered a successful attack, it cost the Australians 6,500 casualties, and the New Zealanders a further 1,700.



*Above: The shattered remnants of Remus Wood after the Battle of Broodseinde Ridge, 5 October 1917.*

The 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division remained in Belgium and spent the last months of 1917, and the first months of 1918, recovering and resting following the series of battles collectively known as Third Ypres.

On 30 March 1918, Sapper Breheny came down with a bout of scabies however returned to duty on 4 April 1918, just in time to participate in the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division's spirited defensive action about 8km east of Hazebrouck, near the French and Belgian border, from 14-23 April 1918.

The strong German attack on 14 April 1918, part of its wider "Spring Offensive", was eventually halted and the British front line stabilised by the Australians' efforts.



*Above: 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion (1<sup>st</sup> Division) soldiers watch as their billets in Hazebrouck come under German shell fire during the attack.*

The scabies returned on 12 May 1918 however after 10 days in hospital, Sapper Breheny returned to his unit in Belgium on 25 May 1918.

After a period of relative quiet following the halt of the Spring Offensive, during early August 1918 the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division was moved from Belgium down to the Somme region, east of Amiens, in preparation for a major Allied offensive being planned.

The great offensive began at 4.20 am on the 8 August 1918 with a massive artillery barrage and hundreds of tanks supporting four Australian Divisions in the attack. The advance was swift and successful.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Division became involved on 9 and 10 August when it helped take the village of Lihons. Sapper Breheny would have been in the thick of it, keeping communications lines intact for the attacking units, as the Germans resisted strongly with gas shells and several infantry counter-attacks. By nightfall on the 10<sup>th</sup> the Australians had taken the German trenches and captured hundreds of guns and prisoners.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Above: 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion (1<sup>st</sup> Division) soldiers in the Old Somme trench system near Lihons, with some of the captured German field guns in the background, 10 August 1918.*

The final action of the war to involve the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division was the battle to breach the outer line of the main German defensive system on the Western Front – The Hindenburg Line. Called the Hindenburg Outpost Line, it included three lines of old British trenches that were overrun in the Spring Offensive in March 1918, now occupied and heavily fortified by the Germans.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Above: Signals Sappers of the 4th Division erecting telephone lines behind Vendelles, on the day before the attack on the Hindenburg Outpost Line, which commenced at dawn on 18 September 1918.*

Attacking at dawn on 18 September 1918, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Divisions successfully breached, and then held, the German outer defences, at a cost of around 1,300 Australian casualties. They also captured around 4,500 German prisoners and 76 guns.

In the ensuing days, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division was removed from the front line to a rest area around Abbeville, France.

Following the signing of the Armistice to end the war on 11 November 1918, all of the Australian Divisions were then billeted in various villages in northern France and Flanders until arrangements could be made to send them back home to Australia.

During this period, many soldiers took the opportunity to immerse themselves in their local communities, helping to clear and rebuild villages or work on nearby farms.

Sapper Breheny also took the opportunity to proceed on leave to England for two weeks from 16 December 1918, spending Christmas 1918 there before returning to his unit on 4 January 1919.

Despite being attached to the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division Signals Company since September 1917, it was not actually until 24 January 1919 that Sapper Breheny was included on that unit's formal roll. It seems fitting given his experiences since becoming a signaller, that he would travel back to Australia with this unit and not the Cyclist Battalion.

On 29 January 1919, Sapper Breheny and his Signals unit were marched out for their return to Australia, and they left France on 3 February 1919, arriving in England the next day.

The 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division Signals Company, including Sapper Breheny, finally embarked from Devonport, England on board the SS *Suffolk* for the long trip home on 12 April 1919.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*Above: SS Suffolk passing through the Suez Canal.*

Sapper Breheny disembarked at Melbourne on 5 June 1919 and was honourably discharged from the AIF on 4 August 1919.

He was later awarded the 1914-15 Star, the British War Medal and the Victory Medal (*left to right below*) for his services during the war.



Post war, we know William Breheny returned to Goornong at some stage as he was known to be prospecting in that area around 1935-36, and also working in the Fosterville area in the 1940's.

On 23 September 1944 he married Elsie Louisa Read at St Patrick's Cathedral, Melbourne.

He died at Bendigo on 1 March 1949, aged 56, and was buried at Bendigo Cemetery.



*Above: William Michael Breheny on his wedding day, aged 51*