

## Private William George McGregor

Regimental No: 3288



The period of recruitment was a happy and exhilarating time for new soldiers. Seeing the world and meeting people of all races was something that they all looked forward to. They were filled with enthusiasm not yet to experience the full horror of war. Amidst this passion and anticipation, William George embarked on what was believed to be "Gods Call", as the ship departed from home on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 1916. William and his fellow soldiers watched as their loved ones sang and cheered, proud and confident. Though they refused to believe it, this could be the last time many of them would see their dearly beloveds.

\* \* \*

South Australian farmer, William George McGregor, was an exceptional young man of twenty-one years. He was not overly tall or extremely strong, but he was a devoted workingman, fair, blue eyed and well kept. After living in the small town of Lochiel his entire life, William decided that he needed to get out and see the world, and what better way to do that, than serving his nation in the First World War. He had seen others go off feeling proud and fulfilled, and he wanted that. Leaving his family, particularly his father James and mother Elizabeth, was going to be difficult but he had confidence that he would see them again, as the war was perceived to be quick, easy and simple.

William did not choose to join the army at first, but the posters and newspaper advertisements<sup>1</sup>, made going to war seem an important service for his country. William obviously possessed the ANZAC qualities of courage, loyalty and selflessness, as giving up a comfortable and peaceful life on the farm for an unknown destination a long way from home was a huge sacrifice.

William was appointed to the 32<sup>nd</sup> battalion<sup>2</sup> as a part of the 8<sup>th</sup> Brigade. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1916, he packed his bags and left for the Mitcham training camp, on the outskirts of Adelaide. According to the Mitcham Camp Memorial<sup>3</sup>, the training centre was the first of two in South Australia. He trained there for six months and when the time came for William to leave for Europe, he boarded the *HMAT A57 Malakuta* in anticipation.

Before William had arrived in Europe, in the July of 1916, his battalion had experienced a major tragedy with almost 90% of their fighting strength killed in the Battle of Fromelles. Having only been in the Western Front trenches for less than three days, it was a major shock for their young Battalion. They desperately needed several more soldiers fast if they were to survive much more of the war that was just beginning. The arrival of William and his fellow soldiers, in the November of 1916, brought much needed strength back into the Battalion.

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of December, just six days after joining the rest of their Battalion, William was admitted to hospital with a fever. He had been in and out of the Front Line trenches where the conditions were deplorable, especially in winter. Many caught awful diseases and suffered from stress related trauma. The deafening sound and the muddy, humid conditions were too much for some, meaning the medical facilities were usually crowded. William's body would understandably not be able to adjust to these conditions so quickly; catching a fever was fathomable and quickly solved with a little rest.

William was often sick during his time at war. He was admitted with bronchitis on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of December, which is a disease that causes swelling of the airways. Many soldiers smoked which combined with the dust and smoulder of weapons would have played some part in bringing on this illness. It is very common for bronchitis to come back, so the following February, William was again forced to slow down and get it treated.

The 70<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade is a unit whose sole purpose is to protect the United Kingdom on their own territory. On the 25<sup>th</sup> of March 1917, William was transferred to this division. During his time away from the 32<sup>nd</sup> battalion, William again spent time in poor health with scabies and gonorrhoea. Sexually transmitted diseases were quite common at war; William was forced to take eighteen days leave in total due to V.D.(Venereal Disease) William's medical record suggested that he spent a total of twenty-seven days in medical facilities with various illnesses. This did not deter his dedication to duty, an ANZAC quality that saw many Australians return to the Western Front after recovery.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of October 1917, William transferred back to the 32<sup>nd</sup> battalion on special orders of which were nowhere stated. His return would be a shock, as serving on the 70<sup>th</sup> Battalion was almost a holiday in comparison to the cruel conditions and tremendous noise and danger of the Front Line trenches in particular.

Excessive investigations<sup>4,5</sup> provide conflicting explanations of the involvement of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion in the Spring Offensive. The Australian War Memorial records suggest they were not involved, source 4 however, a letter by a member of Williams battalion, puts the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion at the Somme and involved in the Spring Offensive. The Germans believed that the offensive was their last shot at winning the war before the powerful United States would step in. During this battle, on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March, William was hit. He was shot in the chest and groin, instantly he knew he would have to fight a mighty battle to overcome this. He was sent to the Second Casualty Clearing Station where over five, slow, agonising days he would eventually die.

Completely oblivious to what had happened half way across the world, James and Elizabeth McGregor were going about their daily lives. They would be unaware for weeks that their son was no longer alive. When the awful news was finally passed on, James attempted to have Williams belongings sent back home, yet as a result of an enemy attack, everything was lost at sea. Despite this, William had been rewarded with various medals, which were sent home as a reminder of the honourable deed he had done by giving his life for his country.

The three medals that James acquired included a Victory Medal, British Medal and the 1914-15 Star. The Victory Medal is given to those who served in a unit during war, the British War Medal is rewarded to those who served time overseas and the 1914-15 Star is a reward for those who served on the establishment of a ship. William may not have committed some heroic act that would result in a unique, revered medal but he, along with the rest of those who served, are remembered with pride and the everlasting admiration of generations of Australians.

William McGregor was buried in the *Outtersteene Communal Cemetery* in Bailleul, France. Many Australian soldiers were buried here from August 1917 but he was one of the last as the already extended cemetery became full by March 1918. William may now lie among many fellow soldiers, but the distance made it very hard for any family to visit. James and Elizabeth would have undoubtedly wished they could bring their son home, but at least they have been rewarded with the medals to remind them of their brave, loyal, idealistic son.

Of the 417000 men who enlisted in the AIF, approximately two hundred and ninety five thousand of these served on the Western Front and nearly sixty-five percent became casualties. The loyalty towards our country was implausible, and the sacrifices made were unthinkable. William was one of the sixty thousand Australians who died on active service, just one of the valuable lives lost. It was a dreadful time for Australia; no one imagined that anyone would let something like this ever happen again. No one thought that we would give up thousands of our bravest, most loyal men again, but despite this, just twenty-one years later, we would do just that.

Word Count: 1332

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## Sources



**SOURCE 1:** Posters used during the First World War to guilt young men into going to war.

### SOURCE 3: Mitcham Camp Memorial Booklet

## Bibliography

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### LANCE CORPORAL LANCE COAD

March 1918

After this trip in the line, we spent some time at Wulverghem but we returned to the front line at Messines. We were in front of a ruined village. It was March 15<sup>th</sup>.

The trench was in a good condition and a little to the rear of the others with comfortable dugouts, and a patch of mud in front of us, but we were well concealed. Yet, it was here that I was wounded by a stray bullet fired from a long way off.

On 21<sup>st</sup> March 1918, the Germans began their last desperate offensive to win the war. The Somme was evidently their main objective, but they made many minor attacks along the whole front, including one on the Messines sector which was held by the Australians. Early on the morning of 21<sup>st</sup> March, I was about to go on patrol when a friend, Frank of Murray Bridge, who wasn't a member of the patrol but who evidently was looking for some excitement, asked me to leave the other members on his post and that we two would go out alone, suggesting that only two could sneak closer to Fritz's trenches. I agreed, so the two of us wandered around the disputed area for over two hours, and we examined his wire entanglements for some distance, and proceeded left as far as it was safe to go, without overlapping the Aussies on our left where we may have been mistaken for Germans. On one occasion, two Aussie patrols mistook each other for Germans and fought each other, with disastrous results.

It was very lively in and behind the German trenches. Plenty of movement and noise, indicating that troops were being reinforced or relieved, or that they were taking up battle position ready to attack, and as it turned out the latter was the case.

After patrol, the leader of same had to report personally to the CO, so I reported that there was plenty of activity in and behind his trench on our immediate left. The CO asked me if I could recognise the noise. I said there was plenty of it, and I considered it the movement of troops.

Just before dawn that morning Fritz attacked the Aussie's on our left, and our CO, acting on my report sent our machine-guns to guard our left flank, but they were not required as the Aussies repulsed the attack and drove the Germans back to their trenches.

I had spent over two hours patrolling No Man's Land that morning, where I was in danger from machine-gun fire or of meeting a German patrol, and yet when I returned to my post in comparative safety, where we hadn't received a shot or shell of any description in five days, a burst of five stray bullets, fired from a long way off went 'plomp, plomp, plomp' into the mud in front of our trench. The fifth landed in our trench passing through my wrist as I was pointing out the direction of the noise I heard whilst on patrol to my sergeant.

### SOURCE 4: Letter written by a soldier in William's battalion, talking through the day that William was shot



**SOURCE 2:** Battalion Colour Patch

**Army Form B. 103. Casualty Form - Active Service.**

Regimental Number: 2888

Rank: Private  
 Regiment or Corps: 2888  
 Christian Name: William  
 Religion: Catholic  
 Date of enlistment: 10/10/18  
 Date of promotion to present rank: 10/10/18  
 Date of discharge: 10/10/18

Occupation: Soldier

Date	From where received	Remarks	Discharged
10/10/18	2888	Enlisted as Private	10/10/18
10/10/18	2888	Promoted to Private First Class	10/10/18
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SOURCE 5: Records of William's illnesses and movement throughout the war.