

William Charles Westbury

1878-1936

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William Charles Westbury

(1878-1936)



William Charles Westbury was part of the 10th Australian Battalion who landed on the shores of Gallipoli on April 25th 1915. He also served in the horrendous battle at Mouquet farm, and in the Boer War. William's final ranking was Lance Corporal. He was Aboriginal.

It was only in 1967 that indigenous Australians became recognised as citizens of Australia (Brennan, 2011). This meant that all Aboriginals enlisted in WW1 were not considered Australian citizens. They were fighting for a country that didn't even recognise them as their own. William's story highlights that Aboriginal soldiers like him didn't shame Australia, they honoured it.

William was born in 1878, Mount Gambier, South Australia to Ellen Baker and James Westbury. His mother Ellen was Aboriginal, of the local Boandik people. William was one of three siblings with a sister, Sarah, and a brother, John James A.I.F 2206. William's brother John also served in WW1, but there is little information about John or William's involvement in the war.

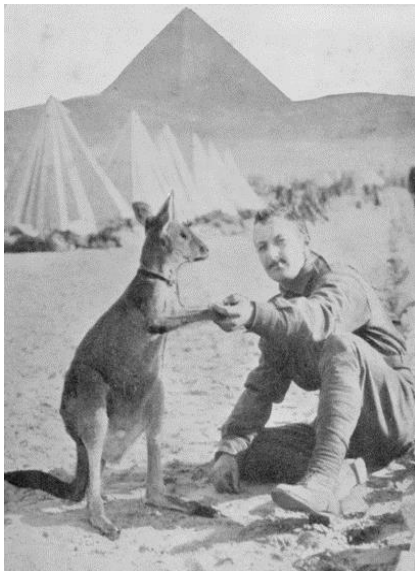
Figure 1: William Charles Westbury

William was born in 1878, Mount Gambier, South Australia to Ellen Baker and James Westbury. His mother Ellen was Aboriginal, of the local Boandik people. William was one of three siblings with a sister, Sarah, and a brother, John James A.I.F 2206. William's brother John also served in WW1, but there is little information about John or William's involvement in the war.

William attended MacDonnell Bay school and loved the outdoors. He was a skilled horseman and a good athlete, winning several prestigious foot races, a strongly built man with a distinctive scar on his left shin.

He was the only South Australian Aboriginal Soldier to serve in the Boer war (Royal, 2018). He served for 18 months in the 5th and 6th South Australian Imperial Bushman Boer War unit. Before this William was a fisherman.

He enlisted in the AIF on the 25th of August in 1914 at Pinnaroo, South Australia. He was posted to the 10th Battalion which along with the 9th, 11th and 12th Battalions, embarked on the HMAT Ascanius from Fremantle on the 25th of October 1914. The HMAT Ascanius arrived at Suez in Egypt that same year.



Before enlisting for WW1, William had been working as a labourer. The man he worked for, M.J.O'Loughlan, had given him a young kangaroo as a parting gift. The kangaroo sailed with William to Egypt and became the "kangaroo mascot" (refer Figure2). An Australian animal was certainly a strange sight to see in Egypt, but the kangaroo was loved by the soldiers none the less and provided welcome distraction. After undergoing training in Egypt, the Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces embarked on the *Ionian* on the 25th April 1915. At this time, the Mediterranean Expeditionary Forces (MEF) consisted of all allied forces that would be part of the landing on the shores of Gallipoli 25th of April, 1915 (Gallipoli Association, 2018).

Figure 2: Kangaroo with an Australian soldier near Egypt pyramids

As is widely known, the landing on Gallipoli was disastrous. The first boats, which carried Williams Battalion, landed on the shores a mile north of their target. The initial plan was to “bombard Ottoman defences with naval artillery, then stretch and disorient their forces with several co-ordinated landings” (The Gallipoli Campaign, 2018). But unforeseen circumstances including steep hills and rugged terrain, hindered their progress.

The 10th Battalion was part of the 3rd Brigade who were the first ashore at Gallipoli at 4:30 am on 25th April, 1915. William and his Battalion's role was to establish the front line and the ANZAC position, and made remarkable efforts in doing so. 747 Australian soldiers were killed on that first day. William was recognised for his leadership ability and promoted to Corporal.

The 10th Battalion served at Gallipoli from the start till the end of the campaign. On the 9th of May 1915 William was injured in action, a gunshot wound to his left ankle. He was evacuated to the England Harefield Auxiliary Hospital on the 8th of June.

After returning to duty at Gallipoli on the 30th of June 1915, William served in the Dardanelles Campaign where he suffered from gastro-enteritis and dysentery. Many other soldiers suffered from these same diseases until the Australian withdrawal and evacuation from Gallipoli in December 1915.

After the evacuation from Gallipoli William became part of the newly-formed 50th Australian Infantry Battalion. Around half of the recruits from the 50th Battalion were new reinforcements from Australia, and the other half former soldiers of the 10th Battalion. The 50th Battalion trained in Alexandria, Egypt, before engaging in their first major battle, Mouquet Farm, Pozieres, France.

The farm was much fought over in WW1 as it held a powerful position in the village of Pozieres, which both sides were fighting for. The Germans used the stone cellars underneath Mouquet Farm as part of their defence, which gave them some advantage. The 50th Battalion arrived in France on 11 June 1916 and fought at Mouquet Farm from the 13th to the 15th of August. Here they engaged in trench warfare, and the conditions were terrible. The endless enemy shelling meant soldiers were constantly repairing trenches and also making new ones. There was barely enough time to bury the bodies of the fallen, and mud got so thick that it clogged machine-gun mechanisms and the

firing pins of grenades (Anzac portal). These were the conditions William would have endured, and it is remarkable that he survived them. "The British advance eventually bypassed Mouquet Farm leaving it an isolated outpost. It fell, inevitably, on 27 September 1916" (Australian War Memorial).



After Mouquet Farm William served in 2 more Battalions, while also taking leave in London in-between. He was 40 by the time he was sent back to Australia, suffering from rheumatism. He was declared medically unfit in August 1917 and discharged with good conduct. William adjusted back to normal life, finding jobs in building, farming and railway work. He was awarded 3 medals for his service in WW1, which were the 1914/15 Star, the British Service Medal, and the Victory Medal (refer Figure3). But with much sadness, one of Williams war injuries eventually caught up with him. He died on 20 February 1936, aged 58. He was buried at Pinnaroo, forever missed by his family and friends.

Figure 3: The British Victory Medal

On the 25th of April, 1915, the ANZAC Spirit was born. This is the day when boys became men, the day they became hero's, leaders and saviours. No matter their background or race, they all became ANZAC's and were all fighting for one uniting cause - their country.

Of all the ANZAC stories I know of, none display the ANZAC Spirt value of courage like William Westbury's story does. For his entire life he was not recognised as a 'citizen' of his country, Australia. But still, after a life of prejudice, racism and discrimination, William had the courage to enlist and fight for Australia. He would have had no idea how he would be treated as an Aboriginal Australian soldier serving in the war. Would he be recognised as an Australian soldier, or undermined and socially ostracised because he was Aboriginal? I think William knew that he was just as much a part of Australia as any other Australians were, even if a law stated that he wasn't. Australia was ingrained in his heart, just as it was in the hearts of white Australia. He didn't listen to the people that told him he couldn't fight for Australia because he was Aboriginal, he listened to his heart and knew he was worthy of serving his country. It takes a remarkable amount of courage for someone to listen to their heart, when other people tell them the opposite. And this is exactly what William did.

For an Aboriginal living in the times and conditions William did, his achievement of becoming lance corporal is admirable. We must keep in mind that this was an era where Aboriginals were poorly understood and treated by white Australia, and many suffered as a consequence. Given these disadvantages it is remarkable that William became a figure of respect and authority.

For Aboriginals during WW1, enlisting in the A.I.F meant "the chance for better wages and international travel and the ability to prove themselves and push for equality" (Developing DIGITAL INTELLIGENCE), but I suspect it would have taken a lot of resilience for Aboriginals to "prove themselves" in the time that they were living in. It is clear that William proved himself through his achievements during his army service, but I can imagine this wouldn't have been easy to do unless you had an extraordinary amount of courage. William was one of those special people who did, and for this reason I admire him.

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Appendices

Figure 1: William Charles Westbury

Piromalli, C | The Australian War Memorial. 2018. *The story of William Charles Westbury Aboriginal Soldier, The Boer War and First World War | The Australian War Memorial*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/william-charles-westbury>. [Accessed 17 May 2018].

Figure 2: Kangaroo with an Australian soldier near Egypt pyramids

Piromalli, C | The Australian War Memorial. 2018. *The story of William Charles Westbury Aboriginal Soldier, The Boer War and First World War | The Australian War Memorial*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/william-charles-westbury>. [Accessed 17 May 2018].

Figure 3: The British Victory Medal

Read, F. 2018. *British First World War Service Medals | Imperial War Museums*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/first-world-war-service-medals>. [Accessed 17 May 2018].

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