

# 2019 Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize



**James Churchill Smith**

*Written by Liam Kay, Cardijn College*

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### Part A 1429 Words

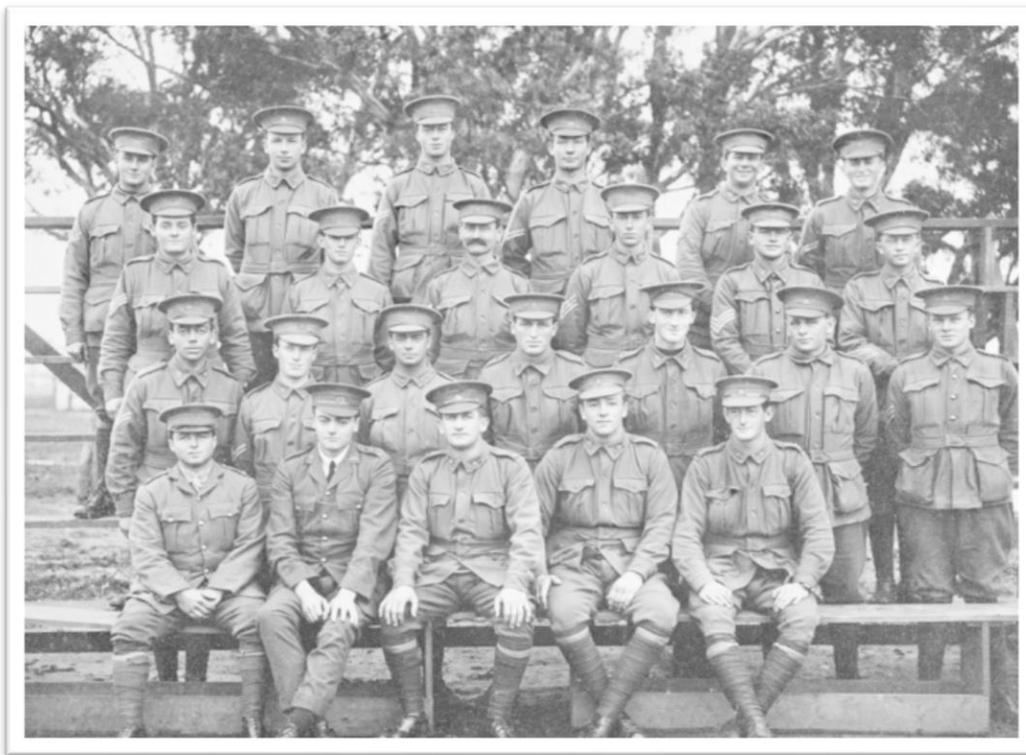


*Figure 1: 1049 CHURCHILL-SMITH, portrait photograph. Taken in 1915. Source from State Records of South Australia GRG26/5/4*

James Churchill-Smith, a daring, spirited, young man just shy of 21 years of age, enlisted to join the efforts of the Great War, otherwise known as World War One (see figure 1). James was an ordinary man prior to the war, but achieved exceptional feats during combat, saving many lives. Born on October 15, 1894, in Norwood, South Australia to Mr James Churchill-Smith Senior and Lucy Churchill-Smith, James was the youngest of three brothers. He was first educated at Miss Derrington's Private School, before proceeding to be educated at Kensington and Norwood Public School (Virtual War Memorial, 2015). James' father, Mr James Churchill-Smith senior, left a mark on Alice Springs' agriculture and cattle industry, moving 600 to 1000 cattle to Alice Springs; which was a difficult feat at the time.

Inspired by his father's achievements in the Cattle Industry, James Churchill-Smith Junior proceeded to do a two-year course in agriculture at the South Australian School of Mines (Adelaide Chronicle, 1916). In 1909, James got his first job as a clerk at the office of Messrs. WL Ware & Co Accountants, in Newton, South Australia.

James' natural desire to achieve and serve his community and country was displayed when he engaged in his school's voluntary army cadets. Part of this program meant he was introduced to military training; which was very alike to that of real military training. James progressed to senior cadets and his strong leadership meant in 1913 he acquired a commission, which therefore meant he could be a commanding officer. In December 1914, James acquired the position of an adjutant for the 79th Battalion, he dealt with the administrative side of people enlisting and assisted the senior officer (Adelaide Chronicle, 1916). Eager for battle, James applied for his commission to be transferred to the First Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.). Near April, 1915, James received his commission from the A.I.F. and acquired the rank of 2nd Lieutenant. On July 12, 1915, James was assigned to the 8th Reinforcement, part of the 10th Battalion (The AIF Project, 2016). He was sent to Mitcham camp in South Australia, where he was trained briefly, preparing him for additional training in Egypt (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2: A photograph of officers and non-commissioned officers of 8th Reinforcements part of the 10th, 12th and 16th Battalions, at Mitcham camp, August 1915. James Churchill Smith is in the front row third from the left. Source: Australian War Memorial P01153.001 Public domains.*

On August 26, 1915, he said farewell to his family and friends, unsure if he would return and embarked on his journey to war (Diary of James Churchill-Smith, 1915, Pg. 4). He headed for Egypt and arrived at Zeitoun Camp on September 22, 1915. At this camp, he was accustomed to additional military training and celebrated his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. On James' 21<sup>st</sup> birthday on October 16, 1915, he was only allowed minimal celebrations. In his diary, terrified by the idea he may be dead by his next birthday, he wrote, "Wonder where I shall be on 15th Oct. 1916?" (Diary of James Churchill-Smith, 1915, Pg. 11).

Following James' 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, he received a notice that he would be travelling to Gallipoli because of a shortage of officers. Though James was happy to leave Egypt, he wrote in his diary, "Glad to leave Egypt, but sorry my men aren't with me." This compassionate entry written in his diary exemplifies his spirit and thoughtfulness. On October 25, 1915, James arrived at Gallipoli, being delegated the job of commanding a platoon in the 10th Battalion. At Gallipoli, James saw out the last months of the campaign, and in his diary, he wrote about Gallipoli being fairly uneventful, with occasional shots being fired at him and only a few people being injured; very different to the experience of men prior to his arrival. He left

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Gallipoli on November 22, 1915. James arrived back in Egypt on December 30, 1915, where further training took place.

After the Gallipoli campaign was over, James and many other men remained in Egypt for quite some time. With the abundance of men coming back from Gallipoli, the high command of the AIF decided to reorganise the structure of the AIF. This meant all sixteen infantry battalions were divided into two, to form the 4th and 5th Divisions (The AIF Project, Order of Battle, 2001). This meant Australia had five new divisions which were all very experienced. Subsequently, on February 26, 1916, James was reassigned to the 50th Battalion's "D Company". He was now a lieutenant in the 50th Battalion after his recent promotion on February 20, 1916. After, April 1, 1915, James pursued the role of a Captain for his admirable work, which meant he was now second in command of D Company. (James Churchill-Smith, 1915, Pg. 37,).

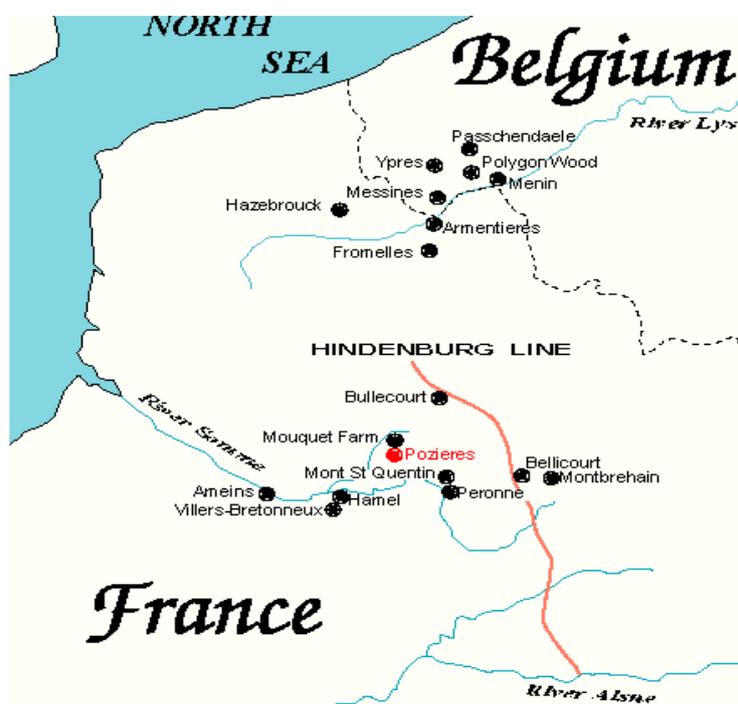


Figure 3: Map of the western front. (1996) Craig Renard Source: Digger History

On June 12, 1916, D company arrived in Marseille, France. After a month of fighting in Armentières, which had the nickname of "The Nursery" for its moderately quiet fighting (Australian War Memorial, 2019), D company participated in their first demanding battle in the Western Front in August, 1916. The 50th Battalion was sent to Mouquet Farm (see figure 3), where after fighting for 5 weeks, the Australian's had grieved over 11,000 deaths (Australian War Memorial, 2019). The trenches which the men were situated in were grimy, muddy, and terrifying ditches dug in the ground which often spread disease because of the death enclosing them (BBC, 2019). It was constantly difficult for men to sleep, because they

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were always in fear of the opponents slaughtering them in violent ways. Initially, James was not situated on the front line but was required to command the 50th Battalion after Captain Hancock was injured on August 13, 1916. When James arrived, he realised that his men were sequestered from the rest of the 50th Battalion and critically low on men. Suffering from substantial gunfire and bombing, it was difficult to hold their position. James wrote in his diary, "Germans bombed down trench towards me killing a few of my men." (Diary of James Churchill-Smith, 1916, Pg. 51) It is baffling to imagine what James would have felt at that stage, witnessing the men he was responsible for die so viciously. Nevertheless, James' spirit could not be destroyed, and under his command, his men were able to uphold their position, until the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion relieved them. Another man from the 50th Battalion, Captain Armitage, described his experience as "four days of hell and four nights of double hell." (Virtual War Memorial, 2019). For the courage and spirit James displayed on that grievous and frightening night, he was later awarded the Military Cross (see figure 4). For the rest of 1916, James commanded small operations under very difficult and minacious circumstances. On the Western Front, food and water was scarce and the average diet of a soldier consisted of bully beef and biscuits (Australian War Memorial, 2019).



*Figure 4: James Churchill-Smith Awards (left to right) Military Cross and Bar, 1914/15 Star, British War Medal, Victory Medal with oak leaf cluster for MID. Source: Australian Virtual War Memorial.*

James continued to command throughout 1917, and by the end of March, 1917, he was the commanding officer of D-company. On September 26, 1917 at 7pm, James was shot in the head, resulting in him being wounded in four places (Diary of James Churchill-Smith, 1917, Pg. 44). Subsequently, he was taken to the 7th General Hospital near Saint-Omer, France. Throughout 1918, James took out many commanding roles, including a major trainee. On September 25, 1918 James was promoted to a captain. (Diary of James Churchill-Smith, 1918, Pg. 1). The 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion was involved in the final battle of the western front called

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"Hundred Days Offensive," this battle went from August 8, 1918 to November 11, 1918. On November 11, all guns fell silent and an Armistice was signed to discontinue fighting. Australia grieved 60,000 deaths of the 416,809 men that signed up, 156,000 men were wounded and the fighting finally stopped after more than 1500 days (Australian War Memorial, 2019). Most of the men were left mentally damaged for life, watching their best mates, brothers and friends all die fighting for their country.



Figure 5: Members of the board of Australian Army Canteens Service; South Australian Detachment. James is pictured in the back row, third from left. Source: State Library of South Australia Image: B 61017

After the war, James studied accountancy at George Williams College, London. He disembarked from England on S.S. Ypiranga, on November 15, 1919 and arrived back in Australia on January 1 1920; this day represented the end of his service in the A.I.F. James pursued a career in accountancy and wedded Xenia Dove at the age of 30 on April 24, 1925. When World War Two commenced, James volunteered his service again and acted as Deputy Assistant Director in the Army Canteen Service of South Australia, having the rank of a major (see Figure 5). James' enjoyed playing sport and never sought the assistance of the Veterans Repatriation Program (National Archives Australia). James' momentous life came to a finish due to natural causes on March 15, 1968 in Adelaide, and he was buried at his family plot in North Road Cemetery in Nailsworth, South Australia.

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