

Sergeant Donald MacKechnie

'The fraud'

With the outbreak of the First World War, a vast number of men flocked to the enlistment centres across the nation. Bakers, miners, drovers, clerks, labourers and shearers—men of every calling were keen to do their bit. In Melbourne, a member of the British Army Instructional Corps, with a broad Scottish accent, volunteered for service with the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). On his uniform he wore ribbons which substantiated his service in the British Imperial Army. But one stood out from all the others; the dark crimson ribbon of the Victoria Cross.¹

Prior to joining the AIF, 36-year-old Donald MacKechnie had served for 12 years in the British Army. As a young private in the Gordon Highlanders, he was a member of the Tirah Expedition of 1897, sent to quell a local uprising in north-western Afghanistan.

When hostilities in South Africa between the British and the Boers escalated and war was declared, MacKechnie, now a sergeant in the Highlanders, fought many battles against the rebelling Dutch farmers. For two years, the Gordons distinguished themselves in actions at Modder River, in the Orange Free State, Transvaal and at Magers Fontein and, as a result, suffered one of the highest casualty rates of the conflict.

Following the Boer War, MacKechnie returned to India with the regiment, again to deal with rebel forces on the North West Frontier.

In 1908, he was a member of the Tibet Expedition which was sent to explore the little-known regions of the Himalayas.²



When MacKechnie enlisted in the AIF, it was little wonder that commanding officers actively vied to have him assigned to their unit. It would be a feather in the cap of one to boast a VC among his ranks, not to mention the value of MacKechnie's wealth of combat experience. Ultimately, the fiery Scotsman was assigned to the 7th Battalion and given his original rank of sergeant. The battalion was under the command of fellow Boer War veteran, the renowned Lieutenant Colonel 'Pompey' Elliott.

MacKechnie wasted no time in whipping the brash colonial lads into shape—in the pukka stiff upper lip manner of the traditional army of the Motherland. He was gruff, obstinate and unforgiving. He was a hard drinker, frequently cornering his fellow sergeants in the mess tent with blood curdling tales of valour in battles past and how he'd showed himself to be worthy of the term 'a Queen's Sergeant'.³ Many times, he would present the following day reeking of stale alcohol.

There were suspicions he was wont to take a swig through the day from a bottle carefully hidden in the bottom of his kit bag. To those around him, whether superior, subordinate or peer, he wore the medal of a hero and they turned a blind eye to his behaviour, as long as he delivered. They felt sure that in battle he would display the true qualities that had earned him his Victoria Cross.

After only two months of training, the 7th set sail as part of the 'first fleet' headed for Europe and the war with the Hun. The entry of Turkey into the war as an ally of Germany resulted in the troops of the AIF being diverted to Egypt for additional training—rather than England, where a cold wet winter would cause havoc, and suitable camps for the AIF were not yet ready.⁴

Training and living in the shadows of the great pyramids, and partaking of the sights, sounds and smells of Egypt was an exciting experience for the young Australians. Before enlisting in the AIF, many had never ventured further than fifty kilometres from where they were born.

When on leave, the attractions that nearby Cairo had to offer were like a magnet to the Diggers. Liquor was cheap and plentiful, and the ladies of the night plied their trade for a modest fee in the brothel area known to the Australian troops as the 'Wozzer'.⁴

With monotonous regularity, Sergeant MacKechnie would stagger in from leave, then turn out to inspect the guard. During these parades, he would hurl abuse at the young Diggers, castigating them for what he considered to be their sloppy appearance. With a venomous tongue, he would berate them, asserting that they would never make it in the 'real' army. He would then weave his way back to his bivvy to sleep it off.³



In late March, the army's patience was wearing a little thin and eventually MacKechnie pushed his luck a little too far when he returned to camp rolling drunk. As the MPs took charge at the gate and ushered the sergeant towards the cells, MacKechnie drew their attention to his VC medal and challenged them to recognise with whom they were dealing.

'Yes mate, we know who you are. But it's still off to the lock-up for you!' the MP sergeant retorted.

On the 18 April 1915, the army had had enough of MacKechnie's antics and he was brought before a general court martial on a charge of drunkenness. The court found him 'Guilty as charged' and sentenced him to 'Reduction to the ranks'. MacKechnie looked the presiding officer in the eye, saluted, turned and marched out.²

By April 1915, rumblings of imminent involvement in the war began to stir the ANZAC lines. Equipment was packed and weapons checked and re-checked.



AWM C00183. Unidentified soldiers and civilians strolling in Esbekiah Street in a quarter of Cairo known as the Haret el Wasser, but referred to by the soldiers as 'The Wozzer'. Not long before, aggrieved Australian and New Zealand soldiers had run amok, throwing bedding, mattresses and clothing from several brothels into the street and burning them.

The soldiers of Australia and New Zealand were ready for anything—or so they thought.

It was just before dawn, 25 April 1915. All that could be heard above the beating of many hearts was the gentle splashing of the oars as the boats moved slowly towards the silhouette of the rugged hills. Unbeknown to the soldiers in the boats, the single rifle shot that shattered the eerie silence was to be the precursor to an unbelievable carnage that would last for the next eight months. This was to be a place that would, from that day, be embedded in the psyche of all Australians and New Zealanders—Gallipoli.

When the soldiers of the 7th stormed ashore, they were confronted with terrain that bore no resemblance to what had been described to them in the pre-landing brief. Instead of a gradual incline from the sea to the ridges, they were confronted by a narrow strip of beach at the base of sheer cliffs.

As the officers and non commissioned officers (NCOs) gathered the scattered remnants of their platoons, they knew that to hold their men on the beach was as good as signing their death warrants. Their only option was to scale the cliffs and seek shelter from the murderous enemy fire.



AWM P01130.002. ANZAC Cove, Gallipoli, Turkey, 1915. A view of ANZAC Cove looking north toward New Zealand Point.

The 7th pushed forward up the left flank of the small strip of beach. The Turks held the high ground and were fiercely protective of their land. They attacked the invaders with a vengeance, mowing down wave after wave of ANZACs as they struggled to cross the narrow beach and scramble up the rugged slopes and out of the line of fire.

The young Australian soldiers strained under the weight of their packs, hampered by clothing that had become waterlogged as they waded ashore, controlling their emotions as they sidestepped the bodies of fallen mates and dodged those who tumbled down the slope around them.

The Diggers' physical fitness from the months of training at the desert camps, and their overwhelming instinct for survival kept them going till they reached the top. Only then could they put rifles to their shoulders and fight back.

No sooner had Mackechnie reached the summit than a Turkish soldier manoeuvred his rifle sight to his eye, focussing on the private as slowly he squeezed the trigger—the crack of the primer's detonation echoing in his ears. As if in slow motion the private turned and to face the Turk, at the same time feeling a sensation akin to a red-hot poker being rammed into his right shoulder. He crumpled to his knees.²

As the battle moved forward, the stretcher-bearers kept pace, searching for the wounded. MacKechnie was one of many carried to the beach for medical treatment. His wound was serious enough to warrant evacuation to a hospital ship lying offshore and, on 7 May 1915, he was admitted to the 2nd Australian General Hospital in Cairo.²

MacKechnie was instantly the centre of attention. The wards were abuzz: not only was there a VC hero amongst the patients, but one who had been wounded during the Gallipoli landing.

MacKechnie required ongoing treatment for his shoulder wound. As the bullet had fragmented on entry, not all of the shrapnel could be removed. Complications, including arthritis, set in. At the same time MacKechnie had also developed a chronic eye disorder. The decision was made to evacuate him to Australia for specialist treatment.

At a medical board attended by Private MacKechnie, it was determined that, due to his deteriorating health, he should be discharged from the AIF.

While the administrative tasks for MacKechnie's demobilisation were being completed, a young clerk proceeded to compile the paperwork required for MacKechnie to receive a medical pension. Being a little more methodical than others, the clerk discovered that all VC recipients were paid an annual gratuity, which he was sure could be incorporated into the pension.

However, the clerk could not find any record of MacKechnie having received his gratuity. Upon further investigation, he found a James McKechnie on the VC roll, but this Scotsman, at around the age of 28, had been awarded the medal in 1854 for his gallantry during the Crimean War. Even allowing for the different Christian name and the spelling variation of the surname, if they were one and

6915—VJ. W. 23074 400,000.—Imperial War Museum, London, D.P. Alexandria. 5/4/15 Army Form B. 103.
 "Gallipoli", (GALLIPOLI CAMPAIGN.)
 Casualty Form—Active Service.
 Regiment or Corps *7th Battalion A.I.F.*
 Regimental No. *523* Rank *Private* Name *McKechnie Donald*
 Enlisted (a) *19-8-14* Terms of Service (a) _____ Service reckons from (a) _____
 Date of promotion to } *23-7-14* Date of appointment } Numerical position on } *44*
 present rank } to lance rank } roll of N.C.Os. }
 Extended _____ Re-engaged _____ Qualification (b) _____

Report		Record of promotions, reductions, transfers, casualties, etc., during active service, as reported on Army Form B. 213, Army Form A. 36, or in other official documents. The authority to be quoted in each case.	Place	Date	Remarks taken from Army Form B. 213, Army Form A. 36, or other official documents.
Date	From whom received				
<i>22/5/15</i>	<i>CO 7th Bn</i>	<i>Wounded</i>	<i>Gallipoli</i>	<i>23/4/15</i>	<i>Board of Enquiry</i>
<i>4/5/15</i>	<i>2nd Aust Gen Hosp.</i>	<i>Admitted to 2nd Australian General Hospital. AFA36. R. W. Right shoulder.</i>	<i>Cairo</i>	<i>30/4/15</i>	<i>No 4 61294/5 (5/5/15)</i>

Part of MacKechnie's service records showing VC crossed out.

the same person then Donald MacKechnie would have to be aged around 90 years old—an impossibility.³

The clerk was confused so took his findings to his adjutant, who in turn took them to his commanding officer. There had to be some explanation.

A cable was sent to the headquarters of the Gordon Highlanders, requesting details of the circumstances of MacKechnie's Victoria Cross. The Highlanders responded that they had no record of the award being made.

MacKechnie was paraded before the commanding officer who asked one simple question. 'We have reason to believe that you are a fraud, that you have never been awarded the Victoria Cross, is this true?' As he struggled for words, MacKechnie knew that his deception had been discovered and the charade was over.

As news of his deceit spread, he was ostracised and ridiculed—yesterday's hero had become today's fool. He was subsequently discharged from the AIF on medical grounds.

MacKechnie's physical and mental health deteriorated as he struggled to comprehend the magnitude of his deception and the persecution and torment that he now faced. Eventually he could no longer cope and in 1917 he was committed to the Ballarat Hospital for the Insane. His wife Edith stood by him and supported him as a loyal and faithful wife.⁵

Until his death on 18 May 1920, Private Donald MacKechnie spent most of his days sitting, staring out the window.⁶ Who's to say what he was thinking. Was he remembering the long-ago battles in the rugged mountains of the North West Frontier? Was he fighting the Boer farmers on the South African veld? Or was he trekking through the snows of Tibet?

Perhaps he was simply coming to terms with his guilt.

Notes

- 1 Dean A & Gutteridge EW, *The Seventh Battalion, A.I.F.: Resume of the Activities of the Seventh Battalion in the Great War, 1914-1918*, W & K Purbrick, Melbourne, 1933
- 2 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 523 Sergeant D MacKechnie (VC)
- 3 AWM 140 Official History, 1914-1918 War, biographical cards, MacKechnie D (Notes detailing MacKechnie's character. Author unknown signed A.V.W.)
- 4 Bean CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War 1914-1918*, Volume 1, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 5 On examining MacKechnie's service records it is interesting to note that Donald spelt and signed his surname MacKechnie, his wife Edith signed her name McKechnie, the same spelling as that of the actual Victoria Cross recipient. Other documents contained within the file are also spelt McKechnie. Perhaps this constant incorrect spelling of his surname contributed to his being found out.
- 6 Memo from Colonel, A.A.G. 3rd Military District to Australian Military Forces Headquarters, Melbourne, 12 June 1920