

A Boksburg family goes to war

Compiled by Dr Anne Samson, 27 August 2016

The McKinlay family lived at 44 3rd Street, Boksburg North. Father Thomas MacMath McKinlay and Mother, Janet McKinlay. James and John were born in Glasgow, Scotland 22 and 21 years respectively before enlisting for service in Europe. The family moved to South Africa and James became a fitter with ERPM. Thomas, 18 on enlisting for Europe was a Clerk and John an electrician. Despite being the youngest, Thomas and older brother John enlisted soon after the outbreak of war and served in both the Rebellion of 1914 and in German South West Africa. Thomas immediately re-enlisted for service in Europe, whilst John was the last to do so. James who had not seen prior service enlisted in December 1915 to go to Europe. The fourth brother, Robert McKinlay had his application to enlist declined as he was the fourth of the children and was needed to remain at home to care for his parents.

Thomas and John McKinlay: Rebellion and German South West Africa, 1914-1915

Thomas McKinlay had been a clerk and his brother John an electrician, for ERPM in Boksburg.

When war broke out in August 1914, the defence of South Africa was entrusted to the permanent force. Parliament agreed on 12 September 1914 that the Union Defence Force (UDF) would invade German South West Africa (GSWA) to put the wireless stations out of action as requested by the British government. John and Thomas headed the call and enlisted at Booyens Camp in Johannesburg on 6 October 1914 with the SA Irish. John was allocated regimental number 342 and Thomas 375.

As part of the SA Irish, Thomas served in the 1914 Rebellion which included General CF Beyers who lived in Plantation, Boksburg and who, before the Boer War had had a successful legal practice. Beyers had been head of the UDF until September 1914 when, on hearing Parliament had approved South Africa's invasion of German South West Africa, he resigned his commission to lead the rebellion alongside Manie Maritz. Beyers had been travelling with General Koos de la Rey, also of Boksburg to Treurfontein to a meeting with prospective rebels when the car he was travelling in went through a roadblock to stop the Foster Gang who had killed a policeman outside Boksburg North Hotel on 15 September. De la Rey was killed by a ricochet bullet and a month later, in October, rebellion erupted.

On 22 October the regiment, including Thomas, left Booyens for Pretoria. The SA Irish served as garrison troops to protect Pretoria, especially the Governor General's house, against any possible rebel attack. The regiment remained in Pretoria until it entrained for Maitland Camp in Cape Town on 9 December 1914 to participate in the German South West Africa Campaign. The Regiment obtained the nickname of *Troglodyte* for their unique way of entrenching for protection against possible air attack.¹

The SA Irish formed part of 4 Infantry Brigade in Northern Force, commanded by Prime Minister Louis Botha. The Brigade was commanded by Colonel Wylie and included 1 Battalion Durban Light Infantry and the Rand Rifles. They left on the *Galway Castle* for Walvis Bay arriving on Christmas Day 1914.² Thomas formed part of G Company, whilst John was in D Company. At Walvis Bay, they offloaded the ship and undertook garrison duty at the blockhouses. On 1 February 1915 they moved by lighters to

¹ Clear the Way: SA Irish, pp 55-56

² Clear the Way: SA Irish, pp 69, 71

Swakopmund and on the evening of 16 March celebrated St Patrick's Day with a dinner in honour of Mrs Botha who was visiting with her daughter.³

Lieutenant Simmond's diary record for 8 March noted: The heat here was terrific, the wind blowing across the desert for the first time since we arrived here. Someone told me he heard the thermometer registered 130 (degrees) in the shade, but I should think it was more than that. The dust blew in clouds and all kinds of flies and insects were blown along with it.

The next day, he wrote: Heat very great but not quite as bad as yesterday. Can do nothing but drink tea. The taste of the water here at Swakopmund is beastly.⁴



South African Irish Regiment; G Coy. Christmas 1914.

This photograph was presented to Mrs Louis Botha. It was donated to the South African National Museum of Military History.

The Governor General visited on 23 March after Mrs Botha had left on 17 March and on 1 April 1915, the Regiment left Swakopmund by train for Nonidas where they then marched for 4 kilometres to the River (dry river bed) where they were allocated sections to watch and maintain the security of the Swakop River Valley. The Regiment held the lines of communication whilst Botha pushed on with the Mounted brigades. Eventually the SA Irish under Wylie arrived at Karibib on 19 May 1915 having marched 80 kilometres from Riet to Jakalswater, through Sphinx, Drostieriviermond, Kubas and Abbabis.⁵ During this march, John is recorded as having had Diarrhoea on 18 April 1915 at Riet before going on duty on 25 April 1915.⁶

On arrival at Karibib, the Regiment was disgruntled at having had little water and rations. Simmonds notes on one occasion that they had not been able to bathe for 4 days. On 24 May he recorded that

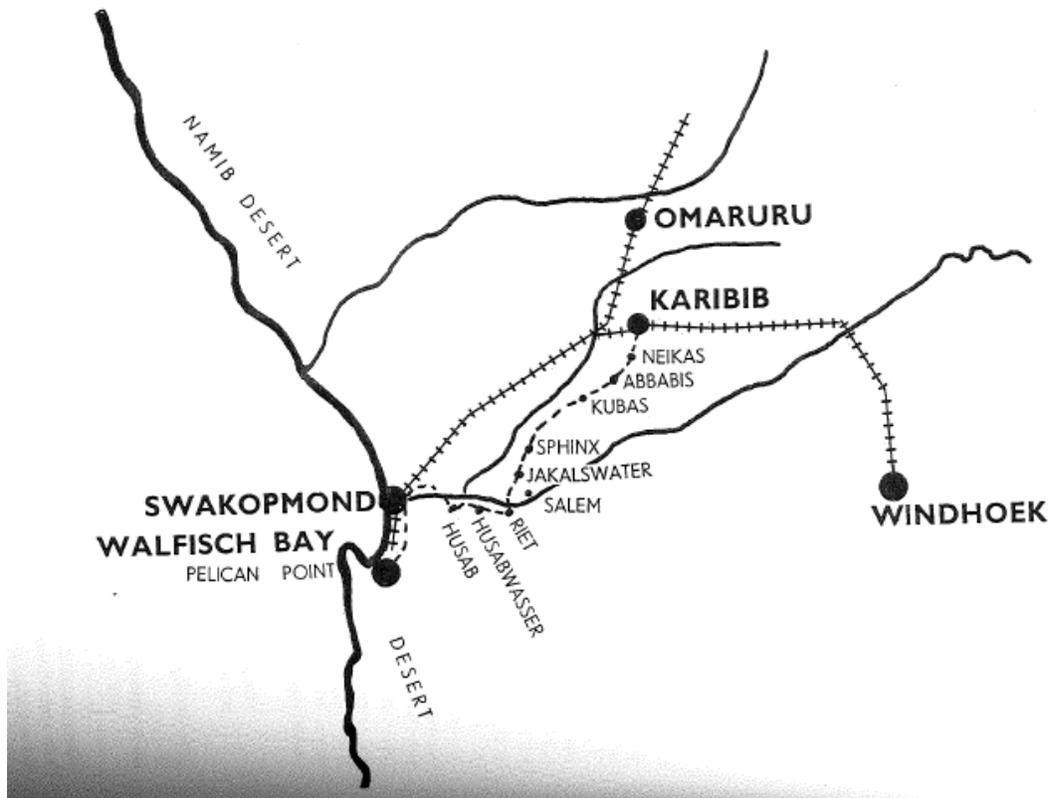
³ Clear the Way: SA Irish, pp 71, 73

⁴ Clear the Way: SA Irish, pp 73, 74

⁵ Clear the Way: SA Irish, pp 75-78

⁶ SANDF Doc Centre: Service Card

'One and a half biscuits were served out and some crushed mealies.' With the surrender of Windhoek to Botha on 11 May 1915, the forces were reorganised and the SA Irish left Karibib for Johann-Albrechshohe on 19 June, a distance of 24 Kilometres. Two days after German South West Africa surrendered, the SA Irish were instructed to leave for Walvis Bay. Accordingly, on 11 July they left, arriving on 13 July embarking on the *Erna Woerman* on the same day. They arrived in Cape Town on 19 July and on 23 July were demobilised.⁷



Thomas goes to Europe

On 5 August 1915, at the age of 18, Private Thomas McKinlay enlisted in Potchefstroom for service in Europe. He was 5 foot 4 inches high and weighed 119 stone, had grey eyes and dark hair.⁸ His Regimental Number was 83, and on 13 August 1915 was posted to E Company 4th South African Infantry (Transvaal Scottish) under Lieutenant Colonel FA Jones DSO. Colonel W Dalrymple who laid the foundation stone for the St John's Presbyterian Church in Boksburg was Honorary Colonel.⁹ He enlisted for the duration of the war and 6 months after. The 4th South African Infantry together with the 1st, 2nd and 3rd formed the 1st South African Infantry Brigade under Brigadier General Tim Lukin.

Thomas was in England from 25 September 1915 until 2 June 1916 during which time he was appointed to the Reserve on 30 December 1915. In December 1915, he had 9 days' detention for absence with

⁷ Clear the Way: SA Irish, p 78

⁸ SANDF Doc Centre: Attestation form

⁹ <http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/delville.htm>

forfeited pay and deprived 3 days' pay. On 20 January 1916 he was transferred to G Company Reserve when he was again noted absent from 24 April 1916 to 29 April for which he forfeited 5 days' pay. The 4th SAI had been placed in quarantine for two weeks prior to landing as there had been a case of spinal meningitis. On 4 June 1916 he disembarked at Bologne having embarked at Folkestone on the *Princess Sistowa*. On 13 June he joined the regiment and on 19 June 1916 moved to B Company.¹⁰

Writing in the *Salstaff Bulletin* of July 1936, Arthur Betteridge, then serving in the 4th Battalion, vividly records his early experience of the Western Front:

July 1st found the brigade at Grovetown, receiving fighting equipment and watching German prisoners being escorted to the cages: two nights later we occupied some small French dugouts in Billon Valley ...

The Frenchies manned heavy guns and let many of us watch the huge projectiles from their guns travelling in the air on their missions of destruction . . The following day we entered the line and found a wounded Frenchman as happy as a sandlark. A sympathetic South African officer had given the fellow a stiff dose of rum, and a missing arm held no terrors for the wounded man who was happily looking for a casualty clearing station. At the Glatz Redoubt, a cement dugout made cosy by the Germans who had been there for more than a year, a wardrobe containing women's clothing, apparently used for amateur theatricals, was found. Many strange sights were seen when the troops arrayed themselves in sundry pieces of intimate female attire. This joke soon ended when one of the company picked up a German helmet attached to a bomb. Several members of the SAI [1st South African Infantry Brigade] lost their lives as a result of 'booby traps' of this kind.¹¹

...

The ill-fated Somme offensive opened on 1 July 1916. The horrific artillery bombardment, commenced on 24 June and recalled by Mr Wepener, was the prelude to this disastrous offensive in the Somme valley. The High Command hoped that the preliminary week's barrage would totally destroy the enemy trenches, exterminating their defenders and thus enabling the Allied infantry to occupy the German lines with minimal opposition. This design, a recurrent feature of the major attacks on the Western Front throughout the War, was to prove totally illusory, on this and on both preceding and succeeding occasions. The shelling completely failed to neutralize the German infantry in their dug outs, and they were ready to meet the assaulting waves of infantry behind the former's emplaced machine guns and barbed wire. The attackers, hurled against the strongest points of the German defences, suffered in excess of 54 000 casualties in the first day's fighting, of whom over 19 000 were killed. Only XIII Corps achieved its objectives; on 30 Division's front the shellfire had done its work in smashing the defences and, in addition, much of the German artillery beyond Montauban had been immobilized. The village of Montauban was deserted and Montauban Alley, at the top of Montauban-Mametz ridge, was secured by 11h00.

The scale of the British failure of 1 July 1916, combined with the extremely limited successes achieved on that day in Gen Rawlinson's XIII Corps sector, exercised a great

¹⁰ SANDF Doc Centre: Personnel file; <http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/delville.htm>

¹¹ <http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/delville.htm>

Hugh Mallett(2), serving in C Company, recalled his experience of this fighting in the following manner:

'Well at last we got the order to pack up, and we were told that we could make up our minds that we would at last have the chance of coming to grips with the enemy, an opportunity we had been waiting for for many months . . .

On our way up the German artillery spotted us and gave us a pretty warm welcome. We lost many men that day. The remainder pushed on and clung for three long days to the position. Then we were relieved and taken back to the guns for a few days rest . . . '



Hugh Mallett

On 10 July, B and D Companies of the 4th South African Infantry Regiment relieved the 2nd South African Infantry Regiment in Bernafay Wood. On 11 July Lt Col F Jones, OC of the 4th South African Infantry Regiment, was killed by a shell as he emerged from his dug-out in Bernafay Wood. This loss of a battalion commander vividly impressed the fact that the war was no respecter of persons. The carnage among the rank and file was yet to follow. It should be noted that, whilst B and D Companies were engaged in Bernafay Wood, A and C Companies of the 4th South African Infantry Regiment had been involved, from 9 July, in the fighting for Trones Wood. On 10 July Capt S.C. Russell, of A Company 4th South African Infantry Regiment, was mortally wounded, dying on the following day.¹²

As part of B Company, Thomas was sent into the trenches at Bernafay Wood on 10 July 1916 to relieve A Company which had been shelled during the day by the Germans. On 11 July the company received heavy shelling. The company was finally relieved on 12 July.¹³ Thomas was Killed in Action on 10 July 1916.

His estate of £47.80 Imperial and the same for Union Pay was for 333 days less 17 days' pay forfeited. A gratuity of £18.5 was sent to his mother. His 1914-1915 star was despatched on 12 November 1920 for

¹² <http://www.worldwar1.com/heritage/delville.htm>

¹³ The National Archives, London: WO 95/1785 War Diary 4th South African Infantry July-December 1916

dates of Service between 6 October 1914 and 23 July 1915. A British War and Victory medal was despatched on 10 Feb 1922. Thomas is commemorated on the Thiepval Memorial.

James goes to Europe

The next brother to enlist for Europe was Private James McKinlay, a fitter for ERPM in Boksburg. Aged 21, on 2 December 1915 he attested at Potchefstroom. He enlisted as a Private in the Reserve Company of the 3rd Regiment SAI (Transvaal and Rhodesia) whose Honorary Colonel was General Jan Smuts with Lieutenant Colonel EF Thackeray in command. His regimental number was 7760. He was unmarried at the time of going to war. Prior to enlisting he had been in the Military Cadets. James was noted to be 5 foot 2 inches tall, weighed 109 pounds, had grey eyes and brown hair.

The 3rd Battalion of the South African Infantry Reserve Company embarked at Cape Town for France on (or about) 22 March 1916. James was taken on strength and posted to F Company on 14 April 1916 and then to D Company on 21 August 1916. James' Casualty Form records that he arrived at 2 IBD,* Rouen on 14 August 1916 and joined the Battalion in the Field on 21 August 1916. Having embarked for France in March 1916, he was granted furlough (leave) between 19 and 25 April 1916, he was noted as having been 'absent' from 25-26 April for which he forfeited one day's pay. It might well have been that the two brothers, James and Thomas took time out to see each other as Thomas was noted absent without leave between 24 and 29 April 1916.¹⁴

On 13 November 1916 James was reported as Missing from 18 October 1916 and on 25 May 1917 his death was accepted as of the date he went missing. The document also noting his date of assumed death was signed by Captain John Harris, Officer in Command of South African Section, GHQ 3rd Echelon, BEF.¹⁵

On 18 October 1916 an Order had been issued that 3rd SAI was 'On relief the 3rd SAI will proceed to Bazentin Le Grand and take over the camping area vacated by the 11th Royal Scots and the 1st SAI on relief will proceed to the camping area in High Wood... The OC 1st and 3rd SAI will send advance parties to take over these camping sites at 4pm on the 19th...

The 1st and 3rd will hand over to their relieving battalions all picks, shovels, bombs and ammunition.'¹⁶

Before that, 3rd SAI was relieved by 1st SAI in the line on the night (16) after the moon rises. 'On relief the 3rd SAI will occupy the lines now held by the 1st SAI.'¹⁷ On 17 October, D Company 3rd SAI was moved to Prue Trench and was placed in reserve in the support trench twenty minutes before zero. 1st SAI would be in the front trench. On 14 October instructions were given as follows: There would first be an assault barrage before the front lines were to go over the top under cover of a smoke barrage. 3rd SAI would be required to carry out the assault on the German trench once it had been reached. It was expected that the assault would likely need to take place in the early hours of the morning of 16 October.

¹⁴ SANDF Doc Centre: Personnel file

¹⁵ SANDF Doc Centre: Personnel file

¹⁶ The National Archives, London: WO 95/1783 War Diary October 1916

¹⁷ The National Archives, London: WO 95/1783 War Diary October 1916

A report by Thackery at 7.40am on 15 October noted that 'the regiment is considerably exhausted by continuous movement, want of sleep, hard work, lack of cooked warm food, and under a continued heavy bombardment since 8am on 12 instant, which infits them for further attack and sustained effort required to hold on and consolidate.' Higher command felt that this report was exaggerated.

By the time the regiment reconfigured at High Wood on 22 October, it was realised that James was missing. The part of D Company attached to B Company arrived in camp on 20 October with the second half arriving two days later. The War Diary accounts for 18 October do not indicate any action other than working parties repairing damage caused by enemy bombardment. This suggests that James was the victim of a stray explosion as he was only found missing later than 18 October.¹⁸ It is recorded that James was killed at Le Sars, France, 18 October 1916.

His mother received a pension of £15/-. James was paid by both the British Government and the Union of South Africa as the force which served in Europe was recruited as an Imperial Contingent. His service dates are recorded as 2 December 1915-18 October 1916, a total of 322 days but as he was absent without permission for 1 day, he was only paid for 321 days. His basic pay was £16.1/- but drew additional pay for his Warrant of £32.2/- making a total of £48.3/-. The Union contributed ¾ of his pay being an additional £48.3/-. The Warrant amount was paid to his father on 10 November 1919. Between 23 November 1915 when he arrived in Potchefstroom and his enlistment in December, he was paid 6d per day, the payment of which went to his mother. He had enlisted for the 'Duration of the war'. He had been part of the 7th Draft.¹⁹

* IBD refers to Infantry Base Depots. Chris Baker of *The Long, Long Trail* records:²⁰

The IBD was a holding camp. Situated within easy distance of one the Channel ports, it received men on arrival from England and kept them in training while they awaiting posting to a unit at the front.

"Each infantry division originally had its own IBD, which was established as it crossed to France. Thus 9 IBD would have supported 9th (Scottish) Division and would have supplied reinforcements to all the battalions in it, each regiment represented in the division having its own camp within the IBD. The divisions taking part in the first phase of the Somme had such heavy casualties that their IBDs were unable to bring them back up to strength, which meant calling on other IBDs, with reinforcements often having to change their cap badges as a result. At the beginning of August 1916 a new policy was introduced: each IBD would now be responsible for supplying drafts for all battalions of particular regiments, usually three or four per IBD. Matters changed again in December 1917 when the IBDs were given letter prefixes rather than numbers. Thus, for example 29 IBD became D IBD. The number of IBDs was also reduced and so each was supporting a greater number of regiments. For instance, 29 IBD was largely supplying battalions of the Royal Warwicks, but D IBD looked after nine regiments, including the Warwicks".

On 27 May 1916, *The East Rand Express* carried an article on the 3rd SA Mascot MacChampion, a Springbok. James McKinlay is posing in the photo alongside fellow soldiers from the East Rand. The

¹⁸ The National Archives, London: WO 95/1783 War Diary October 1916

¹⁹ SANDF Doc Centre: Personell file

²⁰ <http://www.1914-1918.net/infantrybasedepots.html> [25 May 2916]

article notes that 'the men travelled home by the Walmer Castle' – home in this instance is England. They left on 4 April. [has list of names of all on board!!]

John goes to Europe

John enlisted for Europe on 25 October 1915. His attestation papers note he was 5 foot, 6 inches and weighed 127 pounds, had grey eyes and brown hair. There was a scar on his right elbow. He also had a dental plate in his upper jaw. He had previously served with the Transvaal Scottish for 5 years 1 month; and 10 months with the SA Irish in German South West Africa and the Rebellion. He was also partially responsible financially for his father.

John formed part of the 6th draft, 2nd Reserve Battalion, South African Infantry, Scottish. His regimental number was 6853 and he joined the 4th Regiment South African Infantry (Reserve Battalion, H Company from 2 February 1916). John embarked on the *Llanstephan Castle* on 15 January 1916. There is a note on his file that he reverted from Lance Corporal to Private on arrival of the ship in England on 21 Feb 1916. He arrived at No 2 Base Depot Rouen on 27 July 1916 and was taken on strength of 4th SAI on 9 September 1916.

On 2 January 1917 he had Mild Trench Foot and was treated at No 6 Stationary Hospital Trevent. The next day he was transported to Ambulance Train to Le Port arriving on 4 January where he was admitted to 16 General Hospital. On 6 February 1917 he was at the South African Richmond Hospital, ten days later on 16 February at Eastbourne Convalescent Hospital from where he was discharged on 14 May 1917. He had leave from 25 September 1917 to 1 October 1917. John had a Pass from 31 December 1917 through to 2 January 1918. On 2 February 1918 John was transferred from K Company to D Company 1st Res Battalion and was entitled to wear *one red and three blue chevrons* (for wounds obtained on service). He had a day's pass on 27 March 1918 for one day only.²¹

He embarked at South Hampton on 31 March 1918, disembarked and arrived on 1 April 1918 at Rouen where 'having proceeded o/seas is struck off strength of D Coy, 1st Res Batt 1.4.1918' and placed on the role of C IDB for record purposes only from the same date. He proceeded to the front on 4 April 1918.²²

The regimental diary is recorded as missing but the Brigade diary records the following leading up to John's going missing. On 10 April the Division moved to the Neuve Eglise – Steenwerk Road where the General Officer Commanding 19th Division explained the situation on Messines Ridge and ordered the South African Brigade to counter-attack. At 6.45pm the 2nd Regiment was recorded as being in place on the Messines Ridge and on 11 April further instructions were given for consolidating the Messines Ridge. On 12 April, 2nd Regiment was holding its line and later in the day the situation was quiet with very little enemy movement being observed. At 5pm on 13 April, the situation facing the 2nd Regiment was unchanged with artillery active along the whole front and the enemy advancing on the left. On 14 April, the Brigade was relieved and the 2nd Regiment returned to De Zon Camp in the La Clytte area.²³

²¹ SANDF Doc Centre: Service card

²² SANDF Doc Centre: Service card

²³ The National Archives, London: WO 95/1779 War Diary South African Brigade Headquarters March-April 1918

John was declared missing on 13 April 1918 at Messina Ridge and accepted dead on 7 December 1918.²⁴

His father received his Estate of £65.2/- Imperial pay and £65.2/- Union rate for the dates 25 October 1915 to 31 December 1916, a total of 434 days. His 1914-1915 Star was despatched on 12 November 1920. A note says 'DoS 6 Oct 1914-23 July 1917 Pte'.²⁵

Memorials

On 26 November 1921, the Rose Window in St John's Presbyterian Church, Boksburg, was unveiled in memory of the soldier-members of the church. A brass tablet was also unveiled. The church building had been completed during the war years, the foundation stone being laid by Colonel William Dalrymple during November 1916.



In 1926, Janet, the mother of the three McKinlay boys who had given their lives in Europe was invited to attend the unveiling of the Delville Wood Memorial. It took place on Sunday 10 October 1926.

The memorial was designed by Sir Herbert Baker who had been the architect for many houses, including the Union Buildings in Pretoria and St Michael's Anglican Church in Boksburg. Baker had designed Bedford Gardens, the house George Farrar lived in. Farrar had been the proprietor of ERPM, which had employed the three McKinlay brothers.

On 11 November 1998, the McKinlay family donated the three memorial obituaries to the Boksburg Gap Shell Hole. Boksburg Gap had been founded in 1928, a year after the MOTHS had formed.

²⁴ SANDF Doc Centre: Service card

²⁵ SANDF Doc Centre: Service card