

Private Marcus Blake Norman Brown



(Virtual War Memorial Australia, N.D.)

Private John Fisher (Left) and Private Marcus Brown (Right).

Researched by Jon Lewis

Acknowledgment of Country

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of lutruwita/Tasmania, my chosen soldier, Pte Marcus Brown's mob, the palawa people. I wish to acknowledge and pay respect to the First Nations People's continuing culture and the contribution to our society that they make. We as a country are much richer for the involvement of First Nations peoples in all areas of society.

Overview

I chose Private Marcus Blake Norman Brown for my study, as he was a soldier that I had come to know when teaching my Year 9 students in previous years and his story is one that I find particularly interesting.

Private Marcus Blake Norman Brown

Marcus was a palawa man born in 1895 on Cape Barren Island, which is located in the Furneaux Islands group, off the North East of coast of Tasmania.

As a young man, he worked as a labourer before joining the army.

Marcus enlisted at the Claremont training camp on 26 June 1916. He was described as having a “very dark” complexion, with brown eyes and brown hair (NAA: B2455, Brown M B N).

Marcus’ older brother Henry George Brown had already enlisted on the 25th of January 1916 and later fought at the Somme. He was wounded twice and also suffered from shellshock. He returned to Australia on 4 May 1917 and was discharged (Libraries Tasmania, N.D.).

Marcus’ younger brother, Willard Brown enlisted on 27 June 1916, but was found to be underage. He had claimed that he was 18, when he was actually 16 and was discharged 16 days later on 13 July 1916 (AWM, 2022).

After three months training at the Claremont Camp, Marcus travelled to Melbourne in preparation for embarkation to England.

Marcus, along with other members of the 40th Battalion departed Port Melbourne on 21 October 1916 on the HMAT (His Majesty's Australian Transport) A16 Port Melbourne, previously known as the *Star of Victoria*.

They disembarked at the port of Devonport in Plymouth, England on 28 December 1916 and travelled on to Durrington for four months of further training, overseen by the British.

On 3 May 1917 Marcus and the other members of the 40th Battalion travelled from Durrington to Folkestone, England and then by ship onto Etaples in France, arriving on 4 May 1917. They then joined the field units 7 May 1917 in Belgium (NAA: B2455, Brown M B N).

The Battalion was sent to Oosthove Farm in Belgium ready for the battle of Messines. On arrival, they received 'a cheerful introduction to the trenches. As a reply to the enemy activity of the previous day, a very special shoot had been arranged for 8pm in which every gun on the corps front was to be let loose for 15 minutes' (Libraries Tasmania, N.D.).

In the lead up to the battle of Messines, Marcus and the 40th Battalion were tasked with the construction of gun emplacements, trench digging and the replenishing of munitions dumps. A number of men were killed during these activities, due to heavy shelling (Libraries Tasmania, N.D.).

In the early morning of 7 June 1917, the Battle of Messines began when a huge amount of explosives that had been laid deep under Hill 60 by Australian tunnellers, were detonated.

At 3.10 a number of big guns began to fire and then the trench-walls rocked...near Wytschaete, a huge bubble was swelling mushroom-shaped, from the earth, and then burst to cast a molten, rosy glow on the under-surface of some dense cloud low above it. As its brilliance faded two more bubbles burst beside it. During 20 seconds the same thing happened again and again, from the right to the far left. (The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, 1941, p.592)

The explosion remains the deadliest non-nuclear explosion in global warfare, with approximately 10,000 German lives lost.

Shortly after the detonation, the 40th Battalion went over the trenches. They faced heavy machine gun fire, with men scrambling to take cover in the many shell holes that littered the area. Marcus was wounded on the same day, receiving gunshot wounds to the left thigh and wrist, though the time is not recorded.

He was taken to an aid post and assessed and then moved by the 9th Field Ambulance to the 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station. He was transferred again to the 11th Stationary Hospital in Rouen, where he sadly passed as a result of the wounds, three days later on the 11th of June (NAA: B2455, Brown M B N).

The 40th Battalion lost 317 men at the Battle of Messines, including Marcus.

Marcus is buried at the St Sever Cemetery Extension in Rouen France.

Marcus' participation in active warfare was quite short, spending just over a month on the Western Front, before meeting his untimely death.

Marcus' family were informed of his passing and were sent the Dead Man's Penny. He was also awarded a British War Service medal posthumously.



(ABC Local, 2013)

After Death

Marcus' story does not end after his passing in 1917, however. It was after this that things started to deteriorate within his family back on Cape Barren Island.

Before his departure in 1916, Marcus had submitted an application, which was subsequently approved, for his deferred pay to be paid to his Uncle Clarence Brown, rather than his mother or father. Henry also listed Clarence Brown in his Will as the beneficiary of his assets.

1918: 18 January, Marcus' deferred pay was paid to the Public Trustee in Hobart. The amount of 80 pounds 11 shillings was then paid to Clarence Brown, as per the application signed in 1916 by Marcus.

1919: 9 November Marcus' father Henry William Brown made a claim for the war leave payment.

**The War leave payment was a scaled payment made to dependents of deceased soldiers who had served abroad for more than four months. The longer a soldier served abroad before dying, the greater the amount paid to the dependent.

1920: 6 January Henry's claim for the war leave payment was rejected on the grounds that "you were not the beneficiary of the soldier..." as Marcus had placed his Uncle Clarence in his Will as the beneficiary of his assets.

In 1920 the *War Gratuity Act* was introduced, and it replaced the war leave payment.

1920: 4 June Uncle Clarence Brown applied for the War Gratuity.

1920: 17 July Father Henry Brown applied for the War Gratuity.

1921: In January more information was requested from both Henry and Clarence, to support their individual claims. Clarence provided documents showing that he was the beneficiary of Marcus' Will. On the 15th January Henry sent a letter providing further information.

Cape Barren Island

15-1-21
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The Secretary
Subordinate War Gratuity Board
Hobart.

Sir,

Re. War Gratuity in respect of the late Private
Marcus B.N. BROWN.

In reply to your 1673 letter of 11-1-21. I have the honour to inform you that as I am the father of the deceased soldier, I claim that I am the only legal dependant; moreover I am prepared to bring witnesses to prove that the alleged WILL was obtained under pressure and whilst my late son was under the influence of liquor. Mr C.W. Brown has no legal right to a fath^{ing}, nor should have drawn the allotment money; but unfortunately my son was induced, whilst in drink, supplied by his uncle, to promise to leave the allotment money to him. The boy was reared and kept by me, and indeed was my main help, up to the time of his enlistment; his uncle never contributing on fath^{ing} towards his support; and it was only after the lad had got into the habit of meeting others for the purpose of drinking, at his uncle's house that he was much away from home. Trusting that my claim will be accepted on the same grounds in which it is made. SIMPLE JUSTICE

I have the honour to be

Sir,
Your obedient Servant

National Archives of Australia

Henry Brown NAA: P1868, T12236

(NAA: P1868, T12236)

1921: 5 March the Gratuity Board found in favour of Henry Brown – Marcus' father. The correspondence made no mention of the rationale for finding in Henry's father, despite the fact that his Uncle Clarence was listed in his will as Marcus' beneficiary. We can only assume that they were convinced by the letter from Marcus' father.

1921: 26 April 73 pounds, 14 shillings and sixpence made payable to Henry Brown.

1921: 5 May the claim was officially rejected from Marcus' uncle Clarence Brown.
(NAA: P1868, T12236)

Recognition

Despite the events that took place after Marcus' death seemingly overshadowing his involvement in World War One, certainly when it comes to looking at the primary source documents that exist, it is important to acknowledge Marcus' service, and remember that he was just a young man who like many others, went away to war and never returned.

The below poem written by Marcus' Aunt on his mother's side, L.J. Everett and printed in the *Examiner* on the one year anniversary of his passing, encapsulates his sacrifice.

Mark, Soldier Mark, far away from Cape

Barren you sleep,

*Far away, 'neath alien flowers and alien
winds that weep.*

*You volunteered for the war, Mark, and
nobly your life laid down,*

*You unto death were faithful, and yours
is the hero's crown.*

*"Until the day break and the shadows
flee."*

(The Examiner, 11 June 1918)

References

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