

Lt Col Charles Macnaghten, CMG

The Duntroon deserter

Rank is of no consequence to some, when their sole objective is to serve their country in time of war.

Charles Melville Macnaghten was born in Rhutenpore in the Nuddhoea district of Bengal, India, on 18 November 1879. He was the son of Sir Melville Macnaghten who, in 1889—as Assistant Chief Constable, second in command of the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard—was a leading investigator in the ‘Jack the Ripper’ murder case.¹

Charles was educated in the traditions of the ‘old school tie’ attending both Eton and Trinity College at Cambridge where he studied law. A proficient all-round sportsman he excelled at cricket, tennis and football. The young Charles’ first exposure to military life was as a private in the volunteer battalion of the Suffolk Regiment. Later, during a visit to India with his grandfather, Charles served as a trooper in the illustrious Calcutta Light Horse.²

In search of ‘greener pastures’, Charles travelled to Australia where on his arrival in Sydney, he took up a position as a solicitor. Accustomed to the social graces that accompanied a military commission, he joined the NSW Scottish Rifle Regiment as a second lieutenant in May 1909—he was promoted to lieutenant in June 1911.¹

It was during this time that the Australian Government invited Lord Kitchener to review the defence capabilities of Australia. One of his recommendations involved the establishment of the Universal Military Training Programme (UMT). This scheme was referred to by some as the ‘Boy Conscription’—the compulsory military training of Australia’s youth. Recruiting areas were defined and zealously fought over, but there was one locality that nobody wanted: the slum neighbourhoods of the Sydney docks. There was, however, one officer who viewed recruitment in these areas as a challenge rather than as nigh on impossible: this was the impetuous Macnaghten.³

Recruiting the finest and most enthusiastic of his legal and other friends as subalterns, Macnaghten and his handpicked officers quickly moulded the street urchins of the Woolloomooloo Cadet Unit into the finest in the land. He instilled into these young soldiers the leadership qualities that would sustain them through the horrendous years of the First World War. A code of discipline and conduct was implemented and administered, in the main by the boys themselves. It was swift and sure and any form of unacceptable behaviour in the unit was not tolerated—the juvenile non-commissioned officers (NCOs) would seek out an offender and swiftly deal with him in their own fashion.²

At the same time, Macnaghten continued his militia service. He was posted as a lieutenant to the 25th Infantry Battalion in July of 1912, and as a captain to the 26th Infantry Battalion a year later. His promotion to major came into effect in December of 1913.

Following Australia's declaration of war in 1914, Macnaghten was appointed as the second in command of the 4th Battalion, 1st Brigade AIF.² In this role, the fiery major used the same exacting methods that had been so successful in the transformation of the larrikin cadets from Woolloomooloo. As the fledgling battalion climbed the gangway of the troop transport, none of the soldiers knew what lay ahead. Macnaghten, however, was sure of one thing, they would be ready. After a short stay in King George Sound, Western Australia, the battalion departed Australia as part of the first convoy of warships headed for Egypt.



The men of the 4th were among the second and third waves of ANZACs to land at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915. They survived the landing relatively unscathed and by the next day had occupied an area known as Bolton's Ridge, where the men finally had time for a brief respite and to lick their wounds.



AWM A00744. Observing through a periscope from a trench.

As Macnaghten and the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Onslow Thompson, sat on a couple of bully beef crates discussing the disposition of the battalion, a messenger burst in, flushed and breathless. 'Order for a general advance', he gasped. 'The line is to make a general advance.'

Macnaghten sprang to his feet. 'I'll take the right, Colonel, if you take the left'.¹ Led by these two highly trained and fearless officers, the only intact battalion in the 1st Division advanced towards the enemy. The battalions to the left and right of them had not reacted as quickly and suddenly the 4th took the full brunt of heavy resistance. Pushing on under the commands of Thompson and Macnaghten, the 4th captured an area to become known as Lone Pine.

At this point the advance stalled. The battalion was hit with shrapnel and came under fire from several machine-guns which began to sweep the area. About ten minutes later someone ordered a retreat, causing an element of confusion and resulting in chaos and panic. Some of the men ran back past the headquarters while Macnaghten and others tried to restore order until they received word to fall back to their original positions.¹

Macnaghten was leading some men forward again when he was shot through the chest. He tried to stay on his feet, but was shot again, this time through the throat. He staggered back to the dressing station, cursing his bad luck and wishing he could get back to the line with his men.

As he lay in the aid post awaiting medical attention, he overheard an officer detailing orders to a group of stragglers. Ignoring the pain of his injuries, Macnaghten struggled to his feet, drew his revolver and started off again with three stragglers, the only men he could find. The additional exertion accelerated the haemorrhaging from his wounds and he collapsed from loss of blood and was again taken to the rear. When Macnaghten regained consciousness, he learned his commanding officer was dead, leaving him to command the battalion.¹

He was evacuated from the Peninsula barely alive, but too stubborn to die. He was ferried to Alexandria where he underwent two operations to remove the Turkish bullets. Macnaghten was not an easy patient and harassed the doctors relentlessly to approve his discharge until he was released from the hospital just seven weeks later. Impatient to return to his beloved battalion, the intrepid warrior organised a berth on the first available troopship heading north. In mid-July, as the new commanding officer of the 4th, he was promoted to lieutenant colonel, at a stage when his men were giving the Turks hell.

By this time, the conflict had developed into a war of attrition, as neither side made gains of any significance, yet both were suffering heavy casualties from the protracted trench warfare. The Allied commanders wanted another landing at Suvla Bay and, in order to divert the Turkish reserves from the area, diversionary



AWM A02025. A trench at Lone Pine after the battle, showing Australian and Turkish dead on the parapet.

tactics were to be employed. The light horse would engage the enemy at The Nek, and the infantry—which would include the 4th as part of the 1st Brigade—would lead a charge at Lone Pine.

The enemy trenches at Lone Pine were heavily fortified and covered with logs for overhead protection. When the ANZAC charge reached the line, the Diggers used bayonets and bare hands to raise the logs, holding them aloft while their mates dropped into the murky darkness. The ensuing battle, most of it hand to hand combat, lasted several days. The 4th, commanded by Macnaghten, penetrated two to three metres from the front trench. Confusion predominated as the officers and men alike fought for their very lives. Later, Macnaghten's men were heard to comment that 'the old man was everywhere'.

By 7 August, the 4th was involved in the fiercest combat, much of it under a constant rain of bombs. Then, in a momentary lapse, an exhausted Macnaghten lost concentration for just an instant. A Turkish bomb landed beside him and exploded, the shrapnel tearing into his left knee. As he was carried from the

trenches, Macnaghten could be heard still yelling orders to his men to keep fighting.⁴

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Macnaghten was once again evacuated from ANZAC, this time never to return. His wounds were severe, and the sickness he had contracted as a result of the appalling living conditions on the Peninsula now ravaged his body. He was in and out of hospital for several months.

He received a CMG (Companion in The Most Distinguished Order of St. Michael and St. George) in the New Year's Honours List, 1916, and was Mentioned in Despatches for his work at ANZAC.⁵ In February 1916, he was placed in command of the camp at Tel el Kebir, Egypt, but ultimately, as a result of his injuries and chronic ill health, Macnaghten was repatriated to Australia on 10 June 1916. His discharge from the AIF as medically unfit became effective on 7 September 1916.² Still a member of the Permanent Army, he was posted to the Royal Military College, Duntroon, as the Director of Military Academics. This was an untenable situation for the fiery Macnaghten so he deserted.⁶

He made his way to Queensland and enlisted as a private in the 23rd Reinforcements of the 9th Battalion. Giving his name as Ciam Macmilville, he was allocated the regimental number of 7101 and sailed for France on HMAT *Kyarra* on 17 November 1916. The warrior was elated to be back in uniform and on his way to the fighting. His leadership qualities did not go unnoticed. He was promoted to acting corporal in February 1917 and to sergeant on 30 March of the same year. 'Macmilville' was promoted to second lieutenant and posted to the 13th Battalion on 26 April 1917. He saw action for the first time under his assumed name at Messines Ridge.⁷

But the bold Digger had not fully recovered from either his wounds or the sickness he had contracted at Gallipoli. Second Lieutenant Macmilville was again hospitalised, this time with a complete nervous breakdown, so severe he was deemed unfit to continue his service in the AIF.

Macmilville confessed to his alias and resigned the commission conferred on him under his assumed name on 10 October 1917. Ironically, even though he was classified a deserter, the Australian Department of Defence sent an official letter to AIF Headquarters in London asking if Macnaghten intended to return to Australia and resume his militia and UMT appointments.⁷

In 1919, Charles Melville Macnaghten joined the British Ministry of Labour as the Deputy Assistant Secretary, an appointment he held until 1927. In this position, he was instrumental in the rehabilitation of disabled British ex-servicemen.²

The burning need for a challenge led Macnaghten to pursue a change of employment and, in 1928, he emigrated to Montreal, Canada, where he became an accountant with the Canadian Pacific Railway.² Sadly, overwhelmed by the

ill-health that had dogged him since Gallipoli, Charles Melville Macnaghten, CMG—the warrior they called the ‘Galloping Major’—died in Montreal on 6 February 1931.⁸

Notes

- 1 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume I, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 2 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, Lieut. C.M. Macnaghten
- 3 Barrett J, *Falling in: Australians and ‘boy conscription’, 1911-1915*, Hale & Iremonger, Sydney, 1979
- 4 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume II, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 5 AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 6 Coulthard-Clark C, *Duntroon: the Royal Military College of Australia 1911-1986*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney: 1986
- 7 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, Lieut C MacMilville
- 8 AWM 43 Official history, 1914-1918 War, biographical files, A377, Macnaghten CM