

McCoubrie's War

Frank Creese McCoubrie was born in 1895 and lived at 5 Droop Street, Footscray. In 1911, at sixteen, he went into the army reserve. His record shows that he weighed 92 lb, had good eyesight and worked as a grocer; by 1914, still in the reserve, he'd put on another 28 lb but his eyesight was failing, or at least was shown as defective on his reserve record.

Among the other young men in Droop Street, there were an electrician, a linesman and an electrical wireman who may have been Frank's mates. And they may have influenced his thinking, because he gave up being a grocer to take up an electrical apprenticeship with H Rowe & Co, electrical engineers of 507 Flinders Street, Melbourne. And he joined the Electrical Trades Union.

Posters around town were calling for men to represent their country in a time of war, some suggesting that those who didn't come forward were cowards. Maybe they fed Frank's sense of pride and adventure because in April 1916, with a letter of support from his employer, he went up to Trades Hall to enlist in the Australian Infantry Force.

Mrs McCoubrie's son wanted to go to war. How did she feel? Had she seen the suffering of Mrs Adams whose son Billy was killed at Gallipoli? Had she heard her sobbing? Did she try to influence Frank's decision at a time when the threat of a white feather hung heavy over any young man who could fight yet wasn't in uniform?

Weighing in at 180 lb and with no mention of defective eyesight, Frank was accepted into the AIF 58th Battalion of the 5th Division on 1 May 1916. It would be fair to say his mum would have had an ache in her heart as her son went off for basic training.

Frank, keen to be a good soldier, wrote things to remember in his little leather notebook: how to advance in formation and how it differed between night and day; how to use his bayonet when coming face to face with his enemy. *'The bayonet no good without training ... Consider distance; long point from 4 to 5 feet from him and drilled at opponent's throat. Short point about 3 feet at opponent's heart or thigh; jab 1 or 2 feet. How to get bayonet out: it may seem easy from a bag of straw; the bayonet is supposed to go in about 3 to 4 inches.'*



As Frank learned how to kill a bag of straw, did his mum draw comfort from the other mothers? In all, 32 young men from Droop Street would do their training and go off to war.

And so it was that Frank McCoubrie, having completed his basic training, boarded the HMAT A9 Shropshire on 26 September 1916, bound for England.

He disembarked in Plymouth on 11 November and ten days later was in training at the Hurdcott camp in Wiltshire where he stayed for close on four months. Maybe it was there that he met Ethel. But who was she? Whoever she, was she sent him off to war feeling cared for:

Dear Frank, Just a card saying how sorry I am you cannot see me before you go away. I would very much like to say goodbye the same as I did at Waterloo. They are not supposed to send you out until you are 19. Well Frank, I am 19 and 4 months. I will have a nice photo taken to send to you and I shall always look forward to letters and your coming home. I will write a letter later. Yours Ethel. xxx

Frank left England in March 1917 to join the 58th Battalion on the battlefields of France. The battles for the Hindenburg line were beginning and the AIF 4th Division were

moving into the Bullecourt sector. On 12 May, Frank's 58th Battalion moved into position. Frank, with a company telephone, was by the side of the road that runs between Bullecourt and Reincourt, and close to the village of Bullecourt. What happened next is best described by other soldiers who were there.

Driver Crawford Hocking was Frank's mate: *'I was alongside him when he was killed by a shell during the hop over at Bullecourt. He was badly knocked about. He was buried where he fell. We were neighbours in civilian life and were particular friends. He came from Footscray, Australia.'*

Private Tom Maroney saw it from another vantage point: *'McCoubrie and some other men were in a deep shaft with the company telephone ... I saw a shell fall on top of the shaft and blow it completely in. There was no hope of getting these men out and I'm quite sure that McCoubrie and his companions were buried alive.'*

The field service report dated 18 May 1917 said: *'McCoubrie, Frank, Creese; In the Field; Killed in Action ... Particulars not yet to hand.'* But that

information still had to be conveyed to those back in Australia.

How Maud McCoubrie was told of her son's death is not known but she must have taken comfort from Reverend Goble, a friend who wrote to her from London as soon as he heard. She kept his letter for the rest of her life:

Dear Mrs McCoubrie, It is with deep regret that I read of your bereavement. It brings this war nearer to us when those we love are taken. I looked back across the seas to your place in Droop St and thought of Frank when a little lad whom Roy and I used to play with ... How proud you must be of him and the memory of him ... You can take your own stand side by side with the Commonwealth's mothers who have paid the price. Still I can well understand that the grief of your loss well outweighs the honour and, though your heart is sore, it is well to remember that the Word says 'Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for a friend.' ... May God comfort and bless you in your sorrow ... I remain yours sincerely, S. B. Goble.

Like many others at the butchery of Bullecourt, Frank's body was never found and to this day he still lies somewhere beneath the soil of the Bullecourt farmlands.

Ken Purdham