



Trooper Donald Thomas GILLIS 1304 – 2nd Australian Remount Unit

Born: 4 Jan 1892, Goolma, NSW.

Parents: Andrew & Catherine Gillis, Obley

Occupation: Railway Porter

District Connection: Obley, Yeoval

Enlistment Date: 29 Sep 1915

Enlistment Age: 29yrs

Embarkation: 10 Nov 1915, Sydney, *HMAT Orsova A67*

Served: Egypt

Fate: RTA 3 Aug 1919 per *HT Delta*

Honour Boards: Obley War Memorial, Cumnock War Memorial Gates & Railway honour board, Central Station, Sydney.

Biography

Donald Gillis was born at Wellington in 1886, the eldest child of Andrew and Catherine Gillis. His father was the school master at Baldry in 1907 and then at Obley in 1910.

Donald had an energetic family who were involved in many aspects of local community life. The next eldest sibling, Francis, was the Obley-Dubbo mailman in 1910. He tried to enlist in the AIF five times between 1914-1916 but failed the medical test each time. His sister Mary was postmistress at Obley for three years before being transferred to Dubbo Post Office in April 1914, and then taking charge of Teralba Post Office near Newcastle in September 1915. Another sister, Margaret ("Madge"), began nursing at the Coast Hospital near La Perouse, Sydney in 1914. His youngest sister, Nora, attended St Joseph's Convent Bodangora and was prominent at local socials and concerts, singing and playing the piano. Youngest brother, Ray, was prominent in the Obley cricket, football, tennis and sports days, and found work in the Australian Bank of Commerce at Dubbo before being transferred to Bathurst in 1917.

Donald was also active in the district, playing tennis and cricket at Baldry and Obley, and participating in foot races at sports days. In addition, he was a good musician, playing the piano at balls and musical performances throughout the district, and was prominent in the Balderodgery Progress Association.

Donald was aged 29 years and working as a railway porter in Sydney when he enlisted at Holsworthy on 29 September 1915. His medical examination stated that he was 5 feet 11 inches (180 cm) tall, had hazel eyes, a fair complexion, black hair and of the Roman Catholic religious denomination. He was assigned as a trooper to the 5th Squadron of the 2nd Remount Unit. His younger brother Jack [1431-Trp Andrew John Gillis] enlisted a day earlier and was allocated to the same unit.

Don and Jack returned to Obley in October 1915, and Don was presented with a smoking kit during a gathering at the Obley hall. They embarked at Sydney on 10 November 1915 and had a good trip to Egypt and "*never felt better in their lives*". They shared their trip to Egypt on *HMAT Orsova A67* with the renowned poet, journalist and author Andrew Barton "Banjo" Paterson, who at the age of 49 years was a Lieutenant in the 6th Squadron of the 2nd Remount Unit.

By the time they arrived in Egypt, the evacuation of Gallipoli was imminent, and the original work intended for the units was not required. When the Light Horse regiments left to fight as infantry at Gallipoli in 1915, they left behind detachments to take care of the horses. Two remount units of 800 men each were formed in September 1915. Accordingly, at the end of March 1916, the two remount units were combined into a single unit. Later in the year, the unit was further reduced to just two squadrons, and became the Remount Depot.

Each unit had 40 rough riders, all younger men like Jack & Donald, especially selected for their horsemanship. The maximum age for enlistment was set at 50 years due to the expected relatively light work, and the units contained a high proportion of Boer War veterans. Many of the recruits were 40 years old or more.

The work involved training and exercising horses and mules, and despatching them to various destinations, and providing replacements for those horses wounded or killed in action. Horses were received from Australia, England, France, the United States, Argentina, and Palestine.

The Depot was initially located at Maadi and then Heliopolis but moved to Moascar in April 1917. The remount units handled large numbers of horses, despatching over 10,000 horses in 1916. Training was time consuming, as many of the animals that arrived were rather wild and only partly broken.

Don was hospitalised with neuritis (inflammation of the nervous system) and influenza in April 1917 and did not return to his unit for nearly 6 weeks

Don spent time with the Field Remount Section near the front line at Ludd in Palestine during September and October 1918.

His brother Andrew had an exemplary record which undoubtedly contributed to his promotion to sergeant. In contrast, Trooper Donald Gillis was not so well behaved. In January 1917, he was



confined to the Heliopolis camp for 7 days for failing to hand in his pass when ordered. He spent another 7 days confined in the Moascar camp in September 1917, for being absent from parade, and for *“conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline in that...he failed to attend at the Kraal [Kraal is an Afrikaans word for a livestock enclosure and was adopted by Boer War veterans in the Remount Depot] after being warned to do so”*.

Unfortunately, worse was to come for Donald. On 16 July 1919, Donald and three other members of the 1st Remount Unit were charged with stealing between February and July 1919. from the Remount Depot at Abbassia, 2 horses, 8 mules and 4 donkeys, the property of the British Government.

Charlie Benneworth, a trooper from Tasmania, testified that Trp Donald Gillis and the other accused soldiers provided him with the animals, which he then sold to an Egyptian buyer. The accused soldiers were not represented by lawyers at the court martial and Donald undertook some cross examination of witnesses on behalf of the others. Donald pleaded not guilty, denied any knowledge of the sale of the animals, and claimed Benneworth was *“an unscrupulous man who would not stop at anything to gain his own ends”*. Lt. Col. Bourne of the Remount Depot described the accused soldiers as *“honest, hard working men”* and said he was *“greatly surprised to see them in (this) position”*.

Trp Benneworth was not charged with any crime, although he admitted selling Government property, and no other witness could identify any of the accused soldiers. Despite this, all the accused soldiers were found guilty and sentenced to 12 months imprisonment.

The Deputy Judge Advocate intervened after the court martial stating that the conviction should not be allowed to stand because it relied solely on the uncorroborated evidence of the accomplice, Trp Benneworth. There was also no evidence that the subject animals were the property of the Government. He recommended that the convictions could not be confirmed, and the Commanding Officer in Cairo agreed on 4 August 1919.

Donald embarked on the *HT Delta* at Kantara, Egypt, as a prisoner on 2 Aug 1919. However, his sentence was suspended while on route, and he arrived in Australia as a free man on 3 Sep 1919.

Donald settled back in Sydney after the war, and married Annie Amelia Johnston at Randwick in 1925. They did not have any children

Donald and Annie lived in Randwick in the 1930s and 1940s, at times with sisters Mary and Margaret (Madge) and brother Raymond. Donald worked as a Council labourer until retiring,

Donald died on 3 July 1949 at the Prince of Wales Military Hospital, Randwick, aged 63 years.

Annie continued to live at Randwick but moved to Lismore in the mid-1950s. She died on the 10 March 1976 at the age of 87 years and was buried in the Goonellabah Lawn Cemetery, now known as Lismore Memorial Gardens.

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WW1 & WW2 Honour Roll, western railway Remembrance Wall, Central Station, Sydney. Contains the names of 234 Traffic Branch railways employees, including Gillis, DT.