

John Keith Henderson: First Australian to Provide Dental Treatment to Troops on Active Service

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Abstract

The Royal Australian Army Dental Corps regards John Keith Henderson as the first Australian to provide dental treatment to troops on active service. At the time, he was a third-year dental student at the University of Sydney who had enlisted as a Private in the Australian Army Medical Corps at the outbreak of World War I. He served in the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force that deployed to German New Guinea in 1914. The lessons learnt from the emergency dental treatment he provided to Australian personnel in that campaign contributed to the formation of an Army Dental Service in 1915. Henderson transferred to the Australian Imperial Force as an infantry soldier, fought at Gallipoli and was later killed in action as a Captain in France in 1916.

Conflict of Interest: None

Introduction

The Royal Australian Army Dental Corps (RAADC) considers John Keith Henderson to be the first Australian to render dental treatment to troops in the field.¹ What makes Henderson's story unique is that he was a dental student and a Private in the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC) when he undertook dental duties on active service overseas in the first months of World War I. Although Henderson has been referred to in several publications,^{1,2,3,4,5,6,7} inaccuracies have appeared, and original sources have not been reported for some of the facts presented. To date, there has been no publication that has dealt explicitly with Henderson. Given his importance to the concept of providing dental support to deployed troops and the subsequent formation of the Australian Army Dental Service in World War I, there is a need for a comprehensive account concerning J K Henderson.

Lack of Army dental service

At the outbreak of World War I in August 1914, no system existed in the Australian Army for the provision of dental treatment.⁸ While the AAMC itself had no regular medical officers other than Surgeon-General W D Williams,⁹ it had medical officers serving in militia medical units who could be mobilised in

times of war.⁸ There was also an AAMC Reserve of officers created initially in 1903 from doctors who had previously held commissions in the Army Medical Corps of the various Australian states prior to federation.⁵ The lack of a dental service was not the fault of the AAMC. As early as 1906, Surgeon-General Williams had recommended the formation of a dental service, but as there was no precedent in the British Army, his recommendation was rejected by the Military Board.⁸ In times of war, it was expected that medical officers would provide any necessary dental treatment required in the field, and they were each issued with four pairs of dental forceps for this purpose.⁸ However, most medical officers had no experience in extracting teeth.¹

Outbreak of war and ANMEF

Following the declaration of war on 4 August 1914, Britain accepted on 10 August the Australian government's offer of raising an expeditionary force of 20 000 men, to be known as the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), that would be placed at the disposal of the British.⁹ On 8 August, a cable was also received from the British Government requesting that Australia 'take speedy action against the German colonies' in what was then called German New Guinea.¹⁰ Therefore, at the same time as the AIF was being organised, it was decided to

form a second force, separate from the AIF, to occupy German possessions in New Guinea and New Britain and to destroy German wireless stations that were essential to the activity of warships of the German East Asia Squadron.¹⁰ This force, known as the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF), would consist of six companies drawn from the Royal Australian Naval Reserve (600 men), one battalion of infantry (1023 men), two machine gun sections, a signalling section and a detachment of the AAMC.¹⁰ Colonel William Holmes, a militia officer, was appointed Commander of the ANMEF on 10 August and tasked to have the ANMEF ready for 'foreign service' in 6 days.⁵

Because of the need for rapid organisation of the force, enlistment for the infantry battalion, the machine gun and signalling sections, and the medical complement began in Sydney on the day following Colonel Holmes's appointment.¹⁰ A large number of volunteers gathered at Sydney's Victoria Barracks and were then marched to the nearby Sydney Royal Agricultural Society Showground to be examined by medical officers from militia units who had been called up for service.⁸ It soon became apparent that although medically fit, the men's dental health 'left much to be desired'.⁵ As there was no Army Dental Service to render the force dentally fit, the dental profession stepped in on a gratuitous and patriotic basis to perform the necessary treatment^{2,7,8} with the Dental Association of New South Wales sending volunteer dentists to the Sydney Agricultural Showground as an 'honorary Dental Corps' before the Minister of Defence knew anything about it.⁴ There, they set up dental surgeries in the Lindeman wine kiosk using loaned chairs, mostly barbers' chairs, and were supported with a £100 (\$AU200) donation from the Red Cross,⁴ equivalent to \$AU12 105 in 2021. On 17 August, Colonel Holmes acknowledged the voluntary treatment rendered by the civilian dentists to 600 of his men in the preceding few days.¹⁰ This ad hoc arrangement for the dental treatment of recruits reflected the complete lack of planning for military dentistry that then saw Australian troops in both the ANMEF and AIF sent overseas without dentists.

ANMEF medical detachment

The medical detachment of the ANMEF comprised four medical officers, one Warrant Officer and 35 other ranks.² Colonel Holmes obtained the services of Dr Neville Howse, who had won Australia's first Victoria Cross while serving as a medical officer during the Boer War with the New South Wales Army Medical Corps,⁵ and was an honorary Major in the AAMC Reserve, as the Principal Medical Officer with

the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.² The other medical officers selected were Captain Frederick Maguire from a militia Field Ambulance unit and Captains John Donaldson and Brian Pockley, both of whom had been recently commissioned in the AAMC militia.² The other personnel selected had either received AAMC training, held some civil qualification in first aid, or had nursing experience.^{2,5} No female nurses were recruited.

One of those selected for the medical unit was Private John Keith Henderson, who had Army service number 36, indicating that he was among the first of over 300 000 Australians who enlisted for service in World War I. Henderson wrote 'dental student' on his enlistment papers in the section asking his 'trade or calling'.¹¹ Previous publications have incorrectly stated that Henderson was a dentist,⁵ a dental surgeon¹² or a fourth-year dental student^{1,2,3,4,7} with only 3 months left to graduate.^{1,3} Investigation of the University of Sydney archives shows that he was a third-year dental student in the four-year course when he enlisted in August 1914¹³ and not a final year student as reported previously. Apart from being a third-year student with another 15 months left to complete the Bachelor of Dental Surgery course, his subsequent dental service is even more noteworthy because he had only entered the dental course the year before, having been a medical student prior to that.

Education and enlistment

J K Henderson, who stated his age as 23 years and 6 months on his enlistment papers, was born in London in 1891 and arrived in Sydney the following year aged one.^{11,14} He was educated at Sydney Grammar School,¹⁴ where he completed his secondary schooling in 1908. Known as 'Keith' at school and 'Chook' to his friends and family, Henderson passed the matriculation examination for the University of Sydney in November 1908 and entered its Faculty of Medicine as a first-year medical student in March 1909.¹⁶ The university records show that he did not pass his 1909 examinations but repeated the first year successfully in 1910, entering second-year medicine in 1911.¹⁷ Unfortunately, he did not pass his examinations that year and repeated second-year medicine in 1912¹⁸ but again failed to pass.¹⁹ In 1913, he transferred into second-year dentistry,¹⁹ passed the annual examinations and entered third-year dentistry in 1914.¹³ His university career from 1909 to 1914 indicates that he was not the type to give up easily, a suggestion supported by his being a university middleweight boxing champion during that time.²⁰

Henderson's recruitment into the medical unit of the ANMEF was secured by Lieutenant Colonel Howse,² who, according to his biographer, was aware of the poor dental health of many of the ANMEF recruits.⁵ As a medical officer who had served two tours of duty in South Africa during the Boer War of 1899–1902,⁵ Howse would also have had first-hand experience of the dental problems encountered in that conflict. At the outset of the Boer War, the British made no provision for emergency dental care of the deployed forces. This resulted in 6942 admissions to hospital for dental reasons and 2451 troops being invalided back to Britain for dental reasons.²¹ In 1900, a British dentist went out to South Africa for 6 months as part of a field hospital funded by public subscription. He reported that disease, neglect and the hard rations had caused significant problems with the men's teeth and that those who lost their teeth were no longer fit for service.²² Eventually, four contract dentists were sent from Britain to South Africa in early 1901.²¹ As Howse was responsible for selecting the members of his unit, he would likely have taken the opportunity to recruit someone with dental training, even if that

person was a dental student. It is possible that Henderson may have been brought to the attention of Howse by one of the medical officers, Captain Brian Pockley. Henderson and Pockley had been classmates in first-year medicine in 1909¹⁶ and had also served together as office-bearers in the Sydney University Athletic Club in 1911.¹⁷

Whatever the mechanism of Henderson's selection, Howse signed his medical examination certificate on 17 August 1914, and Colonel Holmes signed the certificate of Commanding Officer on the same date appointing Henderson to the AAMC.¹¹ From the entries recorded on those papers enlisting Henderson in the ANMEF 'for a period not exceeding six months', we know that he was 5 feet 9.5 inches (176.5 cm) tall, weighed 11 stone 12 pounds (75 kg), had a 'fair complexion' and 'very fair hair'. This description is at odds with the RAADC corps history which describes Henderson as a 'redhead'.¹ On 18 August, the force boarded the P&O liner *Berrima*, which had been commissioned as a transport in the Royal Australian Navy and converted to carry



Figure 1. Onboard HMAT *Berrima*, August 1914. Front row left to right: CAPT F A Maguire, CAPT B C Pockley and far right, CAPT J E Donaldson. Middle row second from right: PTE J K Henderson. Back row second from left: SGT W R Dovey. (Photograph from Mackenzie10 p. 208).

four 120 mm naval guns, and sailed from Sydney harbour the next day.¹⁰ Prior to departure, those ANMEF members who were graduates or students of the University of Sydney had a group photograph taken on the deck of the *Berrima*, which included Henderson, along with Captains Maguire, Pockley and Donaldson of the AAMC (Figure 1).

Rabaul campaign and occupation

The *Berrima* reached Palm Island near Townsville on 24 August, where the troops spent over a week in training before proceeding to Port Moresby. On 7 September, the *Berrima* departed Port Moresby for Rabaul in convoy with Royal Australian Navy ships comprising two cruisers, three destroyers, two submarines and several support ships that joined the battle cruiser HMAS *Australia* under the command of Rear Admiral Patey.¹⁰ In modern parlance, this would be called an amphibious task force; the size of this fleet was to protect the force from the German cruisers *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst* suspected to be in the area. The first Australian land action of World War I occurred in the early hours of 11 September 1914 when the ANMEF landed at Kabakaul near Herbertshoe to the southeast of Rabaul on the island of New Britain.¹⁰ They encountered strong opposition but were able to capture the German wireless station after casualties on both sides. One of the casualties was Henderson's former classmate Captain Brian Pockley who selflessly took off his Red Cross armband and gave it to a Naval Reservist so the latter could safely move a wounded man back to the beach. The Germans respected the Red Cross and did not fire. However, when Pockley moved forward without his Red Cross armband, he was shot and badly wounded. He was evacuated back to the *Berrima* where he died. Pockley was the first member of the Australian Army to lose his life in World War I.¹⁰

Henderson's dental service

Following the fall of Rabaul and the German surrender, the existing German hospitals at Rabaul, Herbertshoe and Madang were taken over, and Lieutenant Colonel Howse made Rabaul the Australian base hospital staffed by the AAMC.⁵ Howse departed for Australia on 4 October 1914 to join the AIF and was replaced as Principal Medical Officer by Captain Frederick Maguire who was promoted to Major.^{5,10} Previous publications have reported the amount of dental treatment done by Henderson in Rabaul but have not cited the source of the data.^{1,3,7} The source was Major Maguire, who reported that Private Henderson performed some 108 dental extractions, 160 fillings and 50 dressings for abscessed teeth between August and December.²

The term 'dressings for abscessed teeth' means the emergency removal of infected dental pulp and root canal tissue, often with the intention of draining pus via the root canal system, followed by the placement of medicaments to disinfect the tooth internally and then the placement of a temporary filling. In relation to the emergency dental care provided by Henderson, Major Maguire acknowledged that 'a material amount of disability—not to speak of inconvenience and suffering—was saved by the work done'.²

Henderson was promoted to Corporal in the AAMC on 1 February 1915.¹¹ His dental services were also acknowledged and appreciated by fellow ANMEF personnel. In a letter from Rabaul to Sydney Grammar School, Sergeant Wilfred Dovey wrote, '*Keith Henderson is putting in splendid work on the men's teeth*'.¹⁵ Unfortunately, Henderson could not undertake any denture construction or repairs due to a lack of the necessary equipment and materials, and Major Maguire reported that this resulted in five men becoming unfit for further service with the ANMEF.² Part of the requirements for third-year dental students at the University of Sydney in 1914 included the performance of 40 amalgam fillings under supervision, of which 20 had to be preceded by root canal treatment.¹³ At the time of Henderson's enlistment in August 1914, he had just completed two of the three academic terms for the year and would likely have completed around two-thirds of his clinical requirements by then. The fact that he then performed 160 fillings and 50 dressings for abscessed teeth over the next 4 months to the Principal Medical Officer's satisfaction, suggests that he was considered a competent dentist despite his student status.

It has been previously reported that when Henderson embarked for service, he supplied his own dental instruments^{6,7} by taking his student dental kit with him.^{1,3} However, no references have been cited for these claims. The most likely source is Major Frederick Maguire, who recorded that Henderson 'provided himself with a small kit of dental instruments' when he went to Rabaul.² Dental students at the University of Sydney were required to purchase an instrument kit for use in their clinical training, especially in the area of restorative dentistry, right up until the 1980s, so Henderson most likely took his student kit with him. Dental forceps for extracting teeth would have been available from the medical officers' kits,⁸ and Henderson may have obtained other specialised forceps and dental elevators prior to embarkation to extract severely broken down teeth or root stumps.

It would have been necessary for Henderson to take dental filling materials such as amalgam and

cements with him to Rabaul, as well as medicaments for treating infected dental pulps and root canals. As there was no establishment for a dental service within the AAMC, it would not have been possible to obtain such dental materials through the army logistics system. Such materials may have been donated by the Dental Association clinic at the Sydney Agricultural Showground or possibly purchased prior to embarkation using some of the donated Red Cross funds. However, no evidence can be found to support this speculation. There is no information available about whether there was a German dentist in Rabaul at the time of the Australian military occupation whose instruments and dental materials might have been used by Henderson. Whereas the Official History documents the presence of German doctors in Rabaul who worked under the supervision of the AAMC, no mention is made of any German dentist.¹⁰

Formation of Army Dental Service

When Major Maguire returned to Australia in February 1915, he produced a report strongly advocating the need for the provision of dental treatment to troops on active service, which attracted the attention of the Minister for Defence.² At the same time, large numbers of personnel who had just arrived in Egypt with the AIF were presenting to sick parades requiring dental treatment, but for which no provision had been made. This necessitated referral to qualified and unqualified dentists in Cairo who had to be paid by the soldiers themselves.⁸ This situation led the recently promoted Colonel Neville Howse, now Assistant Director of Medical Services for the AIF, to do as he had done with Henderson in Rabaul and use any dentally qualified personnel he could find within the AIF in Egypt to provide treatment at the Australian General Hospital.⁸ Following the landing at Gallipoli, Howse again employed the same arrangements there, but men were often sent back to Egypt for dental treatment, meaning they could be away from their units for weeks at a time.⁵ Like Maguire, Howse pushed for dentists to be appointed to the AAMC to provide health support for the Army overseas.⁸

The Australian Department of Defence finally acted, and in June 1915, Military Order number 387 authorised the formation of a dental service within the AAMC to comprise 13 dental officers, 13 Staff-Sergeant dental technicians and 13 dental assistant Privates.⁸ By November 1918, the dental service had grown significantly, and there were 130 dental officers serving abroad with the AIF.⁶ Writing after the war, Frederick Maguire commented that the report he had made on the importance of dental treatment

to deployed troops as demonstrated by Private Henderson in Rabaul 'may have influenced the subsequent appointment of dental surgeons to the AIF'.² It seems reasonable to conclude that Maguire's report, followed by requests for dental personnel from Howse in Egypt and then Gallipoli, contributed significantly to the formation of the Australian Army Dental Service in World War I.

Egypt and Gallipoli

Following the completion of his 6 months service at Rabaul, Corporal Henderson returned to Australia on 4 March 1915,¹¹ where he transferred to the AIF on 27 March.²³ During the next few months, he underwent infantry training that included a course at the School of Musketry at Randwick in Sydney.¹¹ After serving as an acting Sergeant for a month with the 20th Battalion, he was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant on 6 July 1915 before being posted to the Infantry Depot at Liverpool military camp, New South Wales.¹¹ On 9 August, he sailed for Egypt as a member of the 8th Reinforcements, 13th Australian Infantry Battalion.²³ While doing police duty in Cairo, Henderson visited Staff-Sergeant Sidney Ratcliff, who had embarked with the first contingent of the Army Dental Service in July 1915, and was serving as a dental technician at the No. 2 Australian General Hospital there.²⁴ Following his return to Sydney, Ratcliff gave a lecture to dental students at the University of Sydney early in 1916. In that lecture, he discussed his experiences overseas and mentioned his meeting with Henderson, whom he described as a credit to the university and the dental undergraduates, and whom he hoped would be given all assistance possible to complete his dentistry studies once he returned from the war.²⁴

On 7 October 1915, Henderson was admitted to No. 1 Australian General Hospital at Heliopolis, near Cairo, with a gastrointestinal infection and was discharged 4 days later.¹¹ At that time, gastrointestinal infections were common among Australian troops in Egypt and believed to be due to defective sanitation procedures in the training camps, especially measures to prevent food contamination by flies.⁸ Following his discharge from hospital, Henderson was taken on strength by the 13th Battalion on 23 October at Mudros, on the Greek island of Lemnos, an important base for British and ANZAC forces engaged with the Turks in the Dardanelles, approximately 160 km away.¹¹ He was posted to C Company of the 13th and landed at Gallipoli on the night of 31 October 1915.²⁵ Henderson fought on Gallipoli until 14 December when he was evacuated to the hospital ship *Caledonia* and then admitted to hospital two days later at Mudros with a diagnosis of 'pyrexia of unknown origin'.¹¹

While Henderson was in hospital, the ANZAC forces withdrew from Gallipoli over several nights, with the 13th Battalion completing its withdrawal to Mudros on the night of 19 December and the early hours of 20 December.²⁵ By daybreak on 20 December 1915, all ANZAC forces had left Gallipoli. Henderson was moved to No. 24 Casualty Clearing Station convalescent depot at Mudros East on 21 December with the diagnosis of 'malaria' before being discharged back to his battalion.¹¹ The 13th Battalion was moved back to Egypt, where it was reinforced with new recruits from Australia after the losses at Gallipoli and Henderson was promoted to 1st Lieutenant on 20 January 1916.¹¹ He was then promoted to Captain on 1 March 1916,¹¹ coinciding with a reorganisation of the Australian forces that saw the 13th Battalion split into two, with one half allocated to the 45th Battalion and the other half remaining with the 13th Battalion. Henderson remained with the 13th as Officer Commanding C Company.²⁵

France

Henderson's battalion arrived in France on 6 June 1916¹¹ as part of the Australian 4th Division of I ANZAC Corps. After field training, the 13th Battalion moved into the front line at Fleurbaix, near the border with Belgium, where the Battalion had its first experience of trench warfare and German bombardments and sustained their first casualties on the Western Front.²⁵ In the middle of July, the

Battalion moved south to Warloy, near Albert, in preparation for a planned offensive at Pozieres.

The war diary of the 13th Battalion records that it went into the front line near Pozieres on 10 August 1916, where it was involved in constant fighting and sustained many casualties from heavy and accurate German artillery barrages.²⁵ Captain Henderson was reported in the Official History as commanding the right flank of the 13th as the Australians advanced to within 275 m of Mouquet Farm during the early hours of 13 August.¹² On the night of 14 August, the Australians again mounted a night attack on the German trenches at Mouquet Farm. At 10 p.m., the first wave of the 13th Battalion, comprising A, D and Captain Henderson's C Company, advanced in an attacking line from the 'hopping-out' trench.²⁵ They encountered a German trench after 70 m and took it following a fight and then continued to advance towards Mouquet Farm. A second enemy trench 'full of Germans' was then captured approximately 140 m from the 'hopping-out' trench. Just after midnight, the Germans counter-attacked strongly at the front and on the exposed right and left flanks where the supporting battalions had failed to move up. The 13th Battalion was forced into a fighting retreat back to the 'hopping-out' trench, taking their wounded from the enemy trenches with them. At dawn on 15 August, the Battalion was relieved and moved to the rear, marching back into Warloy later that night.²⁵ For the period 7–15 August inclusive, the 13th



Figure 2. Officers of 13th Battalion, Egypt 1916. Middle row left to right: LT C B Meyer, LT J K Henderson. (Australian War Memorial photograph. Accession number H15116).

incurred a total of 386 casualties at Pozieres;²⁵ about a third of its strength.

In the night action of 14 August 1916, the 13th Battalion sustained 117 casualties including two officers and 22 other ranks listed as missing. Captain J K Henderson and Lieutenant Cyril Meyer were the two officers reported as missing in action.²⁵ Lieutenant Meyer had joined the 13th in March 1916 in Egypt²⁶ and appears in a photograph taken of 13th Battalion officers at that time standing next to Henderson (Figure 2). In October 1916, word was received that Lieutenant Meyer had been located as a prisoner of war in Germany and in November, it was learned that he had been admitted to hospital there in September with shrapnel injuries sustained on 14 August, necessitating a leg amputation.²⁶ There was no information as to the fate of Henderson. At a court of inquiry held by the 13th Battalion on 23 January 1917, 5 months after he had been reported missing, Captain John Keith Henderson was officially listed as 'killed in action' on 14 August 1916, with the finding certified by AIF Headquarters on 12 March 1917.¹¹

The fate of Captain Henderson

During World War I, the fate of missing Australian personnel was investigated by the Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau.²⁷ Working with the British Red Cross and other Red Cross societies, prisoner of war lists were obtained and searched, and statements collected from anyone who had been in the same action or might have heard about what had happened. Captain J K Henderson's Red Cross file²⁸ contains eight statements from hospital patients, five of whom reported him killed, two that he was wounded, and one that 'he was never seen again' after leading his men 'over the top'. Three of the statements were obtained in England in October and November 1916, while the others were obtained between January and September 1917 from three patients in Australia and one each in France and England.

Of the eight statements, five gave first-hand accounts and three reported what others had told them. Two of the first-hand accounts referred to Captain Henderson by his nickname of 'Chook' Henderson, one stating that he was a 'good officer' and the other that he was 'one of the best officers'. All the statements varied in their descriptions of what took place on the night of 14 August 1916. One stated that Henderson was wounded in the legs, but before getting him out, they were 'bombed' (grenaded) out of the trench and had to leave him behind. Another said that he was wounded in a charge and seen to fall. Other statements recorded that he was 'blown to

pieces with a shell', another that he was killed by a 'whizbang' (a light shell fired by a small calibre field gun) and died a few minutes after being hit, and yet another that he was killed 'as we were going over'. It is unknown what evidence was presented at the 13th Battalion court of enquiry in January 1917 that led to the finding of 'killed in action', and the Red Cross reported in May that year that their attempts to obtain the evidence had been unsuccessful.²⁸ The proceedings of that court of enquiry cannot be located in the National Archives of Australia.

One of the statements obtained by the Red Cross in October 1916 included information that Henderson's body had been brought in by the battalion that relieved the 13th Battalion.²⁸ This was the 51st Battalion that took over the 13th's position at 5 a.m. on 15 August.²⁵ The 51st Battalion's war diary²⁹ records that it remained in place all that day in expectation of a counterattack and that they were heavily shelled. At dusk, patrols were sent out to look for wounded and guide in men lying out in no-man's land all day. However, no attack was made on the German trenches near Mouquet Farm where Henderson had presumably been hit. The 4th Battalion replaced the 51st at 6 a.m. on August 16th. The 4th Battalion did not move forward either but was heavily shelled before being attacked by the Germans.³⁰ Given that the relieving battalions did not venture forward, it seems unlikely that Henderson's body was recovered by them. In August 1917, a year after his being reported missing, the Red Cross concluded that they had been unable to obtain any definite information regarding Captain Henderson's fate.²⁸

Further information

Back in Sydney, Henderson's father had contacted the Department of Defence in Melbourne on two occasions in October 1916, seeking details about his son, who had by then been missing for 2 months.¹¹ He was informed each time that no details were available but was reassured that the Imperial authorities were doing their utmost to obtain all available information regarding those reported as missing.¹¹ Henderson's father then wrote to Lieutenant Colonel Leslie Tilney, the Commanding Officer of the 13th Battalion. Lieutenant Colonel Tilney had been sent to hospital in France on 21 August 1916, a week after the action at Pozieres, and had been evacuated to England 10 days later.³¹ He was invalided back to Perth in October 1916 and was discharged from the AIF on 30 November.³¹

Tilney replied to Henderson's father in early 1917 and told him that following the action of 14 August 1916, it was thought possible that his son had been

wounded and carried back, and so inquiries were made at adjacent dressing stations and hospitals, but no trace of him could be found.²⁰ Tilney, who had served in the Boer War and also won a DSO as a Major on Gallipoli,³¹ wrote, '*It is most difficult to get reliable information of happenings in night attacks, usually individuals cannot see anything except in their immediate vicinity, and in the heat and excitement often do not get a clear impression of what is going on. Very often, too, the only ones who could throw light on certain incidents are killed or wounded themselves*'. In his opinion, so much time had elapsed without information about '*dear old chook*' that it had to be concluded '*he must have made the supreme sacrifice for his country's cause*'. He concluded his letter with the words, '*I have lost a valued friend, but you, his parents, something infinitely greater*'.²⁰

Further dental service

It is not known whether Henderson performed any dental treatment when serving in Egypt, Gallipoli or France. This seems unlikely as the Army Dental Service had been formed and deployed overseas by the time he reached those theatres.⁸ However, it is known that he took his dental instruments with him when he embarked for overseas service in August 1915 because when the AIF returned his belongings to his family in Sydney in May 1917, they contained a 'case of dental instruments'.¹¹

Commemoration

Captain J K Henderson has no known grave, and his name is commemorated at the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux in France, along with the names of over 10 700 other Australian service members killed on the Western Front whose resting places are unknown.³² Henderson is also recorded on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial and a plaque at the base of the War Memorial Carillon at the University of Sydney that contains the names of 205 undergraduates, graduates and staff of the university who died in World War I.

It is probable that Henderson's remains may still lie in the Pozieres-Mouquet Farm battlefield area. The Germans held the land around Mouquet Farm, where Henderson was last seen alive, until finally being driven out on 26 September 1916.³³ Given that Henderson was killed on 14 August and it was summer, his remains, if recovered, would likely have been buried by the Germans. The battlefield at Pozieres received the longest and most intense artillery bombardment of all the Australian battlefields of the entire war,³³ meaning that many bodies were likely obliterated or buried by the heavy shelling. The three Australian divisions involved in that battle suffered 23 000 casualties in less than 7 weeks in 1916, leading the official war historian, C E W Bean, to comment that the less than 2 km-long Pozieres ridge 'marks a ridge more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth'.³³

Conclusion

Due to his work in Rabaul, Henderson holds a place of honour within the RAADC as the first Australian to provide dental treatment to troops on active service. The lessons learnt from his service in Rabaul in 1914 were important in the momentum to establish an Army Dental Service as part of the AAMC in World War I. This led to the formation of the Australian Army Dental Corps in 1943 during World War II, which then was granted the 'Royal' prefix in 1948 and became the RAADC.¹ Since then, the RAADC has continued to provide healthcare support to Australian troops deployed on operations overseas, continuing the service begun by Private John Keith Henderson in 1914.

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