

“McGOUGH OF THE SECRET SERVICE”

The *West Coast Sentinel* from South Australia ran an interesting article in January 1921, which caught my eye as it related to the service of John Henry McGough, a soldier whom I recognised as having been a military policeman during the Great War. It prompted me to renew my interest in McGough’s service. A quick look at his NAA (Archives) file shows nothing abnormal about this soldier, and his file was not unusually large, being only fifteen pages in length.

The *Sentinel’s* article was obviously written by an ex-soldier; possibly he had been a military policeman serving occasionally alongside McGough, but the writer had more probably served with him in the Remounts. The article seems to be a mixture of fact and fiction, and the truth is probably somewhere in-between.

John Henry McGough hailed from Mt Pleasant in South Australia. His father, Henry (senior), had emigrated from Ireland circa 1866, settling in South Australia. He married Honorah Kain at Mount Barker in 1873. ‘Harry’ (as John was always known) married Susannah (‘Susie’) Maria Thackrah in April 1905 at Northam in Western Australia. It appears that Harry took over the ‘dairy and milk round’ that Susie had been running in 1906. Harry vowed to ‘continue to supply only the purest milk’.

In 1913 Harry McGough had bought into the Robinson Estate. His holding was within a few miles of Albany, where he had bought 25 acres at £12 per acre. The Robinson Estate was some 2 560 acres and was immediately adjacent to Albany. The land had been purchased by Mr Herbert Robinson, the Mayor of Albany. The area did have some drainage issues, which was largely solved by placing a large main drain through the estate, some three and a half miles in length.

Harry built a ‘substantial homestead’ for Susie and their six children: Bobby, Dulcie, Iris, Allan, Victor and their latest addition Hubert. Harry described himself as being a farmer, and continued farming on the Robinson Estate.

Harry was nearly 42 years of age when he chose to enlist on 28 September 1915. It was probably due to his age that Harry volunteered for the Remounts and became part of the 4th Squadron, 1st Remount Unit. Squadrons for the 1st Remounts were drawn from Victoria, Tasmania, Western Australia and South Australia. Each of the squadrons contained 40 ‘Rough Riders’, all men specially selected for their horsemanship.

The bulk of the unit came together at Maribyrnong in Victoria. Here the equipment needed for the unit was sourced and the men continued their military training. The 1st Remount Unit embarked from the Port of Melbourne aboard the *Orsova* on 12 November, 1915. Also aboard were two squadrons of the 2nd Remount Unit (presumably raised in NSW and Queensland). The *Orsova* (shown **right**) reached Fremantle on 18 November and it was here that Lieutenants Watts and Blake joined the unit.



The voyage to Egypt went without incident. As well as the Remount troops, there were also some artillery and service corps men, and a large number of Australian nursing sisters aboard. The

Orsova coaled up at Aden, and arrived at Suez on 8 December, 1915, arriving in Egypt just before Christmas. Watts would thus later be entitled to wear the 1914-15 Star.

Sid Cusack (from WA) in the *Sunday Times* described the unit's voyage and some of its personalities:

"It is now nearly two months since the remounts shook the dust of W.A. from off their number nines. We have done some travelling in the time, but ere this letter reaches Australia we will probably be settled down to work. So far it has been a huge holiday, and most of us will be glad to get properly into harness. The trip so far has been grand, the weather a trifle warm during the day, but delightfully cool in the evenings, while the treatment and accommodation of troops on ship board have been superb. So good, in fact, that one cannot help thinking that either the remounts have been exceptionally lucky or those who have sent back complaints to Australia have allowed their imagination to get the better of them. We have plenty of room for exercise, ditto food, and all of it well cooked. In fact, it is superior to anything we had in camp either in the West or in Victoria. Sports and concerts are held every afternoon and evening, and the talent is surprising. A lot of the singers would do credit to any concert platform.

The W.A.'s and Tasmanians are one squadron – D – under the command of Captain Boyes, with Lieut's Watts and Blake, two Westralians, as his officers. The choice of officers is a happy one, particularly as regards Lieut Watts, who, known throughout the West as an accomplished horseman, has all the confidence of the men. Besides, he is known personally to so many that it is like being with an old friend. He is going to make good. We help to make up the first unit under Colonel McLeich, of Victoria, who seems a very capable man, who has seen service in Africa. Our sergeant-major is an ex-Indian soldier named Lewis, who of late years has been residing in the Denmark district near Albany. The sergeants comprise a well-known resident of Katanning named Jack Blythe, Harry Staber, who was attached to the staff of the railway goods shed in Perth, and Reg Paget of the Permanent Remount Depot at Guilford. The corporals are Ottey, at one time in the police at Perth and Peak Hill, and Wilson, an old Indian soldier, while the lance-corporals are Baxter, one of the permanent remount men from Guilford; McDermott, a well-known Toodyay identity, and Gasnor. They are all shaping well, though our sergeant-major's strict adherence to the Imperial or Indian ideas of issuing orders and enforcing discipline hits home hard on the majority. However, probably the men will get used to him ere long, or perhaps, he will soon learn that a more mild manner will enhance his popularity. He is I believe, a good fellow at heart, and only needs to get used to the ways of the Australian.

We are a mixed lot. In the ranks you will find the wealthy squatter or a farmer, the miner, the clerk and the navy, all as happy as Larry, and they are as good a lot of men as you will find anywhere. We have been called 'the old men and cripples brigade', but when we are wanted it will be found that all of us who were either too old or had some defect which precluded us from joining the fighting forces will more than hold our end up.

The 1st Remount Unit disembarked on 9 December and entrained to Zeitoun, where they camped. The total strength of the unit was just short of 800 men. On 14 December the unit took charge of 198 artillery horses; these were the first horses handled by the unit.

It was found upon arrival in Egypt that the evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula was beginning. Consequently, the original work intended for the unit would not to be required. British authorities decided to utilise the unit and it was placed under the command of Brigadier-General CL Bates, CMG, DSO, Director of Remounts, and of all Remount Depots in Egypt.

On Christmas Eve the unit was handed its first draft of horses – 356 all up. On 28 December the unit moved out from Zeitoun and marched to Maadi, where a depot was established. That march was some 16 miles, with only six men falling out. Headquarters and the two squadrons of the 2nd Remount Unit were luckier; they reached Maadi the same day aboard a train.

On 29 December the unit was tasked with moving 716 mules from the Abbassia Remount Depot across to the Maadi Remount Depot. Some 60 men were sent to Abbassia to herd the mules. The path taken by the mules passed through historic land, including through the Tombs of the Khallifs, between the famous Citadel and Blue Mosque, and through the Dead City onto open desert. The mules were of some annoyance to the locals, as some strayed into enclosures and some into graveyards along the way.

The photo (**below**) are from a demonstration given by the Remounts at the Heliopolis Racecourse. It shows a 1st Remount rough rider, Tabner, breaking in a horse.



In February 1916 a letter appeared back in *The West Australian* newspaper. In it, Harry thanked Miss Eileen Casey for a Christmas parcel that he had received from his home state that Eileen had helped put together. Harry was still with the remounts at this time. Harry conveyed to Miss Casey that as well as a pudding, the parcel also included: *two handkerchiefs, four packets of smokes, three packets of chewing gum, four packets [of] chocolates, 1 packet cigars, bootlaces, safety___, milk kisses, and some raisins*. Harry assured Miss Casey that he had ‘heartily enjoyed them’.

Towards the end of his letter, Harry wrote that he was attached to the ‘*WA Rough Riders, but may be transferred to the Light Horse*’.

In early March 1916 it was proposed to reduce the strength of the Australian Remount Depot by half, which was to be done by forming one unit from both the 1st and 2nd Australian Remount Units. It was intended to give the officers, NCOs and men not required for the new unit the opportunity to join other corps if medically fit. Those that were unfit were to return to Australia.

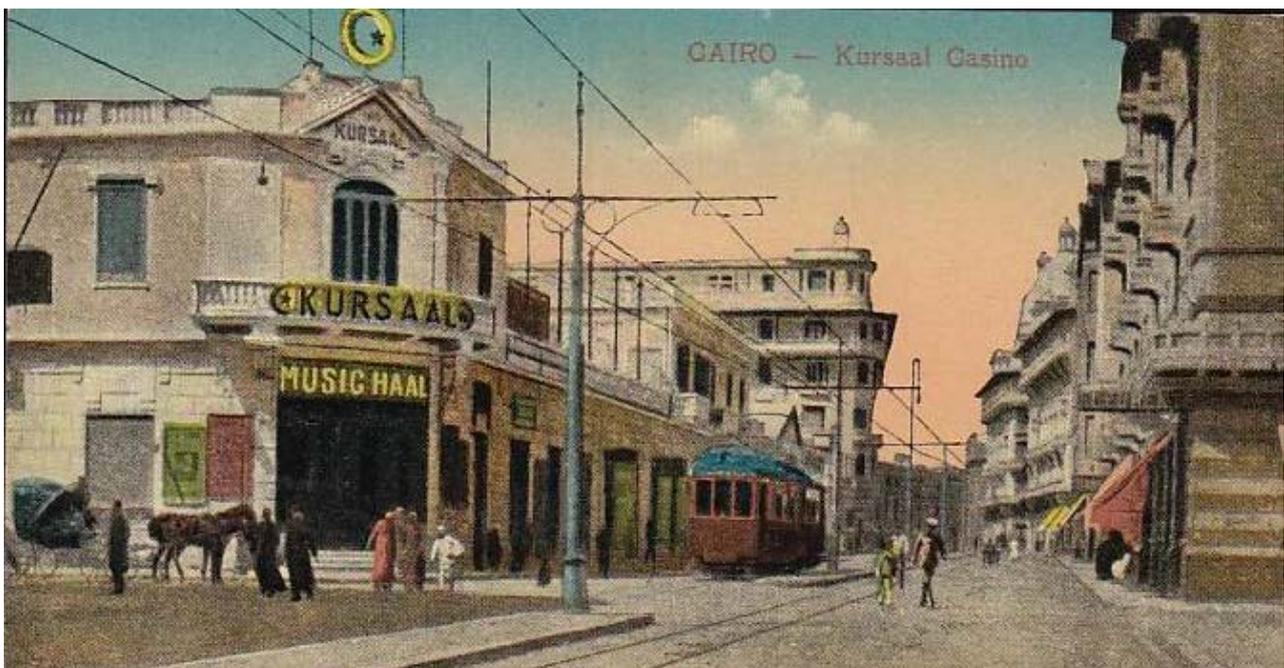
On 6 March, 1916, applications for transfer were called for. It was not until 27 March that the formation of the unit occurred. The procedure was as simple as halving the units, with the exception of both unit's rough riders, who were all retained.

A number of men volunteered for the newly forming Anzac Provost Corps, which was coming together at Abbassia. Lieutenant Watts and Adams transferred to the provosts. The Corporal Wilson (**right, bottom**) mentioned in Sid Cusack's letter also did so. Another from WA was Corporal Wheatley (**right, top**). Trooper John Henry McGough was also accepted to train and assess his suitability, and he began his training at Abbassia on 5 April, 1916. John spent the next few months at Abbassia.



The writer of the 1921 articles recollection of McGough's early years are a bit vague and are not fully accurate. He described:

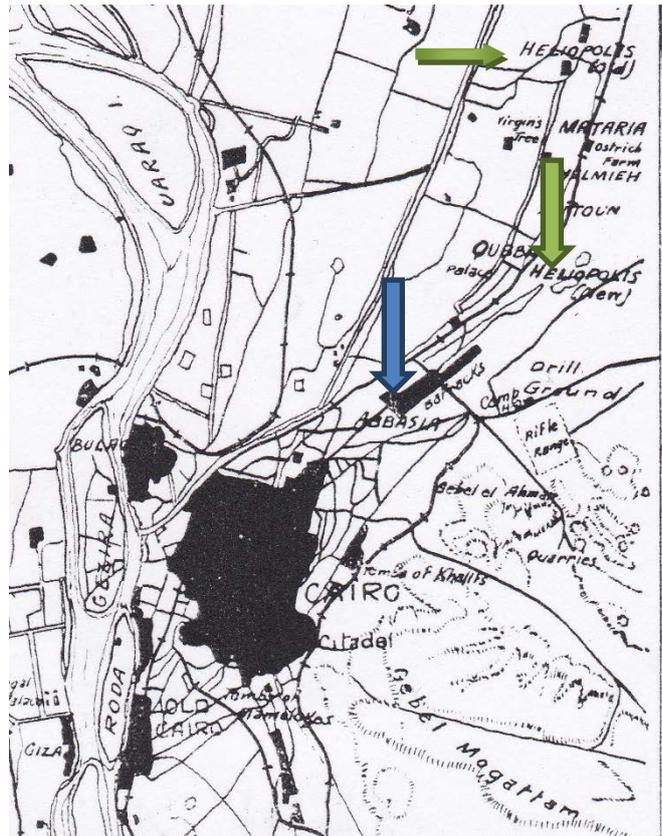
McGough was a loyal Australian-born German. His real name was Gough. Early in 1917, for reasons best known to himself, he volunteered for service in the mounted section of the Anzac Provost Corps, and was transferred to the training depot at Heliopolis. McGough had done about three months training for his new job when he suddenly received orders to pack up and report at Headquarters, Kasr-el-Nil, Cairo. Speculation at the barracks was rife as to McGough's future destiny, and some predicted staff objection to his German blood. No one seemed to guess the real truth, and the incident was almost forgotten when news arrived that he had been seen dressed as a regimental sergeant from the desert on leave at the Kursaal, the great music hall of Cairo. Was he really back in the lines? Or perhaps he might be a deserter. The informer of the news was emphatic about it being the real McGough. Slowly it dawned on the older men, and reliable information soon filtered through. McGough had been attached to the British Secret Service.



McGough's file shows nothing of being attached to the 'British Secret Service', if indeed any such entry would have been made. The date of McGough's transfer is also about a year out. A far simpler theory for his leaving Abbassia (blue arrow) for Heliopolis (green arrow) would be that he followed Lieutenant Hyam (as his batman) when he left the Provost Corps to join the 67th Australian Squadron of the Royal Flying Corps.

So McGough was in fact attached to the Flying Corps up until early April 1917. On 30 March 1917, Lieutenant Hyam died from wounds that he received while flying near Rafa. Only a few weeks later, on 12 April, McGough himself suffered shrapnel wounds, presumably inflicted during an enemy raid on the squadron's airfield. Harry suffered wounds to his right thigh and foot.

Harry was sent back to the 14th AGH at Port Said, where he remained until 10 May, when he was sent to a convalescent depot. On 8 June, 1917, McGough ceased to be attached to the Flying Corps and returned to duty with the Anzac Provost Corps.



Trooper McGough is shown as returning to 'police duties' in Cairo, probably at Heliopolis, where indeed a portion of the detachment were from the mounted section of the corps. On 26 March, 1918, Harry was promoted to corporal. On 10 May, 1918, he is shown as being transferred from Heliopolis to Moascar. Moascar was the provost depot for postings and training for those now joining the corps. In mid-May, Harry was posted to the DMC (Desert Mounted Corps) rest camp for just under two months. The nature of this time (on rest or on duty at the camp) is not clear; possibly McGough may have been on special duties during this time. Corporal McGough returned to police duties on 13 July 1918 (probably back in Cairo).

It was not until early December 1918 that McGough was promoted to the rank of sergeant (acting). The article writer further wrote in his article that:

Gough could speak German fluently, he was a crack shot, and he could keep his counsel – all qualities essential to his new work. Though a close friend of his, I never learned the nature of his training, yet I know he was a great success. It was wonderful how I would meet him, sometimes in the field near the enemy's lines, sometimes down on leave I would find myself seated beside him amongst thousands of troops at a big concert or boxing tournament, and once when strolling through Esbekiah Gardens at Cairo I saw him casually leaning on the lawn fencing, and as I passed opposite he murmured two words, "Stand by". I knew something was doing and presently two plain clothes stalwarts closed on a deserter emerging from the YMCA. McGough was the secret of his capture and the deserter never knew.

After two years of secret service work, so competent had he become, that McGough became known as the 'mystical McGough'.

Documents held by this author perhaps clarify a more logical conclusion as to McGough's service and may not have been as secretive as the 1921 author would suggest. The statements relate to McGough during the latter part of 1918 when he was the NCO (corporal and then sergeant) in charge of a team of 'Special Duties' men. It appears that about five men were employed in seeking out deserters and criminal activities within (predominantly) the Cairo area. To carry out their duties the men (at times) were authorised to wear civilian attire.

The first page of the documents has a covering letter written by the then OIC of the Cairo Detachment, Captain D Grigson (shown to the **right** as a sergeant), on 20 October, 1918, to Colonel Bisdee VC (head of the corps):



With reference to certain members of this detachment who are employed as Special duty men, I wish to bring to your notice the good work which has been done by Cpl McGough and A/Cpls Anderson and Campbell. The last mentioned two have only been on the job since the 13th of September.

These three N.C.O's are especially responsible for the locating and arresting of four deserters within the short space of time; namely:-

No 888. Tpr H. Riddell, 7th A.L.H. Regt. Deserted from Port Said Rest camp on the 23rd of May 1918, and arrested on the 2/10/18 in Cairo.

No 336. Dvr O.C.M. Ingrey, AASC, deserted from Moascar Camp on the 12/4/18, and arrested on the 2/10/18 in Cairo.

No 2099. Tpr A.W. Calder, 10th L.H. Regt. Deserted from the Boulac Convalescent Depot on the 29/7/18, and arrested on 11/10/18 in Cairo dressed in civilian clothes.

No 104. Tpr F.L. Flynn, 4th A.L.H. Field Ambulance. Deserted from his unit in the Field on the 17/6/18 and arrested on the 11/10/18 in Cairo, dressed in civilian clothes. All of whom have been very sly customers.

I might also mention that Cpl Anderson was greatly responsible that Tpr Riddell did not get away on the night of the arrest. As it was he did get away, and if it hadn't been for Cpl Anderson's determination he may not have been caught. Cpl Anderson had to follow him for about half a mile before he was arrested.

The other two members L/Cpls Soni and Povey have also been doing very good work in conjunction with the other three. So I feel justified in recommending the four aforesaid N.C.O's to you for some sort of reward in recognition of their good work.

Hoping this will meet with your approval.

These following reports were made by Corporal McGough:

Sir/.

I visited Fagalla St at 10-30am, also Cafes & Bars in Clot Bey, returning to Barracks via Mohamed Aly St at 12-30pm. Left Barracks again at 6-0pm & met Soni & Povey in Kamel Street. I arranged that they with Cpls Campbell & Anderson should proceed to Shoubra, & watch a house in Yalbuga St, at front & rear of the premises. I visited them about 10-30pm and from their reports decided that we would watch the place until 2-0am

Report No 6.6/10/18.

Sir/.

Between 10-0am and midday I visited the Cafes & Bars in the vicinity of Fagalla, and returned at 12-30pm.

Left again at 6-0pm and visited the Cafes in Emad-el-Dine. Cpls Anderson & Campbell watched No12 Garden St. L/cpls Soni & Povey after visiting Cafes & Bars in Kamel & Wagh-el-Berke Sts proceeded to Shoubra, to again watch the house in Yalbuga St. I watched approaches to houses on the right over Shoubra Bridge, where I followed girls from No12 Garden St, but did not again see anyone resembling the abs-entees visit here. About 11-30 I visited L/cpls Soni & Povey who reported seeing various civilians & girls visiting the house.

This house is a resort of prostitutes, and I believe by watching it we will eventually locate Flynn & another.

The person whom I suspect of harbouring Flynn visits this place but also has a place of her own in another locality. We returned to Barracks about midnight.

Report No 7.7/10/18.

Sir/.

I attended the Esbekieh Court House in the case of one C.J. Azar, a Sub Officer of the Arabian Army whom I had occasion to arrest in Wagh-el-Berke on 22/9/18. He claimed at the time to be a British Officer and was creating a disturbance. He was sentenced to three months hard labour. Returned to Barracks at midday.

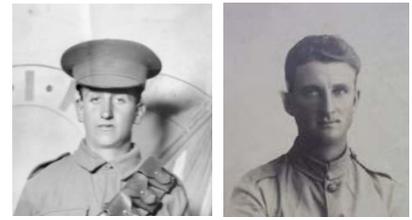
Left again about 6-0pm. I instructed L/cpls Soni & Povey to proceed to Shoubra & watch the house in Yalbuga St until 8-0pm and then meet me in Kamel Street. Cpls Campbell & Anderson to watch over Shoubra Bridge until the same time, thence to proceed to No31 Boulac St and try to obtain information concerning the whereabouts of a certain prostitute whom I described to them.

L/cpls Soni & Povey returned about 8-30pm and with them I went to a Hotel in the Mousky, which we watched until 10-30, returning again to the vicinity of Garden St. I returned to Barracks at 11-30 the others later.

A further statement dated 9 October, 1918, records all five of the special duties men reporting to AIF Headquarters to receive a 'short address' from Lieut Colonel Bisdee VC, in relation to their duties.

Harry McGough was in fact mentioned in despatches for his service during the period 19 September to 31 January, 1919. The MID correctly shows McGough as being a private (acting sergeant), but, unfortunately, the mention doesn't elaborate any details. I assume that it was upon Captain Grigson's recommendation.

The Cairo Detachment Roll Book from 1918/1919 is also available. It shows McGough amongst the detachment's strength and remaining so well into 1919. The detachment's strength as at 16 July, 1919, was recorded as four Senior NCO's, 53 men in barracks (Kasr-el-Nil Barracks) and five men carrying out Special Duties. Two men are shown detached to the Field Punishment Compound at Abbassia and two sick in hospital: a total of 66 men. At that time, McGough was in charge of the Special Duty men, they were Smith (**above**), Fawcett (**above right**), Corporal James and Etherington.



Only one of the special duty men (from earlier) appears to have been an ex-policeman. This was Victor Povey, who had been a Broken Hill officer (shown **right**).



Sergeant McGough was formally promoted to ER Sergeant (extra regimental) on 5 March, 1919, when Sergeant Stevens marched out from Cairo to Moascar to return to Australia. It was not until 2 August that John was given a berth back to Australia aboard the *Delta*. John Henry McGough was discharged from the AIF on 19 November, 1919.

I was looking forward to concluding this profile/article with the view that McGough's role during the Great War was, in fact, far in excess of what we can glean from his file – but I can't say that. John's file is consistent with his service, and without having any first-hand accounts from McGough to verify any 'British Secret Service', I am sceptical to credit him with any such service.



Maybe McGough's friend who wrote the 1921 *Sentinel* article was privy to that access. More likely he observed some of McGough's actions with his 'Special Duty' men. If anything, this article has strengthened my desire to find a wartime photo of Harry McGough – in order to put a face to the man referred to (by some) as being the '*Mystical McGough*'.

After Harry's return from Egypt he secured (through the Repatriation Department) an orchard at Mount Barker (WA). Harry and Susie had two further children: Jack (jnr) and Norman (twins), who were born in September 1922. In May 1923, Susie took one of the twins to Perth for treatment. However, it was Susie herself who was admitted to hospital, suffering from 'gastric trouble'. Unfortunately, peritonitis developed and she died the following day. The *Albany Advertiser* described Susie as having been '*extremely popular, her amiable disposition and kindly manner making her beloved by all with whom she came in contact*'. Not surprisingly, Susie's funeral at Northam was well attended.

In 1928 one of Harry's youngest, Norman, was involved in a 'spring cart' accident. Apparently, Norman and Hubert and one of the older girls had been heading to the nearby railway station to join the Albany train. Hubert (now 13) was in charge of the cart, when about a mile from the station he lost control; the cart hitting a tree and overturning, and little Norman was pinned under the cart.



Hubert ran back to get his father. Harry freed Norman and carried him to the station and from there Norman was taken to Albany. Norman had suffered a 'broken spleen' and after a major operation, it took him a long time to recover (he probably never *fully* recovered). In November 1934, Norman (now 12) took a 'turn for the worse' and had to be rushed to the Nornalup Hospital, where he died shortly after being admitted.

Harry McGough died in 1958, aged 85.