

Fighting Mac: the Anzac chaplain

by Daniel Reynaud

ASK AUSTRALIANS WHO WAS THE MOST famous Anzac of the First World War and most will probably answer, "Simpson, the man with the donkey". But while Simpson is a household name in Australia today, the soldiers who fought in the First World War would give a different answer.

Rivalling popular generals, such as 'Birdie' Birdwood and John Monash, was an extremely unlikely candidate for the most famous Anzac of the Great War: Captain William McKenzie. McKenzie was chaplain of the 4th Battalion, an enthusiastic Christian minister keen on evangelism and against booze, brothels and bad language. Yet, by the end of the war, he was so popular that it would take him more than three hours to reach the Sydney Town Hall from his office on Goulburn Street, just three blocks away. People mobbed him just to shake his hand. So who was this clergyman who won for himself the nickname, 'Fighting Mac'?

Scottish born, William McKenzie's family migrated to Australia when he was 15, settling near Bundaberg where the teenage McKenzie soon rose to be an overseer on a cane farm. He grew to be a big man, who loved fighting and abandoned his strict Presbyterian upbringing. But at the age of 19, McKenzie met the Salvation Army and was impressed with their work for the needy. He trained as an officer in the Army, and then served in tough working class towns such as Newcastle and Charters Towers.

When the Great War began in 1914, McKenzie volunteered as a chaplain. He got a frosty reception,



but quickly changed the men's opinion of him. He held short and interesting church parades that attracted up to 2000 men to them. He joined in training exercises, carrying the packs of tired soldiers half his age on long desert marches, digging trenches and doing target practice with them. He organised lively concerts and popular sing-a-longs. At one concert, the rowdy men were out of control until McKenzie jumped on stage, blew a whistle and got instant silence. Apparently, he was a very good boxer, taking part in events he organised. His tireless energy on the soldiers' behalf earned their respect, while his charismatic personality won their love. He was a born leader, with a tremendous sense of humour, a child-like innocence, real integrity and constant cheerfulness.

He also tried to counter the temptations of Cairo by providing wholesome leisure activities. Yet the cheap drink and the brothels attracted many men. And like the other chaplains, McKenzie preached against the brothels in the Wazir district. But unlike other chaplains, McKenzie also acted. He went down to the red-light district at night and literally dragged men out, and put them on a tram back to the camp. He fully expected a knife in the ribs from the brothel owners for ruining their business.

On April 25, 1915, the Anzacs landed at Gallipoli. A couple of weeks later, an impatient McKenzie was allowed to join the fighting men. One of his first tasks was to bury his commanding officer, right on the front line, kneeling close to the ground to avoid becoming a casualty himself.

It was at Gallipoli that McKenzie won the undying respect of the Anzacs. Like other chaplains, he conducted burial services, often under shell fire. But he went the extra mile. Once he tramped all over Anzac Cove collecting enough chocolates for each man. Another time, he spent all night cutting steps into a steep and slippery part of a track, to make it easier for stretcher bearers. The stairs were christened 'Old Mac's Steps' by the soldiers. But his actions at Lone Pine are typical of why he was called 'Fighting Mac'.

On August 6, 1915, McKenzie's battalion attacked the Turks at Lone Pine. The Turkish trenches were deep, and covered with logs and earth. Everyone knew that the attack would be costly. McKenzie should have been in the rear trenches, but instead he was with the men. His diary reads: "Many trembled from head to foot, yet despite it all I felt strangely elated and somewhat excited over the prospects." A soldier recalled that before they went over the top, McKenzie turned to the men and said: "Boys, I've preached to you, and I've prayed with you, and do you think that I am afraid to die with you? I'd be ashamed to think of myself to funk it when you are up against it here."

As the men charged, McKenzie followed, carrying just a spade. He was to need it: over the next few weeks he sorted the living from the dead and buried 450 men. For his actions at Gallipoli, he was decorated with the Military Cross.

After the battle, McKenzie found the body of a young Scot whom he had led to Christ the day before. In the man's pocket was a letter to his God-fearing mother, telling her of his decision for Christ. Knowing he was dealing with men who might die at any time lent urgency to his work. He wrote: "Last night when talking to the men I was obsessed with the idea and yearned with unutterable longing to lead them to the blessed Saviour. One is very near to the eternal here, indeed all subterfuges are rudely torn aside and one is ever threading on the threshold of the Eternal World and marching in step with the sinister shadow of death."

McKenzie was a spiritual giant, and led something like 2000-3000 men to Christ during the war. Here is what one of his letters records in Egypt: "I realise the nearness of His presence and something of the sweetness and power of His great salvation. I confess that I cried myself to sleep last night or in the early hours of the morning after long meditation over the sacrifices and death of the Christ of God. This I think helped me to read the scriptures and preach the truth better at this morning's parade, . . . when for half an hour some 2000 of us there sang of the Cross and its meaning and pondered over the story once again."

When he returned to Australia in 1918, thousands came to see him in every town and city he visited. In Sydney, his feet never touched the ground from the train to the Town Hall. In following years, at Anzac Day parades, his hand was seen to be bleeding from the sheer number of people who shook it.

Some have said that the Anzacs were not terribly religious. Perhaps so, but McKenzie noted on Gallipoli that many showed an interest in God. He said: "Men realise as never before that the most manly thing to do is to worship and glorify God." R

Daniel Reynaud is faculty dean of Humanities and Creative Arts at Avondale College of Higher Education.

An It is Written Oceania TV program telling this story will air on Channel 7 TWO, FoxTel and the Hope Channel on Anzac Day.