

*Lucas: An Evangelical History Review* 2.7 (June 2014) 31-59

## **The Legend of William McKenzie, Anzac Chaplain**

**Daniel Reynaud<sup>1</sup>**

Peter Cochrane's study of the life and legend of Simpson provides us with an understanding of how an obscure soldier on Gallipoli became a figure of national significance and of almost universal recognition within Australia through legendary accretions.<sup>2</sup> Contrast this with the career of a soldier who in the immediate post-war years was described in some quarters as the most famous soldier of the AIF, 'perhaps overshadowed only by [General] Birdwood' or by Billy Hughes,<sup>3</sup> but who has now regressed to a state of almost complete erasure from the public imagination. William McKenzie, the Salvation Army chaplain widely known as 'Fighting Mac' or 'Anzac Mac' was a living legend during the First World War, and remained popular in the decades immediately after the war.

Yet despite losing his status as a household name, McKenzie has attracted his own share of tales of varying reliability, leading Sydney-based Salvation Army archivist Dr George Hazell to coin for his story the term 'hagio-mythology'.<sup>4</sup> A hagiography by Col Stringer, a flamboyant Australian evangelist who has freely interpreted various aspects of Australian history in order to support his views on Australia's Christian heritage, is a work that has

---

<sup>1</sup> Daniel Reynaud is Associate Professor of History at Avondale College, New South Wales.

<sup>2</sup> Peter Cochrane, *Simpson and the donkey: the making of a legend* (Melbourne: MUP, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> Michael McKernan, *Padre: Australian Chaplains in Gallipoli and France* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), 3; Michael McKernan, 'William McKenzie', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Online Edition) [www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100299b.htm](http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A100299b.htm), accessed 13 August 2007.

<sup>4</sup> In conversation with the author, 1 May 2008.

currency in some Christian circles. His book *Fighting McKenzie* is his second attempt to claim the Anzac legacy for his particular brand of Christianity. An earlier work paints the fantastical proposition of the Australian Light Horse as Christian heroes for helping to found Israel by capturing Beersheba in 1917, and his fixation with the Light Horse is repeated in the McKenzie book, where he persists in associating him with the Light Horse instead of the infantry.<sup>5</sup> Stringer has influenced others, who have borrowed McKenzie stories from his book and website.<sup>6</sup>

Among the responses to Stringer's book was an unpublished letter to the Editor of The Salvation Army newspaper, *The War Cry* from historian Graham Wilson, protesting its various inaccuracies, which Wilson addressed in detail in an entire chapter of his recent book *Bully Beef and Balderdash*. In particular, Wilson objected to Stringer crediting McKenzie with having organised and led the Wazza riots on Good Friday 1915, and to tales of McKenzie leading a charge at Lone Pine armed with a shovel. Wilson further accuses Stringer of listing a primary source which Stringer later admitted he had not sighted: McKenzie's diaries held in the Australian War Memorial. A website attacking Stringer's work quotes another Wilson letter accusing Stringer's book of containing 'distortions and outright lies', adding that 'he is certainly the worst historian that has ever walked the Earth.'<sup>7</sup> Various contributors to the Australian Light

---

<sup>5</sup> Col Stringer, *Fighting McKenzie*, *Anzac Chaplain* (Robina Qld: Col Stringer Ministries, 2003), Col Stringer, *800 Horsemen* (Robina Qld: Col Stringer Ministries, 1998). The McKenzie-Light Horse references in *Fighting Mac* include pp 50, 75, 77, 85.

<sup>6</sup> See for example John Banton. "I Dare You," [http://www.johnbantton.org/John\\_Banton\\_web\\_sermons/ANZAC\\_DAY\\_2004\\_I\\_Dare\\_You.htm](http://www.johnbantton.org/John_Banton_web_sermons/ANZAC_DAY_2004_I_Dare_You.htm); 'The Fighting Padres,' <http://www.acctv.com.au/featuredetail.asp?id=987>, accessed 31 August 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Graham Wilson, Undated letter to the editor, *War Cry*, Archive Box R15, Salvation Army Heritage Room, Melbourne; Graham Wilson,

Horse Association Forums have deconstructed Stringer as well, noting in detail his historical failings with the majority demonstrating an impressive restraint by confining their judgement to his historical rather than religious excesses.<sup>8</sup>

Stringer's myopic, rambling and exaggerated writings might make him a contender for historiographic infamy were he in fact a historian; instead he writes with a sweeping disregard for any facts that may interfere with his purpose as an evangelist. And yet, many of his claims are not unsupported by earlier sources. Virtually every McKenzie story that Stringer tells finds its origins elsewhere. These earlier sources are not always reliable, and demand careful scrutiny, and Stringer's hyperbolic retellings take the tales on new flights of fancy. But Stringer is not alone among modern chroniclers to make exaggerated claims about McKenzie. A recent Salvation Army newsletter featured an article which claimed that McKenzie occasionally defended himself and burying parties with small arms, a statement which does not stand up to historical scrutiny, and one which was not supported by the Army's own Melbourne-based archivist and historian.<sup>9</sup> In short, there are a number of stories revolving around McKenzie, and they can be categorised into those which are demonstrably false, those of uncertain veracity and varying probability, and those which have the support of reliable contemporary records.

---

*Bully Beef and Balderdash: Some Myths of the AIF examined and debunked.* Newport NSW: Big Sky Publishing, 2012, chapter 9 'Do you think I'm now afraid to die with you?', 315-344; Correspondence quoted in 'Peter Hogan v Col Stringer – evangelical impostor and crook', [www.knol.com.au/aoa/h\\_s.htm](http://www.knol.com.au/aoa/h_s.htm), accessed 31 August 2007.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.lighthouse.org.au/forum/topic.asp?TOPIC\\_ID=3189](http://www.lighthouse.org.au/forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=3189), accessed 16 June 2008.

<sup>9</sup> Barry Gittins and Faye Michelson, 'Wars and Rumours of Wars,' *On Fire*, Vol 9 No 8, 26 April 2008, 9; Lindsay Cox, email to author, 23 May 2008.

The process of adding gloss to McKenzie's undoubted achievements is nearly as old as the achievements themselves. The first published accounts of McKenzie's actions date from the war years and, apart from his own letters published in *The War Cry*, include admiring stories by influential journalist Keith Murdoch, popular author and journalist Harold Begbie and leading Salvationist Colonel Unsworth, while *The Scottish Australasian* featured him in 1918.<sup>10</sup> Canadian war correspondent F. A. McKenzie, former editor of the weekly edition of *The Times* and neither a relation to William nor a Salvationist, included several McKenzie stories in his tribute to the Salvation Army's assistance to the British Army during the war.<sup>11</sup> All four named authors were able to write from first hand experience: Murdoch met McKenzie in France and possibly Gallipoli, Unsworth in Egypt and London, and Begbie and F. A. McKenzie also in London in 1916. Some of these contemporary accounts have references to Stringer's disputed stories. Murdoch wrote, 'He is a wonderful man is Fighting Mac. At times he has been more than a padre, as when he led a group of men with an entrenching tool at Lone Pine. But that story has been told.'<sup>12</sup> Where it had been told, Murdoch left unstated, apparently assuming it to be common knowledge, but it has yet to come to light to modern research. Others take up the story, with minor variations. F. A.

---

<sup>10</sup> Keith Murdoch, "'Boy's Best Friend": What the Anzac thinks of his mother. A conversation between Chaplain-Major McKenzie and Keith Murdoch at the Anzac Headquarters,' reprinted in *War Cry*, 22 December 1917, 9; Harold Begbie, 'Captain Mac: a famous Australian Salvationist,' *War Cry*, 3 March 1917, 3; Colonel Unsworth, 'Captain Mac,' undated clipping, probably from *War Cry*, early 1916, Archive Box R15, Salvation Army Heritage Room, Melbourne; *The Scottish Australasian: a monthly newspaper of Scots-Australian interest*, August 1918, 6415-6419.

<sup>11</sup>F. A. McKenzie, *Serving the King's Men: How the Salvation Army is helping the nation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918).

<sup>12</sup> *War Cry*, 22 December 1917, 9.

McKenzie records, 'I first heard of William McKenzie in the days when the Australian troops returned to London from Gallipoli.' He continued:

'We had a Salvation Army Chaplain with us,' one hard-bitten Australian trooper told me. 'My! He was a big, burly fellow, and without a bit of nonsense in him! Some of the stunts he did would make your hair stand on your head. One day at Gallipoli we had to storm the stiffest part of the Turkish trenches; it was the worst bit of the whole show, and "Mac" declared he was going with us. "Boys", he said, "I've preached to you and I've prayed with you, and do you think I'm afraid to die with you? I'd be ashamed of myself to funk it when you are up against it here.'" And he came along with us right in the front line. He had nothing but a little stick with him, and he came out of the fight without a scratch. He had a bandanna handkerchief on his head to keep the sun off. The handkerchief was riddled with shrapnel and he hadn't a scratch. He was a man!'

The story concludes with another soldier repeating a joke that William McKenzie apparently told, that the men followed him closely in the action because he had their pay in his pocket and they were afraid of losing it.<sup>13</sup>

As it stands, there is nothing particularly startling about this story. McKenzie's courage is not in question: he was awarded the Military Cross for his actions on Gallipoli, and his sense of humour is also well attested. Later writers have also echoed the contemporary sources. Prolific Salvationist author Adelaide Ah Kow's largely reverential 1949 biography of McKenzie made passing reference to McKenzie's speech,<sup>14</sup> while tabloid journal features on McKenzie from the late 1950s to the 1980s featured the spade in their

---

<sup>13</sup> McKenzie, *Serving the King's Men*, 56-7.

<sup>14</sup> Adelaide Ah Kow, *William McKenzie, M.C., O.B.E., O.F. Anzac Padre* (London: Salvationist Publishing, 1949), 41.

accounts,<sup>15</sup> so Stringer's story is not pure invention. Graham Wilson, however, contends that no such event took place, noting its conspicuous absence from any official history, let alone any of the unofficial battalion histories, which would have been likely to include such a stirring tale had it actually occurred.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, while the non-combatant status of chaplains had not yet been formalised, many chaplains felt that they were not supposed to carry weapons. Chaplain Dexter, for example, restrained himself in the very act of firing a new trench mortar, saying, 'I have all along refrained from handling any arms. I am not here for that.'<sup>17</sup>

And it is true that myths about notable chaplains circulated even during the war. Immediately following the trench mortar incident, Dexter wrote of the 'stories told about myself and a couple of other chaplains leading charges on the first day here, which of course is piffle', especially as only one chaplain, Father John Fahey, went ashore on 25 April.<sup>18</sup> The Methodist chaplain Colonel Green noted in a letter, 'The men greatly appreciate the work of the chaplain, and are over generous in their estimates. If you carry a fellow's rifle to help, or some such thing as that you "have led a charge."<sup>19</sup> McKenzie also accumulated stories about him leading charges, and a number of sources refer to his astonishing deeds in the heat of battle, but without going into any kind of detail. While Murdoch brushes off stories of McKenzie's heroics on the presumption that they were already known, Harold Begbie's article disingenuously suggests the heroics while disclaiming specific knowledge, 'He was with the dying, but he was also with the fighting. Once, when the Turks came thrusting up to the trenches, he

---

<sup>15</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 25 April 1959, 5; *Sun*, 24 April 1972, 13; *Daily Mirror*, 28 August 1981, 60.

<sup>16</sup> Wilson, *Bully Beef and Balderdash*, 335.

<sup>17</sup> W. E. Dexter, *Diary*, 27 July 1915, AWM PR00248.

<sup>18</sup> McKernan. *Padre*, 49-50.

<sup>19</sup> J. Green, Letter dated 22 August 1915, published in *Methodist*, 9 October 1915, 8.

seized a ... But I really do not know the rest of the story.’<sup>20</sup> A Salvation Army writer after the war credits McKenzie’s Military Cross award to his rallying leaderless retreating men and heading a counter-attack against the Turks with an entrenching tool (again), which took the enemy line.<sup>21</sup> Salvation Army Lt-Col Percival Dale’s eulogy at McKenzie’s funeral separates the stick and entrenching stories into two separate events. The stick is associated with the ‘I’ve preached to you...’ speech, while the other story is couched as a rhetorical question, as if unsure of the tale: ‘Was it another occasion when the Turks advancing almost into the trench in which he crouched, he seized a trenching tool and led the counter attack, – the Officers in that Sector having been killed.’<sup>22</sup>

In his own diary about the events of Lone Pine, there is no evidence of the moving speech or of leading an attack. McKenzie noted that he was ‘strangely elated’, while ‘many trembled from head to foot’ before the attack. He carried messages three times from the Colonel to the Major in the fire trenches, then did ‘nerve wracking’ work sorting the dead from the living, and burying 450 men over the next three weeks.<sup>23</sup> As to his Military Cross, McKenzie played down the award with true Scottish-Australian self-deprecation, suggesting that many exaggerated stories had gathered around his time on Gallipoli. When pressed by Begbie, he joked that a left-over MC had been given him by chance.<sup>24</sup> On another occasion he claimed he won it as a consolation prize for coming last in a

---

<sup>20</sup> Begbie, ‘Captain Mac’.

<sup>21</sup> John Bond, ‘Fight it Through,’ *War Cry*, no date, Archive Box R15, Salvation Army Heritage Room, Melbourne.

<sup>22</sup> Percival Dale, ‘Fighting Mac Answers New Reveille.’ Typescript of eulogy, 5 August 1947, Archive Box R15, Salvation Army Heritage Room, Melbourne, and quoted in *War Cry*, 9 August 1947, 6.

<sup>23</sup> William McKenzie, Diary, 6 August 1915, AWM PR84/150.

<sup>24</sup> Begbie, ‘Captain Mac’.

hundred yards sprint.<sup>25</sup> Unlike many MC citations which describe the specific deeds leading to the award, McKenzie's citation is a masterpiece of generalisation: 'Continued courageous devotion to duty during the occupation of Anzac. Both in the trenches and out, his behaviour has set a good example to the men, in the fearless way in which he carried out his duties under fire.'<sup>26</sup>

In effect, there are three independent wartime sources to support his leadership of an attack, each based on the writer's personal contact with eyewitness reports. However, they are not necessarily reliable. The patriotic and religious Begbie, whose alcoholism threatened his career until rescued by the Salvation Army, was a key propagator of the myth of the Angel of Mons,<sup>27</sup> which exposes his susceptibility to a story that suited his ideological agenda. Murdoch and F. A. McKenzie claim eye-witnesses to support their accounts, but again, the sheer number of witnesses is no guarantee: the Mons Angel legend also had many supposed eye-witnesses, and both Murdoch and McKenzie were not above using journalistic licence in a story suited to their patriotic agenda.

Graham Wilson's argument that battalion histories do not support the McKenzie legend falls down because until recently there was none of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion to either confirm or deny the alleged actions. The closest was that of the 2/4 Battalion, which begins with a potted history of its Great War predecessor. Apart from the commander, Lt-Col Macnaghten, it mentions just one 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion soldier by name, describing McKenzie as 'a legend and a by-word: not just in the battalion or brigade, but indeed throughout the whole A.I.F.' It adds:

---

<sup>25</sup> *War Cry*, 21 December 1918, 16.

<sup>26</sup> [http://awm-public/cms\\_images/awm28/2/98/0010.pdf](http://awm-public/cms_images/awm28/2/98/0010.pdf), accessed 20 April, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> David Clarke. 'Rumours of angels: a legend of the First World War', *Folklore*, October 2002, 9.



Then came Gallipoli and it was here that he made history. Fearless, devoted, helpful and brave: he was all this and more and his work at Lone Pine and Shrapnel Gully and all through the Gallipoli campaign earned him the undying love of all the battalion. It also earned him the Military Cross, rarely awarded to a non-combatant chaplain. But Mac, in spite of repeated instructions, was no “non-combatant”!<sup>28</sup>

Unfortunately, it provides no further evidence to support its teasing assertion that he was no non-combatant. In 2007, a history of the Fourth Battalion was published, but it could only be written using extant sources, so it sheds no new light on the debate, although McKenzie features prominently in its pages. But the only reference to this story is when author Ronald Austin quotes a 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion officer who stumbled across McKenzie working faithfully for the wounded and dying in the Lone Pine trenches the day after the attack.<sup>29</sup>

C. E. W. Bean’s official history fails to mention McKenzie at all, but then chaplains appeared to interest this son of the manse very little, for they are rarely mentioned in any of his works. However, McKenzie’s continual presence in the front line was sufficient to earn him the title ‘Fighting Mac’, without him having to take up arms, and there are many accounts of McKenzie’s presence being an inspiration to the troops. McKenzie was noted for exhorting soldiers to do their duty, and stories of him halting a retreat and turning the leaderless men back to a successful attack<sup>30</sup> are within the realms of possibility, though whether he actually led an attack is

---

<sup>28</sup> *White over Green: the 2/4<sup>th</sup> Battalion and reference to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion*, Unit History Editorial Committee (eds) (Sydney: Angus and Robertson for 2/4<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion Association, 1963), 22.

<sup>29</sup> Ronald J. Austin, *The Fighting Fourth: A History of Sydney’s 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion 1914-19* (McRae, Vic: Slouch Hat, 2007), 74.

<sup>30</sup> Bond, ‘Fight It Through’.

highly improbable. Wilson, who cites his own army experience and knowledge gained as a researcher in the Directorate of Honours and Awards in the Department of Defence, argues vigorously against the leadership of any kind of attack, either at Lone Pine or to retake a trench.<sup>31</sup> This story is most often associated with Lone Pine, although it is sometimes implied to have occurred at Suvla Bay, a simultaneous but separate battle which suggests confusion on the part of the writers.

However, an interesting letter from Colonel Macnaghten, commander of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Lone Pine, to McKenzie, dated 7 August 1916 throws the debate open again:

My most hearty and sincere congratulations, dear old Padre, on your Military Cross – but it ought to have been the DSO. However, that will come, if not the Victoria Cross – and I know of no one more likely to gain it than yourself. I will never forget you when we were waiting to go over at Lone Pine – when I found you up with us, and you stated quite simply you were coming over with the boys, and I refused to allow you to come without a rifle and bayonet.<sup>32</sup>

Macnaghten's letter is open-ended as to what McKenzie actually did: certainly it permits the interpretation that he went over the top, armed. On balance, that would still seem highly unlikely, given that he never carried arms in any other circumstance, and even the more mythological retellings of this event have him carrying nothing more than a spade or a stick. In all likelihood, he left the Australian lines only after the main attack had gone in on the Turkish trenches at Lone Pine, but probably while the bullets and shrapnel were still flying, for Salvation Army General Bramwell Booth was moved to write to McKenzie after Unsworth sent him McKenzie's shrapnel-shredded cap, begging him on the evidence it provided to not risk his

---

<sup>31</sup> Graham Wilson, Email to author, 12 August 2008.

<sup>32</sup> AWM PR 85 049.

life unnecessarily.<sup>33</sup> It is not unlikely that he carried a spade or stick at Lone Pine, and that he leapt out of the trenches with such an implement in his hand. His proactive, even aggressive, style as a chaplain suggests that he may have stayed as close to the action as possible. He had use for a shovel, spending a ‘sickening’ and ‘nerve wracking’ time sorting the dead from the living in waist-deep heaps in the trenches, and conducting hundreds of burials over three weeks. He also had need of the stick, for after one week, overwhelming fatigue and severe neuritis reduced him to crawling around ‘in pain with the aid of a stick and sheer force of will.’<sup>34</sup>

Several accounts have him working without rest for three days and nights in the immediate aftermath of Lone Pine, surviving on three biscuits and six pannikins of water.<sup>35</sup> Some up the ante considerably, claiming he buried 647 men in that time, on the same diet. A recent Salvation Army newsletter improved even on this by having McKenzie dig and fill many of the graves while he was at it.<sup>36</sup> But the sheer logistics of so many funerals in so short a time, let alone digging and filling even a small proportion of this figure, beggars belief. McKenzie often dug and filled graves, both on Gallipoli and in France, but there is no need to go past his more tempered, yet still overwhelming, account of 450 burials in three weeks, which by his own admission, as we have seen above, left him utterly exhausted both physically and emotionally. As for the accounts in Dale’s eulogy, there are sufficient errors of fact in it to suggest that its details need independent verification. Dale later

---

<sup>33</sup> Bramwell Booth, Letter to McKenzie, 17 January 1916, Archive Box R15, SA Heritage Room, Melbourne.

<sup>34</sup> William McKenzie, Diary, 6 August 1915.

<sup>35</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 40, repeated in *Daily Mirror*, 25 April 1959, 5, *Sun* 24 April 1972, 13, and *Daily Mirror*, 28 August 1981, 60.

<sup>36</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 41; Richard Collier, *The General next to God: the story of William Booth and the Salvation Army* (London: Fontana, 1969), 229; Gittins and Michelson.

wrote a short account of McKenzie's life, again based on loose research which diminishes its value as a source.<sup>37</sup> In effect, being in the front line during battle, and carrying anything could easily lead to rumours of McKenzie's involvement in combat, stories that only grew with the retelling. In the end, these stories can neither be dismissed nor upheld as certainties, although one could be fairly sure that if he did he would have done so without personal weapons. Ion Idriess dropped a half-written biography of McKenzie upon discovering that 'Fighting Mac' had not carried weapons, on the grounds that he was insufficiently dashing for the Idriess treatment.<sup>38</sup> But at least we can dismiss the charges of invention against Stringer, even if he used his sources indiscriminately.

With regard to the attack on the Wazza brothels on Good Friday 1915, F. A. McKenzie wrote, '[i]t would be too terrible to suggest that a Chaplain had any hand in such lawless proceeding! But when I have talked with the boys over that night, and have asked how it came about, I have heard more than once, "Well you see, Bill McKenzie got talking to us, ...and...[sic]"'.<sup>39</sup> This allusion was given a major makeover in a *Daily Mirror* special feature about McKenzie, on Anzac Day 1959, and repeated in a *Sun* feature on the eve of Anzac Day 1972, the latter reputedly the memoirs of an anonymous former soldier now in his seventies, although actually a light rewrite of the anonymous 1959 article. In August 1981, the *Daily Mirror* ran the same story, again marginally rewritten.<sup>40</sup> Both newspapers were part of Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, and the story appears to have been handed down as needed, continuing Keith Murdoch's glorification of McKenzie. Among other episodes in each article is an account of McKenzie leading 'a picked AIF contingent in an onslaught against the vice dens,' setting fire to the brothels,

---

<sup>37</sup> Percival Dale, *Fighting Mac*, (London: SP & S, No date).

<sup>38</sup> Beverly Eley, *Ion Idriess* (Sydney: ETT, 1995), 171

<sup>39</sup> McKenzie, *Serving the King's Men*, 57.

<sup>40</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 25 April 1959, 5; *Sun*, 24 April 1972, 11-13; *Daily Mirror* 28 August 1981, 60.

beating up the natives and finally destroying the hoses of the fire crews. It quoted as supporting evidence a senior official who stated after the war, ‘There are men in Australia who would never have returned had not Padre McKenzie single-handedly challenged the hell-houses of Egypt.’ *The War Cry* repeated much of the *Sun* article, but only alluded to McKenzie’s involvement in the riot with, ‘Most folk had a shrewd idea as to who had organized the event!’<sup>41</sup> Stringer expanded on these sources by including the New Zealand Salvation Army Chaplain Greene as a participant in the riot, liberally interpreting a loose reference in Ah Kow’s biography.<sup>42</sup>

The facts are these: McKenzie’s letters and diary record an intense, mystical spiritual experience on the morning of 2 April 1915, followed by a moving church service, then a day of packing for the move to Alexandria.<sup>43</sup> There is no mention of the Wazza riots at all. Given McKenzie’s propensity to document his confrontations with evil, this would be a strange omission. While he was not prone to big-note his own courage, he kept careful track of his actions in the spiritual sphere, to the point of bragging. In his diary and letters he frequently commented on his popularity vis-a-vis the chaplains of mainstream denominations, the success of his spiritual and social meetings, and his efforts to physically remove men from the brothels of Wazza.<sup>44</sup> It might be argued that he was so deeply embarrassed by his participation in the riot that he did not record his actions, but even this defies the rest of the evidence. A military court of inquiry which was convened the next day to investigate the brothel riot concluded

---

<sup>41</sup> *War Cry*, 11 November 1972, 3.

<sup>42</sup> Stringer. ‘*Fighting McKenzie*’, 55; Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 34.

<sup>43</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Commissioner Hay, 2 April 1915; William McKenzie, Diary 2 April 1915, AWM PR 85/815.

<sup>44</sup> See for example letters to his wife Annie McKenzie, 15 January 1915, 11 March 1915, 2 April 1915 AWM PR 84/150; William McKenzie, Letters to SA Commissioner Hay, 27 December 1914, 27 January 1915; William McKenzie, Diary 19 January 1915.

that it was a spontaneous event caused by dissatisfied Australian patrons. However, it would be surprising if senior officers of an official court of inquiry managed to draw the full truth about misdemeanours out of a group of ordinary soldiers,<sup>45</sup> so that alone should not exonerate McKenzie. Many had their own theory; Chaplain Dexter recorded that ‘Australians will get the blame, but it was the New Zealanders who started it,’<sup>46</sup> echoed by others, including a junior officer of 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion who wrote, ‘There was a very bad riot in the town tonight, supposed to have been started by N. Zealanders—various theories given as to origin.... It is difficult to explain what caused the whole show.’<sup>47</sup> However, some interesting evidence points to another explanation: McKenzie spoke vehemently against the brothels, wishing that ‘the whole block were burnt to the ground,’ and some soldiers later said that they decided ‘that the padre should have his wish.’ Ah Kow adds, quoting from a senior Salvation Army officer friend of McKenzie’s after the war, ‘He learned ... to his great amusement... that not a few troops thought he inspired the eventual riot which resulted in the wholesale demolition of these hell-houses. He disclaimed the honour but grimly expressed his satisfaction with the result.’<sup>48</sup> So there is perhaps a kernel of truth in the idea that the riots began unintentionally with McKenzie, as one historian of the Salvation Army noted,<sup>49</sup> but the evidence definitely does not support the rumours of later wartime nor the exaggerated tabloid stories in the 1950s-2000s, that McKenzie led the riot and was active in attacking locals or the fire crews, or that he even knew anything of the riot as it unfolded. Such high-handed behaviour was foreign to McKenzie’s character.

---

<sup>45</sup> Suzanne Brugger, *Australians and Egypt 1914-1918* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1980), 145

<sup>46</sup> Dexter, *Diary*, 2 April 1915.

<sup>47</sup> Herbert Carter, *Diary*, 2 April 1915, AWM 3 DRL 6418.

<sup>48</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 34.

<sup>49</sup> Collier, *General Next to God*, 228.

Michael McKernan throws up another twist related to this topic. ‘The legend sprang up that, incensed that the venereal diseases camp had taken on the appearance of a prison, he helped the men to pull down the barbed-wire fence. This is unlikely because in his diary McKenzie shows a distinct lack of sympathy for venereal sufferers.’<sup>50</sup> McKernan’s source for this particular rumour is unknown—he lists ‘private information’ among his references—but his assessment of McKenzie’s attitude is accurate, and it corrects his earlier account where he wrote of these reputed actions as if they were fact.<sup>51</sup> McKenzie’s diary records his desire for VD cases to be isolated in a ‘Leper’s Camp’, their pay stopped, for they ‘should be made to suffer for their sin’ as they had been ‘deliberately and wilfully bad,’ not heeding the warning and entreaties they had been given.<sup>52</sup>

The quote that McKenzie saved many men through his attacks on the brothels finds its origin in an unnamed official’s tribute to McKenzie, repeated in Ah Kow’s biography.<sup>53</sup> But the context is misunderstood. In Egypt, all the chaplains (as well as many officers and men) reacted with similar horror at the immorality and filth that assaulted them at every turn: the casual nudity, the cheap and harmful liquor, and the brothels of Wazza. They all preached against these vices from a distance, and some of their diaries note with fascinated disgust the extent of the prostitution industry.<sup>54</sup> Some even passed through the red-light district: A.H. Tolhurst was pressed by some officers to enter the brothels and ‘see things with your own eyes, Padre,’ but was ashamed of what he saw while merely in the

---

<sup>50</sup> McKernan, ‘McKenzie’.

<sup>51</sup> Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and activities of the major churches 1914-1918*. (Sydney & Canberra: Catholic Theology Faculty & Australian War Memorial, 1980), 49

<sup>52</sup> William McKenzie, *Diary*, 29 December 1914.

<sup>53</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 34.

<sup>54</sup> T. P. Bennett, *Diary*, 14 May 1915, AWM PRMF 0015.

street.<sup>55</sup> But McKenzie, with his Salvationist tradition of direct confrontation of evil, went further than that. Unafraid of being tainted, he repeatedly entered the district to chase out the soldiers. His diary notes one night in December 1914, when he ‘dragged and ordered well on for 100 men (troops) some in a deplorable state. I had them taken into a well-lit street and sent off to camp.’<sup>56</sup> After the drunken Christmas celebrations, he wrote to Salvation Army Commissioner Hay in Australia,

I have done some mighty plain talking on this point and also gone into the brothels and steel holes to drag the men out. I shouldn’t be surprised if I get a stab one of these nights for this as the Brothel keepers are mad with me for emptying their places and ordering the men home. Still I can’t avoid it when my blood gets stirred with this giant foe.<sup>57</sup>

It was to these repeated actions that the official referred, rather than to the Wazza riots, as a careful reading of Ah Kow shows. Perhaps the official in question was none other than C. E. W. Bean, who in his radio eulogy for McKenzie said, ‘But it was at Mena that he fought his greatest fight, and none who saw it, or knew his work later, will ever forget him.’<sup>58</sup> However, Bean’s statement refers to McKenzie’s work in general, including the entertainments he provided which helped keep men out of trouble.

On this point, Stringer is again guilty of an uncritical willingness to believe sources that suit his purposes, but not of invention. However, he includes the presence of New Zealand Salvation Army Chaplain Greene at the riot, an invention for which this author can find no evidence at all.

---

<sup>55</sup> ‘War Reminiscences of an Australian Padre’, MSS 1342, AWM, proof sheet 8, 34.

<sup>56</sup> William McKenzie, Diary, no date, December 1914.

<sup>57</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Hay, 27 December 1915.

<sup>58</sup> C. E. W. Bean, Eulogy for William McKenzie, transcript of radio broadcast, News Digest, early August 1947, AWM PR 84 150.



Stringer makes much of another story from the *Daily Mirror-Sun* articles for which this author again can find no contemporary evidence. The articles speak of his organising boxing matches at the Mena Camp in Egypt in which he also took part. ‘No novice with the gloves himself, his long reach, jarring upper cuts and dangerous half-hooks left some of the army’s best pugs dazzled.’<sup>59</sup> McKenzie’s papers contain just one reference to a boxing match, in a passing comment in a letter to his wife, but without going into detail.<sup>60</sup> If he did participate in boxing matches, this omission is strange, given that he recorded his other successful physical exertions, such as trench digging and rifle target practice. It couldn’t be that boxing was unbecoming to a parson: champion amateur boxer Rev. Hulton Sams, the ‘fighting parson’ who was one of a number of clergymen who enlisted as combat soldiers, was eulogised for his ‘muscular Christianity’.<sup>61</sup> Perhaps McKenzie feared adding to his wife’s concerns for him, for his letters show that she was under considerable strain at the time, struggling to manage four children, including their energetic eldest teenage son who did not respond to her constant scolding. However, an Australian government website captions a photo of McKenzie taking a burial service on Gallipoli with a reference to his nickname, ‘Fighting Mac’, acquired because of ‘his prowess in the boxing ring.’<sup>62</sup> McKernan also accepts it as true in his biography of McKenzie in the Australian Dictionary of Biography, though his wording is almost identical to that of the *Sun* story of 1959, and Austin repeats it as fact, although considering other stories such as the spade incident and the pay joke to be

---

<sup>59</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 25 April 1959, 5. The *Sun*, 24 April 1972, repeats this almost word for word, while the *Daily Mirror*, 28 August 1981 paraphrases it.

<sup>60</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Annie, 15 January 1915.

<sup>61</sup> *Sun*, 7 August 1915, 25; 15 August 1915, 11.

<sup>62</sup> [http://www.anzacsite.gov.au/2visiting/walk\\_05shrapnel.html](http://www.anzacsite.gov.au/2visiting/walk_05shrapnel.html), accessed 21 April 2008.

probably apocryphal.<sup>63</sup> Perhaps McKernan was able to verify the story from his ‘private information,’ for there are other unverifiable elements of the McKenzie stories in the newspapers that he does not pick up on. Some sources actually attribute the origin of his nickname “Fighting Mac” to his pugilistic youth.<sup>64</sup>

There is also a question over the extent of McKenzie’s fame. Graham Wilson challenges the judgement that McKenzie was the most famous man in the AIF. Without disputing the merits of the man, he argues that his influence was limited to the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, or at best the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, and that he had little direct contact with the fifteen or more other brigades. He considers that McKenzie may not even have been the most famous chaplain at the time, noting the reputation of men such as Dexter and Father Michael Bergin. He argues that the huge crowds which greeted the returning McKenzie in Australia in early 1918 were mostly Salvationists, and his popularity was subject to significant post-war inflation, perhaps similar in a way to the Simpson legend, especially under the stimulus of well-executed Salvationist publicity, leading to his current status of the best-known padre of the war.<sup>65</sup>

It is true that Salvationists turned out for McKenzie’s return, encouraged by *The War Cry* to make a good showing, although Salvation Army archivist Lindsay Cox considers most of the 6000-strong audience at the Melbourne Exhibition Building to have been returned servicemen and their families.<sup>66</sup> Nor is it unfair to state that

---

<sup>63</sup> McKernan, ‘McKenzie’; Austin, 19, 68.

<sup>64</sup> Barbara Boulton, *Booth’s Drum: The Salvation Army in Australia 1880-1980* (Sydney: Hodder & Stoughton, 1980), 212; Envoy George Hazell, McKenzie Podcast, at <http://www.chr.org.au/audio/fighting-mackenzie-podcasts/MacKenzie-Track-01.mp3>, accessed 25/07/2013.

<sup>65</sup> Wilson, Emails to the author, 12 August 2008, 9 March 2009, *Bully Beef and Balderdash*, 315-344.

<sup>66</sup> Lindsay Cox, ‘Lone Pine 1915,’ *War Cry*, 24 April 1999, 1.

McKenzie's reputation spread further after the war. However his claims to earlier fame deserve examination. In early 1918 the Melbourne *Herald* trumpeted that, 'No man is better known among Australian soldiers at the front than Chaplain-Major W. McKenzie, of the Salvation Army,'<sup>67</sup> although there is probably an understandable journalistic licence in the statement. The newly returned McKenzie allowed for positive propaganda, when the nation was war-weary, and the outcome of the struggle was still far from clear. On the other hand, Bean, who was as well-placed as anyone to make such a judgement, stated in his radio eulogy that 'Fighting Mac was the most famous chaplain of the First AIF. Though we had many fine chaplains (a number gave their lives for their men) his fame came foremost and earliest.' While this comes from a funeral tribute, and hence is not likely to be a critical observation, Bean's assessment of McKenzie's influence is still significant, and deserves weight, especially as chaplains found virtually no place in his otherwise detailed and monumental writings. McKernan claims that after Anzac Day marches his hand was observed to be bleeding from the sheer number of men who wanted to shake it.<sup>68</sup> In 1926, noted journalist Norman Campbell stated that '[t]here is no more striking personality or better-loved man in Australia than Lieutenant-Commissioner W. McKenzie, of the Salvation Army.' Both of these observations are of McKenzie's post-war reputation, and neither offers any supporting evidence, but again, they may be discounted but not dismissed.

There is considerable evidence that McKenzie reached a wide circle of soldiers, more than just his own battalion or even brigade, and he also influenced civilians at home with his phenomenally successful campaign for people to write to anonymous soldiers, which generated tens of thousands of letters. On the ship to Egypt, he ministered to over 2000 men. His church parades in Egypt grew to include more than half of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade, outnumbering the

---

<sup>67</sup> Quoted in *War Cry*, 16 February 1918, 5.

<sup>68</sup> McKernan, *Padre*, 3.

parade attendances for the other three chaplains combined. His concerts in Egypt and France were legendary, with audiences often in the thousands, drawn from any and every nearby unit, including British and Canadians at times, and no other chaplain dared act as MC if McKenzie was present: the soldiers wouldn't allow it.<sup>69</sup> His diary notes services taken for a variety of troops across both his brigade and other brigades, making him a familiar figure at the very least to most of the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, and he worked for and with Salvationists from many other units, including the New Zealanders. On Gallipoli, he was for some time the only chaplain serving the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade. Between 1914-1917, in camps, on ships, at the front, in hospitals, in transit, and in England, he met literally many thousands of soldiers, running formally organised and impromptu meetings and concerts at every conceivable opportunity, and impressing the majority with his energy, cheerfulness and sincere care. Where most battalion histories often barely mention their own chaplain, let alone one from another battalion, his activities are noted in the histories of the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalions, and commanders in other brigades saw his influence on their men.<sup>70</sup> The unit war diary for Chaplains, Other Protestant Denominations, notes his widespread activities across many units, noting that in just one month before he left England for Australia in January 1918, he visited about 1,000 men in British hospitals.<sup>71</sup> He counted many senior and influential officers among

---

<sup>69</sup> William McKenzie, Letters to Annie, 5 March 1915, 16 March 1915.

<sup>70</sup> William McKenzie, Letters to Hay; William McKenzie letters to Annie; Eric Wren, *Randwick to Hargicourt: History of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, A.I.F.* (Sydney: Ronald G. McDonald, 1935), 34, 134; F. W. Taylor and T. A. Cusack (compilers), *Nullis Secundus: A History of the Second Battalion, A.I.F. 1914-1919* (Swanbourne WA: John Burrige Military Antiques 1992 [original printing 1942]), 52.

<sup>71</sup> Australian Imperial Force unit war diaries 1914-18, Senior Chaplain, Other Protestant Denominations, Headquarters AIF, London, August 1914-October 1917, AWM4 6/4/1-4.

his personal friends. Doubtless, the vast majority of Australian soldiers, spread across the five infantry divisions in France and the Light Horse units in Palestine, never met him, but then they probably didn't meet any of the other legendary figures of the AIF, including Birdwood, Monash and Billy Hughes. There probably is hyperbole in the claims of his almost universal fame, but there is no doubt that his reputation extended far beyond the sphere of his personal influence, as wide as that already was.<sup>72</sup> It is also true that his fame grew after the war: his prominent leadership role in the Salvation Army made it easy for that organisation to capitalise on his reputation. However, in the years since his death in 1947, outside the Salvation Army his memory has virtually disappeared from popular consciousness. This author would argue that his reputation was established early, grew under the influence of late-war and post-war needs, then has faded to undeserving insignificance.

The only other major debateable feature that McKernan includes in his biography is that 'it was rumoured that he had three times been recommended for the Victoria Cross.'<sup>73</sup> Apart from Macnaghten's letter, such rumours are confined to post-World War Two references, one of which states that the officers who intended to recommend him were killed before they could.<sup>74</sup> His decorations were limited to the Military Cross, a 'Mentioned in Despatches' in France, the OBE in 1935, and the Salvation Army's Order of the

---

<sup>72</sup> Norman Campbell, 'Fighting Mac', undated news clipping circa 1926, McKenzie file, Salvation Army Heritage Room, Bexley North, Sydney; also quoted in Dale, 'Fighting Mac', and quoted in *War Cry*, 9 August 1947, 6.

<sup>73</sup> McKernan, 'McKenzie'.

<sup>74</sup> Peter McGuigan, 'A Man of Exceptional Courage,' *In the Steps of the Founder: Celebrating the lives of 23 Australian recipients of the Order of the Founder* (Melbourne: Salvation Army, 1995), 72; Robert D. Linder, *The Long Tragedy: Australian Evangelical Christians and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2000), 133.

Founder. It was relatively difficult for chaplains to win medals, not merely because they were usually confined to more peaceful rear areas, but also because medals for bravery tended to contradict their peaceable status. Peter McGuigan claims that a war office ruling limited chaplains to just one decoration, but in fact there were exceptions to this.<sup>75</sup> With little more to go on, McKenzie's VC recommendations will have to remain as rumour.

The articles in the *Daily Mirror* and *Sun* contain a number of obvious factual errors, for example giving McKenzie's age as 24 in 1914, with a birth-date of December 1889 (in fact the date of his acceptance for training as a Salvation Army officer) instead of 1869, which means that he was really in his mid-40s during the war. Such errors might not be surprising in the memory of an ageing veteran, but also suggest that memory is not always a reliable guide to the past if indeed it is, as the *Sun* claims, a veteran's memoir; otherwise it is sloppy journalism in keeping with much of the rest of the reporting in the stories.

There are other uncertain details of less consequence of the McKenzie legend in the *Daily Mirror-Sun* articles. While doubt is cast on them by the demonstrable inaccuracy of other elements, yet some are within both character and the bounds of credibility. The articles note the hostile reception which McKenzie received on board ship, adding that his bed was short sheeted, a dead fish left under his pillow, and crude notes pinned in his cabin. The cool reception was standard; another chaplain at first hid timidly in his cabin while outside his door soldiers used the foulest language in an attempt to intimidate him,<sup>76</sup> while the 2/4 Battalion history records that McKenzie 'was not very welcome at first, for he was a padre and that cramped their style somewhat.'<sup>77</sup> Ah Kow states that McKenzie was met on board by an officer who remarked dubiously, 'I know little

---

<sup>75</sup> McGuigan. 'A Man of Exceptional Courage,' 72.

<sup>76</sup> 'Experiences of Rev. Donald B. Blackwood,' AWM 1 DRL 619.

<sup>77</sup> *White over Green*, 22.

about The Salvation Army,' to which McKenzie brightly replied that he knew little of the King's Army, and therefore they could teach each other. A soldier, on seeing McKenzie's trunk marked 'Chaplain-Captain McKenzie, Salvation Army' asked loudly, 'what have we done to deserve this?' When McKenzie attempted a sing-song, the men cruelly counted him out. However, within a week or so he had turned their opinion around and they counted him in.<sup>78</sup>

McKenzie's papers contain no hint of a poor reception on the boat. In a letter to Commissioner Hay days after going aboard, he speaks positively of conditions, saying that the men treat him with 'helpful frankness and [are] most respectful and chat away without restraint.'<sup>79</sup> In truth, McKenzie was probably unlikely to diarise any negatives, for he took a determinedly optimistic attitude to life, which could only rarely be dampened by actual circumstances. His letters are peppered with statements like, 'I never felt better in my life, and am full of snap, vim and elastic vitality,' and, 'I rejoice in abundant health, a disposition for hard work and a cheerful spirit to help keep my heart a-singing.'<sup>80</sup> Even when he wasn't well, he could write, 'I am feeling O.K. though the cold weather is a corker. I have had a very sore throat and influenza, with strong retchings, violent pains, etc., for ten days; they wanted to put me in dock, but Scottish hide and Australian grit made me sternly resist and hang on, so now I'm "jolly good" once more.'<sup>81</sup> His constant cheerfulness, exemplified by his own legendary composition, the Sunshine Song, endeared him to thousands of soldiers. It took exceptional circumstances to wear down his optimism. In September 1915, the intensity of the Gallipoli campaign was taking its toll on his body

---

<sup>78</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 28-29.

<sup>79</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Hay, 21 October 1914.

<sup>80</sup> William McKenzie, Letter, *War Cry*, 27 February 1915, 9; William McKenzie, Letter dated 13/10/1916, *War Cry*, 13 January 1917, 4.

<sup>81</sup> William McKenzie, Letter dated 16/2/1917, *War Cry*, 28 April 1917, 4.

and spirit. To his wife he wrote that he was at a ‘low ebb and I’ve got to apply “the whip” occasionally.’<sup>82</sup> To Hay he admitted privately that ‘the work and the nervous strain after the Lone Pine charge knocked me to “bits” physically.’<sup>83</sup> Later in the war he was sent to England for a rest, suffering from complete exhaustion, but he failed to recover fully and was sent home.<sup>84</sup> In any case, after years of working as a Salvation Army officer in some of the toughest districts in pre-war Australia, McKenzie was well used to verbal and physical abuse. Like a number of other Salvation Army workers, he had been imprisoned for ‘breach of the peace’ while conducting outdoor meetings in Charters Towers, and he had been heckled, sworn at and even assaulted—on one occasion with an iron bar—while visiting miners and steel workers in pubs.<sup>85</sup> Under such circumstances, minor abuse from cynical soldiers would have left little impression. The specific stories of shipboard harassment therefore seem quite likely, but cannot be confirmed.

The two *Daily Mirror* articles tell of McKenzie tackling swearing by introducing a fine for officers using bad language. A frustrated officer heard him out, then tossed him a shilling with the words ‘There’s your bob, Mac. And now I’m going to tell you what bloody fools these bastards are.’ This story comes from Ah Kow, replacing her ‘blanky blankies’ with the swear words, and it is in character.<sup>86</sup> McKenzie noted in a letter to Commissioner Hay:

I had a fine parade on Sunday morning when I spoke fairly plainly on three prevalent sins – swearing – ‘pinching’ & brotheldom. I dressed each pill with an incident & while they smiled I just dropped the pill down their mental vortex. It has caused quite a lot of comment among the officers & men. I

---

<sup>82</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Annie, 5 September 1915.

<sup>83</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Hay, 23/9/1915.

<sup>84</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 51.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 13-15, 19.

<sup>86</sup> *Daily Mirror*, 28 August 1981, 60; Ah Kow, 42.



suggested re swearing that if they must say something to relieve their feelings when annoyed it should not be anything stronger than ‘hokey pokey’. Now one tent in close proximity to my own has printed on it in large letters – ‘the Hokey Pokey Push’.<sup>87</sup>

Like other chaplains, McKenzie believed his anti-swearing campaign to have had a good effect,<sup>88</sup> but his ability to laugh at himself would have made him appreciate the ‘Hokey Pokey’ joke, and the swearing officer’s humour.

What is uncontested was McKenzie’s remarkable connection with soldiers of any rank or status. General Birdwood counted him a friend,<sup>89</sup> and corresponded with him, a mere chaplain-major of one battalion. His fellow battalion officers apparently trusted his expertise in arguments of a purely military nature,<sup>90</sup> and McKenzie’s Brigade and Battalion commanders affirmed his work in the warmest language,<sup>91</sup> while the Brigade Major offered him a regular commission and command of a company, considering him ‘too good and valuable a man to be a *Padre*’.<sup>92</sup> Upon his return to Australia, he was feted with public receptions in every town he visited, with crowds often turned away.<sup>93</sup> Many senior civil and military dignitaries acted as Master of Ceremonies for his meetings over the next twenty years, such was the value of his reflected glory. It was said that he could not walk the streets of Sydney without being repeatedly stopped by well wishers. A visiting Salvation Army Commissioner decided to test this theory, and found that in one hour,

---

<sup>87</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Hay, 10 February 1915.

<sup>88</sup>Page of an unknown letter addressed to Annie, but attached to Commissioner Hay letter 17 December 1914; Bennett, Diary, 25 July 1915.

<sup>89</sup> Ah Kow, Foreword by Field Marshal Birdwood, 3, 52-53.

<sup>90</sup> F. A. McKenzie, 57.

<sup>91</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Hay, 4 January 1915.

<sup>92</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Hay, 27 January 1915,

<sup>93</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 53-4.

they had not yet left Goulburn Street, let alone approached the Town Hall, a mere three blocks away.<sup>94</sup> Even in 1933, his lustre had not diminished, the *Sydney Morning Herald* noting the rapturous reception given him by old Diggers at a Town Hall reception, and *Reveille* lauding the man with superlatives.<sup>95</sup>

McKenzie's success was based on a combination of factors. His imposing physique (he was nearly 188 cm tall, weighed close to 109 kilos, and had fists like legs of mutton), robust constitution, apparently indefatigable child-like energy and cheery ways were the starting point. His fertile imagination generated ideas to keep bored soldiers entertained under any circumstances: on trans-oceanic ship voyages, in desert camps, at or behind the front, his presence lifted morale. His lively nature, wide-ranging interests and phenomenal memory helped him converse on almost any topic with intelligence.<sup>96</sup> His concerts were legendary, and he could get a crowd singing in no time, and he was as effective with British and other Dominion troops as he was with Australians. In a letter to his wife he brags about triumphing over a 'Methody' colonel chaplain (almost certainly the well-intentioned but somewhat stuffy James Green) who was booted off the stage, followed by McKenzie, who merely blew a whistle and achieved instant quiet.<sup>97</sup> Despite being a natural showman, and displaying a tendency to boast in his diary and personal letters, McKenzie was universally regarded by his contemporaries as 'modest and unassuming, above most men I have met. He has humility without servility.'<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>95</sup> 'A Soldiers' Hero: Ovation for "Fighting Mac"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 April 1933; G. J. Donnellan. "Fighting Mac," *Celebrities of the A.I.F* (31), *Reveille*, 1 March 1933, 8-9.

<sup>96</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 46.

<sup>97</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Annie, 2 April 1915.

<sup>98</sup> 'A Glowing tribute by an Unknown Soldier', *War Cry*, 14 June 1930, 9.

Next was the sheer volume of work he put in to support the soldiers he served. He shared all their hardships, be it training route marches in the desert, target practice, or trench digging, where he prided himself on outperforming men twenty years his junior, wrongly claiming that he was the only chaplain to attend training marches, but correctly noting that ‘this gives me a great hold of the boys.... You can hardly imagine how popular I am with the men and this helps me so much’.<sup>99</sup> He also sought to alleviate their circumstances, providing letter writing paper for thousands when the Army failed to make it available, and starting a phenomenally successful ‘Letters for Lonely Soldiers’ campaign in Australia that provided morale-boosting mail and parcels for thousands of men who had no other correspondents. On Gallipoli he scrounged eggs and chocolates for his battalion, having overheard casual remarks wishing for them. He spent one night cutting steps into a particularly steep and slippery part of a track, to ease the work of water carriers and stretcher bearers. McKenzie routinely tramped up and down the steep hills all day from beach hospitals to front-line trench meetings, and often had all-night burial services, so losing another night’s sleep to hard physical labour was no small thing. ‘Wasn’t that just like him’, an observer wrote, ‘but they could never get him to say who did the work. No wonder they all love him.’<sup>100</sup> In France he would often carry the packs of tired soldiers as they walked to the front, then greet the soldiers coming out of the line at night with steaming hot drinks. He persistently disobeyed orders confining him to the rear in order to lead services with men in the front trenches.<sup>101</sup> All of these endeared him to the men.

---

<sup>99</sup> William McKenzie, Letters to Hay, 17 December 1914, 16 March 1915; William McKenzie, Dateless diary entry, circa March 1915; William McKenzie, Letter to Annie, 11 March 1915.

<sup>100</sup> ‘A Tribute to Brigadier McKenzie and His Work,’ *War Cry*, 13 November 1915, 3; ‘A chat with a chaplain,’ *War Cry*, 19 February 1916, 3.

<sup>101</sup> Ah Kow, *William McKenzie*, 48.

Surprisingly for such a popular man, McKenzie was also perhaps the most aggressively evangelistic of all the Australian chaplains, making no secret of his desire to convert them to Christ. To the stigma of being a chaplain, McKenzie added intense religion, yet he appealed almost universally to the overwhelmingly secular soldiers of the First AIF, largely on the strength of the transparent integrity of his character and the appeal of his dynamic personality. He held regular voluntary evangelistic meetings, to which he could attract crowds of hundreds, and on occasions a thousand or more, and his preaching was always direct, using simple, appealing illustrations and humour. His diary and letters boast of the growing numbers at compulsory church parades over the weeks at the expense of the other three Brigade chaplains, with remarks such as, 'I've got the parsons snowed under.... A lot of men in my Battaln [sic] are changing their religion. It's quite laughable to watch the shuffling of cards in this direction.'<sup>102</sup> To be fair, not all the changes were prompted by McKenzie's merits; the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion official history notes the comedy of men changing church parades in the hope of finding one where they could sit at ease instead of standing for the entire service.<sup>103</sup> McKenzie's diary and letters record frequent conversions, and by his own estimation, during the war he had witnessed 'between 2000 and 3000... kneel and seek mercy in humility before God.'<sup>104</sup> A large percentage of these would have been the results of his own ministry. There are many testimonies from secular-minded soldiers of the real regard they had for McKenzie's religion, one soldier saying to McKenzie, 'I'm not a religious man, but your damned religion'll do me every damned time!'<sup>105</sup> And there is no doubting the genuine nature of his faith. His diary, letters and speeches abound with deeply personal spiritual

---

<sup>102</sup> William McKenzie, Letter to Hay, 4 January 1915.

<sup>103</sup> Wren, *Randwick to Hargincourt*, 35.

<sup>104</sup> 'Chaplain "Mac," M.C. Conclusion of his speech at the welcome home in the Exhibition Building,' *War Cry*, 30 March 1918, 2.

<sup>105</sup> Campbell, 'Fighting Mac'.

conversation, and his religion could delve into the mystical. He said that on a number of occasions, he avoided death by obeying a voice which directed him out of imminent danger.<sup>106</sup>

The extraordinary qualities of McKenzie were sufficient to seal for him a treasured place in the hearts of thousands of Australian soldiers. It is perhaps inevitable that his larger-than-life personality accrued legendary dimensions, but also unfortunate, as the glossy myth of works like the *Daily Mirror* articles and Stringer's excesses only detract from the glory of the unvarnished facts. Perhaps the last words on McKenzie can go to two witnesses of him in action, reflecting in *Reveille*, the returned soldiers' magazine, in 1933. G. J. Donnellan wrote:

Up and down the hills [of Gallipoli], lumping stretchers, carrying water, doing anything and everything, always with a cheery smile, and a joke—or a kindly word of sympathy or advice—he did more for Christianity than a host of sermons.... Without him, I guarantee half of us would have been candidates for the 'clink' or the mental hospital.

'Tempus Fugit' adds a perceptive footnote to the article:

'Fighting Mac' was one of the brightest figures in the A.I.F. He was a big man, physically and mentally. His understanding of the psychology of the masses, particularly that of the Digger, is the secret of his success as a man among men.'<sup>107</sup>

---

<sup>106</sup> William McKenzie, 'God steps in at a crisis,' *War Cry*, 23 July 1927, 3.

<sup>107</sup> Donnellan, "Fighting Mac".

