

ANZAC Day in Dakar: The final chapter – Senegal’s own ANZAC

by Louisa Gibbs. Photos courtesy of Malick Welli, a Senegalese photographer who gave his time freely to record this event for the Australian community living in Dakar.

You may recall from previous editions of the HRC newsletter that earlier this year, two representatives from the Australian High Commission in Ghana flew to Dakar in Senegal to attend the ANZAC Day dawn service. As we are such a small Australian and New Zealand community here in Dakar, we were delighted to welcome them ... and intrigued when the diplomats said that they had heard there were ANZACs buried in Senegal.

Chasing this information, we learned from the Commonwealth War Graves Commission that indeed there is one sole Australian laid to rest here in Dakar.

If your history lessons were like mine, you will know a lot about the Commonwealth’s involvement in the Great War, but far less about the French contribution. Living here in Dakar, I have learned that Senegalese troops formed a significant portion of the French army during World War I, as it was still a French colony at the time. In fact, Senegalese made up more than half of the French Expeditionary Force at Gallipoli (approximately 40,000 men!) – fighting just a few kilometers away from our ANZACs.

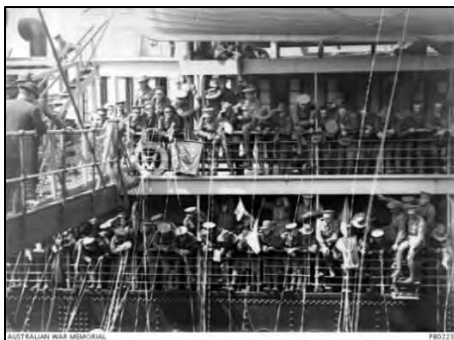
Despite this Senegal-ANZAC connection, it does not explain how one lone Australian came to be buried in the cemetery in Dakar. Obviously, a small group of us became determined to find out!

What we discovered was the story of a young man, one of the 60,000 Australians who died serving their country in World War I but the only one to be laid to rest in Senegal.

The grave belongs to John Donald Campbell. John was born in Launceston on 27 April 1895, the loved son of Alice and Alexander and middle brother of Gladys and Norman. At some stage the family moved to Melbourne and that’s where they were living when war broke out.



Senegalese troops arrive at Gallipoli in May 1915



Troops departing on the HMAT Barambah on 5 June 1916. John Donald Campbell is somewhere down below stoking the fires.

John joined the Royal Australian Navy and during 1916 was a second class stoker on the *HMAT Barambah*. The ship departed from Port Melbourne in June 1916 carrying AIF troops to the western front. Stoker Campbell died on 15 August 1916 from meningitis aged just 21. We suspect that he fell ill as the ship made its way along the west coast of Africa from Melbourne to its destination of Plymouth, with his body being buried in Dakar along the way.

Whilst our enquiries lead us to believe than neither John nor his siblings had children, amazingly we were able to locate and correspond with a great-niece of Norman’s wife – a living link from John’s story to our Australian community living here in Dakar today!

Norman Campbell also served during WWI. Following the death of John, their mother Alice requested that Norman be discharged to return to the family. We found a copy of the letter confirming that Norman was on his way home to his mum in 1917. We also learned that John’s sister Gladys lived until she was 83, traveling widely to the UK, the USA and marrying her second husband in Singapore in 1927.

Significantly, our research revealed that Monday the 15th of August this year marked 100 years since Stoker Campbell died.

For us in 2016, Senegal feels a long, long way from home. We can only imagine what it must have been like for his parents in Melbourne a century ago to learn that their son would be buried in this far away land. So, on the centenary of his death, to commemorate his sacrifice and remember his family's loss, a dozen of us set off through the crazy Dakar traffic in the sticky summer heat to visit Stoker Campbell's grave.



Australians living in Dakar visit the grave of John Donald Campbell on the centenary of his death

The Senegalese caretakers at the cemetery helped us to locate the grave and cleaned it for us. Even from a distance we could recognise the distinctive shape of the Commonwealth headstone. The cemetery is generally well maintained and Stoker Campbell's grave lies pleasantly under the shade of a tree.

That morning, we had picked gum leaves from the eucalypt trees that grow unexpectedly in some parts of Dakar. We now laid them on Stoker Campbell's grave, along with a sheath of flowers, poppies and sprigs of rosemary for remembrance; something we suspect his family never had the chance to do. We each planted a wooden cross provided by the Australian War Memorial, reading aloud the messages that Australian school children had written on them. "You have not died in vain" was one epitaph. "Thank you for your courage," was another.



L to R: Henry and Felix (grandsons of HRC member Roger Gibbs) lay flowers on Stoker Campbell's grave; We planted the wooden crosses that the Australian War Memorial had sent us, engraved with messages from Australian school children; Felix reads the inscription on his cross as he lays poppies on the grave.

For ANZAC Day 2016, Senegal-based Australian artist Loman Pawlischek had crafted a metal “slouch hat sculpture”. Although Stoker Campbell was a sailor rather than a soldier, the sculpture was created as our community’s special tribute to our fallen. We laid this too, for a time, upon the grave.

The inscription on Stoker Campbell’s headstone reads: “A LIFE OF PROMISE, HONORABLY CLOSED”. We wondered what his 21 promising years may have held. We read a poem, a beautiful prayer for a sailor. And together we recited the Ode of Remembrance.

Over an ANZAC biscuit, we continued to reflect on John Donald Campbell’s life and the importance of the ANZAC spirit in our sense of identity. For the families in the group, this was also an important opportunity for our children to ask questions about Australia’s history.



ANZAC biscuit, anyone?

Stoker Campbell is remembered on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial and also on the Honour Board at St Mark’s Chapel at HMAS Cerberus. Rest in Peace, John Donald Campbell. You will also be remembered in all the Dakar ANZAC Day ceremonies in years to come.

