

TASMANIAN BOY SOLDIERS & SAILORS

by

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©

WWI & WWII

Anthem for Doomed Youth

*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?
Only the monstrous anger of the guns.
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle
Can patter out their hasty orisons.
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.
What candles may be held to speed them all?
Not in the hands of boys, but in their eyes
Shall shine the holy glimmers of good-byes.
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.*



Left: Jack H.H. Stevens. Right: Thomas Donnelly



Left: Jack Ray Johnson. Right: William Stonehouse



Left: Tom Payne. Right: James (Jim) Payne.

Like all wars, World War I had many dreadful aspects to it. One was the turning of a blind eye to under-age recruitment. 'Boy' soldiers served on both sides in the tens of thousands and ten of thousands were killed. Boys from ages 12 served on the firing line with officialdom tolerating this absurd situation, mainly because the need for constant manpower to fill the depleted ranks.

Boys in their enthusiasm, seeing the whole affair as an adventure, joined the army and were sent overseas to serve in all theatres of war, including the hellhole of the Western Front. If parents wrote to the relevant authorities pointing out that their son was under-aged and demanded them back, then on many occasions they were sent home, but not every time. If, say 14,15, 16-17 year old boy was asked whether he wanted to return and he replied in the negative, then there was a good chance he stayed where he was – in the trenches.

I personally knew a gent who joined the English forces under-aged who went to Flanders and was wounded by being shot through the cheeks. It was then discovered he was under-aged and after recovery, was sent back to school! When he finished his schooling, now 18 years, he returned to the war.

How many 'boy' soldiers served in Australian forces? It is hard to say, but it is estimated that up to 8% of British recruits was under-aged. There is no reason why this figure should not correspond with Australia, especially when all our soldiers were volunteers. There are abundant family stories of a member serving while not 18 years old.

Taking into account that 13,000 Tasmanians served, the number of under-aged soldiers from our State could be in the hundreds and taking into account that the fatality rate was about 20% and that the overall casualty rate was about a third, there could have been dozens of boys killed or wounded. To come to an exact statistic is difficult, but there is no doubt Tasmania produced such boys.

One such soldier was Jack Roy Johnson. When the war was declared he left Tasmania and enlisted in Melbourne. He was but 16 years of age. To his disappointment, he was recognised by his brother and was promptly sent home. After returning to Tasmania he again enlisted, still under-aged under another name, John Rollins, stating he was 19 years old. He served with great distinction at Gallipoli, Middle East and in France. He added the Military Medal to his medal total. He survived the war. John Rollins told the story of how the Australians would make cigarettes, with tobacco at each end of the cigarette, but donkey dung in the middle and then sell them to the locals.

Another was 15 year old, William George Stonehouse who enlisted, was discharged when found being under-aged. However, several months later he tried again, enlisting under his mother's maiden name, Scott and gave his grandfather's name, Alexander Scott as his father. He stated that he was 18 years old. He eventually returned from the war.

Charles Kimberley Houston joined with his mate, Snowy O'Neill when only sixteen. They signed each other papers and signatures and put their ages up. When Charles' father found out, Charles reminisced, "*my old man kicked me up the bum, but he let me go anyway.*" They served on the western front and fortunately, again, survived the war.

Sixteen-year-old, George Frederick Muchridge enlisted in Launceston 11th Sept 1916 and was discharged Hobart 9th December 1919 being "*medically unfit through illness contracted on active service*".

Gunner Thomas Donnelly was another who lied not only about his age, but name. Just two days after his 15th birthday he enlisted as James Westlake. He too survived. Henry Laurence Newland had his 17th birthday in France, *up to his knees in mud*. To help calm his nerves he was encouraged to smoke and while surviving the war, he died of emphysema in 1974.

Another boy soldier to go on to win a Military Medal was, Private Ian Lance Smith, 16 years, from Huonville. Telling his mother that he "*was not stopping home to hoe turnips since he has three elder brothers serving*" he fought at Gallipoli. He too survived.

These are just some of the stories of the boys from Tasmania who served and lived to tell their children their amazing tale. There would be many, many similar stories, such as Jim Payne who actually joined the navy. Fourteen old Jim did not get far. When his alarmed parents found out they quickly contacted the authorities and their son was returned home, he not leaving the State; no doubt much to his disappointment and embarrassment.

During WWI Tasmanian boys also served. Three that I have on record, all lost their lives while serving with the Royal Australian Navy.

Tasmania's history of boy soldiers can be traced back to the American Civil War. It is believed that a 12 year old Hobart boy served as a drummer for the Union Forces. He enlisted as William Goody, but his real name was Manfred Rose.

Those who enlisted and those who died.

Red: those who died.

DOW - died of wounds.

KIA - Killed in action.

WWI.

BERRY, Peter Private. Enlisted 22 May 1917. Aged 16 years, 17 months.

BENSON, JOHN EROL. Pv 12 Bn. From Bellerive. DOW Gallipoli.

3/9/1915, 17 years old. Promoted to Lance Corporal.

BUCK, WILLIAM KENNETH. Died while serving on HMAS Sydney.

From Devonport, West. Buried Linlithgow, Scotland. Pneumonia.

CAMPBELL, ALEC 16 years. Last surviving veteran in Tasmania.

CHALMERS. GEOFFREY Aged 15-16 years. Drowned while a sea cadet.

DOMENEY, OWEN ("Boy"). Aged 17 years. Joined the 40th Bn. KIA

Messines June 7 1917

DONNELLY, THOMAS LADAS (joined as James Westlake) enlisted two days after his 15th birthday – St Leonards.

ECKFORD. ALAN DEDLINGTON Enlisted under false name of Allan Lane who joined when 17 years and 7 months.

EDWARDS ALFRED. 12 Bn. From Bagdad. DOW 12/8/1915. Buried Lemnos Greece. 17 y.o.

GADD, WILLIAM MANSFIELDPtv. (Queenstown). Age 16 ½ enlisted as 18 years. Enlisted 1916, killed April 1917.

GITTUS WILLIAM HENRY ALBERT. 12 Bn. Private Enlisted 8/11/15. Age 15 years 5 months.

GRAINGER. William Douglas. Bn. 12/04/1900 – Lefroy. Died 28th April 1917. Aged 17.

HOUSTON, CHARLES KIMBERLEY. 2/40th Battalion. (see O'Neil) 16 y.o.

JOHNSON, ALBERT EDWARD. 12 Bn. From Wilmot. Enlisted with his father Jabeth Johnson who was discharged because of his age. KIA

17/10/1917. 17 Years 3 months.

JOHNSON, JACK ROY Enlisted under the name John Rollins.

MORRISON, William. 15 years old when enlisted –.

MORSE Valey. 3rd Field Ambulance. Enlisted 2n June 1915. Aged 16 years.

MUCKRIDGE, GEORGE FREDERICK. Aged 16. Launceston. No. 572 58th Battalion. Enlisted September 1916.

NEWLAND, HENRY LAURENCE. Enlisted July 1916. 17th years

O'NEIL, SNOWY. 2/40th. 16 y.o. (see Charles Houston) Enlisted July 1916. Discharged August 1916 and re-enlisted as Sydney Harold Smith. KIA August 1918.

O'NEILL, STANLEY HOWEARD. Enlisted as Sydney Harold Smith. Enlisted three months short of 17 years. July 1916. Killed August 1918. 2/12th.

PATTERSON, ALBERT. Enlisted in October 1915. Discharged underage in December 1915. Re-enlisted October 1916. 17th birthday in France.

PREGNALL, JAMES.

PAYNE, JAMES (JIM) Joined the navy but was sent back at parent's request.

RADFORD, REUBEN CAMERON. 40 Bn. From Thirlstane. KIA 28/8/1918. 17 years and 11 months.

ROBINSON, ATHOL 12th Battalion. Aged 16 years on enlistment. KIA. 9-22/8/16, aged 17. KIA

ROSE (or ROSS) EDWARD. 12th Btn. Enlisted Dec 1916. Died Illness in UK. 1 June 1918. Aged 16 years.

SAULT, EDGAR HARCOURT. Joined 14 and a half years. Left Tasmania to join Royal Engineers (English).

SMITH – IVAN LANCE. Joined 51st Bn aged 16. Fought at Gallipoli.

STEVENS – JACK HECTOR HUME. Pte. Aged 16 – 40th Bn. Returned.

STONEHOUSE, WILLIAM GEORGE

YOUNG, TASMAR ARTHUR Enlisted May 1917. 17 years old. 12th Battalion. Returned to Tasmania.

WWII

HAYWOOD GEORGE JAMES. Ordinary Seaman. HMAS Sydney. Indian Ocean 20 November 1941. Aged 17 years.

NICHOLS FRANCIS ROY. Ordinary Seaman. HMAS Sydney. Indian Ocean. 20 November 1941. Aged 17 years.

RILEY John (Jack) Joseph. Stoker. HMAS Australia. Murdered 13th March 1942. He was born 12th November 1922 and enlisted June 1939 making him 17 years of age.



John (Jack) Joseph Riley. Picture from book Dark Secrets by Robert Halder



John William Clark. Photo from the Motor Yacht Club Lindisfarne, Tasmania.

CLARK JOHN WILLIAM. Stoker. HMAS Yarra. Sunk while serving. 4th March 1942. Aged 17 years and 7 months. Pictured above.