

# WHL BURGESS

## TRANS-TASMAN GUNNER



Major WHL Burgess Battery Commander 9<sup>th</sup> Battery AIF,  
photographed in 1917 as Commander 4th Division Artillery (CRA)  
(Photo AWM H00045)

".....rendered invaluable service in the action and subsequent defence of Lone Pine. ....This officer has been repeatedly brought to notice for gallant and skilful handling of his battery."

As a young horseman looking for adventure, the mounted rifles of the New Zealand Volunteer Force in Timaru would have appealed to 18 year-old William Burgess in 1898. Four years later, whilst working in Auckland the carpenter and engineer, he succumbed to the thrill of horse drawn artillery by transferring to the New Zealand Regiment of Field Artillery Volunteers. His career as a Gunner had begun.

As a volunteer artillery captain in 1911 he was among the first to accept a regular commission as a lieutenant in the New Zealand Staff Corps. With ten years artillery experience he was appointed adjutant of the 16th (Waikato) Regiment (infantry) and commander No. 4 Area Group in Hamilton, regaining his captaincy in 1913. Later that year he was seconded to the Australian Military Force for 12 months duty on exchange with Lt Walter Alderman, a Hobartian, at HQ 6<sup>th</sup> Military District, Hobart, Tasmania.<sup>1</sup> He was appointed Brigade Major and in this capacity was responsible for mobilisation planning prior to the outbreak of war and for raising and embarking the Tasmanian contingent of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF).

In this pre-war climate and no doubt with an artillery command in the offing, he elected to join the Australian Imperial Force rather than the New Zealand

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<sup>1</sup> In the early days of the Australian Military Forces members were transferred interstate or by agreement with other countries, participated in overseas exchanges to inculcate an Australian identity rather than existing state allegiances as well as to broaden an individual's experience.

Expeditionary Force but retaining his New Zealand Staff Corps status. His fellow exchangee, Alderman, now a Captain, likewise volunteered with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force as adjutant of the 1st Auckland Battalion.

On 17 August 1914, Burgess was appointed to the AIF as a captain, and given command of the 9th Field Artillery Battery, the artillery component of the first Tasmanian contingent. He set about the task of raising and training the battery with enthusiasm and innovation. From all accounts his emphasis was on technical competence and mobility. Numerous exercises were undertaken in cross country movement and obstacle crossing. All officers were expected to be proficient at driving a 6 horse team towing a limber and an 18 pounder gun as well as technical duties on the gun line and in observation.

For the gunners and observers he developed a training regime involving the construction of a miniature landscape with moving targets. A .303 rifle was attached to the barrel which replicated firing over open sights as miniature targets appeared and disappeared. For indirect shooting, a hessian screen obscured the gun detachment's view ensuring reliance on the observers' directions.<sup>2</sup> Within the 1<sup>st</sup> Division, only the Western Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Battery was to fire live rounds prior to embarkation.<sup>ii</sup>

Burgess was promoted to major on 17 September and his battery embarked from Hobart on 20 October 1914 comprising over 140 members, 125 horses, 4 guns, limbers, wagons, ammunition and great enthusiasm.

Training continued in Egypt and, no doubt because of the experience at Pontville, the 9<sup>th</sup> Battery quickly won the first shooting prize. The competition between the batteries of the Brigade shows the competitive nature of Burgess. (His battery's record was coming into action and firing within 35 seconds.) By the end of its time in Egypt the battery had earned the title "the Galloping Ninth"<sup>iii</sup>. A battery poem written at the time has the verses:

"When the Major wants work done  
They tackle it & call it fun  
As long as he's first, that's all he cares  
Men & horses they never spare".

And goes on:

The officers at mess that night  
Chiacked Burgess with all their might  
Said he "I'll bet you two hundred quid  
I'll take a gun up the pyramid."

None of them dared to take him up  
They knew his men wouldn't sell him a pup

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<sup>2</sup> At a cost of £4/17/6 for an 18 pounder shell, live firing was costly whereas 2<sup>d</sup> for a .303 round meant Burgess' system was cost effective.

Said he "I'll show you what they can do,"  
And he knew his battery could see him through." iv



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Senior members of 9<sup>th</sup> Battery L to R: Battery Sergeant Major Light; Lieutenant Morgan; Captain R Gee; Major Burgess; Lieutenant Crisp; Lieutenant Ellis. (photo Australian War Memorial AO1493)

A high standard was expected throughout the battery as evidenced by an orderly room incident where two charged with "absence without leave" in Colombo were "given a good tongue lashing" by Burgess who then "broke down as he felt it so very keenly".<sup>v</sup> No doubt he felt the both his battery's and his reputation had been sullied within the Division. Nevertheless, his successor as battery commander, Major Gee, wrote of him "Burgess was a wonderfully fine officer and to him, I think the main credit of all the good doings of the 9<sup>th</sup> Battery is due to the training he gave".<sup>vi</sup> His gunners commented that he was the "soul" of the battery and "never hesitated to take (personal) risks"<sup>vii</sup>.

Burgess went ashore at Gallipoli ahead of his guns on 28<sup>th</sup> April and was wounded on 7<sup>th</sup> May, returning to duty nine days later, the first of numerous close calls throughout the war. For his leadership of 9<sup>th</sup> Battery on the right flank of the Anzac position from May to October he was awarded the DSO. His health steadily declined from July until he was invalided to Egypt in October with "severe fever"<sup>viii</sup>, most probably aggravated by exhaustion.

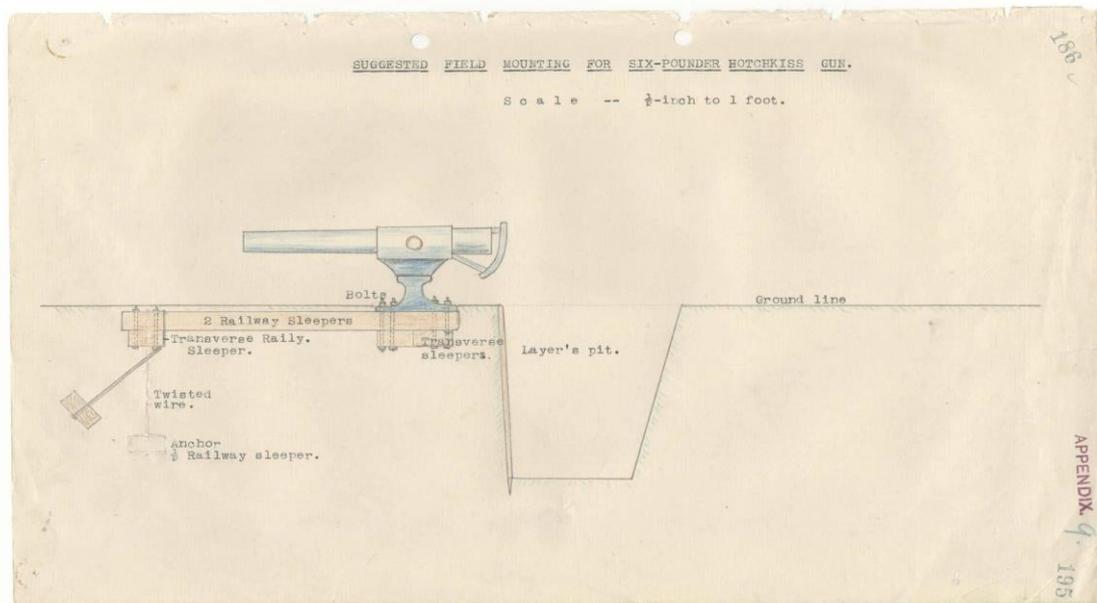
Promoted lieutenant colonel in March 1916, he went to France commanding the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Artillery Brigade at a time when the artillery was reorganised from 36 field batteries to 60, a howitzer battery added to each brigade and the creation of trench mortar and heavy artillery batteries. The resulting mass artillery, a characteristic of the Western Front, was demonstrated at the battle of Pozieres where one of his Battery Commanders described the artillery deployed: guns for "miles on every side of us, guns ahead of us and for ten miles behind us, all firing together"<sup>ix</sup>. It was at this point that a number of artillery brigades, including the 3<sup>rd</sup> became "Army Brigades" which could be 'grouped' together for a specific purpose. He particularly

distinguished himself in action from July to September 1916 during the Battle of the Somme and at Messines commanding such a 'group'.

In August 1917 he was appointed brigadier general and after a short spell as artillery commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division commanded the 4<sup>th</sup> Division artillery for the remainder of the war. His promotion followed the appointment of Major General Sinclair-Maclagan as commander 4<sup>th</sup> Division. He had previously commanded the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Brigade which the 3<sup>rd</sup> Artillery Brigade (including the 9<sup>th</sup> Battery) had supported at Gallipoli. In this capacity he controlled the guns of the 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Division's Artillery at the battle of Ypres where over 20% of his guns were "out of action or stuck in the mud"<sup>x</sup> in the appalling conditions.

The following year from mid-March saw the German counter offensive and the first use of tanks by both sides. Burgess was immediately recalled from leave to resume his command. The subsequent defence of Villers-Bretonneux and the denial of German access to the logistic base at Amiens became legend. During this desperate defence he cycled his brigades through 4 weeks in the line; one week reserve and one week on-call if needed. At the same time he maintained a close cooperation with the French artillery on his right. As the war diary records; "*The security of Amiens depends on our maintaining our position on the Villers-Bretonneux Plateau intact*"<sup>xi</sup>.

It was during this defence that Burgess used his civilian skills to personally design mountings for 6 pounder Hotchkiss guns salvaged from a derelict British tank, two of which he used in an anti-tank role on likely approaches.<sup>xii</sup>



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Burgess' diagram for placement of mountings of 6 pounder Hotchkiss guns in anti-tank role<sup>xiii</sup>.

On the offensive at last in July at the battle of Hamel, Burgess controlled 16 of the 29 field brigades allocated for the operation (4 Australian). Again, in the advance from Amiens he controlled 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Divisions' Artillery where the lessons of Hamel were implemented on a technical and tactical scale never before witnessed in the history of warfare.

It was during the battle of Amiens that the British and Australians were advancing together either side of the river Somme. Burgess had ordered that, to avoid confusion, the Australians were to restrict their fire to their side of the river. In the event the British advance slowed and the Germans were able to fire into the Australian flank<sup>xiv</sup>. Both the 38<sup>th</sup> Battery and the 110<sup>th</sup> Howitzer Battery took casualties and several guns and six tanks were put out of action. Despite orders to the contrary, the 111<sup>th</sup> Battery opened up on the Germans and was joined by two other batteries. Under fire from Burgess's batteries and suffering casualties, the German guns withdrew. Belatedly, Burgess gave his permission on condition the flashes from the German guns could be seen. The unauthorised firing was instigated by the Battery Commander of the 111<sup>th</sup> Battery, Captain Ellis Cox<sup>3</sup> from Tasmania. For his "court martial or medal" decision he was awarded the Military Cross (MC) and promoted to Major. Despite the failure of Cox to follow orders, Burgess wrote him a gracious letter of congratulation<sup>xv</sup>.

For his World War 1 service Burgess was mentioned in dispatches six times, awarded the French *Croix de Officier* of the *Légion d'honneur* and also received the Distinguished Service Medal from the government of the United States. In 1919 he was invested as a Commander of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) and Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB).<sup>xvi</sup>

After the war, both Burgess and his fellow exchangee, Alderman, returned to their respective countries each with the substantive rank of Lieutenant Colonel. Alderman, who had commanded several New Zealand battalions through the war and a brigade for a short time, subsequently served back in Hobart and became Commandant at Anglesea Barracks in 1923<sup>xvii</sup>.

Born William Livingstone Hatchwell Sinclair in England in 1880, his parents divorced and his mother married George Burgess and William took the surname Burgess. The family emigrated to New Zealand c1894<sup>xviii</sup>. Upon his return to New Zealand post war he married in 1921 and changed his name to Sinclair-Burgess. The marriage ended in divorce and there were no surviving children.<sup>xix</sup>

Back in the New Zealand army as senior gunner officer, Sinclair-Burgess' career advanced with appointments as Director of Military Intelligence and Training; Chief of Staff at army headquarters and in 1931 as a major general the dual appointments of General Officer Commanding and Chief of General Staff, New Zealand Military Forces. The culmination was a knighthood in 1934.

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<sup>3</sup> Ellis Cox subsequently commanded Tasmania's 6 Field Regiment (Militia) until 1943 and became a judge of the Supreme Court of Tasmania. His son, William, also commanded 6 Field Regiment, served as Colonel Commandant RAA and became Chief Justice and Tasmania's 26<sup>th</sup> Governor.

Major General W. G. Stevens (a fellow gunner) described him as a 'tall dark man with flashing eyes and a striking appearance, with a touch of flamboyance, and a love of self-publicity and self-display'. Because of his flamboyance and holding dual appointments, Sinclair-Burgess was nicknamed "Sinky-Boo" after the multi-rolled Gilbert and Sullivan character Pooh-Bah in the comic opera *The Mikado*.<sup>xx</sup> He had a 'fetish' about secrecy, but was known to be kind and approachable. His wearing of full-dress uniform to cabinet meetings did not endear him to Labor ministers. One greeted him with, 'Feathers and all to-day, eh General?'<sup>xxi</sup>

He was keenly interested in the motorisation of transport and the experimental armoured formation within the British army. This obviously appealed to his concept of mobility first demonstrated with the 9<sup>th</sup> Battery and gave rise to his experiments in 1936 for motorising the New Zealand army to enhance its mobility. With the abolition of compulsory military training in New Zealand he had the task of reorganising the Territorial Force on a voluntary basis. The rise of Japanese militarism found him leading New Zealand defence planning.

In his time leading the army he took a strategic approach to defence in close cooperation with Britain. His proposals included a New Zealand section of the Committee of Imperial Defence (CID) and the formation of a New Zealand squadron within the Royal Air Force. He supported the acquisition of reconnaissance and escort aircraft; preparations for an expeditionary force of an infantry division and a mounted rifles brigade; the creation of a regular infantry battalion and artillery battery. These proposals did not all materialise as New Zealand's defence priorities changed to emphasise naval and air defence. With expenditure on development of naval dockyards and the creation in 1937 of an independent (of the army) Royal New Zealand Air force, the army became less prominent in defence priorities.<sup>xxii</sup> Nevertheless, his influence was apparent and after his retirement (following a two year extension) in 1937, a number of his proposals were eventually adopted including the purchase of artillery.

Sinclair-Burgess offered his services during the Second World War. His application, supported by his successor, General Puttick (who wanted him as a brigadier at General Headquarters) was unsuccessful. It is understood he did undertake work for the New Zealand security services.<sup>xxiii</sup>

On retirement he built his own house at Lower Hutt which was destroyed by fire along with his military memorabilia; however, fellow army officers subscribed to replace his medals and insignia. He died on 3 April 1964 and is remembered as the most decorated and longest-serving head of the New Zealand army.

As Napoleon once said:

"The best Generals are those who have served in the Artillery".<sup>xxiv</sup>



Major General Sir William Livingston Hatchwell Sinclair-Burgess KBE, CB, CMG, DSO; the most decorated and longest-serving head of the New Zealand Army. Photo Wikipedia  
ART00104 Bell, George, Brigadier General William Burgess (1918), oil on canvas, 61.6 x 51 cm, AWM copyright

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## NOTES

- <sup>i</sup> AWM Honours and Awards (Recommendations) 391/8/5 Recommendation for DSO.
- <sup>ii</sup> Horner David, "The Gunners, A History of Australian Artillery" Allen & Unwin 1995 p81.
- <sup>iii</sup> Broinowski, L (ed); "Tasmania's War Record 1914-1918" J Walsh & Son Ltd MCMXXI Page 37
- <sup>iv</sup> Orchard, Arthur, "Diary of an ANZAC" Arthur Orchard 2009 Pages 191 - 192
- <sup>v</sup> "The War Diary of WG McKenzie" edited by Charles McKenzie (unpublished) entry Nov 17 1915
- <sup>vi</sup> War Diaries of Lt Col R S Gee page 3
- <sup>vii</sup> Orchard, Arthur, "Diary of an ANZAC" Arthur Orchard 2009 Pages 43 & 50
- <sup>viii</sup> The Auckland Press Thursday March 23 1916 "Lieutenant Colonel Burgess Promotion in Egypt"
- <sup>ix</sup> Gee Diary, 16 July 1916 AWM, 3DRL895
- <sup>x</sup> Horner David, "The Gunners, A History of Australian Artillery" Allen & Unwin 1995 p160.
- <sup>xi</sup> 4th Division Artillery War Diary, May 1918 AWM 4, 13/13/24 Part 1, Appendix 1(b)
- <sup>xii</sup> 4th Division Artillery War Diary, May 1918 AWM 4, 13/13/24 Part 1, entry 21 May 1918
- <sup>xiii</sup> 4th Division Artillery War Diary, May 1918 AWM 4, 13/13/24 part 2, P73
- <sup>xiv</sup> Horner David, "The Gunners, A History of Australian Artillery" Allen & Unwin 1995 p181
- <sup>xv</sup> Cox, William, "From Western Front to Changi Gaol, The Wars of two Friends" WJE Cox 2009 p126
- <sup>xvi</sup> W. David McIntyre "Sinclair-Burgess, William Livingston Hatchwell 1880–1964 Military leader" biography first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume 4, 1998
- <sup>xvii</sup> Gow , Neil, 'Alderman, Walter William (1874–1935)', Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 7, Melbourne University Press, 1979
- <sup>xviii</sup> New Zealand Herald, Volume XXXI, Issue 9590, 15 August 1894, Page 6.
- <sup>xix</sup> W. David McIntyre "Sinclair-Burgess, William Livingston Hatchwell 1880–1964 Military leader" biography first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography Volume 4, 1998
- <sup>xx</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>xxi</sup> *Ibid*
- <sup>xxii</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>xxiii</sup> *ibid*
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Quoted in Horner David, "The Gunners, A History of Australian Artillery" Allen & Unwin 1995 p188