Queensland Rifle Association
ROLL of HONOUR TRIBUTE



Major William Ernest MARKWELL DSO MID

ANZAC Day 2026

Soldier and Rifleman in the
Great War 1914 - 1918

Major William Ernest MARKWELL DSO MID

He was born on 23rd December 1889 in Beaudesert, Queensland. He was the only child of grazier, John Markwell, and his wife, Agnes McDonald. He attended Beaudesert State School and Southport High School, then worked on his father's property.

William Markwell was a member of the Beaudesert Rifle Club in its early days, and was said to have “possessed plenty of pluck, and rather more than a usual amount of dash”.

Having already served for four years, William enlisted in Brisbane on 18 August 1914 as a Captain aged 24. In September he embarked with 2nd Light Horse Regiment, on the ‘Star of England’ and served for some time in Egypt. During his training, Markwell participated in a rifle match between the Australian 2nd Light Horse Regiment and the Cairo British Rifle Club in very unfavourable conditions. The Australians won this match with their best shooting result being that of Markwell.

Following his training in Cairo, he arrived at Gallipoli only a few weeks after the initial landing, where he remained until the evacuation eight months later without suffering injury or illness.

During the Gallipoli campaign more than 8,700 Australians lost their lives but by late November the plan to evacuate was begun and it involved operations such as the ‘silent stunts’, where there was no artillery fire or sniping from the Allied lines. This suggested to the enemy that preparations were underway for the coming winter, instead of a complete withdrawal. Also Drip (or "pop off") rifles were used which were self-firing rifles designed to deceive the Turks during and after the evacuation. These devices provided sporadic firing which helped convince the Turks that the Anzac front line was occupied long after thousands of men had crept down to the beaches and escaped.
In the end, 80,000 men were evacuated with only very few casualties (making the evacuation one of the campaign’s most successful components), although most of the soldiers felt guilty leaving behind their mates who had made the ultimate sacrifice. In the words of one soldier

"It broke me up when we had to leave the Peninsula, after burying so many good, brave lads, but we all knew that it was the best thing to do under the circumstances. Don’t you think we did well without having one man killed?"

On leaving Gallipoli, his regiment returned to Egypt where William was involved in arduous desert work for an extended period. He was Mentioned in Dispatches for his efforts in Romani and Bir-el-abd, then promoted Major for “his general good work and marked ability” in several battles in the Middle East.

In December he was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for “the gallant manner in which he pushed the position on the second ridge and led the final assault against the trenches and the redoubt on this ridge, thereby completing the defeat of the enemy positions covering Magdhaba from the west”.

William was again Mentioned in Dispatches for his efforts while he was in command of the left flank and was under heavy fire. He “organised the defence with great skill and beat off a heavy counter-attack. His coolness and daring inspired his men with confidence (which) greatly contributed to the success of the subsequent withdrawal”.

Major Markwell was part of the Australian contingent who were trying to secure important water supplies in the heavily fortified Palestinian town of Beersheba. On 31 October 1917, it became the scene of an historic charge of the Australian Light Horse Brigade.

Commencing at dusk, the brigade stormed the town, using their bayonets as swords in a highly unconventional charge. The momentum of the surprise attack carried them through the Turkish defenses and within an hour they over-ran the Turkish trenches and were able to secure the town before it could be destroyed by the retreating Turkish force.

During this attack the Australians suffered 67 casualties with two officers and 29 other ranks killed, one of whom was Major Markwell.

The fall of Beersheba opened the way to outflank the Gaza —Beersheba Line. On 6 November, after severe fighting, Turkish forces began to withdraw from Gaza further into Palestine.

A letter written by a chaplain at the Front, made reference to Major Markwell: "He led the final attack ... in fine style and his example went a long way towards making the charge as irresistible as it proved to be."

In another letter to Major Markwell's mother, Anglican chaplain Reverend John Boardmann described the loss: "He was one of the finest officers in the whole division. The army has lost one of the best officers, and you have lost a noble man, and I have lost a friend."

Major William Ernest Markwell DSO, MID is buried in Beersheba Military Cemetery in Palestine and remembered at the Australian War Memorial Roll of Honour and the Beaudesert War Memorial.

We remember Major William Markwell.

Lest we forget