

John was born at Annandale, NSW on 9th Feb 1895, the son of Herbert Henry and Matilda Axtens. At the time of joining the AN&MEF on 11th August 1914, John was a Lieutenant with the 18th Infantry, a CMF Unit. He did enlist in the AN&MEF as a private and served for 206 days, returning from Rabaul on 4th March 1915 and discharged as term expired.

John was a prolific letter writer, writing to his family right through WW1, commencing during his service with the AM&NEF in 1914. 252 pages of these letters are available for reading on the AWM website. Also on the website is his diary of the first couple of months in Rabaul. Whilst the diary tells of events, his letters are far more revealing as to what he was actually thinking.

In my covering page, I mention the apparent conflicting reports about the actions of the Naval and Military components of the Force, about who did what. It is interesting to get a report from someone who actually landed at Kabakaul and observed firsthand that initial action of the war. In a letter to his father dated Thurs 17th September 1914, John states:-

(WARNING: Some of the language used would appear very derogatory today but was the vernacular of the day, some 100 years ago. I have provided a direct translation of the letter.)

“Last Friday we arrived at New Britain early in the morning at about 9.30am then were rushed ashore with about 10 minutes warning. Two companies of Naval Reserves and No. 1 Machine Gun Section landed at Kabakaul and instead of sending the Machine Guns ahead with an escorting company they sent us out skirmishing & the Naval men went on ahead with the result that as we went on some hours later we were met by some of the first party being carried back on stretchers, the casualties were 2 officers killed and 1 man killed & 1 man wounded. I think that the way the attack was carried out was suicidal. The reserve men marched straight ahead with no scouts or flank guard of any sort with the result that the Germans who had trenches across the road and armed niggers in the trees had only to fire a volley and then throw up a white flag. If we had gone ahead when we first landed we could have mounted the maxims at the side of the road screened by bushes & fired into the trench & probably saved the loss of our men. We marched on as far as the third trench which was about two miles from the wireless station which we were marching onto. We arrived at the trench about 5 o'clock dead beat having had to carry our guns, tripods, ammunition etc on our shoulders. On the way out we disconnected two or three mines which happily failed to explode and passed two parties of natives & German prisoners on their way back to the landing stage. At the trench was another party of niggers in charge of a Naval Reserve guard and also five or six German Officers on parade we had hardly been there 10 minutes when the blacks stampeded. They were supposed to have received a signal from one of the Germans. As soon as they started to bolt nearly everyone with a rifle blazed away & about 12 niggers were killed & one of the Germans who had attempted to get away was shot as well. We occupied the trenches that night and left for the base at about two in the morning having sent one Naval company onto the wireless station which was dismantled by then & a few more prisoners taken. We arrived at the base about half past three with three Naval men who had been wounded in the scrap with the niggers though whether by the enemy or by our own men is a matter of some doubt. We had to leave the guns etc about two miles back on the road as we were too exhausted to carry them so we left a guard over them till morning.

After about two hours sleep we were sent back again for the guns. Having got them we marched down to the landing place and arrived there about 2 o'clock nearly dead with exhaustion. We had a

feed from the store and went on board the Yarra where we were treated royally by the sailors and landed from the destroyer in the evening at Herbertshohe.”

And later in the same letter:

“When we first landed we were the only military here the rest all Naval Reservists under Commander Beresford. I hear today that he was censured by the Brigadier for not sending us (M.G.C.) to the front.”



Men of the Machine Gun Company awaiting re-embarkation onto the Yarra, in the background

In another letter to his father written in Herbertshohe on 1 October, John observes: -

“We are having a very good time here considering that we are under naval rule. I have decided that Naval Reserve officers re the biggest muddlers extant.”

In a later letter to his father on 1st December 1914, written in Rabaul, John comments on one of the other controversies that arose during the AN&MEF Occupation of New Britain. He notes: -

“we arrived back in Rabaul just too late to witness the flogging of 4 germans who were punished for flogging Reverend Cocks a Methodist Missionary in New Ireland. One got 30 lashes, 2 got 25 and one, 10. They were sent to Sydney yesterday on the Morinda along with the prisoners we brought from Manus.”

On 20th June 1915 John joined the 30th Battalion, AIF, regimental number 13, and left Sydney aboard the BELTANA on 9th November 1915, arriving in Suez on 11th December 1915. On 3rd March 1916 he was transferred to the 8th Machine Gun Section and gained his appointment as 2nd Lieutenant on 12th March.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P11064.001

John, third from left, second row, at Officer Training in Sydney before departure.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H15414

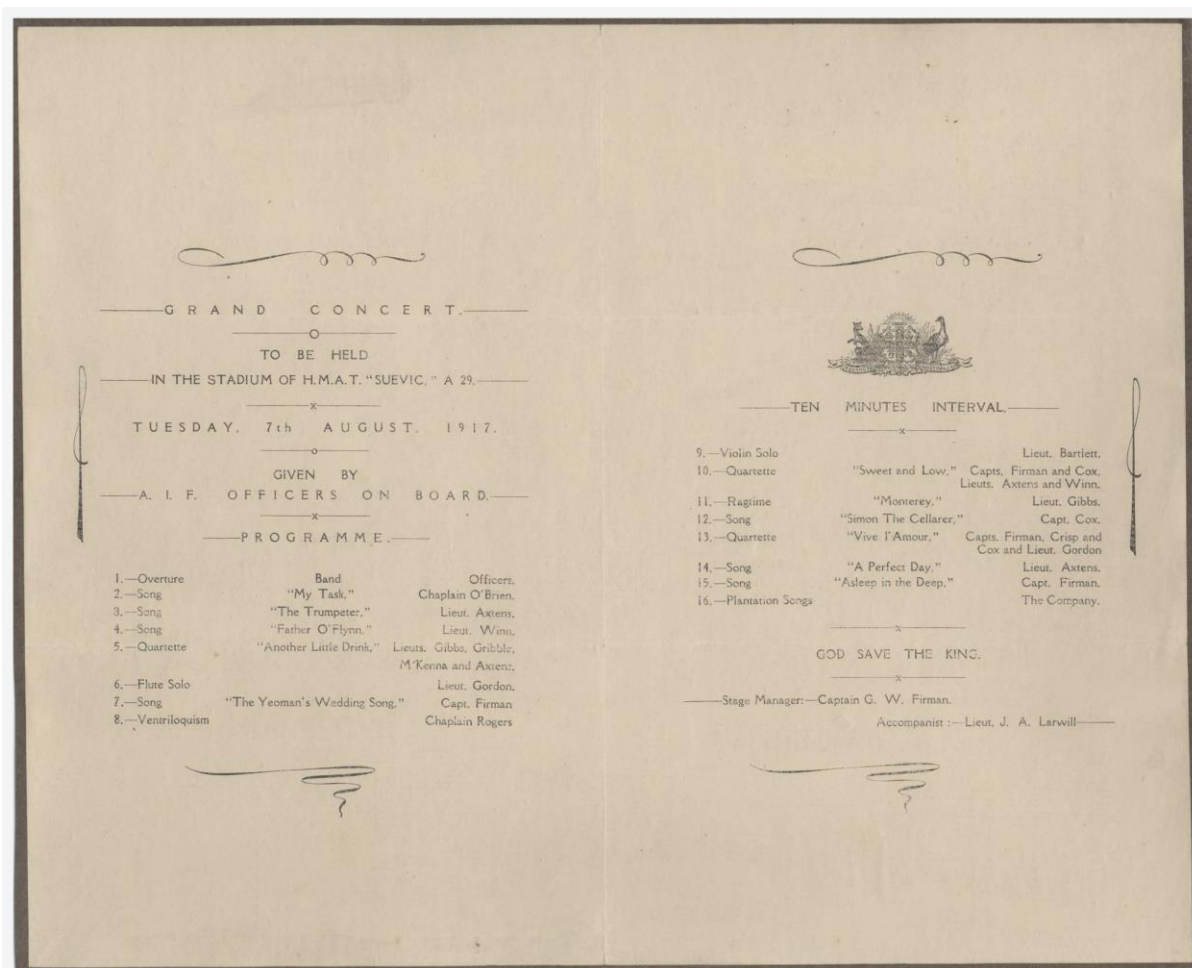
2LT Axtens, middle back row in Egypt 1916.

On 20th July 1916, John was wounded at Fleubaix, France. In a letter to his father dated 23rd July 1916 he describes the action his unit was involved in on that day including the following about his own injury: -

“At last our turn can came and over we went. We were right on the left flank of the attack and got the full benefit of the Fritz’s rifles and machine guns. Several bullets passed through my haversack, which I had on my back before I stopped one through the elbow and another just clipped between two fingers. This was about half way across no man’s land but I managed to get as far as the German front line with a gun and two uninjured men. I had to give up when I got there and was lying in one of the German dugouts, when one of our bombing parties came along and seeing someone there, let fly with a hand grenade. I was lucky and got off with a gash in the head and several cuts on the arm.”

John was evacuated to the 3rd London General Hospital and after recovering was sent back to Australia, leaving aboard the WILTSHIRE on 12th November 1916.

John returned to duty on 19th April 1917 and embarked again for the UK from Melbourne on 21st June 1917 aboard the SUEVIC. In his diary he notes that the SUEVIC went via South Africa, arriving in Durban on 13th July, Capetown on the 19th, Freetown on 9th August arriving in Liverpool on 2th August.



Programme for a concert aboard the SUEVIC, in which John was involved.

On 20th April 1918 at Aubigny, France, John was again wounded, this time less seriously as he wrote in a letter to his parents, dated 2nd May 1918: -

"You will be surprised to hear that for the time being I am in command of the company. Our O.C. was gassed a fortnight ago, also four other officers and a large number of men. I merely got a Blighty wound the other day – a shell came through the ceiling and burst above my head. Reg Webb got a wound in the leg, but I only collected a couple of cuts to the head – nothing serious."

A "Blighty Wound was - a **wound** serious enough to require recuperation away from the trenches, but not serious enough to kill or maim the victim.

The 20th April was also conspicuous for another event that was noted in the unit diary of the 8th Machine Gun Company: -

"Lt J W Axtens procced to Bn HQ to conference. Baron von Richthofen brought down on left sector"

John returned to Australia aboard the PORT MELMOURNE arriving home on 5th July 1919. On 23rd April he was made an Honorary Captain and appointed to the reserve of Officers.

His younger brother, Herbert Raymond Axtens, also served in the AIF, as part of the 12th Light Horse, regimental number 1565 and is often referred to in John's letters home. Herbert, or Ray as he was called by his family, returned home in April 1919.

John was a neighbour of Arthur Henry Treloar, who served with him in the Machine Gun Company, AN&MEF (regimental number 60) and also served in the AIF as a Lt in the 5th Machine Gun Company.

In 1926 John married Ella Doreen Sackett in Lismore. John became an accountant operating firstly in Grafton and subsequently in Albury.

On 22nd July 1942, he enlisted again, Service number NX141462, and served until 10th June 1944 as a Captain in the 3rd Garrison Battalion.

John died on 25th April 1980.