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National Boer War Memorial Association. National Patron:
Chief of the Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Mark Binskin AC

WA Committee of NBWMA Inc
Chairman: Maurice Kissane

Lieutenant (later Lieutenant Colonel) Frederick Bell VC, MiD.

Bell was awarded a VC during the Boer War. He again performed gallantly in World War 1 and after the war his fearless testimony at a Commission of Inquiry saw him run foul of authority.

He was born in Perth, Western Australia, 3 April 1875. Two of his brothers served in the Australian Imperial Force in WW1; Edgar was killed at Gallipoli and Bert at Pozieres in France. Fred Bell was initially in the Western Australian Customs Dept, joining as a cadet in 1894; he later became a cashier.

In October 1899, at the outbreak of the South African War, he enlisted as a private in the 1st West Australian Mounted Infantry (1 WAMI).

He first saw action at Slingsfontein, and later took part in the relief of Johannesburg and Pretoria and the battles of Diamond Hill and Wittenbergen. On 19 July 1900, in a sharp engagement at Palmeitfontein, Bell was seriously wounded in the abdomen and invalided to England. He returned to Perth in February 1901, was commissioned lieutenant in the 6th Contingent on 8 March and re-embarked for South Africa.

He gained the VC at Brakpan in the Transvaal for bravery in action.



The citation read: *On 16 May 1901 at Brakpan, Transvaal, South Africa, when retiring through a heavy fire after holding the right flank, Lieutenant Bell noticed a man dismounted and returned and took him up behind him. The horse not being equal to the weight fell with them, Lieutenant Bell then remained behind and covered the man's retirement till he was out of danger.*

He was the first Western Australian to achieve this honour.

After his discharge in May 1902 he joined the Australian section of the

Coronation Escort for King Edward VII. He then settled in Perth, but returned to England, joined the Colonial Service in 1905 and was appointed to British Somaliland as an Assistant District Officer in April.

He became an Assistant Political Officer later that year, a post which he held until 1910. He took up big game hunting and in 1909 narrowly escaped death in a lion hunt. He found himself alone as a lion charged. He shot it, but managed only to infuriate it by blowing away its lower jaw. The lion and he wrestled in the dust until help arrived. He spent six months in England recovering from the mauling.

He became Assistant Resident in Nigeria in 1910 and an Assistant District Commissioner in Kenya in 1912. In 1914 he became ill and was sent to England to recuperate.

At the outbreak of WWI, on the eve of his recovery, he immediately volunteered for service. (In 1907 he had been commissioned in the 4th Reserve Regiment of Cavalry). He went to France with the Royal Irish Dragoon Guards. He was Mentioned in Dispatches and promoted to captain in October 1915. He was also wounded again. He returned to England and was made commandant of a rest camp and promoted to major. Later he was made Lt Col and became Commandant of the Embarkation

Camps in Plymouth. After the War he became a district commissioner in Kenya. In May 1922, aged 47, he married in London to Mabel Mackenzie Valentini (nee Skinner), a divorcee. She died in 1944.

In 1924/25 he gave evidence at the Masai Inquiry Committee which appeared to displease the Government. He was retired in 1925,



allegedly on the grounds of age - he was fifty at the time. The Government denied the allegations he gave under oath to the Inquiry.

He remarried on 20 February 1945 to Brenda Margaret Cracklow (nee Illingworth), a widow. At this time he was sixty-nine. He visited Western Australia with his wife in 1947 and took part in a ceremony with other holders of the VC.

Prior to 1952 he lived in England at Darklands, Symonds Yat, Hereford. He moved to 89 Stoke Lane, Westbury-on-Trym, Bristol following the purchase of the house by his wife

on 11 July 1952. He died in Bristol on Wednesday 28 April 1954 at the age of 79. Buried in Canford Cemetery, Bristol. Lt Col Bell had no children of his own.

In 1991 a permanent display about him, including his VC was placed in the foyer of the Customs Department in Fremantle.

John Sweetman

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The Battle of West Australian Hill



This battle took place on 9 February 1900. The first West Australian contingent consisted of a rifle company and a machine gun section of one hundred and thirty soldiers later mounted as a mounted rifle squadron under the command of Captain, later Major, H G Moor. By the time of the battle the force had been designated as 1st West Australian Mounted Infantry (1 WAMI).

"The General Officer Commanding wishes to place on record his high appreciation of the courage and determination shown by a party of twenty men of the Western Australians under the command of Capt H G Moor in the above operations. By their determined stand against three hundred to four hundred men they entirely frustrated the enemy's attempt to turn the flanks of our position."

With these words, Major General R A P Clements congratulated the soldiers of the First WAMI who, through their gallant defence of the small hill to the south of the main camp, had prevented a major Boer attack from that quarter. While on patrol large numbers of the enemy were seen advancing to their right. Captain Moor, the Western Australian commander, ordered his patrol to a nearby kopje in an effort to delay the enemy advance. Two infantry assaults along with artillery fire were launched at their position; these were stopped effectively by accurate aimed rifle fire. Sniping and artillery fire continued throughout the day. Corporal M Conway was killed and Lt G Hensman was wounded. As a result of this action Quartermaster Sgt G Bishop later died of sunstroke and fever. As recognition of their gallant stand here the scene of their first action



would be forever known as West Australian Hill.

So who were these people that were involved in this first battle?

Private Geoffrey Gordon William Hensman, twenty-four years of age, born in Bermuda in the West Indies, was a miner. He had served as a soldier in the Royal Horse Guards from October 1895 to March 1897. Following enlistment in the first Western Australian contingent he was promoted to sergeant and then commissioned as a lieutenant on 1 January 1900. He was shot through both legs with explosive bullets. Eventually taken to hospital at Capetown he died following the amputation of his right

leg. Originally he was buried in St Thomas's Church cemetery in Rhondebosch, Capetown, South Africa. In 1965 his remains were moved to the newly established Garden of Remembrance, Maitland, Cape Town, South Africa.

Private George Neville Bishop, also twenty-four years of age. Born in New South Wales and accountant by profession he had served eight months in the Fremantle Infantry Volunteers before enlisting. He had



From the top: WAMI Section, George Bishop, Geoffrey Hensman, WA Transvaal at Karrakatta station.

been promoted to quartermaster sergeant perhaps because of his accountancy background. He had suffered sunstroke during prolonged exposure to the sun during the action at West Australian Hill. He died at De Aar on 14 February 1900 and was buried in the Garden of



Remembrance at De Aar in Cape Colony, South Africa. His name appears on a Central Memorial there although his initials are given as G M.

Private Michael Conway was twenty-eight years of age. Having been born in Victoria he was a tramway employee in Perth Western Australia. He had served with C Battery, Victorian Field Artillery Volunteers and

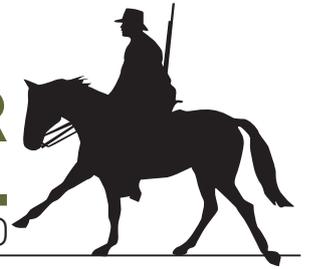
then with No 1 Battery, Perth Artillery Volunteers prior to enlistment. As an employee of the Perth Electric Tramways Company Conway had been presented with a gold medal inscribed "M Conway from PET employees 11-1-1899." Making the presentation was the managing director of PET who said he trusted to see Conway return with another medal, the reward of a brave soldier. Unfortunately this was not to be the case. Michael Conway had been promoted to corporal prior to the action at West Australian Hill. He was killed instantly by a bullet to the forehead, whilst assisting Private Krygger to protect the critically wounded Lt Hensman from both Boer marksmen and the effects of the sun.

Corporal Michael Conway was the first member of a Western Australian contingent to be killed in the Boer War which was not the recognition that had been wished for him. He was buried in the Garden of Remembrance, Colesberg, Cape Colony, South Africa. His actual grave location is not known as he does not have a headstone. His name appears on the Central Memorial as J Comwhy which is a sad end to Western Australia's first fatality of the Boer War.

All received the Queen's South African Medal (QSA) with the clasp Cape Colony. A memorial placed on West Australian Hill on the centenary commemorates the action.

John Sweetman

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