



# Trooper Thomas Downey: From Sydney to the Somme



Thomas Downey was born in 1891 in what is now the Holy Ground public-house in Church Street, off John Street, in the Irishtown, Limerick.

His parents, Thomas and Mary, had two other children, Michael and Mary Bridget, and the family lived over the pub.

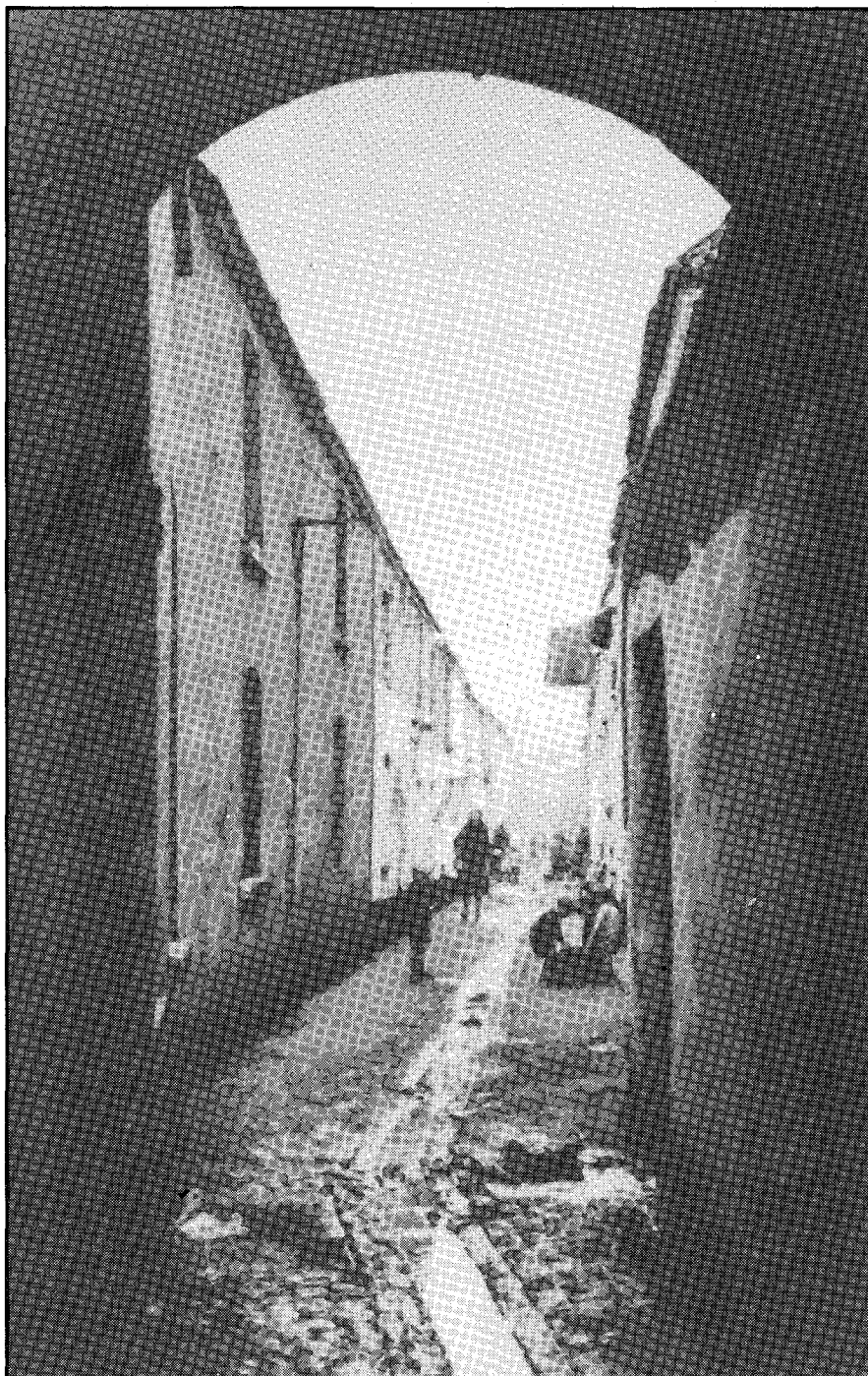
When Thomas was about eight years old, his father sold the pub in Church Street and moved to a larger premises at 47 Parnell Street (now Dempsey's Chemists), at the entrance to Hunt's Lane. Although this street had been renamed in 1890, the old name of Nelson Street was still being used when the Downeys moved in.

Young Thomas attended the Christian Brothers school in Sexton Street, and showed particular aptitude for English and Geography. Outside of school hours, he spent much of his time in Singland and Garryowen with his cousins, the Murphys and the Cuneens. It was here that he developed a strong interest in rugby football.

During their long summer holidays Thomas and his brother Michael would set off for the 'Table Rock' in the Shannon Fields or to the Railway Bridge (the 'Metal Bridge'), near the Salmon Weir Bank in Corbally, for a swim. Before the motor car came into general use, a trip to the seaside was a rare luxury for most people: consequently local swimming places on the Shannon and Abbey rivers were popular spots, particularly with working class children, well into this century.

In 1906, when Thomas Downey was fifteen years old, the Limerick City Football Club (also known as 'Young Garryowen' and later to be nicknamed 'The Gaubies') was formed. The team's members came from the Pike, Garryowen and Mulgrave Street, and were mostly C.B.S. past-pupils. Young Downey's love of the game, his frequent visits to Singland and Garryowen, and his social status as a C.B.S. past-pupil ensured for him a place on the team. In the 1911/12 season the club won the Munster Junior Cup - no mean achievement at any time - and Thomas Downey filled a place on the winning side.

When he finished school at the age of fourteen he went to work as a boy labourer at Spaight & Sons Ltd., on the Dock Road, Limerick. His brother



*Hunt's Lane, off Parnell Street, Limerick, in the 1920s.*

by Richard Ahern

Michael had secured employment as a post office clerk in the Midlands, but on one of his visits to his family in Limerick tragedy struck. In the summer of 1911, while swimming at his boyhood haunt

at the 'Metal Bridge', he drowned. His early death not only robbed the Downey parents of their eldest son, but the loss was to continue to haunt them to the end of their lives.

Thomas's sister, Mary Bridget (usually called Mary B.), helped their father



Limerick City Football Club ('The Gaubies'), winners of the Munster Junior Cup, 1911-12. Michael Downey is third from the left in the back row.

to run the public-house, but Thomas had other plans. Life behind a bar-counter, surrounded by the teeming, poverty-stricken lanes off Parnell Street, held little attraction for him; he had set his sights on a much larger, faraway and unknown world.

In November, 1913, at the age of twenty-two, he left home. The Limerick railway station, his first point of departure, was little more than a hundred yards away. Some weeks later, at Christmas time, he arrived at the house of his uncle, William Downey, at 61 Fig Street, Pyrmont, Sydney, New South Wales. Following the example of his dead brother, Thomas became a post office clerk and started work in Sydney.

But his spirit of adventure and wanderlust was not satisfied with this secure and pensionable position, and he soon headed into the outback to work on a sheep farm. By this time, however, Europe had been plunged into the First World War, and, somewhat like Ireland, Australia found itself sucked inexorably into the conflict.

Like many of his fellow Limerickmen 13,000 miles away in Ireland, Thomas Downey heard, and – despite the strong anti-conscription campaign in both countries – heeded the call. When the war was in its sixth month the 17th Battalion was raised and embodied as a unit of the Australian Imperial Force. On 13th December, 1915, just two years after his arrival in Sydney, Thomas Downey joined this battalion. In his

search for adventure in far-flung Australia he could hardly have envisaged the circumstances of his return to Europe, but he was destined to spend nearly three years in the 'futile hell' of that war-torn territory.

The Australians were to make a major contribution to the British imperial war effort of 1914-18: its army maintained five infantry divisions on the crucial Western Front; its soldiers won high praise as fighters, especially during the closing period of the war. The total number of Australians killed in the conflict has been estimated at just under 60,000.

Each of the five Australian divisions deployed on the Western Front comprised three brigades, each made up of four battalions. The 17th Battalion, along with the 18th, 19th and 20th, was attached to the 5th Infantry Brigade, which, in turn, was embodied in the 2nd Division.

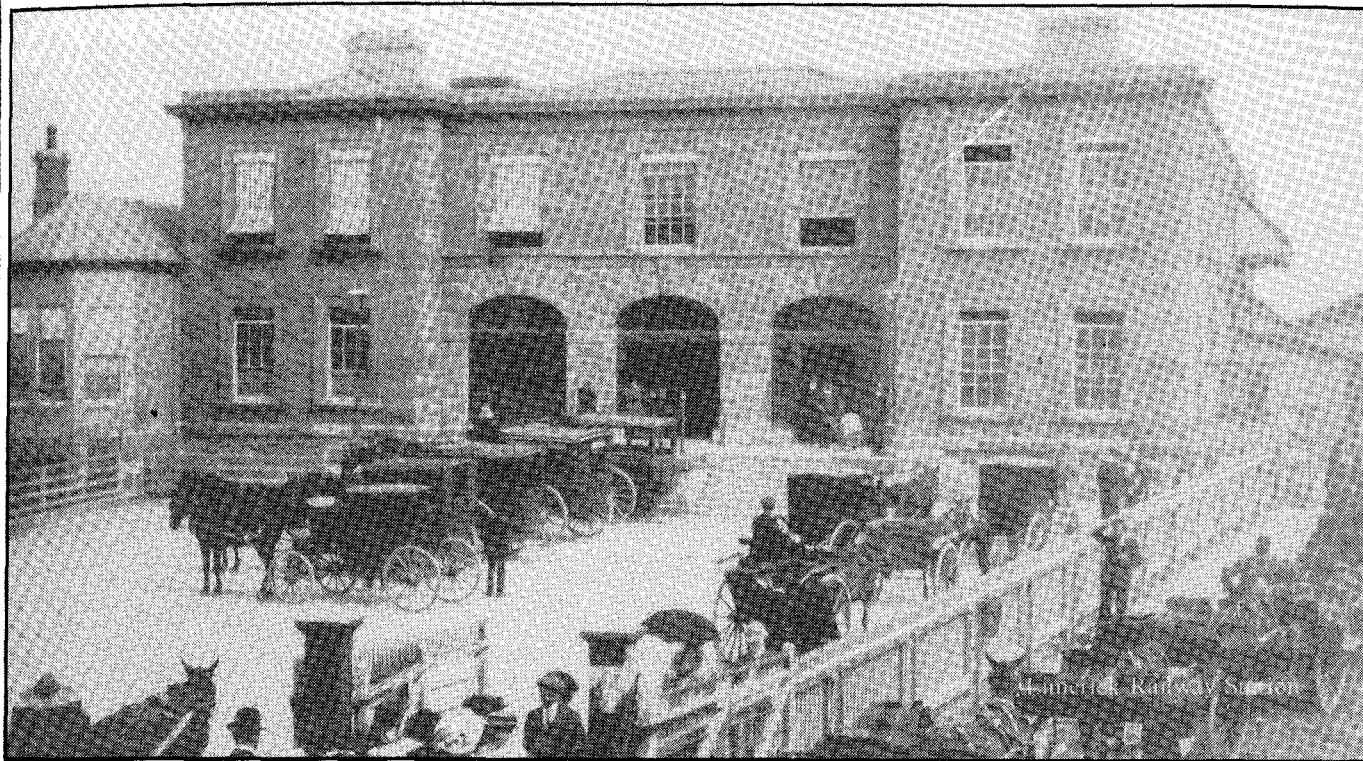
After an initial training period under Chief Instructor Lieutenant G. Costello, the Battalion marched to its own band through Sydney. Under its new commanding officer, Lieutenant H.A. Goddard, the 17th set off for Europe on Monday, 17th March, 1916, the Battalion embarked on the S.S. *Arcadian* for Marseilles – though it is unlikely that Thomas Downey and the other Irishmen on board had much opportunity to celebrate St. Patrick's Day.

The men of the 17th all came from the New South Wales area. It was the

strict policy of the Australian Army to keep men from the same region in the same battalion: for instance, New South Wales men and Queenslanders were never brought together in the same battalion. This policy gave the Australians a unique cohesiveness and a definite advantage in morale.

Wounded and sick soldiers were sent to their own depots and then brought back to their former units. By contrast, the staff at the British depots did not take the trouble to sort convalescent reinforcements, and, not understanding a soldier's love of his unit as his war home, despatched him to the first unit which required its ranks refilled. The Australians, therefore, were kept together as a corps; as a result of this policy, they had a team-spirit which Highlanders thrust into county battalions, or Londoners drafted into Welsh battalions, could not be expected to acquire – it was a true *esprit de corps*.

Another unique feature of the Australian Army was that it did not impose the death-penalty for desertion, although its rate of desertion and absence without-leave was high. Douglas Haig, the British Commander-in-Chief, considered the Australians a danger to the discipline of the allied forces. Even in the last months of 1918, when the Australians were fiercely demonstrating their valour, Haig was still pressing for the extension of the death-penalty to their ranks for cases of desertion.



Limerick Railway Station, at the turn of the century.

On 1st July the Battle of the Somme began, and throughout the rest of the war the 17th Battalion never moved far away from that fatal river, which became the borderline around which the decisive battles were fought between 1916 and '18.

Private Downey found time to write regular letters and postcards to his home, but none has survived. He also managed a visit to Limerick during his leave and was seen parading around the city in the unusual uniform and hat of the Australian Army.

August, 1918, was to prove the decisive turning-point of the war, and the 17th played a crucial role at this time. On 8th August, a major British attack destroyed 11 German divisions, captured 16,000 prisoners and thousands of guns, and made the enormous advance of six to seven miles along an eight mile front. This attack was sustained until the 21st, when a two-pronged but slower assault was made to the north and south, the Australians serving as the southern prong.

The Germans fell back to a line of defence which included Mount St. Quentin, a hill on a bend of the Somme, above the approaches to the crossings of the river. The Australian General, Monash, decided to gamble on capturing the hill, and gave this dreaded task to the 5th Infantry Brigade, and specifically to the 17th and 20th battalions.

By this time the men of the 5th Brigade were badly fatigued, but had to continue the advance. During the night of 28th August they prepared to attack.

They advanced and fought throughout the next day and assembled for another attack that night. Despite their exhausted state, at dawn, on 30th August, they were marched back again to a spot near Frise, where they had expected to be able to take time out for a sleep, but, instead, after washing, shaving and breakfasting, were moved at 10.30p.m. along the Somme tow-paths and bridges to Clery.

On 31st August, as they were moving into position west of the hill (Mount St. Quentin), waiting for an attack, dawn broke. Each of the two battalions was divided into four companies, plus the H.Q. staff which was roughly company strength. At this stage the 17th had 18 officers and 357 men.

The task ahead was one of the most formidable ever faced by the Australian infantry. Mount St. Quentin was already a familiar sight, as it had faced the attacking battalions most of the day before, and, as they came over Clery Bridge, it commanded the centre of the landscape, which was completely bare except for the village trees, the trenches and bands of rusty wire. As 5p.m., the hour set for the barrage, drew near, few officers or men in the war-weary companies of the 20th (averaging only 60 rifles) and the 17th (70 rifles) believed they had any chance of success. The men had no hot meal that night, but the 18th Battalion brought up dry rations, and at 3a.m. an issue of rum arrived. On this occasion the old Australian Army practice of keeping the rum until after the action was bro-

ken as a concession to the weariness of the men.

German resistance proved less than had been expected and Mount St. Quentin was taken – but at a price. In the three-day period from August 31st to 2nd September the 17th had a casualty rate of about 45% – eight officers and 151 men of the other ranks. Trooper Downey was one of the lucky ones: he merely suffered a neck wound.

The capture of this stronghold turned the assault of the German forces to the Somme, and they then had to fall back on their final defensive system, the Hindenburg Line. A further attack at the end of September blew a hole in this line and Ludendorff, the German Commander-in-Chief, decided the position was hopeless: it was time to start seeking terms.

The Armistice followed on 11th November. The 17th Battalion spent Christmas, 1918, at Silenrieux, and, in January, 1919, moved on to Montigny-le-Tilleul in preparation for their return to Australia. On 24th April the 17th left for England on the first part of the journey home.

Trooper Downey and his Battalion returned to Sydney. On 19th September, 1919, he was discharged and given his 'Martin Henry' suit. He had served the full term of enlistment of three years and 251 days, most of it in the front line of battle.

In the early 1920s Thomas Downey returned to Parnell Street, Limerick. The street had seen little change since

his departure, almost ten years before. While the streetscape had not altered, the attitudes of many of those who had remained there during the previous decade had – almost beyond recognition. He had come back to a ‘new’ Ireland where Sinn Féin thinking was predominant, and where there was anything but a feeling of pride towards those who had fought in the British imperial war effort. This attitude created an uneasy atmosphere for ex-soldiers, perhaps even to the point where they were made to feel little better than traitors to Ireland’s ‘cause’ – that flexible, catch-all term, so successfully exploited by the contending political forces of the day.

Work was scarce and money even more so in the Limerick of the 1920s. Although he did not find the work of a publican conducive to his free spirit, Thomas Downey was glad to avail of whatever was on offer.

The six feet tall, slow-walking Downey was a talkative man, especially when the subject of rugby came around – and sport has often proved to be a useful way of breaking down barriers in Limerick. However, he said little about the horrors of the Somme, or his part in ‘the defence of small nations’. During the next few years he helped in the family’s pub, but took time out to stroll up the road to Wolfe Tone Street to whisper some tender words to Mary Agnes O’Halloran, who worked in Goodwin’s shop in William Street.

In 1926 the couple married at St. Joseph’s Church, Quinlan Street, Limerick. Soon after they emigrated to New York and made their home on West 92nd Street, Manhattan, where

- 6055 DOUGHTY, William L.
- 5565 DOUGLAS, Alroy Clyde
- 2879 DOUGLAS, Gordon
- 5538 DOUGLAS, Ronald N.
- 1800 DOUGLAS, George
- Li. DOULL, David Farquhar
- 1187 DOW, Arthur
- 2878 DOWLING, Eric M.
- 1213 DOWLING, Frederick
- 5870 DOWNES, James John
- 866 DOWNES, John Joseph
- 5341 DOWNEY, Thomas
- 191 DOYLE, John Michael
- 2138 DOYLE, Joseph
- 6547 DOYLE, Raphael C.
- 4101 DOYLE, Robert
- 5004 DOYLE, William
- 7821 DRAKE, Edward Stanley

*Trooper Thomas Downey, No 5341, 17th Battalion.*

their sons, Michael and Robert, and daughter Mary, (who died in infancy) were born. In New York Thomas Downey secured employment at various types of office work, and his income was supplemented by his wife Mary, who worked at Woolworth’s Department Store.

In late 1931 his father died in Limerick. Thomas and his family returned to Parnell Street to run the pub, with the help of his sister. Mary B. had not married, and continued her job in Toppin’s Shannon Laundry in Parnell street, serving in the pub on a part-time basis.

During this period the street was a hive of diverse activities. There were a number of other licenced premises there, including Thady Coffey’s, Lynch’s, (‘Cheap John’s’), St. George’s, Frawley’s, Winter’s, the Railway Bar, McDonnell’s, Costelloe’s, Tracey’s and

Walsh’s, which doubled as a chemist of sorts, and went by the name of the ‘World’s Wonder’. The customers of these premises were mainly workers from the flour mills, the docks, McMahon’s timber yards, the bacon factories and the railway, most of whom lived in the small two-storey houses in the narrow laneways (Lady’s, Hunt’s, Dixon’s, Robertson’s and Gorman’s) running off Parnell Street and Carey’s Road.

In the tiny backyards of many of these houses were kept small numbers of pigs, which were sold to the local bacon factories. The nearby Matternson’s bacon factory (now demolished) is still remembered for the pungent smell which permanently emanated from it and which permeated the surrounding streets and laneways. Occasionally lice-filled mattresses were to be found mouldering in these lanes, with no trace of their former owners. On religious occasions during the year little altars, decorated with flowers and lighted candles, were set up at the bottom of each lane.

Among the other business premises on the street were the offal shops of ‘Nonie’ Maher, Carey’s, Culhane’s and Mullane’s, which was situated next door to Downey’s at number 48. There was also a variety of other shops: Culhane’s and McCormack’s, drapery shops; Reidy’s animal feed; Naughton’s and Marcello’s, fish and chip shops; Carey’s jewellers; Hackett’s and O’Mara, barbers, and Parker’s pawnshop.

The railway station was a bustling centre of activity, with up to thirty trains coming and going from Limerick daily. Imports of coal and other com-



*An Australian military band marching through Bapaume.*



Michael Downey, dressed in his Sunday best.

modities to the docks were hauled by horse-and-cart to the station by the Cusacks, Shannys, Quilligans, McNamaras and many more carters, including the legendary 'Doggy' Cross.

Like all other pubs in Limerick at the time, Downey's was a 'man's' pub, but occasionally a few brave, blackshawled women ventured sheepishly over the threshold, across the sawdust-covered floor and into the 'snug'. Thomas Downey served up the porter at 8d and (later) 9d a pint; twenty cigarettes - Gold Flake, Woodbine, Golden Spangle and Primrose - were sold at 11½d. One of the perennial topics of conversation, of course, was Young Garryowen, and he had some lively discussions with members of the 1928 Young Munster Bateman Cup-winning team, such as Charlie St. George, Henry Raleigh, Frank Garvey and Michael 'Cock' O'Flaherty.

All day on the street outside a passing parade of horse-drawn carts, cyclists and pedestrians moved up and down, and the Corporation's dung-car also did its daily round. Bare-footed children played 'Dobbie-off' (marbles), 'Cat' (a similar game to cricket), 'Hoop' (with tyreless bicycle wheels), and also sent spinning-tops dancing across the roadway.

At night large numbers of men would leave the congested lanes to assemble on the street and amuse themselves by singing to the accompaniment of 'bones' and jew's harps. These sessions were occasionally interrupted by outbreaks of fighting, which usually

ended as quickly as they had begun.

Thomas Downey took his son Michael swimming to the Table Rock during the summer months. On Sunday afternoons they would wait near the railway station for the Boherbuoy Band, made up of their neighbours, such as the Bensons, Murphys, Glynn's, Connors, Dillons and Fitzpatrick's, to make its appearance *en route* to the bandstand in the nearby People's Park.

By the mid-1930s Thomas Downey's health was beginning to fail. He lived to see the clearance of the laneways and the departure of many of his friends and neighbours; most were re-housed in the newly-built estate at St. Mary's Park. Towards the end of his life he often saw some of these 'displaced persons' strolling up and down the street, like returned 'immigrants', looking forlornly at what had been left of their old homes and at what had been a labyrinth of hide-and-seek lanes.

In June, 1937, Thomas Downey fought his last battle, his early death being brought on by a severe chest ailment, caused by the hardship and suffering he had endured in the war. He was aged forty-six years. His burial at Mount St. Laurence's cemetery in an unmarked grave was a simple cere-

mony, attended by his family, friends, neighbours and Young Garryowen comrades.

His end, like his life in Limerick, was quiet and undramatic, and there was no band on hand to play 'Waltzing Matilda', or even a trumpeter to sound the 'Last Post'. Trooper Thomas Downey, 17th Battalion, had made his final journey. All he left behind from his days in Sydney and the Somme was his faded certificate of discharge (No. 5341) from the Australian Imperial Expeditionary Force.

### Sources

- Michael Downey, Island Road, Limerick.
- Kevin Hannan, Pennywell, Limerick
- Ned Kirwan, Corbally, Limerick
- Ned Delaney, Sexton Street, Limerick
- Charlie St. George, Corbally, Limerick
- John Minahane, Waterloo Road, Dublin
- Frank Kearney, West Melbourne, Australia
- Cartha Maloney, Benteigh, Australia
- The Story of the 17th Battalion A.I.F. in the Great War 1914-18* by Lt. Col. K.W. MacKenzie M.C.
- British Official History of the War 1918*, Vol. V by Brig-General Edmonds, p.p. 178-179
- Australian Official History of the War*, Vol. VI by C.W. Bean, p.p. 806 and 809-810

Register No. WASTOR

**AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL EXPEDITIONARY FORCE**

**Certificate of Discharge** of No. 5341 (Rank) Private

(Name) Downey Thomas

(Regiment or Corps) 17th Battalion

born at or near the Town of Limerick

in the State or County of Ireland

Attested at Sydney 9th 1919 on the 13th 1919 for the Australian Imperial Expeditionary Forces Regiment or Corps at the age of 32 years.

He is discharged in consequence of Termination of his period of Enlistment.

Service towards completion of engagement Three years 247 days. Medals \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_

Service Abroad Two years 218 days. Decorations \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Officer [Signature] Commanding Regiment or Corps. Sgt. J. S. [Signature] S.O. 1 & 2, S. 2 & 3.

Returned Soldiers' Badge Place Sydney, N.S.W.

Issued 1919 Date 19th August 1919

Discharge confirmed at Sydney, N.S.W.

Signature [Signature] Capt. \_\_\_\_\_ Date 19th August 1919 (by Dist. Com. and Insp.)

NOTICE TO EMPLOYERS - This certificate has been issued in pursuance of the intended provision of section 10 of the Soldiers' Repatriation Act, 1915, and with all particulars relating to Entitlement and pay are therein stated. All signatures have been verified and the original certificate is now being destroyed.

Civilian Suit and Cap Issued 15/11/19 SHOULD THIS CERTIFICATE BE LOST OR MIALED NO DUPLICATE OF IT CAN BE OBTAINED.

Entitled to and issued with 17th Red 17th & 17th Chevrons.

Michael Downey's Certificate of Discharge from the Australian Imperial Expeditionary Force, 19th August, 1919.