



**Major-General Sir John Gellibrand
(1872-1945)
By Reg A Watson**

Major-General Sir John Gellibrand was an amazing son of Tasmania, and one of the greatest Tasmanian heroes of World War 1. Having served in two wars, Gellibrand, as a man of compassion, saw the horrors of violent conflict. He also looked beyond the time when hostilities ceased. In the days before government assistance, Gellibrand came to the fore to give support to the bereaved families of Tasmania. His efforts soon spread to the whole of Australia. This is his story...

Gellibrand was born in the rural community of Ouse, Tasmania on 5th December 1872. His grandfather Joseph Tice, being the first ever Attorney-General of colonial Tasmania, during Governor George Arthur's administration (1825-1836). His father, Thomas, was a Member of the Tasmanian House of Assembly and was a captain in Third Rifles, Southern Tasmanian Volunteers. Young John (Jack) left his isle home and attended school in England and toured Europe. He entered the military academy, Sandhurst. He became a great sportsman; and enjoyed the theatre and music halls. He graduated at the top of his class in 1893. During a dance he met his future wife, Elizabeth (Elsie) Helena Bruel (1869-1949). Elizabeth was German whose father had moved to England to open an antique shop. After marriage on the 27th July 1894, Gellibrand (as part of the British Army) was sent to Ireland. He also took to writing, submitting work to various military magazines. One of their main concerns of married life was continual financial strain; he had a small legacy from his late father, but this proved to be inadequate. In the end, as was quite common for military personnel he had to borrow against his future pay.

With the coming of the Boer War, Gellibrand was about to put all his army experience into practice. Gellibrand was with the South Lancashire Regiment and so was not offered command of the first Tasmanian contingent.

Operations in South Africa for Gellibrand began in February 1900 where he commanded a company assisting the relief of Ladysmith, then under siege from the Boers. He saw a great deal of action. Ladysmith was eventually relieved, but Gellibrand contracted the dreaded enteric fever and went into a coma. His recovery took some months and the authorities decreed his return to England. Recovering sufficiently in England he was transferred as captain to the Manchester Regiment in Aldershot. Nineteen months later, on the island of St Helena, he was responsible for guarding 6000 Boer prisoners. He then served on the staff at Camberley College and as Deputy

Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General, in Ceylon, from where he was gazetted out of the Army on retired pay.

On 27th April 1912 he returned “home” to Tasmania and became a farmer by working an orchard at Risdon. Oddly enough, the author of this work lives on the farm Gellibrand once had.

War in 1914 saw Gellibrand immediately offer his vast military experience. He was present on 25th April 1915 at Gallipoli where he was later wounded twice. Recovering from his wounds, he was to continue to serve at Gallipoli until contracting severe typhoid. Receiving the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for his outstanding service at Gallipoli, he was promoted to Lieutenant Colonel and given command of 12th Battalion AIF (a Tasmanian Unit) on 4th December 1915.

Promotion to Colonel, then Brigadier, and in command of 6th Brigade AIF in France on 31st May 1915, Gellibrand was again wounded. Returning to lead 6th Brigade in the fighting at Pozieres, severe influenza intervened, but he soon returned to command. A bar to his DSO followed for fighting at the Hindenburg Line, and then after a period in England in administration, a Companion of the Order of the Bath (CB).

In November 1917, he returned to the Western Front and on 1st June 1918, was promoted to Major General and given command of 3rd Division AIF, which he commanded to war's end.

Further awards followed; Knight Commander of the Order of the Bath (KCB) and an Officer of the Legion de Honeur. Although he had had disagreements with other Generals, including Monash, over tactics and battle plans, Gellibrand had performed outstanding service. He noted in his diary (2nd May 1919), “had the honour of being received by the King for an hour”.

Sir John Gellibrand (on return to Hobart in June 1919), was received with great honour by the Hobart community. Later he was to become Tasmania's Public Service Commissioner briefly (he clashed with his political masters) and then Victoria's Police Commissioner.

Returning to Hobart in 1923 with a concern to help the plight of ex servicemen and their families he contacted a number of prominent Hobart business and professional people. He put to them that they should form a “*cobbers club*” as he termed it with the motive “*A desire to co-operate in promoting welfare of the independent R.S. – of securing for them such measure of support from their comrades and the general public as may suffice to fill the national pledge – and since we are now civilians again for keeps we hope to deserve well of the state by doing what in us lies to further progress in state and commonwealth.*” Thus the Remembrance Club was formed. The inaugural meeting was held over lunch at Anzac House, the headquarters of the RSL. The Remembrance Club and Gellibrand's influence inspired those who began the Melbourne Legacy Club. The new club rekindled the spirit of optimism and national idealism and filled a great need. The Club's first publicity stated, “*to safeguard the interests of soldiers and developing a broad outlook on national problems.*” Legacy was born and has been strong ever since.

The 90th celebrations of the founding of the Hobart Remembrance Club (later to become Hobart Legacy) which will take place at the John the Baptist Church, Ouse, on 24th March 2013 the birthplace of Gellibrand will be joined by two grandchildren, Miriam and John. John lived with his grandparents for two years, when he was seven and eight years old in central Victoria. John remembers his grandfather as “*tallish, although not over six foot.*”

“*By this time of course, he had white hair and was still suffering from his war time wounds and sickness.*” said John.

“*He was quite strict. He never hesitated to correct me with pronunciation and grammar. He read hugely and I remember him as a very erudite gentleman.*”

John Gellibrand, grandson, who spent twenty five years in the Royal Australian Navy and Royal Australian Air Force also remembers his grandfather as being very neat and tidy, *“things had to be ordered. In essence, however, I remember him as a lovely old fella. He was very gentle, spoke excellent English. We used to read to each other, many works starting with Kipling, (Jungle Book, Kim, etc) and then moving on to Mark Twain et al.*

“When I lived with him and Elsie those many years ago, he was quite frail as was she. He never walked very well, but his mind was as astute as ever,” said John.

Gellibrand entered Federal politics in November 1925, as member for Denison, Tasmania. He was defeated in the elections of 1928 and 1929. He returned to farming; first in Tasmania and then from 1937 near Yea, Victoria. Often asked by the Federal Government to comment and recommend procedures for the nation’s defence, the years began to take a toll. Both he and Elsie left Tasmania for the last time on the 27th March 1937.

On the 3rd June 1945 death came from a mild cerebral haemorrhage. After a short private service at Balaclava, he was buried at the Yea Cemetery, Victoria. Elsie died 13th August 1949 in Hobart. They left two children, Cynthia (1901-1994) and Thomas (1908-1981).

* Reg. A. Watson is a Tasmanian historian and author. Mr Watson has long supported Legacy and is a very active Friend of Hobart Legacy

Recommended reading:

- “The Paladin – a Life of Major-General Sir John Gellibrand” – Peter S. Sadler.
- “Legacy – the first fifty years” - Mark Lyons.
- A more comprehensive account of this article can be found at www.legacy.com.au/hobart