

JAMES DONALD SUTHERLAND 'DON' MUNRO

AIF, RFC

by Duncan Curtis

Born in Hackney, London on 21 July 1892, James Donald Sutherland Munro was the son of Charles Munro and Mary Stocks Sutherland. Charles and Mary, Scottish by birth, had run away to London to escape the disapproval of their parents and married there during 1888.¹

From early life, James was known as 'Don' and, on 27 November 1895, he began his education at Hackney's Tottenham Road School,² along with his sister Violet Olive. Their father, Charles, had been a joiner at the time of his marriage but, by the time of James' birth, had joined London's Metropolitan Police, initially as a constable. By 1895, the family were living at 120 Tottenham Road.³

Don was a keen swimmer and earned a medal in 1908, for winning a mile race at an as-yet unknown London swimming championship. He was later educated at Ackmar Road School in Fulham,⁴ at a time when his father was moving up through the ranks of the police force, such that, by 1911, he was an inspector.

However, Don apparently shunned a life in the constabulary and, by the age of 18, had become a catering clerk.⁵ However, his life took an abrupt turn in 1911, when, at the invitation of his brother William, he sailed for Australia. Initially Don Munro settled in Victoria, subsequently moving to New South Wales, where he farmed for a while.

At the outbreak of war in 1914, Don was living in Brisbane and working as a shorthand typist but, within a month, he had joined the army. He enlisted as a Gunner in the 1st Battery, First Field Artillery Brigade of the Australian Imperial Force, at Brisbane, on 23 August 1914.⁶ He was 22. At the time of his attestation, he stood 5ft 6in tall, with dark brown hair and blue eyes. His complexion was listed as 'dark', which seems notable, bearing in mind his Scottish ancestry. He joined his unit at the Sydney Show Ground barracks⁷ and then boarded the HMAS *Argyllshire*,⁸ which embarked for a long sea voyage to the Mediterranean on 1 November 1914. Meanwhile, his parents had also emigrated to Australia and their ship passed Don's somewhere in the Indian Ocean, as they sailed, unseen, in opposite directions. The *Argyllshire* made a stop at Aden before arriving in Alexandria on 5 December and the Brigade then settled in to Mena Camp, ten miles east of Cairo.

Gunner Munro was transferred to the General Staff of Divisional Headquarters on 1 January 1915 with the Corps Number 82 and he embarked by sea from Alexandria (probably aboard the transport *Minnewaska*⁹) on 3 April 1915, bound for Gallipoli.

Don took part in the Gallipoli landings on 25 April 1915 and was promoted to Staff Sergeant, there, on 1 May. A subsequent entry in his service record shows an admission to No 2 Station



Probably taken around the time he began flight training, Don Munro posed for the photographers at Curzon Studios in Richmond. He wore the standard RFC 'maternity jacket' and breeches. :via author

Hospital, on the Greek island of Mudros, on 21 June 1915, for natural causes, but this would have been a short-term break from the desperation of the campaign.

Staff Sergeant Munro then returned to Egypt, this time aboard the steamer *Kingstonian*, arriving in Alexandria on 6 August 1915. But, just four days later, he was bound for Gallipoli again, this time embarking on the SS *Cawdor Castle*.

A month into his second tour in the Dardanelles, Staff Sergeant Munro was admitted to the 1st Casualty Clearing Station on the Gallipoli Peninsula, suffering from influenza, and was then transferred to the hospital ship HMHT *Dunluce Castle* on 26 September, bound for Malta. He arrived there the following day but his illness upon admission to the St Andrews hospital was now classed as *dysentery/paratyphoid*.

His condition had now become more serious and, on 8 October 1915, Munro was further embarked home to England, aboard the Hospital Ship *Panama*, and, upon arrival, was admitted to the 1st Southern General Hospital in Birmingham on 16 October.

But life was about to take one of its more positive turns. Whilst in hospital, Don met his future wife, a nurse named Clara Latham, and they were married in Fulham during March 1916.¹⁰

Continuing his recovery, Staff Sergeant Munro was sent first to Abbey Wood near Bristol and then,

in May 1916, he was transferred to Monte Video Camp, near Weymouth, on England's south coast. Monte Video Camp had been established the previous year as a convalescent establishment for ANZAC troops and, generally, those expected to be out of action for six months or more.

In the summer of 1916 Don was declared fit and he began the transition back to active service on 6 July, when he marched in to Perham Downs camp at Tidworth, and the following month to nearby Bhurtpore Barracks, HQ of the AIF in England.

Now fully fit for service, Munro embarked on the hospital ship *Victoria*, at Folkestone, on 8 September 1916, to join the BEF. Disembarking at Boulogne the same day, he reported to Base at Etaples on 9 September and soon rejoined the HQ Staff of the First Australian Division near Amiens. He was declared *supernumerate to establishment*. But, in his two years of service in the Army, Don had obviously experienced a great deal of hardship and, like many, he sought to escape the static war in the trenches by applying for a transfer to the Royal Flying Corps.

He was next declared on command at the RFC Officers Cadet Battalion in England on 8 November 1916 and he initially trained at No.1 Officer Cadet Wing, Denham¹¹ before commencing his theoretical education with the School of