# Trooper Andrew John GILLIS
## 1431 – 2 Australian Remount Unit

**Born:** 4 Jan 1892, Goolma, NSW.

**Parents:** Andrew & Catherine Gillis, Obley

**Occupation:** Tram Conductor

**District Connection:** Obley, Yeoval

**Enlistment Date:** 28 Sep 1915

**Enlistment Age:** 23yrs

**Embarkation:** 10 Nov 1915, Sydney, *HMAT Orsova A67*

**Served:** Egypt

**Fate:** RTA 22 Sep 1919 per *HT Argylshire*

**Honour Boards:** Obley & Yeoval Honour boards, Cumnock War Memorial Gates.

## Biography

Jack was born at Goolma on 4 January 1892, the 4th child of Andrew Gillis and Catherine Gillis (daughter of Thomas Hennessy of Comobella). His siblings included three brothers and three sisters. His father was born in Mudgee and worked as a school teacher in a number of places including Spicers Creek, Goolma, and Rocky Ponds before becoming school master at Baldry in 1907, and then Obley in 1910. He was also the Obley postmaster for a time. Jack's parents were in the Obley district until October 1917, when Andrew retired from teaching and they moved to Randwick.

Jack was an athletic young man, participating in foot races and playing the occasional game of cricket and tennis. In 1910, all four Gillis brothers played cricket for Baldry against Obley. Jack left the Obley district in January 1914 to take up a job in Sydney as a tram conductor, residing in Moore Park.

Jack enlisted at Holsworthy on 28 September 1915 aged 23 years and 9 months. His medical examination stated that he was 6 feet (183 cm) tall, had grey eyes, dark hair and dark complexion and was of the Roman Catholic religious denomination. He was assigned to the 5th Squadron of the 2nd Remount Unit. His eldest brother Donald [1304 – Trooper Donald Gillis] enlisted a day later and was allocated to the same unit as Jack.

Don and Jack returned to Obley in October 1915 to visit their family before going into camp. Jack was presented with a shaving outfit during a gathering at the Obley hall. Jack and Don embarked on *HMAT Orsova A67* at Sydney on 10 Nov 1915.

The work of the remount units involved training and exercising horses and mules and despatching them to various destinations. However, by the time they arrived in Egypt, the original work intended for the remount units was not required due to the imminent evacuation of Gallipoli. Accordingly, the remount units were reduced and many of the older recruits were sent home. The younger roughriders like Jack and Don were retained.

Although based in Egypt, the depot delivered remounts to the Palestine front by driving them across the Sinai Peninsula in order to save scarce rail transport, and so is credited with participation in the Palestine campaign. Jack participated in at least one of these trips, delivering 160 horses in November 1917 from Moascar to Rafa, a distance of about 400 km, and taking 9 days.

Jack and Don wrote several letters to their mother from Egypt. Once they complained of the "*very severe*" heat which sometimes reached more than 120ºF (49ºC) "*in the shade*". They also sent home

"*interesting photos and snapshots of picturesque and historical spots, and snaps of themselves and others at their sports, running, jumping, etc. and several of the famous Jack Dempsey riding outlaws*".

Sergeant Major John Albert Dempsey from Leeton, NSW, known as 'Jack', was a horse breaker and he served with the 2nd Remount Unit with the Gillis boys. He directed the work of the roughriders, under the command of Major "Banjo" Paterson.


***Sgt Jack Gillis, 2nd Remount Unit, Egypt. P00358.014***

The rough-riders were described as *"a distinct class. They are invariably as wild as the horses they subdue"*. Their job was to break in the untamed horses that were delivered to Egypt. All horses provided to the AIF were supposed to be broken in, but in reality *"most of these horses came from Australia, where the bucking habit is easily acquired, and as the patriotic dealers carefully passed every buckjumping outlaw in the country on to the Government buyers, they had some real pebbles to deal with over in Egypt"*.

Jack described his own rough-riding in a letter home: *"One of our officers brought some ladies here and asked me if I would give an exhibition on a buck-jumper. I rode one with spurs, and they all say it was the best bit of bucking they had seen in Egypt"*.

In a letter to his father dated 10 Sep 1916, Jack recounted a trip from his camp at Heliopolis Egypt to Salonika (now Thessalonika) in northern Greece with a load of 600 mules. He said that *"after we got among the islands of the Grecian Archipelago the sea was as smooth as a duck pond. We had an escort all the way, and sometimes three or four. They were torpedo destroyers…*
*The distance from Alexandria to Salonica is 700 miles, and it took us 4½ days to go over. For some reason or other we travelled very slowly and did a lot of zig-zagging. We came back in 2½ days.*

*We had two days in Salonica, and had a good look round. It is a very pretty place to look at from the harbour, but when you get into the town it has quite a different appearance. It is a very filthy place, and has a very mixed population. I think there are representatives of every race in the world to be found there. They say we were the first Australians to land there, and for a time the people used to call us Americans. Of course, there are a lot of Tommies there.*

*There are some lovely sights to be seen going through the islands. Not far from Salonica we saw a boat that had taken 1000 mules from us when we were at Ma-adi* (Egypt)*. It was torpedoed, but as luck happened they were close to the shore; so they ran the boat aground as soon as she was hit and beached her, and I believe never lost a mule or a life…I could tell you a lot about our trip, but I am afraid to say much, or my letter won't pass the censor".*
He also stated that *"The weather is much cooler now, and I don't think we will have much more heat this summer. We have started cricket again. It has been too hot to play up to now. It is a winter game over here. We played a match against one of the other squadrons today, and had a win."*.

Jack's trip to Salonika was to support the Allied troops stationed there. Following the invasion of Serbia by Austrian, German and Bulgarian troops in October 1915, British and French forces went to northern Greece. They were too late to prevent the defeat of the Serbian forces, and the Allied troops withdrew to the Salonika town area. They established a strong defensive position in the face of the Bulgarian and German forces, and by early 1917, approximately 600,000 French, British and Serbian troops defended northern Greece.

Jack appears to have spent most of the War at the Heliopolis and Moascar depots. However, he spent some time with the Field Remount Section near the front line at Ludd in Palestine (1918) and was there when the Turks surrendered on 30 Oct 1918.

He maintained good health until late 1917, but then was admitted to hospital 3 times in 3 months. The last, in February 1918, was for otalgia (ear pain) and he did not re-join his unit for over 6 weeks, spending some time at a rest camp in Port Said.

Jack was sent to the UK on leave in May 1919, and then returned to Australia on *HT Argylshire* on 22 Sep 1919. He was one of the last soldiers from the Yeoval-Obley district to be sent home.

Jack returned to Sydney after the War, but then moved to the Southern Tablelands and lived in the Tarago and Goulburn areas. He married Margaret Mary (Madge) Lewis on 6 June 1942 at the Sacred Heart Church in Randwick. His younger brother Roy was best man. At the time, Jack was 50 years old and Madge was 42 years. The couple held a reception at the Coogee Bay Hotel, honeymooned in Bowral and returned to Goulburn to live after the wedding. They had a daughter, Catherine.

Jack and Margaret returned to Sydney and appear in the Australian Electoral Rolls at Randwick East (1943), North Sydney (1949), Artarmon (1954) and Gore Hill (1958 and 1963).

Jack died on 12 July 1967 at the age of 75 years and is buried at Macquarie Park Cemetery. Margaret died at Quakers Hill on 13 Jun 1997, aged 97 years.

*Photo page 1: Sydney Mail – 7 Mar 1917, p25. Corporal Gillis of the Australian Remounts*.
*1431 Sgt Andrew John GILLIS is profiled in the book "Wellington's Finest" by Trevor Munro & Graeme Hosken, 2005.*






***Above: Andrew & Margaret Gillis, with daughter Catherine.***
***Right: D & J (Andrew John or Jack) Gillis names on the Obley War Memorial.***