+ SGT Major JOHNSTON
629 – 6th Australian Light Horse Regiment,
2nd Light Horse Brigade.

Born: 1889

Parents: Donald & Susannah Johnston

Occupation: Farmer

District Connection: Baldry

Enlistment Date: 28 Sep 1914, Sydney.

Enlistment Age: 25yrs

Embarkation: 21 Dec 1914, Sydney, HMAT Suevic A29.

Served: Gallipoli, Egypt.

Fate: DOW 18 Aug 1916, Egypt.
Cairo War Memorial Cemetery, Egypt.

Honour Boards: National War Museum, Canberra;
Baldry & Dilga District; & Cumnock War Memorial Gates.

Biography
Major Johnston was born in 1889 and registered at Molong to Susannah and Donald Johnston. He was the eldest child of seven children - Major B1889, Donald (3rd) B1890, John B1891, Arthur B1893, Ruby B1895, Elizabeth B1899, & Hector B1902.

Donald Johnston (Snr), who was born at Inverness, Scotland, in 1826. He came to Australia in 1845 and took part in the construction of the first NSW railroad and laying of the first rails from Sydney to Parramatta. After some time at the gold fields at Sofalo and Wattle Flat he bought a small farm in the Bathurst district, but later sold it and selected land at Myrangle, Cumnock, in 1876. (*The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser* – 7 Dec 1912, p16). He married Cecilia Mcgilvray, from Scotland, at Sydney in 1856 and they had a family of five sons and two daughters. Donald (Snr) added land to his Myrangle property and purchased old Dilga Station around 1900. He handed over management of both properties to his son James in later years. Cecilia died. aged 69yrs, in 1898, and Donald (Snr) died, aged 86yrs, in 1912. They are buried in the Presbyterian section at the Molong Cemetery and have a very elaborate headstone.

Donald (known as Daniel) Johnston (2nd), the eldest son of Donald and Cecilia, was born at Sydney in 1857. He married Susanna Eagleston in 1887, registered at Molong. Susanna was the daughter of Major & Eliza Eagleston of 'Woolagolong', near Cumnock. Donald (2nd) purchased 400 acres of land, Silverdean, at Baldry, around 1890. He register sheep brands for Rocky Ponds, Mount Aubrey in 1894 and later purchased a further 813 acres of land, Carton's farm, in 1908. Susannah died, aged 70yrs, in 1933 and Donald (2nd) died, aged 80yrs, in 1937 at Parkes. They are buried in the Anglican section at the Cumnock Cemetery.

Major Johnston worked with his parents at 'Silverdean', Baldry, after finishing his schooling. He was on the executive committee of the Baldry Liberal League in 1913 along with his father and would have associated with the young men around the district in social and sporting events. He enlisted, aged 25 yrs, at Sydney on 24 Sep 1914. He was 6 feet tall, had a ruddy complexion, brown eyes and hair, and was of the Church of England religious denomination. As a member of the 6th Light Horse Regiment, Trooper Johnston embarked from Sydney on *HMAT Suevic A29*, on 21 Dec 1914, and was part of the 2nd Australian convoy that left Albany, Western Australia, on 31 Dec 1914. They disembarked in Egypt on 1 Feb 1915.

The 6th Light Horse Regiment distinguished itself from all other Light Horse Regiments with the use of the wallaby fur puggaree (hat band) around the slouch hat. Most of the other Light Horse Units wore emu plumes tucked into their puggarees. The 6th LH Regiment volunteered to operate as infantry at Gallipoli and landed on 20 May 1915.

The Molong Express & Western District Advertiser – 17 Jul 1915, p3:
Major Johnston writes to his mother, Mrs D Johnston, of Siverdean, Baldry, on notepaper headed

‘Salvation Army, Naval and Military League, Australian Imperial Force’ as follows:

“I am writing this standing up. We are in the trenches. All is going well with me. We have been a few days in the trenches. The enemy’s trenches are about 65 yards from ours. In one place they are 15 yards apart. We have not had a battle yet, but we are always expecting an attack. We are sniping at them, while they are doing the same.

Yesterday an armistice was declared; that is, peace was declared from 7am till 4.30pm, so as to bury the dead. A few of our dead were mixed up with their dead. The Turks went round and put up pegs half way across. I saw one of our officers walking round arm in arm with a Turkish officer, and our boys gave the Turks cigarettes and matches; when it was time to get into the trenches again, several of our boys shook hands with the Turks, and saluted them. A few minutes after, they were firing at them.

I have been made a Lance Corporal – the first stripe. I have to take my turn of being in charge of part of the trench we hold. All the boys you know are well. G. Tyson is somewhere, but Appleby [975 Sgt Sidney Appleby, served at Gallipoli and Egypt] *did not come with us. We had to leave our horses in Egypt. We get fed well here, and it is not too bad in the dry weather, but it is no good in the wet. Love to all at Baldry.”*

On 30 Jul 1915 Trooper Johnston reported sick with a fever and was transferred to Mudros and then to Cairo, where he was also treated for enteritis. In a letter to his parents written on 8 August, from Luna Park Hospital, Cairo, and published in the *Molong & Western District Advertiser* - 25 Sep 1915, P4, Major Johnston writes:

“One day I was sent down to the pier [at Anzac Cove] *in charge of our regimental meat fatigue party– a dozen men. I saw that they took the meat, and then went for a bathe in the Aegean Sea. As it was about 11 o‘clock in the morning, and the sun was hot, and having no towel, I sat on the beach without my hat on till I dried before dressing, but I think I got a touch of the sun, and I had a headache. For four days I put up with it and then I went to the doctor. My temperature was 103, so he sent me away. I went across to Lemnos in a hospital ship, spent a couple of nights there, and then came on to Heliopolis. We get real good tucker here. There is a place that will sit 1000 at a time, yet there had to be a second sitting this morning. Of course, all the tables are not used twice, but there are hundreds that have their breakfast in bed. You can guess what a lot are away from the front sick. All the badly wounded go to Malta; a lot of the sick go to Lemnos, Embros, and Alexandria; and the very badly wounded go to England.*

I am feeling good on it now, but I can do with a few days’ spell. I will be going back to the trenches in a week or two. I am in hopes of getting another stripe when I go back – for a month before I left I was doing the work of a corporal. If I do get another stripe, it will mean a rise in my wages to 10s a day; a Lance-corporal does not get anything extra. Some of the boys in my troop were a bit off-colour for a while when I got the first stripe; they all thought they ought to have got it.

Talk about shells! We get them all day, but mostly in the evening. They are not egg-shells either. Every day some of our regiment get hit with a shell – an average of two or three a day. Shells are terrible things to be hit with; they blow a fellow to pieces. One day 25 of our squadron went out in front of the trenches, and the Turks turned the shrapnel onto them. They were out only twenty minutes, but twelve got hit and four of them were killed. I just missed going out with them. I started away with them when our Major called me back and told me I was not with that lot, so I had to stay in the trenches. One chap in our troop, the best lad of the lot, got hit with two shells. He was shattered terribly and died before they could get him in. Another was a sergeant. He was lying down when a shell went underneath him, without bursting. He did not get hit at all, but the concussion killed him. I have had some close goes with shells. I missed one by about a yard one morning, and many a time I have had the pellets cutting up the ground all round me. We take no notice of bullets, they are nothing compared to the shells.

I think there must be a big movement on very soon; they have taken a lot more men to Gallipoli. When I was coming away from Lemnos a boat was just coming in with 7000 Tommies on, and they were expecting another boat load. They have taken nearly all the doctors and all the stretcher bearers away from Egypt, and sent them to the Penninsula.

From Anzac – where the Australian forces are – we can see the war ships bombarding the top of the hill. When they start they shift something. When they first started action at the Dardanelles, the ‘Queen Lizzie’ was trying to get at a fort behind a hill, but she couldn’t; so she started into the hill, and took the top off it and then blew the fort up. That is what they say she did. Fancy a ton weight coming through the air for 20 miles, and going into the ground and then bursting – it must shift something. It costs £1000 for every shot the ‘Lizzie’ fires.

All the boys from Manildra are well. ‘Bill’ Brown [unidentified] *is very thin, and ‘Togo’ Reynolds* [582 Cpt Aubrey Reynolds] *has been very sick, but he was alright when I left. I often meet someone that has been through Baldry.”*

L/Cpl Johnston rejoined his regiment at Anzac Cove on 28 Aug 1915. He received his promotion to Corporal which was backdated to 3 Aug 1915, and on 16 Sept, was made a Supernumerary Sergeant at Anzac Cove, and received further promotion to Sergeant on 15 Oct 1915.

On the 25 Dec 1915, the 6th LH Regiment was evacuated to Alexandria and marched out to Serapeum on 23 Feb 1916. The 6th LH Regiment moved to join its parent brigade, the 2nd LH Brigade on 28 Feb 1916, which was taking part in the defence of the Suez Canal. They were then moved to the Romani region to bolster the defence of that area.

Trooper Raymond Chappell wrote in a letter to his sister Mrs JR Hughes, of Cumnock Dec 1915/Jan 1915: *"I had the good luck to meet poor old Major Johnston. He had just returned from the trenches when we landed, and, by jove, he looks well. I also saw Don and Jack Gillis* [1304 Donald Gillis and 1431 Andrew John Gillis, both of 2nd Remount Unit]*, and several other boys from Manildra. It made me think I was home again, to be back amongst the old boys..."*

Sgt Johnston reported sick with Pleurisy to hospital at Ismailia on 5 Mar 1916, and transferred to Cairo by train. He was discharged on 23 Mar and returned to duty at Serapeum on 24 Mar.

The 6th Light Horse played an important role in beating back the Turkish invasion at the Battle of Romani 4 Aug 1916, followed by the Battle of Katia on 5 August.

Map of Romani & Katia - https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Katia

Sgt Johnston was wounded at Bir et Maler during fighting on 5 Aug 1916 with a gunshot wound to the abdomen and was transferred to No. 3 Australian General Hospital at Cairo on 8 August 1916, At 9am on 18 Aug 1916, Major Johnston, aged 27 years, died of wounds received in action and peritonitis.

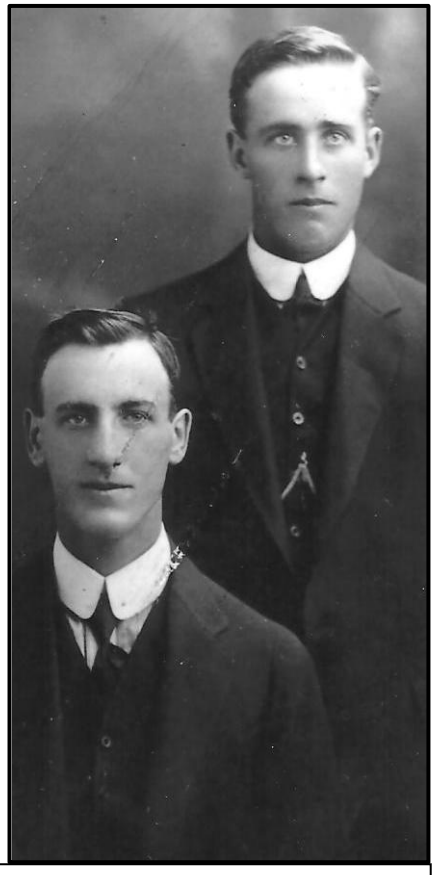

Photo of Arthur Johnston (sitting) & Major Johnston, c1915. Courtesy of Ron Hatton, Bogangar, NSW.

Sgt Major Johnston was buried at Grave 135, Sect F, British Military Cemetery, Cairo, on 18 Aug 1916. As a mark of respect for Major Johnston, his fellow members of the 6th Light horse Regiment donated a days pay and erected a monument to him which read:

"In honour of Sergeant, Major Johnston, Bravest of the Brave."

Unfortunately, the monument no longer stands.

Donald and Susannah Johnston later received his 1914-15 Star Medal, British War Medal and Victory Medal.

In his book about the 6th Light Horse Regiment, 'Under Furred Hats', Lieut. Geo. L Berrie writes about the Battles of Romani and Katia and about how Sgt Johnston was wounded (pages 83-85).
The following is an extract:

"The total casualties for 4th and 5th of August amounted to 7 killed and 45 wounded, of which several died later, including Sgt. M. Johnston, of Molong, N.S.W., who in death, as in life, set an everlasting example to his Regiment."

Major's younger brother, Lance Corporal Arthur Eggleston Johnston, 2165 – 20th Battalion, also served at Gallipoli. He was killed in action 18 May 1918 in France. Nurse Eva Eggleston, a first cousin, also served with the Australian Army Nursing Service in Egypt and France.