

L/CORPORAL WILLIAM MARTIN HUGHES 462 – NEW SOUTH WALES CITIZENS' BUSHMEN (B & D Squadrons)

Born: 30 Sep 1877, Molong, NSW.

Parents: John Martin & Hellen/Ellen Hughes

Occupation: Farmer

District Connection: Cumnock

Enlistment Age: 22yrs, Sydney.

Embarkation: 28 Feb 1900, SS *Marplemore*, Sydney.

Fate: Accidentally injured by a train at Edenburg, SA, April 1901, and required a leg amputation. Transferred to England.

RTA: Sydney, 7 Jul 1902, RMS *Cuzco*.

Medals: Queen's South Africa Medal & King's South Africa Medal & 4 clasps.



Biography:

William Martin Rutherford Hughes was one of five children born of John Martin Hughes and Hellen/Ellen Millicent (nee McDonald) Hughes. The name Rutherford was included because his parents were good friends of James Rutherford of Cobb & Co. fame. Siblings were: John Robert (1873-1935); Helen/Ellen (1875-1900); Luke Prospect (1880-1974); Florence Ida (1881-1973).

John Martin Hughes operated the New Royal Hotel at Molong from 1878 to 1885, before moving to Lithgow in 1886. Hellen Hughes died at Lithgow in 1891 and John Hughes in 1896. Hellen was well known as a fine singer and her children inherited her love of music.

The Molong Argus – 22 Apr 1898, p2 has a news item stating that John Robert Hughes, his wife Effie (nee Chappell from Eurimbla), brothers William and Luke, and sisters Helen and Florence Ida were living out from Eurimbla, “up the Native Dog Creek, and in about 2 miles”. On 27 May 1898, p4, *the Molong Argus* reported that John Robert Hughes played the piano, William Hughes the violin, and Luke Hughes the mouthorgan, at a concert in Molong.

Trooper William Hughes enlisted at Sydney in the Bushmen's Contingent in February 1900. His photo (profile photo) appears in *The Sydney Mail & NSW Advertiser* – 3 Mar 1900, p509. A letter he wrote from the SS *Mapelmore* on 28 Mar was published in *the Molong Argus* – 18 May 1900, p2, describing the voyage and arrival in South Africa.

A further letter from Trooper Hughes from Hillside Camp, Buluwayo, dated 20 June, to his brothers and sisters at 'Cundumbul', was published in *the Molong Argus* – 24 Aug 1900, p2:

“The ride down to Buluwayo from Marandellas [both in Zimbabwe] I enjoyed very much on a tip-top sort of a mare, but not my own. At first the ‘trekking’ wasn’t up to my fancy. We need to start to trek about sundown, camping, or rather outspanning, at 9pm; get up again at 2am and trek until about 6 or 7am, keeping with the ‘spans’ of oxen all the time. I came with about 70 Queenslanders, whose officers soon found a better way of travelling than that. Instead of getting up at 2am, we used to sleep until daylight, catching up with the waggons again about 8 or 9am. Everything is done in Africa as slow as possible, so you will understand how it was that we took 25 days to cover 320 miles.

There are three pretty little towns along the route – Fort Charter, Engledorn, and Gwelo [now known as Gweru]. Running streams (spruits) and rivers cross the road every 8 or 12 miles— Rhodesia being the best country I ever saw for water. Monuments to soldiers, who fought in the Matabele War [Second Matabele War, fought between 1896-97, between the British South Africa Company against the Matabele people], adorn the roads in many places. Luke ought to have been here; he would never have enjoyed anything like our ride through Rhodesia. The party Lidster [Trooper Edward A. Lidster – 349 NSW Citizens' Bushmen] came with had a very hard time, having to walk almost all the way and carry blankets, rifle, and bandolier full of cartridges, and do forced marches. After all, they were too late for the relief of Mafeking.

Those who volunteered for the war are all offered farms, but I don't know the particulars of the business yet, only that they will be 1000 or more acres each with a nominal rental of 17s 6d for four years, after which it becomes freehold. Mineral rights are reserved. The land round here is of the best red soil (just like the red dam), with hardly any timber, and plenty of running water. There are thousands of acres without a tree, and near a railway. But the farms may be situated in the Transvaal or Orange River Colony, which places contain the best country in South Africa.

There are some very bad features in Rhodesian land besides the good ones. For instance, while coming here from Marandellas, clouds of very large grasshoppers (called locusts here) were flying through the air. They clean out a nigger's mealie crop (a poor sort of maize) in a single night. We could not walk on the grass without crushing hundreds of them. Then there is the rinderpest, which sweeps off the cattle, goats &c., occasionally; also a horse disease, which did so much damage among out horses and mules in northern Rhodesia.

I don't think I told you I was kept behind. The Veterinary Major kept me at Umtall with the sick horses, and promised me promotion, &c., if I would remain behind there on the staff. Of course I would have been out of all the fun, so after keeping me behind my squadron for three weeks, he let me go on.

The Basutos are kicking up ructions, and some of the NSW Bushmen have gone to quieten them. I follow in a day or two, but I don't know whether we go for Boers or Basutos— perhaps both. If we don't get much service here a lot of us will try and take a hand in the Chinese trouble; but it's too early to speculate yet. We have a good crowd of Boer prisoners here in Buluwayo...

We will be under the command of the great Baden-Powell [Major-General. Well known for being the garrison commander during the Siege of Mafeking, which lasted 217 days.] when we get down to Mafeking. Buluwayo is the largest, cleanest, and most up-to-date looking city I've seen since leaving Cape Town...

I have not decided yet whether I will go back at once when the fun is over, as I am anxious to see what the Transvaal is like; but in all probability I will go home with the crowd, for a while at any rate, and try and secure something good here while things are mixed up. Ted Lidster and myself are in D squadron once more- the best squadron of the four...

Another long letter from Trooper William Hughes written to his brother John of Cundumbul, was written on 13 Aug 1900 from Commandant's Nek and extracts published in *the Molong Argus* on 21 Sep 1900, p6:

"... Ted Lidster and I came together as far as Zeerust, where his squadron was left. The other two squadrons, B and C, came on to Rustenberg... When within about 3 or 4 miles of the town something went 'boom,' and I had an intimation that it was for us. We had to gallop across a few miles of open plain towards the town while the Boers fired volley after volley of Mauser bullets into us. They were on three sides of us, and the way they tore up the dust was— well, not too pleasant for a new chum. To make things worse, and odd 7lb shell would fly across and burst; but that was nothing when the pom-pom or Vickers maxim started throwing its pretty 2lb shells about in quick succession. I did not take much notice until I saw Russell [Trooper Joseph Russell -149, NSW Citizens' Bushmen] and Murray [Corporal Walter Murray – 195, NSW Citizens' Bushmen, killed 7 Jul 1900 at Rustenberg] who were riding a few yards from me, roll off their horses stone dead. They were the only men killed that day, and were both in my troop, although 9 or 10 were wounded.

Once in the town we dismounted, and up the hill after the Boers, about 350, and in an hour's time they were off for their lives. 35 or 40 of them were killed and I don't know how many wounded. Their commandant, [Caspar] Du Plessis, we found in a farm house the next day shot through the lung, but he's alright and safe in Pretoria.

That fight was on a Saturday, [and] on Monday we had some more. The B Squadron, which I am in, had to go out on patrol to Oliphant's Nek, 6 miles from Rustenberg, to see if there were any Boers there. We suddenly turned back, quite satisfied they were there, when the whole troop, 21 men and a lieutenant, got into a nice spot surrounded with bushes and rocks. They poured it into us, some of them within 25 yards of us behind the rocks and on three sides of us, but they couldn't shoot for sour apples and only killed five horses, wounded two men, Welsh and Hay, and captured one prisoner. We got away with our wounded men quick and lively as soon as we got the word 'retreat'. One Boer was shot...

We were ordered back to Zeerust, where about 1200 Boers (uninvited) were posted in strong positions waiting for us. We numbered barely 200 and without any heavy guns of any sort. Boer reinforcements came on the scene, and they peppered away at us for about 7 hours. We held out with no cover, only the grass, until Lushington came up with reinforcements, then the Boers cleared out.

The Captain of our squadron was killed and 1 NSW man and 8 Victorians. They put 7 holes in my poor old horse and killed 3 more besides that. I was holding about 30 horses, and a few men, killed and wounded, lay around me near an old farm house. We hoisted a red cross flag and brought the dead and wounded into a place of safety. This is the worst we have had yet. The other crowd left about 20 dead there, and as usual nobody knows anything about their wounded. I've had my share of narrow escapes; my haversack carries a hole which they put in it at Oliphant's Nek and my horse got shot through the ear the same afternoon...

James Green, in 'The Story of the Australian Bushmen', wrote of the incident that Baden-Powell had ordered Colonel Airey to go back to Elands River on the 22nd for a convoy. Airey's force was about 300 strong, made up in equal proportions of men from the New South Wales, Queensland, Victorian, and West Australian Bushmen. The Boers lay low while the advance-guard passed and then opened a heavy fire on the main body. The men instantly opened out a little and lay down in the grass, where they held on for eight hours. Captain C W Robertson was shot in the head while directing 'B' squadron, NSW Bushmen, and Lieutenant Eckford, who succeeded him, was wounded. Surgeon Lieutenant Colonel Ingoldsby and 2 officers of the Queenslanders were also wounded.

Two English ladies resident in the neighbourhood, Miss Bach and Miss Macdonald, boldly entered the firing-line and dressed wounds. Airey sent back for reinforcements, but the message was wrongly delivered or misunderstood. Miss Bach rode in as a second messenger, and 200 Australians under Colonel Lushington and Captain Fitzclarence, VC (Bechuanaland Protectorate Regiment), came out, and the enemy were driven off.

(<http://www.angloboerwar.com/unit-information/australian-units/166-new-south-wales/387-1st-nsw-bushmen>)

The Molong Argus – 2 Nov 1900, p2, published another long letter from Trooper Hughes written from Warmbad, telling of his experiences throughout September. He stated at the end of it that he *"had seen by home letters that Wall Finch [Pte Walter Finch – 263, 1st NSW Mounted Rifles] and Fox Owens [Cpl Frank Owens -12, NSW Mounted Rifles - both from Cumnock] are home again."*

The Evening News, Sydney – 20 Feb 1901, p2, published another letter from Trooper W Hughes from Plennar's River, Transvaal, 4 Jan 1901:

"... The 'bushies' are all quite full up of Africa, and want to get home again, as there is nothing to be done here, only practice work. A great many of them have got what I might call 'Africites,' which is what is left in the system after one has had malaria, enteric, and a few other African diseases..."

The Molong Argus – 12 Jul 1901, p2, reported on the serious misfortune Lance-Corporal Hughes met with, from a letter William wrote to his brother John on 6 Jun 1901. The news item states:

"It appears that Lance-Corporal Hughes met with an accident resulting in compound fracture of the leg. A fortnight afterwards an abscess formed which necessitated a further operation, and becoming worse, the doctors aid that to save the young soldier's life a portion of the leg would have to come off. The break was eight inches below the knee, so it is supposed the leg was amputated at that place."

On p4 of the same paper they also published an extract of his letter:

"I suppose you heard about my accident at Edenburg, while on the way home, the result of which will necessitate my going to Netley Hospital, England, to get fitted up with a piece of counterfeit leg to replace the bit they took off. With the latest in this line a fellow can ride a horse, bike, and walk without crutches or stick, and you can hardly tell which is the genuine leg. I will be up in a few days, and in a week or two on the briny ocean once more..."

Lance-Corporal Hughes returned to Sydney via *RMS Cuzco* on 7 Jul 1902, after a fairly rough voyage via Marseilles, Naples, Port Said and the Suez Canal, Colombo and Fremantle, as reported in *The Sydney Morning Herald* – 7 Jul 1902, p8.

A public reception was held at Cumnock to honour the last of the returning Boer War soldiers, Troopers Charles Grimson, Joseph George Sherringham and William Hughes, on Wednesday 10 September 1902, and to present them with gold medals.

The *Molong Argus* – 12 Sep 1902, p8, reported on the event and extracts are:

“Corporal Hughes returns after a somewhat lengthy absence, during which he was invalided to England... The gallant Corporal has been fitted with a cork substitute, and is now in receipt of an Imperial pension...”

Corporal Hughes, who was received with great applause, expressed the pleasure he felt at being among his Cumnock friends again. He thanked them sincerely for their hospitable welcome and also for the memento of their esteem which he would always regard and prize highly. Referring to the war, it had, he said, taught its lesson, and to no country more than Australia had that lesson been more valuable. The colonials had shown that in the saddle, combined with British pluck, they were a power to be reckoned with. As to their late antagonists, but now fellow colonists, the Boers, he hoped they would thrive under British rule. The Boer generals had agreed to let bygones be bygones, and it was his earnest hope that both sides would now strive to promote peace on earth and good will among men...”

Narrative per his daughter, Crystal (Hughes) Thornley –

“William Martin Hughes left his brothers to join up with the NSW Citizens’ Bushmen for the war in South Africa. This was a regiment composed of mounted men from NSW and was supplied from subscriptions from the citizens of NSW, hence its name. Later as more recruits joined the army it amalgamated with the Australian Bushmen’s Regiments. The first recruits were enlisted at Bathurst and William Martin became Trooper WM Hughes no. 462, ‘B’ Squadron. In all there were four squadrons – A, B, C, and D with 25 officers, 495 other ranks, 482 riding horses, 36 draught horses, 10 pack horses and 36 spare horses...

*The regiment embarked at Sydney on *Atlantian* and *Marplemore* on 28 Feb 1900, arriving at Capetown 2 Apr 1900, and proceeded to Bulawayo via *Marandelas*. B, C, & D squadrons were under Lt. Co. Airey DSO, and took part in a severe engagement at *Kosters River* on 22 Jul 1900, attempting to relieve the *Eland’s River* Garrison. The squadrons were complimented on ‘the dash and gallantry with which they made the affair a brilliant success.’*

*My father William Martin served often as a scout, and told of one occasion in the veldt, when he saw the barrel of a Boer gun behind a cactus bush. He slid to the far side of the horse as he had done at home for fun, and got the bullet through his knapsack into his rations. ‘Lucky I hadn’t eaten them’ he used to say. On another occasion, he was swimming with a party of men in the *Limpopo River* and rested on an old tree trunk. When it started to move, he found he had been resting on a crocodile!*

At the end of the war he was loading prisoners onto a long train which suddenly shunted and he was thrown onto the line and a wheel passed over his left leg, crushing it beyond repair. He spent the journey on a stretcher, and at Durban he was taken to the hospital where an amputation, the first of several operations, took place. He was sent to a Military hospital in England for final treatment and convalescence.

*After returning to Sydney, he worked as a gramophone mechanic, a commercial traveller etc. and married Luella Gladys Turner in June 1905 [at Woollahra]. He worked for a firm which pioneered ‘air-gas lighting’ and installed this system in the *Jenolan Caves* and *Caves House* when Mr Wybird was in charge about 1907. He invented a petrol valve seal for use in petrol stations and in about 1921, took it with him to America. However, the petrol there had too many additives which spoilt his seal.*

He and my mother then made and marketed a material called ‘Petrobar’ which could seal cracks and leaks etc in petrol tanks. Next, they improved a preparation invented by Henry Chas Turner, my mother’s father, which killed and prevented infestation by white ants. This was called “Morant-ant” and provided a good living until his death in 1956. His wife [Luella] died on 7 Nov 1947. He remarried and lived at Doll’s Point, Kogarah.

His war medals show that he served in Transvaal, Orange Free State, Rhodesia, and Cape Colony. He also had the South African medal of 1901, Queen Victoria and South Africa medal of 1902, and King Edward v11.”

Luella and William Hughes had four children: Crystal (Thornely) (1907-200); Ida May (McLeish) (born 1908); Rose Doris (Bower) (born 1911); and Eric William (1925-1978). Luella and William Hughes divorced in Feb 1941 and the same year, William married Vera Muriel Taylor at Rockdale.

William Martin Hughes died on 14 November 1956 at Sans Souci, NSW. He was 79yrs old and was buried in the Garden Court Wall of Memories, Woronora Cemetery – panel M/0021.

Two of the verses from a poem by a Lance/Corp. W M Hughes, NSW Bushmen, "A Psalm of Life" "After Longfellow" (A long time after) are quoted (first and third verses) from the book, POOR JIM HAS DIED by Helen Haynes, 2001:

*Tell me not in mournful numbers
That we can't go home till June,
In the voice of one who slumbers,
I say let us all go soon.*

*Lives of great men all remind us
Federation is sublime;
"Duke of York," and "Toby Barton,"
Pray, do get us home in time.*

William Martin Hughes is also mentioned in the book, Orange Remembers – Boer War 1899-1902m by Heather Nicholls, 2005.

Thank you also to Maria Griffiths (nee Hughes) who provided family information and the narrative about William Martin Hughes by his daughter Crystal Thornley.

© Dianne Strahan & Val McKenzie, Cumnock, May 2017. www.cumnocknswmemorials.com



**THE AUSTRALIAN TOWN AND COUNTRY JOURNAL – 24 Feb 1900, p25, D squadron.
Trooper William Martin is No. 94 top row – he had yet to be designated to a squadron.**



Cumnock's Boer War Honour Roll was unveiled at Cumnock's 2017 Anzac Day commemorations, by descendants of Charles Grimson and Christian Miller.