

Gunner of Renown



Royal Australian Artillery Historical Company

**Major General Sir William Livingstone Hatchwell SINCLAIR-BURGESS, KBE, CB,
CMG, DSO**

(1880-1964)

William Sinclair was born in Kirkmanshulme, near Manchester, Lancashire, on 18 February 1880, the son of a shipping merchant. His parents later divorced and his mother married George Burgess, a Congregational minister, and William took the surname Burgess. The family migrated to New Zealand in the early 1890s.

William worked as a carpenter and engineer and joined the New Zealand Volunteer Force, serving with the Canterbury Mounted Rifles in Timaru. He transferred to the New Zealand Regiment of Field Artillery Volunteers in Auckland in 1902 and became a captain in 1909. In 1911, he accepted a regular commission as a lieutenant in the New Zealand Staff Corps. He became adjutant of the 16th (Waikato) Regiment and commanded No.4 Area Group in Hamilton. On 11 June 1913 he was promoted to captain.

On 4 November 1913, Burgess was seconded to the AMF for 12 months duty as an exchange officer. This year would eventually become six. Burgess became brigade major on the staff of 6th Military District, Tasmania, where he was serving when WWI broke out. His initial tasks were handling partial mobilisation prior to the outbreak of war, and preparing for and raising a Tasmanian contingent for the AIF.

On 17 August 1914, Burgess was appointed to the AIF as a captain, and given command of the 9th Battery, a unit formed on a cadre of serving and former members of both the Hobart and Launceston based militia field batteries (41st and 40th respectively). Burgess was promoted major on 17 September 1914, and the battery embarked from Hobart on 20 October.

After training in Egypt, 9th Battery, 3rd Field Artillery Brigade (FAB), went ashore at Anzac on 5 May 1915 and began moving into positions on Bolton's Ridge. On that same day, a shell fired by a Turkish battery in the area south of Gaba Tepe, later known as the Olive Grove, burst in Lieutenant Colonel Rosenthal's headquarters dugout, wounding both Rosenthal and Burgess, who were evacuated. Burgess returned to Anzac on 15 May. The Olive Grove guns were to be the nemesis of 9th Battery for the rest of the campaign. Burgess remained in command of this battery until 1 October when he was evacuated sick with paratyphoid. For his performance on Gallipoli, he was awarded the DSO.

Burgess arrived at Lemnos to rejoin his battery, only to find it had already sailed for Egypt. He eventually rejoined it there, where on 24 February 1916 he became commander of the 3rd FAB, replacing Rosenthal, who had been appointed CRA of the newly formed 4th Division.

Burgess was promoted lieutenant colonel on 12 March 1916, and embarked for France on 23 March. His brigade began firing again on 29 April 1916.

Burgess commanded his brigade through the fighting at Pozieres and briefly commanded the 1st Division Artillery for a few days in December. On 20 January 1917, 3rd FAB became an Army Brigade, no longer part of 1st Division, but available for service anywhere. His brigade participated in the advance to the Hindenburg Line and the fighting around Bullecourt. He also commanded an ad hoc grouping of brigades at Messines.

On 25 August 1917, Burgess again succeeded Rosenthal, this time as CRA 4th Division, and, on 25 September 1917, was promoted colonel and temporary brigadier. During the difficult times at Third Ypres, the divisional artillery took so many casualties in men and guns that it had to be pulled out of the line without relief, and the batteries temporarily reduced from six guns to four. For the Battle of Hamel in 1918, Burgess commanded sixteen brigades of artillery.

Burgess was made CMG in 1918 and CB in the 1919 New Year's List. In all he was Mentioned in Despatches six times. From 15 December 1918 to 11 January 1919 he was acting commander of the 4th Division.

He returned to New Zealand after the war with the rank of lieutenant colonel. In 1921, he became chief of staff at Army Headquarters. In January 1924, he became Director of Military Intelligence and Training and then in April Chief of the General Staff with the rank of colonel. Sinclair-Burgess (the surname he adopted in 1926) was appointed General Officer Commanding New Zealand Forces in 1931, a post he held until 1937. He was promoted major general in 1931, created Knight Bachelor in 1934, and KBE in 1934. From 1933 onwards, he urged preparation for another world war.

He was known in the New Zealand Army as 'Sinky-Boo', after a character in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado*, on account of holding down multiple jobs and for a certain flamboyance that frequently involved wearing full dress uniform. Sinclair-Burgess offered his services during WWII but was apparently turned down, although it is said he worked for the security services.

He built his own house at Mahina Bay near Wellington employing his pre-war carpentry skills. When it burned down in 1959 with the loss of all his papers and belongings, fellow army officers subscribed to replace his medals and insignia. Sinclair-Burgess died at Lower Hutt on 3 April 1964. He was remembered as his country's longest serving and most decorated Chief of the General Staff, the one who held it together through the Great Depression. In Australia, he was remembered as one of the New Zealanders without whom Anzac would lose half its meaning.

Sources: ADF website/AWM referenced from *New Zealand Dictionary of Biography*, pp.476-477; AWM 183/10; D. Horner, *The Gunners*, p.80; C. E. W. Bean, *The Story of Anzac*, Vol. 2, pp.76-7.