

The CANE BEETLES MARCH – April 1916.

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On 5 November 1915 a public meeting was held in the Exhibition Hall, Brisbane to Initiate a "Snow Ball"¹ Recruitment march. The most noted of these were: Central West Boomerangs (Parkes to Bathurst), the Coo-ees (Gilgandra to Sydney), the Dungarees (Warwick to Brisbane), the Kangaroos (Wagga Wagga to Sydney), the Kookaburras (Tooraweenah to Bathurst), the Kurrajongs (by train from Inverell to Narrabri), the Men from Snowy River (Delegate to Goulburn), the North Coast Boomerangs (Grafton to Maitland), the Wallabies (Walgett to Newcastle) and the Waratahs (Nowra to Sydney).And then came the North Queensland Cane Beetles march.

A special meeting of the Cairns City Council on 4 January 1916, voted to form a recruitment committee with the aim to enlist local men to fight the enemies of Britain and her Allies.



A weekly recruitment meeting was held in Cairns at Koch's monument² with the Cairns Citizen's Band in attendance. Acting Mayor, Alderman A.J. Draper announced that the minimum quota required from Cairns was 52 men, the following monthly enlistees being 17 which was well below the required numbers.

In early March 1916, the Cairns Recruitment Committee (CRC) proposed a recruitment march held to coincide with the first Anzac Day Parade held in Cairns in 1916. It was to be named the Cane Beetles March and under the leadership of Sgt-Major Monty BLOOM. At that time the cane beetle³ was causing a huge amount of damage to sugar cane fields in northern Queensland. The banner

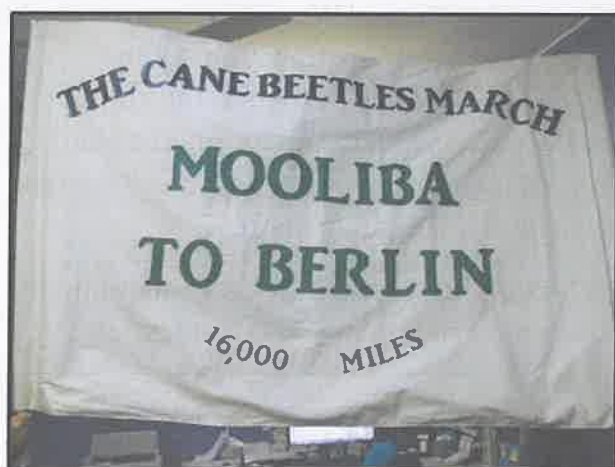
¹ They were called Snowball marches due to their ability to gather up men along the way.

² A monument dedicated to the pioneer Cairns Doctor E.A. KOCH. Currently located at the corner of Abbott and Spence Streets, Cairns. It was constructed in 1903.

³ The Cane Beetle (*Dermolepida albobirtum*) is a native Australian beetle and a pest to sugar cane.

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the men displayed during the March showed German Kaiser Wilhelm II fleeing before swarm of cane beetles. The CRC received a letter from Mr F. Wylde of the Queensland Recruiting Committee, agreeing with the proposed march from Mooliba to Cairns *“this has the approval of my committee, but all local arrangements would have to be made by the local committees”*.



The 2016 replica Cane Beetle march flag showing on the reverse the Kaiser being chased by cane beetles.

The March commenced.

Four volunteers marched out from Mooliba⁴ on 20 April 1916 at 3pm led by Sgt-Major Bloom. In the wake of an enthusiastic send-off, they marched into Babinda at 5.25pm in the rain, wearing white head caps, to the rousing tune of “It’s a Long Way to Tipperary”. After a lively reception from schoolchildren and townspeople, the group was joined by nine more volunteers. At 8am on Good Friday 21 April, the group set off for Aloomba⁵ in the with stops at Bellenden Ker, Deeral, Fishery Creek⁶ and Mt Sophia. They were exuberantly welcomed everywhere with speeches, patriotic songs and plentiful refreshments including a large quantity of fresh fish from the Russell River.



The first Aloomba Hotel in the early 1900’s.



The current (third) Aloomba Hotel, 2025.

They spent the night at Aloomba⁷ after hearty welcome. Leaving at noon the next day Saturday, 22nd April, they reached Gordonvale and the Cairns Post reported *“...a cry was heard*

⁴ The place name Mooliba no longer exists. It is probable that it is now the small township of Mirriwinni or nearby Pawngilli (a railway siding).

⁵ Aloomba today consists of the second incantation of the Pub, several houses, a rail siding and thousands of acres of sugar cane fields.

⁶ Fishery Creek, now known as Fishery Falls.

⁷ The main road to Cairns passed in front of the Aloomba Hotel in 1916.

"Here they come" and in a few minutes the dungarees and white hats came into view". A hearty cheer greeted the embryo warriors, and the procession was reformed, with the Marshall, Mr J. Johnson, at its head, followed Constables Rountree and Lauder, mounted, and two of our local soldiers who were on furlough, viz: Corporal Hoare⁸ and Private Morris⁹, also mounted." They were cheered on by citizens, the rifle club, cadets, school children and the band. The marchers were entertained by the local Red Cross and the Nelson Hotel and enjoyed a swim in the river. The next morning was spent practising army drill followed by motor car visits to various farms for entertainment and refreshments. At night they attended a church parade at the Presbyterian Church. On Easter Monday, 24th April, the marchers reached Edmonton to a splendid meal, music, toasts and speeches. At the sportsground they took part in a 90-minute football match against the locals which resulted in a no score draw.



The Cane Beetles arriving at Gordonvale.



The Cane Beetles arriving in Cairns 25 April 1916.

Arrival at Cairns on Anzac Day:

On Tuesday 25th of April, the marchers were presented with tobacco and cigarettes. They departed Edmonton at 9.35am and soon after were at Woree to be met by the Mayor and crowds of people before proceeding through Parramatta to Norman Park (now Monroe Martin Parklands) looking dusty but in the very best of spirits. There was a large procession of bands, military and naval forces, community groups, local Japanese - several of whom wore sword fencing uniforms and 1200 schoolchildren. That evening an impressive ceremony was held in remembrance of the fallen at Gallipoli with the Last Post sounded from the top of the Boland Building. This was the first commemoration of Anzac Day in Cairns.

The aftermath:

In total 29 men joined the Cane Beetles March. Their medical examinations were held on 29 April. The results were unimpressive with only nine men declared fit. Two were temporarily unfit. 14 were declared unfit and four failed to report for the medical examination. Of note, most were classified as unfit despite taking part in the march. The Cairns Post named 15 participants including Frederick Thomas Willett, 24 years, miner of Kidston, medically unfit with congenital hernia; George Edwards a 32 year old South African born miner, previously rejected on medical grounds; Spanish born Richard Abad, a 33 year old labourer who had earlier been discharged as medically unfit suffering from problems from a previous skull fracture; Scottish born Private Neil Campbell,

⁸ Probably Pte Mathew Joseph HOARE (72) of Lower Burdekin, Qld, farmer. Enlist: Jan 1916 at Cairns. Emb for OSS, November 1916. Tos 52 Bn AIF. WIA (GSW to leg – compound fracture). RTA: Sept 1917 and Discharged January 1918.

⁹ There were three possible Morris's who had enlisted in Cairns prior to April 1916 so I was not able to identify which one.

aged 39, a Boer War veteran, engine driver and widower who subsequently served in France with the Australian Veterinary Hospital before being returned to Australia on medical grounds. Of the 15 named participants, only five appear on the records and only two actually served. In 1936 The Cairns Post published an obituary for Private George Sydney Steele¹⁰ who had joined the Cane Beetles March at Gordonvale. He served in France with the 26th Battalion. The march generated a huge amount of local publicity and enthusiasm but did little to swell recruitment numbers or fill North Queensland's recruitment quota.

Names of those who volunteered for the march:

Started the March at **Mooliba**, Thursday, 20 April 1916: Four volunteers started the march unfortunately their names were not recorded.

Joined the march at **Babinda**, 21 April 1916:

5) Frederic Thomas WILLETT miner of Normanton, Qld. Enlisted 26 April 1916 in Cairns. 11 Depot Bn. In May 1916 he was discharged Permanently Medically Unfit.

6) George EDWARDS a miner from Pretoria, South Africa. He enlisted at Cairns in January 1916. 11 Depot Bn. He was discharged Permanently Medically Unfit the following month.

7) W. SMITH details unknown.

8) T. MEHRNE details unknown.

9) W. PEPPARD details unknown.

10) Richard ABAD labourer of Spain. Enlisted at Ayr, Qld in January 1915. Unallotted Light Horse. He was discharged Permanently Medically Unfit in April 1915.

11) J. JOYCE details unknown.

12) T CLARK details unknown.

13) Pte Neil CAMPBELL (6054) of Scotland. Enlist: Cairns in April 1916. Served with Australian Veterinary Hospital in France.

14) Probably Pte Francis William QUINLAN (1416) stockman of Maryborough, Qld. Enlisted at Cairns 8 February 1915. 2nd Reinforcements of 9 AIF Bn. WIA at Gallipoli 14 August 1915. RTA and discharged Medically unfit 12 April 1916.

Joined the march at **Aloomba**, Good Friday, 22 April 1916:

15) P. ORMSBY - details unknown.

16) A. McALOON - details unknown.

17) I. ROUSE - details unknown.

18) A. GOVRIN - details unknown.

19) Mr KELLAHER - details unknown

Joined the march at **Gordonvale**, Saturday, 23 April 1916: Six men.

20) Pte George Sydney STEELE (5922) 26 Bn AIF.

Joined the march at **Green Hills**¹¹: Two men.

Joined the march at **Edmonton**, Sunday, 24 April 1916: Three men.

¹⁰ George Sydney STEELE (5922) of Cooktown. Enlist: 29 April 1916 at Cairns. Emb for OSS: 21 October 1916. TOS: 26 Bn AIF. Sick. RTA: December 1918 and Discharged: March 1919. Died Gordonvale, 14 July 1936.

¹¹ Green Hills, a few kilometres southeast of Edmonton.

Joined the march at **Woree**¹², Monday 25 April 1916: One man.

The March leader:

Sgt "Major" Henry Montague "Monty" BLOOM 18861 (1868-1958). At age 13 years, Henry joined the Queensland Cadets and later in the Moreton Regiment as Staff Sergeant. After his recruiting work in Queensland, he joined the AIF and embarked for OS service in October 1917, with the 3rd Australian Light Railway Operating Company in France. He suffered a debilitating arm injury and he RTA in March 1918 and was discharged from the AIF in February 1919.

Following complaints that Sgt BLOOM had promoted himself to Sergeant Major and that he claimed to have served at Gallipoli, the QRC was contacted and they responded that he had *"Absolutely no right to call himself Sergeant Major and so far as the opinion goes, he never was at the front."* As soon as the March of the Cane Beetles was over, Bloom was to be sent home to Brisbane. Sergeant Bloom was farewelled at Cairns at the end of May, returning to Brisbane and some newspaper articles expressed regret about his leaving. Sgt Bloom clearly had his supporters and was well-liked.



Monty BLOOM

In the years after the war, he became the first President of the Jewish Ex-Servicemen's Association. Monty Bloom's Concert Party gave vaudeville concerts to prisoners and those less fortunate. During World War Two, the Party's 363rd concert was given to soldiers in the large pavilion at Fraser's Paddock in Brisbane. The programme included an orchestra of piano, saxophone, trumpet, violin, and drums; songs, dances, impersonations, a sword dance, conjuring, comedy patter, Irish jig, bird and animal imitations, and a bass solo with chorus, Monty Bloom and his concert band, assisted by Albion Scottish Pipe Band. On turning 85, the *Truth* newspaper described Monty Bloom as well-known for spreading *"a little laughter and lightness in places where there's ill-health and unhappiness"*. In 1958 Montague Bloom was honoured with a Member of the Order of the British Empire (civil) for his service to charities.

¹² Woree, a southern Cairns suburb.

Over the years Monty loved to be involved with the military, to entertain and to never let embellishment of the truth get in the way of a good story or a higher purpose. Moses Henry Montague BLOOM MBE died 29 September 1958 and was buried at Toowong Cemetery, Victoria.

The 2016 Re-enactment March:

A re-enactment march was held in April 2016 to commemorate the Cane Beetles 100th anniversary. 25 people completed the 63-kilometre march. In recognition of their effort, the Cairns RSL put the re-enactors at the head of the city's 2016 Anzac Day parade. Bob Stewart represented Sergeant Major BLOOM and wore a replica WW1 uniform. The current Bruce Highway (A1 – Australian National Highway) does not exactly follow the road to Cairns followed in 1916.



ABBREVIATIONS:

2ALH FA	2 nd Australian Light Horse Field Ambulance.
ANZAC	Australian & New Zealand Army Corps.
CRC	Cairns Recruitment Committee.
GSW	Gunshot Wound.
QRC	Queensland Recruitment Committee.
WIA	Wounded In Action.

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