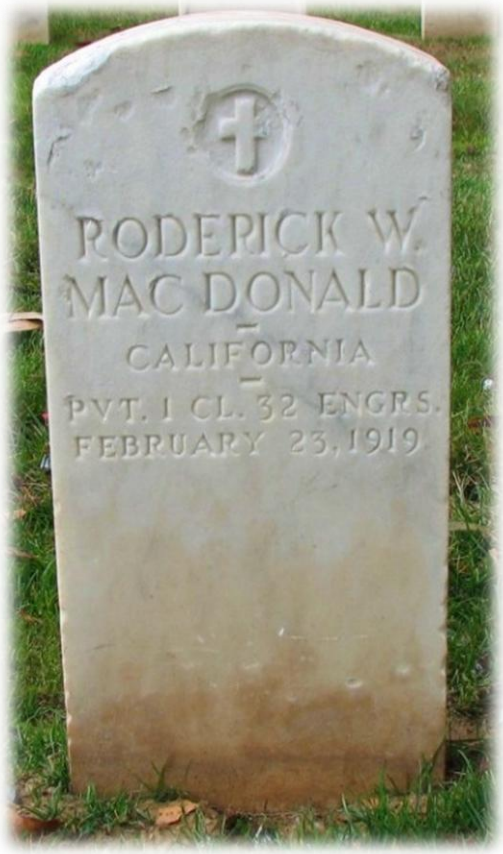
Bartlett's News Briefs

# NOT JUST ANYBODY

**community-sponsored stories**
**by Pacifican Jean Bartlett, longtime Bay Area News Group writer**
**November 11, 2026**

# IN HONOR OF THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED ~ A REMEMBRANCE OF SALADA BEACH (PACIFICA) SON RODERICK MACDONALD

March 29, 1897 – February 23, 1919




On November 11, 1918, General Ferdinand Foch, Marshal of France, serving as Supreme Allied Commander during the final months of World War I, negotiated the end of the war inside his private railway carriage in the Compiègne Forest near the town of Compiègne, France. He sent word to all Allied commanders:

"Hostilities will be stopped on the entire front beginning at 11 o'clock, November 11th (French hour). The Allied troops will not go beyond the line reached at that hour on that date until further orders."

On the 11th hour, of the 11th day, of the 11th month, the war was over.

On November 11, 1918, in San Francisco, civilians and military personnel took to the street when they heard the news. There was dancing, cheering, flag waving, impromptu parades and embracing. Businesses came to a halt as San Franciscans poured out of buildings to join in the celebration. It was the same all over the Bay Area and all over the country. It would be no different in Salada Beach or Brighton Beach, two San Mateo County coastal communities who would become the town of Sharp Park (now a neighborhood of the 1957-incorporated City of Pacifica).

Roderick Walker MacDonald spent a number of his tween years, all of his teen years and the first years of his young adulthood in Salada Beach. That's where home was; that's where his family waited for him.

Roderick was the son of Roderick and Agnes Burgess (Walker) MacDonald. The couple met and married in their native Scotland and when they were quite young, Mr. MacDonald decided to take his master carpentry skills to South Africa. The Witwatersrand Gold Rush of 1886 turned Johannesburg into a thriving metropolis of 100,000 by 1896. Carpenters were in demand. The couple's first child, Roderick, was born in Johannesburg South on March 29, 1897. The couple's daughters Flora and Vera were born there as well, 1900 and 1904, respectively. The MacDonald family then moved to New Zealand.

Starting in the early 1900s, there was a great amount of building going on in New Zealand. All the trades were sought out. Ready for another great opportunity, the MacDonald family moved to Auckland in about 1905. In 1906, the couple's fourth child, Evelyn, was born in New Zealand. In August of 1907, the MacDonald family moved to San Francisco. Roderick's little sister Isabelle was born there as was his brother, Douglas.

The family loved living in the Bay Area and in the fall of 1912, Roderick's father became a naturalized citizen. With that all of his children, because they were all under the age of 21, became U.S. citizens. By that point in time, the MacDonald family was living in Salada Beach. Their first born, like his dad, learned carpentry and in addition, in early 1918, Roderick can be found working as a bookkeeper for Cal Steam & Plumbing Supply Co in Salada Beach.

World War I officially began on July 28, 1914, when Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia. On August 1, Germany declared war on Russia. On August 3, Germany declared war on France, and on August 4, Germany invaded Belgium, which was neutral. Fearful of a full-scale world war that would threaten its sea routes to other countries, on August 4, 1914, Great Britain declared war on Germany. Eight days later, Great Britain declared war on Austria-Hungary. On April 6, 1917, the U.S. ended its neutrality and declared war on Germany. On December 7, the U.S. declared war on Austria-Hungary.

On May 18, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson signed the Selective Service Act of 1917 into law and on June 5, 1917, National Registration Day for men ages 21 through 31 began. Roderick was 20 in 1917 and when he turned 21 on March 29, 1918, he registered.

On June 15, 1918, U.S. Army Private Roderick W. MacDonald, of Salada Beach, set sail from the port of Hoboken, New Jersey, with fellow members of the specialized U.S. Army unit, the 32nd Engineer Regiment. The unit sailed on the USS Leviathan to Brest, France, an ideal spot for troop deployment due to its natural deep-water harbor and its accessibility to main rail lines heading straight to the Western Front. The USS Leviathan was formerly the German luxury ocean liner SS Vaterland – launched in Hamburg, Germany, in 1913. The ship was seized in New York when the U.S. declared war on Germany and was subsequently commissioned into the Navy. Retrofitted with stacked bunks, it was renamed the USS Leviathan by President Wilson, and it was the largest U.S. troopship of WWI.

The 32nd Engineer Regiment provided critical infrastructure as well as strategic support duties to bolster and preserve Allied front lines. They did light and standard railway engineering projects and repairs at strategic hubs across France. They constructed infrastructure needed during combat, such as floating bridges or standard bridges. They built supply roads and created emergency cribbing for British tanks.

They were constantly on the move, they worked round-the clock, and they interacted with numerous units daily. When what was called the "Armistice Wave"—the third wave of the global flu pandemic, dubbed the "Spanish flu"—struck between late 1918 and early 1919, thousands of men who survived the war died in one of the massive, over-crowded embarkation camps in French port cities waiting to go home. Worldwide, the influenza pandemic of 1918, in its three phases, killed more than 50 million people. Everyone, everywhere, was aware of this deadly flu. In the U.S., it devastated the East Coast and it crippled U.S. Forces in France waiting to be demobilized.

George E. Dunn, Editor and Publisher of the Coast Side Comet, wrote about the flu pandemic in coastal San Mateo County:

"Following San Francisco's lead, a 'mask' resolution has been passed by a special session of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors. The penalty for being caught without a 'muzzle' is a $100 fine and or ten days in jail.

"Half Moon Bay has closed schools and set up 'hospitals' inside private homes."

Later Mr. Dunn would write: "At its peak, some 30 cases were reported daily in San Mateo—fortunately, the deaths from this horrific flu never matched the numbers back East."

There was space on the San Mateo County coast, room to breathe. There was no space among the poorly ventilated, over-crowded troop transport ships. There was no private space at the railway stations, demobilization areas and crowded barracks holding battle-weary men who wanted to go home.

By the end of 1918, more than 45,000 U.S. troops (including 15,000-16,000 American soldiers in France) died of the flu and its related pneumonia, making it the war's most lethal enemy. On February 23, 1919, a month shy of his 22nd birthday, Roderick Walker MacDonald died "of disease" in France, waiting to go home to Salada Beach. News of his death came weeks later.

"The War Department is several days behind with U.S. reports on casualties among the American Expeditionary Forces," wrote the "San Luis Obispo Daily Telegram" on March 14, 1919. "Hence the daily reports will continue for several days and the names published as they can be compiled."

One year after the First World War ended, President Woodrow Wilson issued a Proclamation on Armistice Day on November 11, 1919, marking the first anniversary of the end of World War I fighting.

On November 11, 1920, the "San Mateo, Cal. News-Leader" reported:

"Military Funeral for R. W. MacDonald, Salada Beach Hero: Funerals with full military honors will be held for fourteen American soldiers whose bodies arrived from France today. Among the boys from California is the body of Private Roderick W. MacDonald, headquarters company, 32nd Engineers, son of Roderick MacDonald of Salada Beach, San Mateo County. MacDonald, like the rest of the boys just returned to their native land, died in action during the war. The majority of the boys will be buried at the Presidio, San Francisco."

There were a number of reasons for the lengthy delay between the death of a member of the U.S. military in France and their return home for burial:

Immediately after the war, shipping space was limited to living troops, weapons and specific wartime supplies. In addition there were strict French sanitary laws which involved a great deal of diplomacy between U.S. and French officials regarding exhumations. The newly established Graves Registration Service, established by the U.S. Army on August 7, 1917, had to locate, identify and exhume bodies scattered across Western Front battlefields. A few prominent U.S. political and military figures thought that those who had fallen should be buried and remembered where they died. Many grieving U.S. families did not want that for their child, though some did. In the end, 74,000 questionnaire cards were sent to families to make that choice, and either way, the U.S. government honored their decision and paid for the burial and the choice of repatriation.

On November 11, 1920, the "San Francisco Examiner" named all the 14 fallen, including Roderick, arriving home for burial:

"California Heroes Due Here Tomorrow: The bodies of California soldiers who gave their lives overseas for America will arrive in this city tomorrow.

"A number of the fallen service men will be buried with full military honors at the Presidio. Others will be privately interred in the various communities where they resided. Those who will arrive, follow:

"Private Jack F. Doherty, 141st Corps Trans.; next of kin, Mrs. Nellie Doherty, 1220 North St., Sacramento.
Private David C. Cottrell, Battery E, 146th Field Artillery; next of kin, L. J. Cottrell, State Hospital, Stockton.
Private Harry L. Colton, Battery C, 143d Field Artillery; next of kin, Joseph P. Colton, R. F. D. No. 1 Burbank.
Private William T. Johnson, sanitary detail, 157th Infantry; next of kin, Robert H. Johnson, sheriff's office, Los Angeles.
First Lieut. Edward J. Smyth, headquarters detail, Third A. I. C.; next of kin, George A. Smyth, 1275 Stevenson Ave., Pasadena.
Private Norman P. Ben, Company C, Thirty-Second Engineers; next of kin, Mrs. Esther A. Brown, 2316 Sixteenth St., Sacramento.
Private John Gabrielli, Battery E, 145th Field Artillery; next of kin, Mrs. Felicita Gabrielli, 910 Forty-third St., Sacramento.
Second Lieut. Cecil M. Anderson, Headquarters detail, aviation section; next of kin, John A. Anderson, 425 Soledad St., Salinas.
Private William H. Long, cook, Company A, 314th Engineers, next of kin, Mrs. Mary E. Long, St. Helena.
Private Roderick W. MacDonald, Headquarters Company, Thirty-Second Engineers; next of kin, Roderick MacDonald, Salada Beach.
Private Elisha Weller, Battery E. 144th Field Artillery, next of kin, Mrs. Frank Rionda, Ukiah.
Private Russell I. Gardiner, Battery C, 144th Field Artillery; next of kin, John Gardiner, 1013 Bella Vista Ave., Oakland.
Private Charles Bennett, Twelfth Company, Twentieth Engineers; next of kin, Mrs. Emily F. Bennett, 2643 Telegraph Ave., Oakland.
Private Jamen Gray, Company C, 144th Machine Gun Battalion; next of kin, Mrs. Caroline Kenst, Petaluma, Cal."

The late American poet Archibald MacLeish, 1892-1982, wrote the following poem (excerpted from the full poem) in recognition of the loss of his brother during the First World War. The poem is held in the Rare Book and Special Collections Division of the Library of Congress:

"The Young Dead Soldiers Do Not Speak:

"Nevertheless they are heard in the still houses: who has not heard them?

"They say, We leave you our deaths: give them their meaning: give them an end to the war and a true peace: give them a victory that ends the war and a peace afterwards: give them their meaning.

"We were young, they say. We have died. Remember us."

Roderick Walker MacDonald is buried at the San Francisco National Cemetery, 1 Lincoln Blvd., in the Presidio of San Francisco.

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**By Jean Bartlett** (November 11, 2026)

*Writer Jean Bartlett was recognized by the Board of Supervisors, County of San Mateo, for "her writing that connects community and preserves local history." She can be contacted through her website, www.bartlettbiographies.com. This story was sponsored by a grant through the Pacifica Historical Society – funded by the Sam Mazza Foundation.*