

100TH ANNIVERSARY OF ARMISTICE DAY

SOURCES

I would like to acknowledge my reliance on the magnificent coverage of the 100th anniversary of Armistice Day by The Australian Newspaper, the Shepparton News and its digitised records, the Australian War Memorial and its digitised records, records from the Mooroopna Historical Society and the generous assistance from local historian Ian Pleydell and friend Professor Ivan Caple.

100 years ago at 11.00 am on the 11th November 1918 the guns on the Western Front fell silent.

Spare a thought for Canadian soldier George Price who was shot in the chest by a German sniper and died at 10:58 am, 2 minutes before the Armistice came into effect.

At the War's end the Australian population was just over 5 million.

On 11/11/1918, there were almost 200,000 Australians serving abroad.

Spare tears for those for whom the bell tolled.

Some 62,000 men were killed: more than 160,000 wounded.

The war lasted 1650 days and on average 38 Australian men died each day.

But when news of the Armistice arrived, crowds gathered in Melbourne cheering through the night.

The Australian War correspondent Charles Bean instead visited the tragic battlefield at Fromelles where the Australians made their catastrophic entry onto the Western front 2 years earlier and

found the 'old no man's land' simply full of our dead.'

Many of those who remained on the Western Front were too exhausted to celebrate.

Aftermath of War

Virtually every Australian home was touched by the war.

Many families were broken. Lives were constricted to nursing the wounded, the lung damaged and disabled.

That task fell to the parents, wives and sisters of the young men of the AIF.

There was no provision for psychological trauma.

Some 20,000 died of injury shortly after the war.

Many more would succumb to wounds, to the effects of gas and to suicide in the decades to come.

Some 60,000 Australians would die within a decade of returning home.

The war's final curse was the Spanish flu transmitted by the returning troops that carried off another 14,000 Australians.

The historian Geoffrey Blainey wrote:

It was the loss of so many talented people who would have become prime ministers, premiers, judges, divines, engineers, teachers, doctors, poets, inventors, farmers, mayors of towns, the leaders of trade unions and the fathers of another generation of Australians. A young nation could not afford to lose such men.

Paul Kelly a journalist for The Australian wrote:

the great War, 1914-18, was a most convulsive, tragic and defining event in Australian history.

And of those of our own who served in the years 1914-18.

There are 124 names of the men of Mooroopna and North Mooroopna including 2 district Chaplains who enlisted for war service inscribed on the Cenotaph. There are also the names of 21 nurses, who volunteered, all of whom, had trained at the Mooroopna Hospital.

Letters Home

In August 1916 Sergeant Robert Bazley *from somewhere in France*, wrote to his mother at the Mooroopna Commercial Hotel with the sub-title *back from the mouth of hell*.

(I read the following excerpts)

Just a line to let you know that I'm still strong and well, having come out of the Pozieres battle without a scratch.

I can tell you it was simply hell. You would wonder how human beings could survive in it.

The bombardment was something terrific. It went on night and day without ceasing.

All of my mates were wounded.

My God, it was awful. I shall never forget it as long as I live.

British Orders were not challenged.

Charles Bean was to write that the *'Pozieres ridge was more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth'*.

There were more Australian casualties in late July 1916 than in the entire Gallipoli campaign.

And we know that within minutes of his first engagement at Pozieres, Sergeant William McLennan was shot through the lungs and later reported missing.

Yet his recently widowed mother Mary who suffered poor health was to wait some 16 months before a Court of Inquiry determined that he had been killed in action.

Sergeant William McLennan was one of some 20,000 Australian men for whom there was no known grave.

In December 1916, Corporal Clarie Doyle wrote to his parents in Mooroopna:

I've met nearly all the chaps from Mooroopna way. Bob Bazley, who is writing beside me now got his commission after Pozieres; Shrewdie Evans, Fred Geisler and Andy Goodfellow are in this battalion. I met Charlie Dobinson last week, who

was going to England as an instructor. Wally Lane also got his commission after Pozieres. Arthur Price told him that Joe Norton was in hospital in England and Ginger Brown and Peter O'Connell ran in a relay race last Saturday.

That band of brothers came home.

A Shepparton News article in December 1916 reported that Mr & Mrs Knight, of Mooroopna received a 'cheery letter from their son Lance Corporal William Knight who as the result of a shell wound recently had his leg amputated'.

He ended his letter with the words:

don't worry about me. I'm all right and I have no regrets.

Citations

Lieutenant Reginal Valentine Hill enlisted at age 21.

He was promoted to 2nd Lieutenant in April 1917.

In May 1917, he was severely wounded with gunshot wounds to the left arm, leg and foot.

He was awarded the Companion of the Distinguished Service Order for displaying conspicuous courage and leadership during operations at Bellicourt in 1918.

His citation begins with the words:

He led a charge against an enemy machine gun post mopped up a garrison of about 20 and captured 3 machine guns.

We know that Captain Eowyn Davies was awarded a military cross for action in September 1918, where

over 2 consecutive nights for throwing footbridges across a river in no man's land, and on the 2nd night under withering fire.

We know that Lieutenant Robert Bazley was awarded a military cross after he took the place of his wounded runners and continually ran valuable intelligence to a command post whilst under enemy fire.

We know that Private Garnet Robbins was awarded a military medal

for cutting enemy wire entanglements under machine gun fire and as stretcher bearers for bringing 3 men back across no man's land under a barrage of shrapnel fire.

We know that Private Edwin Smith of Lancaster was awarded the military medal for action on the 19 December 1915 when at Gallipoli

he was one of 4 men who for some 2½ hours created a ruse in trenches 500 meters long in front of Johnston's Folly that enabled his battalion to escape safely

We know that Rudolf Geisler (NCO) was awarded a military medal in October 2017 after he led his platoon with great dash and skill east of Ypres.

We know that Privates Garnet Robbins and Edwin Smith were later killed in action.

We know that the Bazley and Hill brothers were among those who came home.

For many years, Clyde Clicker Hill a light horseman led Mooroopna's Anzac/Remembrance Day Marches on horseback. The Mooroopna Historical Society has a faded photograph of him taken in 1933 astride a horse bred by Bill Woods and named after his daughter, Emma.

But spare a thought for the Hooper and Robbins' families who lost 2 brothers.

Imagine the anguish of parents at the loss of 1 son let alone 2.

The Munro Family lost 3 brothers

Spare a thought then for Mr Alexander Munro and his wife Katherine from Undera.

James enlisted at age 22. He was killed in action at the first landing at Gallipoli on the 25 April 1915 and buried at Anzac Cove.

George enlisted at age 20. He sustained a gunshot wound to the thigh at Gallipoli in May 1915.

He was killed in action in July 1916 at Pozieres and has no known grave.

Colin enlisted at age 19 and was killed in action during the battle of the Menin Road Ridge in September 1917. He too has no known grave.

There was no mission to save Private Ryan.

Alexander enlisted at age 28. He was wounded by shrapnel in the shoulder in April 1915. He returned to active duty in February 1916.

He was badly injured in April 1918 sustaining a fractured skull from a gunshot wound.

Somehow he survived his ordeal.

In August 1918, he was repatriated to Australia.

In March 1941, at age 54 he enlisted in the local Volunteer Defence Corps.

We know that Lance Corporal William Knight, Privates Robert Edwards and Joseph Norton were to die after they returned home from the effect of injuries they sustained at war.

We also know that in November 1920, Captain Eowyn Davies committed suicide.

Of our World War I fallen, we do not know of their hopes, dreams and aspirations, or their feelings of existential dread.

We have no copies of their diaries.

But we know that they did not wish to die.

We can only imagine the unbearable heartache and anguish of parents, grandparents, siblings and girlfriends who were never to overcome their sense of loss or grief.

We know that the James Munro's fiancée never married.

We know that the Munro family dressed for Sunday lunch and that Mrs Munro set places for her missing sons.

Commemoration of the Cenotaph

Some 9 years after the end of the war, this cenotaph was dedicated on Thursday, the 26th April 1928.

The Shepparton News reported that Mr B. M McLennan, chairman of the Mooroopna War Memorial committee, said much difficulty had been experienced getting the Memorial completed.

Dr Florance paid for the clearing of the site and the construction of a fence.

The Memorial and site on which it stood cost £1,100.00.

And there are 30 names listed under the heading of Our Glorious Dead.

We know that the Cenotaph became a proxy for the lonely graves overseas.

Cr Little, President of the Rodney Shire, concluded his address by reading the speech delivered by Abraham Lincoln on the field at Gettysburg in November 1863.

That speech ended with the words:

That we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain-

That this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom-

That government of the people by the people for the people should not perish from the earth.

And for whom the bell tolls...

Our anthem of fallen youth: 30 dead

And add to list of fallen, the name of Lieutenant Reginal Hill, who was to die shortly after the opening of this Cenotaph.

For the nation, some 62,000.00.

And another 60,000 within a decade of returning home.

How are we 100 years later to make sense of that unimaginable loss.

We think of service and of enduring values of courage, endurance, mateship, and sacrifice.

Our men fought for the bonds of nationhood.

And if the voices of our fallen could speak to us from the battlefields where they fell, what would they ask of us.

That their names be not merely etched in stone, but rather that we know their individual stories and that those stories become part of our collective memory.

Adrian Ambrose, Immediate Past President of Mooroopna Rotary Club

