

AROUND THE GRAVES

ISSN 1835-5641
ISSN 1835-565X

NEWSLETTER OF THE FRIENDS OF CHELTENHAM AND REGIONAL CEMETERIES INC.



To commemorate Remembrance Day, we focus on a few soldiers of the Great War with links to the Cheltenham cemeteries in this special extended edition of *Around The Graves*.

Cemeteries are unique places when researching events that affected citizens across the width and breadth of the country. Indeed, one only has to visit a burial ground to see the human stories of our involvement in the Great War. While the obvious indications are the ubiquitous war graves of soldiers whose death was attributed to their war service, look behind the monuments and the totality of those human stories emerge.

It'll be over soon...

Boy, were there some eager men to become "six-bob-a-day tourists" at the King's pleasure. The first man to enlist in the Cheltenham district was Joseph Warburton, husband of **Elsie (Pioneer, CofE "103" 37)**. The date was 17 Aug 1914—seven days after recruiting began. Warburton's war was over on 8 May 1915 soon after the Gallipoli landing with bullet in the abdomen. At the planting of the Cheltenham avenue of honour, the officials insisted that **Albert Fisher (van der Veen) (Memorial Park, CofE "176" 43)** was in fact the first to enlist which led to Warburton writing to Base Records to set the record straight; the reply came that Fisher had enlisted one day *later* (18th).

Sgt. Albert Fisher was a veteran of the Boer War; during WWI, he led "A" Squadron of the 4th Australian Light Horse in the famous Battle of Beersheba. While recuperating in Egypt he wrote;

"At a hospital. El Arish, a lot of pyjamas

arrived, and they were needed too. While they were putting a suit on a patient (one of the many just arriving) a note fell out, and an orderly said to the patient, 'Well here you are old man, here is a note with them,' and this is how it read, 'To a soldier in France, I hope none of those cold footers [ie wimps] in Egypt get these.' This chap had one bullet through his head, one through the groin, with six other bullet wounds, and that is the message that a lady of Melbourne sent along, so you can guess what our thoughts are. She must think we are on a picnic. I would like that lady of Melbourne to have thirty seconds of what that soldier went through."

Four other Fisher brothers enlisted; a fifth, Francis (Frank) was granted an exemption on 2 Nov 1916. Their father **James Fisher (van der Veen)** married **Mary née Gettens**, daughter of **Mary Ann Charman (Pioneer, CofC "A" 7-8 & 10)** founder of Beaumaris.

Another veteran of the Boer War to enlist was the son of **William and Euphemia Pentland (Pioneer, Pres "61" 29)**. William Christie Pentland jnr was a member of the famous 14th Battalion (Jacka's Mob) and later its sister battalion the 46th. During the Battle of Bullecourt, he received a gunshot wound to the leg which had to be amputated as a result. Pentland was mentioned in Sir Douglas Haig's despatches as well as Dr. C. E. W. Bean's official history of the war—a rare accolade.

Others to enlist in those heady days of



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August 1914 include Harold, son of **Charles** and **Mary Ann Booker (Pioneer, CofE "98" 13)** and Dudley, son of **Henry** and **Bertha Beulke (Pioneer, Meth "82" 22)**; both soldiers died at Gallipoli within a day of each other.

Eligible men could obtain permission from the Exemption Court to be excused from joining the armed forces. Whether an only son, the sole family support, or for reasons of hardship and even conscientious objectors, the Court overwhelmingly granted exemptions to the mostly market gardeners of the district. There was only one sitting in Cheltenham held on 2 Nov 1916; of the 57 applications, all but five were granted. **Roswald Judd (Memorial, Lawn "E4" Row K 7)** was one of the few to be refused an exemption though he stated that he was the only remaining son at home with his aged parents; of five sons, one was married, and two had enlisted. **Mary McKay's (Pioneer, CofC "A" 40)** last remaining son Percival Penny was another to be refused. **Alexander Biehl (Memorial, CofE "342" 7)** was likewise told he had to enlist. Not that he did!

Oddities...

Many an odd story emerges. While three of the Fisher brothers served in the AIF and all survived, Robert Fisher enlisted with the NZ Expeditionary Force (NZEf) and was killed in France. It's odd to see an Australian-born soldier with the silver fern on his war grave.

Not only were **Clement West (Pioneer, CofE "44" 28)**, 49, **James Fitzsimons (RC "27" 61)**, 47 and **Maude Deakin's (Pioneer, CofE "43" 59)** husband Edwin, 44, over-aged, but their sons enlisted as well. The interesting thing is that neither lied about their real age given the enlistment age was 18 to 35 year-olds. But the army still accepted them! West, of Commercial Rd, Mentone was indeed an oddity; the grandfather enlisted on 22 Aug 1914 when the entry requirements were strict. Not only that, he had left his wife and eight children of his own who had arrived from England the year before. West was wounded at the Gallipoli landing and re-joined the 5th Battalion for five days in November before his war service ended.

It makes you wonder just how far the loyalty of the British empire extends when two brothers and a cousin pay the supreme sacrifice fighting for the freedom of the same empire who transported their grandfather to Tasmania in 1840 for the theft of a few trivial items. One can only wonder what ex-convict **John Blencowe (Pioneer, Meth "E" 71)** would have thought in the knowledge that Pte Louis Blencowe (KIA 25 Apr 1915), Pte Francis Blencowe (KIA 31 Oct 1916) and Sgt Clarence Blencowe (died of wounds 1 Sep 1918) all laid down their life to uphold British 'justice'. Francis' son **William Blencowe (Memorial, RC "258" 71)** was just a young infant at the time of his father's death and lies buried in the Cheltenham Memorial Park.

There are some brave men in the pack. Three men with links to Mentone all won the Military Medal. Eric Caudwell, son of **Joseph** and **Emily (Pioneer, CofE "111" 7-8)** (of the well-known firm "Caudwell Brothers", Timber Merchants) received his award in May 1917. **William Caulfield (Pioneer, CofE "43" 24-25)** died 15 months after returning home and James, one of three brothers of **Albert** and **Mary McKay formerly Penny (Pioneer, CofC "A" 40)** to enlist the others being William (killed in action 22-23 Sep 1917) and Millard who survived.

Fromelles-Pozieres

July 1916 was confirmation that the commanders hadn't learnt much from the Gallipoli campaign. Fromelles (19 July) was the first major battle for the AIF on Flemish soil and the most bitter; the ill-conceived diversion cost 5,500 Australian casualties including Albert Andrews whose parents **Mary** and **Albert (Memorial, CofE "94" 10)** resided at Hampton and William, son of **Cornelius** and **Mary McInerney (Pioneer, RC "27" 19)** while **William Alder (Pioneer, CofE "8" 42)** of Thames Promenade, Chelsea lost his son Robert who was fighting with the 31st Battalion ("Tivey's Chocolate Soldiers").

The 1st, 2nd and 4th Australian divisions were all drawn into Haig's great offensive on the Somme. On 23 July, the untried 2nd Division had its baptism of fire led by its controversial

commander, **Major-General James Legge (Memorial, RC "122" 39)** at a loss of over 3,500 casualties. **Louis and Louisa Thomas (Pioneer, CofE "52" 2)** of Mordialloc lost two of their three sons who enlisted, including Frederick who was killed on 28 July 1916 fighting with the 23rd Battalion as part of the Pozieres battle; his brother Alfred died in the closing stages of the war. **Cedric Burnett (Pioneer, CofE "D" 85)** fighting with the 23rd Battalion, survived Pozieres; his war service record is atypical of the larrikin Digger—failing to salute, absent without leave and failing to obey a command...

Brothers in arms...

The Thomas brothers were not the only sons fighting in the same unit. The Blackwood brothers of Mentone—**Victor and William Douglas (Pioneer, CofE "E" 73)**—not only served in the 5th Battalion and survived the horrors of the war but died young and lie buried in the same grave at the Pioneer Cemetery.

Not so fortunate were the Janssen brothers whose parents **Inuk Janssen and Margaret née Scopie (Pioneer, CofC "42" 17)** resided at 1 Barry St, Mentone. Imagine losing both sons in the space of two weeks in the first major battle of the war? L/Cpl Carl Wilhelm Janssen and Pte Ernek Valdemar Janssen served in the same battalion as the Blackwood brothers (5th) and were on the same boat at the Gallipoli landing when a shell hit Carl. He died of wounds the following day and was buried at sea. Ernek was killed in action on 8 May during the Battle of Kirthia on Cape Helles. The brothers enlisted on 15 and 18 August 1914 respectively. (Back in 1985, there was a five-part Australian mini-series *The Anzacs* starring Paul Hogan, Jon Blake and Andrew Clarke. In episode one, there were two brothers, "Private Erik Johansen" and "Private Karl Johansen" and both were killed at Gallipoli...)

But the saddest story to emerge from the war was the Whitehead brothers whose

father **John Whitehead (Pioneer, Meth "32" 19-20)** was for many years a Trustee (1923-32) and later auditor of the Cheltenham Cemetery Trust. His sons, Walter Middleton (Mid) and Robert Whitworth (Bob) Whitehead were both commissioned officers in the same unit (21st Battalion) and died on the same day (3 May 1917) in the same battle (Second Bullecourt). They both lie in unknown graves "somewhere in France". It was many months before it was confirmed both died on that fateful day hoping that Bob had been taken a POW. Bob Whitehead was engaged to Trixie Rose, the daughter of the local undertaker, **William (Dub) Rose (Meth "17" 27-28)**. The five diamond engagement band is still worn to this day by Trixie's daughter Vera.

Another local lad who lost his life in the same battle fighting in the same unit (21st) as the Whiteheads was John Watkins, the son of **George (Pioneer, Pres "C" 32-33)** and a member of the pioneering Mordialloc family of fishermen.

Memorials...

As can be expected, one can find in any cemetery references to deceased soldiers who never made it home. Whereas war memorials collectively remembered groups of soldiers usually associated with a particular town, a memorial in a cemetery is more personal. They were popular with families who were unable to visit their loved one's grave in a far away land... if they had one at all.

Kerang-born Reuben Marshall survived the war, but died from broncho pneumonia less than two weeks after the declaration of hostilities. His parents **David and Maria Marshall (Pioneer, Bap "C" 77)** resided on Balcombe Rd, Cheltenham and included a simple reference to their son on their headstone—"Reuben / died O.A.S France / aged 22." [OAS stands for "on active service"].

David and Lottie Gladstone (Pioneer, CofC "39" 6) also remembered their son Cpl

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Ernest Gladstone with a simple inscription—*“Cpl. E. GLADSTONE / killed in action. France. / Sept 2nd 1918 / aged 20 years”* as did **Hugh and Florence Hughes (Pioneer, CofE “122” 20)** the parents of Capt (Dr) Melville Hughes—*“Melville killed in action at Bapaume. France. 20-3-1917. / the eternal God is our refuge.”*



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Lancelot Rippon (**Pioneer, Memorial “A” 1R**) is an interesting story. He was said to have exempted and did enlist, but as a munitions worker for Vickers. On the way over to England, his boat, the *Arabia*, was torpedoed and sank on 4 Nov 1916.



18

Ernest Dunbar (Pioneer, CofE “44” 18) survived Gallipoli only to desert in Dec 1915 and re-enlisted under an assumed name of John Beech. His sketches are held in the AWM and show his larrikin self. Dunbar died in the Melbourne Benevolent Asylum from epithelioma on 25 Jan 1925 aged 30.

Lucy Lessing’s (Memorial, CofE “96” 3) husband Frederick had the ‘spooks’ (aka “Chelsea Confidential Committee”) write a letter ‘approving’ his enlistment as his father was a naturalised German.



19

For many of the veterans buried in the Cheltenham cemeteries, there is no mention of their war service. To uncover them leading up to the centenary of the Great War is an important task for the Friends. **John Anderson (Pioneer, Meth “E” 284)** married into the well-known Follett family of market gardeners. Neither he nor **Charles Follett (Pioneer, Meth “B” 29B)** have any mention of their war service on their respective headstones. Follett gained a temporary exemption at the Dandenong Court in Oct 1916 until after his crops had been picked and he eventually enlisted in Jun 1917.



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Another who sadly has no reference to his war service is **James Harkins (Pioneer, Pres “58” 13)**. An extraordinary observer and perceptive mind, Harkins was a prolific letter writer and many an extract of the originals held by the AWM were published in the local *Moorabbin News* throughout the war. Here is an extract from a letter dated 12 Dec 1916;

“I am taking another opportunity of dropping you a line from ‘Somewhere in France.’ I might here mention that I have been thoroughly baptised into the art of modern warfare, and had the experience of being sandwiched between lines of angry, growling, never-satisfied steel tubes belching fire and barking with fury, as they launch forth tons of scrap-iron, compactly packed into small space to be scattered at a point desired, and the mission fulfilled, death and devastation resulting. As we stand at our posts in the trenches and things are on the quiet side, friendly shells glide gracefully overhead through the thick atmosphere with a long drawn ‘whish-sh-sh’.”

And finally, when the boys came home, they continued the fight, but with the Diggers’ interests in mind. **Dr. John Joseph O’Neill (Memorial, RC “134” 38)** was one of the founders of the Sandringham RSL and served as its President for 12 years; while **George Walter Richards (Pioneer, CofC “93” 18)** was secretary and later President of the Cheltenham RSL at the time of his death; Richards was born, married and died on the same anniversary date. Lest we forget.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

- 1—Sgt Albert Fisher (*left*) who led the charge on Beersheba (courtesy Holloway, D., “*Fight and Endure*”)
- 2—Grave of Charles and Mary Booker
- 3—Grave of Henry and Berth Beulke
- 4—Grave of Mary Ann Charman
- 5—Lieut William Pentland (AWM DA14110)
- 6—Grave of L/Cpl Robert Fisher, Terlinchtun Cemetery (The War Graves Photographic Project)
- 7—Clement West (courtesy Vicki Laveni)
- 8—Pte Lewis Blencowe (courtesy “*Blencowe Families’ Association Roll of Honour*” published 2008)
- 9—Pte William McInerney (AWM P05900.001)
- 10—Grave of Pte Robert Alder, Anzac Cemetery Sailly-Sur-La-Lys (The War Graves Photographic Project)
- 11—Grave of Pte Alfred Thomas, Assevillers British Cemetery (The War Graves Photographic Project)
- 12—Pte Ernek Janssen (AWM H05578)
- 13—L/Cpl Carl Janssen (AWM H05579)
- 14—Grave of John and Emily Whitehead
- 15—Pte John Watkins (AWM P09819.001)
- 16—Grave of Cpl Ernest Gladstone, Peronne Cemetery (The War Graves Photographic Project)
- 17—Grave of Capt Melville Hughes, Bapaume Australian Cemetery (The War Graves Photographic Project)
- 18—Sketch titled “Dressed to kill, two styles” by John Dunbar (courtesy harrowercollection.com/beece.html)
- 19—Grave of James Harkins
- 20—Pte George Richards (AWM H01425)