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# Walter Leonard Blackwell

Military Story 1916-1919

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Soldiers training at the Claremont Army Camp in the First World War (Tasmaniana Library, SLT)

# Background



## Walter Leonard BLACKWELL

Regimental number	18277
Religion	Brethren
Occupation	Engineer
Address	Wynyard, Tasmania
Marital status	Married
Age at embarkation	26
Next of kin	Wife, Mrs E Blackwell, Wynyard, Tasmania
Enlistment date	7 December 1916
Date of enlistment from Nominal Roll	1 December 1916
Rank on enlistment	Private
Unit name	<a href="#">June 1917 Reinforcements</a>
AWM Embarkation Roll number	26/99/2
Embarkation details	Unit embarked from Sydney, New South Wales, on board HMAT A68 <i>Anchises</i> on 8 August 1917
Rank from Nominal Roll	Private
Unit from Nominal Roll	1st Motor Transport Section
Fate	Returned to Australia 18 July 1919



## Militia Structure in Australia from 1903 to 1914

The period from the Boer War to the Great War saw remarkable changes in thinking about the nature of Australian defence and the role of the mounted infantry.

The Militia Light Horse had a significant role in creating the basic structure of the Australian Imperial Force Light Horse formations which is evident more recently in the histories dealing with the operations during the Great War.

## Tasmanian Rifle Club List, 1910

One of the most important adjuncts to the militia system from 1903 to the reorganisation of 1912 was the role played by the Rifle Club movement in Australia. At the time, these clubs were seen as the reservoir of manpower for a potential guerrilla force should any invasion occur. The doctrine was almost a copy of that pursued by the Boer forces in South Africa which successfully held the Imperial Army at bay for nearly three years. For Australia, the invasion fear was uppermost in the minds of the population. This fear found its articulation in a novel written by Charles H. Kirmess (the nom de plume for Frank Fox) called "Commonwealth in Crisis" which was first serialised in the "Lone Hand" magazine which was largely funded by the Commonwealth Government through

the influence of Alfred Deakin. The story was about a Japanese invasion of the Northern Territory in 1912 requiring the Commonwealth to resist with a guerrilla force of irregulars trained through the rifle clubs.

So important were the rifle clubs for the defence of Australia that the Commonwealth provided the training staff, rifles and ammunition so the clubs could function. Members were drilled, wore uniforms and practised all the basic skills of soldiering as well as target shooting.

Walter was a member of the Wynyard Rifle Club from its inception in 1912, so was not unfamiliar with military matters when he enlisted in 1916.

# War Service

1917-1919

## 2. TASMANIA TO FRANCE

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*Parade - Claremont Training Camp, Hobart, Tasmania*

### The Need for Reinforcements

Following Gallipoli, the Australian AIF served significantly in the Middle East in 1915, and then in Belgium and France in 1916. The battles in that year at Fromelles and the Sommes, had greatly decimated the Australian forces, including medical personnel. At Fromelles, 40 ambulance drivers remained out of 250. The loss of stretcher bearers was even greater. At Paschendaele, following the battles of Bullecourt and Lagnicourt, the Second Division was down to 700 men out of 4,000 by October, 1916.

A call for reinforcements from Australia was instituted and Walter Leonard Blackwell responded and filed his papers on the first of December, 1916, in Wynyard, Tasmania,

and was declared fit for service following a medical examination a week later. He was 26 years old at the time, married to Elsie Harrison. They had one child.

Walter's religion is listed as Brethren, a very active movement in North-west area of Tasmania at the time, very much a result of the evangelism conducted in the area by Walter's father, Edwin Orlando Blackwell. In the paper, 'THE IRREGULARITY OF KILLING PEOPLE': TASMANIAN BRETHREN RESPONSES TO WORLD WAR I, Elizabeth Wilson discusses the Brethren attitude to the war and the tendency to claim Conscientious Objection. While there seems no doubt that Walter enlisted claiming CO, he seems to have had little opposition by the authorities, mainly I would claim, because the need for ambulance drivers was so great.

## Claremont Camp

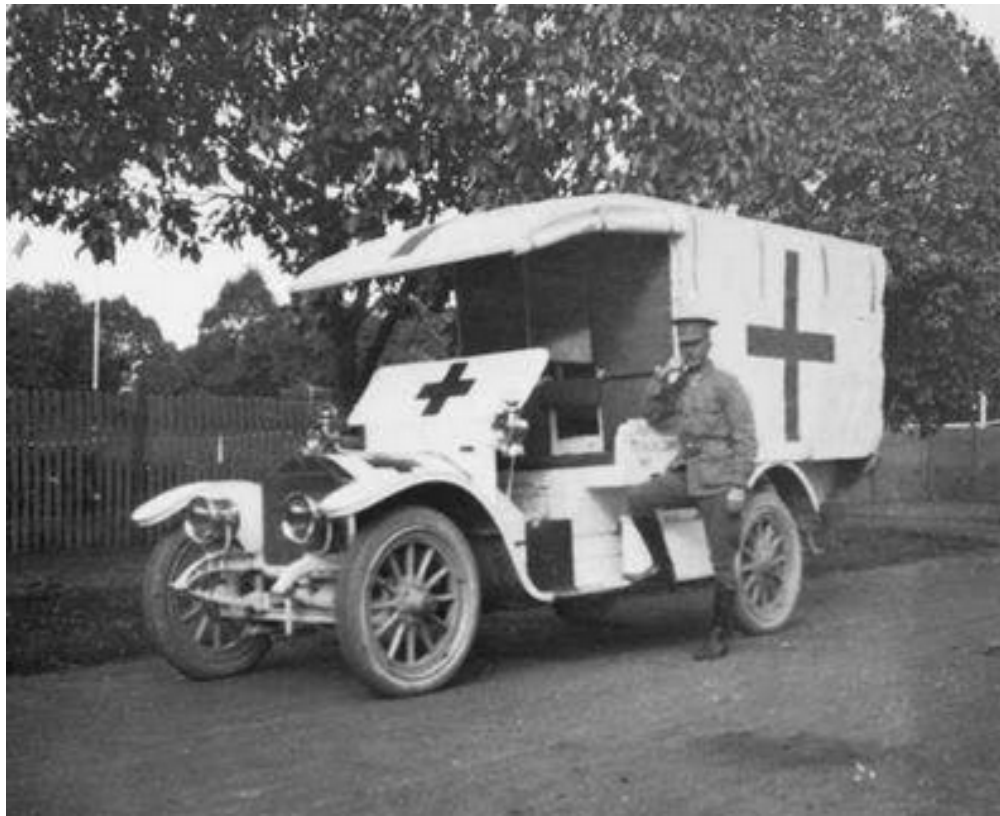
He was sent to the Claremont Camp, near Hobart on the seventh of December, 1917, for training and medical evaluations. He was assigned to the 3rd Field Ambulance Corps. The 3rd. Corps had more casualties than any of the field ambulances in the battle at Menin Road.

The stretcher bearers during the First and Second World Wars were usually recruited from military bands and other volunteers as determined by the recruiting or army officers. Some members were conscientious objectors. Their responsibility was to administer first aid and transfer the injured to the Regimental Aid Post (RAP). It was customary to have four bearers attached to a company and the RAP site was close to the combat zone, sometimes in the reserve trenches. The Commander or the Company doctor chose the site protected from enemy fire. In France where injuries were numerous some injured had to wait before retrieval.

The bearers administered first aid, applied dressings, pain relief and splints. They then decided whether the injured could walk or be carried or required a stretcher. The aim was

to arrive at the RAP as soon as possible. The responsibility of the stretcher bearers stopped here. Any further transport and treatment was taken over by the Field Ambulance.

The Field Ambulances conveyed the injured to the Regimental Dressing Station or similar post further away. This was a triage station. The lightly injured were accommodated, fed and treated here.



A very complete picture of life at Claremont is provided by a Rev. F.J. Rankin in a talk given at Burnie Methodist Church on Sunday night in June of 1916, who a few days previously had returned from the camp, where, for a fortnight, he acted as captain.

Mr. Rankin prefaced his remarks by a graphic description of the situation or the camp, which was, he said, on a beautiful peninsula of the Derwent, which swelled to the dimensions of a lake towards Hobart. Surrounded by mountains and hills, and smiling homesteads of farmers, it was one of the most picturesque spots in Tasmanian. or anywhere else in the world.

Proceeding, the speaker said: "The peninsula has a considerable quantity of young timber, amongst which are to be noticed the finer leaved peppermint the tamarisk of Tasmania, the white gum with its gleaming crunks, branches, and twigs, and clumps of young wattle well covered with green feathers. Underfoot the soil is mostly composed of water worn gravel most admirably suited to the purpose of a military camp for no matter how much rain may fall it does not make mud. Claremont is a town of tents and galvanised iron structures, laid out in orderly arrangement, with main road from station, and divisions and streets marked off by lines of big stones, whitewashed, the whole being lighted up at night with acetylene lamps. There is a roomy post office telegraph and telephone, and shops, of many kinds.

#### The Reality of War.

"Once inside the camp its various aspects made one vividly realise that we were at war. I thought I knew some thing of the fact from newspapers, magazines, books and testimony of returned soldier participators. But it was the sight of this paraphernalia of war, the lines of tents companies at drill, officers shouting orders, miners with their picks and shovels, artillery men training and firing their guns, the occasional terrific explosions of bombs, which, produced such a realisation of the fact that we were at war as passes description. It had a very solemnising effect.

#### The Wastefulness of War.

'I got a most vivid impression of the wastefully injurious thing war was. It takes a multitude of men from the pursuits of industry, useful wealth-producing workers— men of education, officers, doctors, chemists, acute business men, clerks, ministers of the Gospel— of whom there were at least ten in the camp — men, in short, from every profession and calling. All these, instead of ministering usefully and happily to the general well-being, are a great financial burden as well, the country thus being doubly the poorer.

#### Cheerful Happiness.

However the men may feel the hardship of camp life after living in comfortable homes, they betray no signs of it. On the contrary one is struck by the happy cheerfulness that everywhere prevails. There is very little sickness, and the general appearance of the men gives one the impression they are enjoying the best health possible. They all appear to be happy.

Even when the heavy rain washed scores of them out of their tents at night, and they were compelled to gather up their, beds and belongings and rush off to the Y.M.C.A. buildings and empty hospitals, there was no complaining: the trial



was only made a matter for laughter and jokes. To look upon the happy faces of these young men, and hear their jokes and sallies, watch them at their evening games and recreations, one would rather think they were preparing for a picnic, instead of the dreadful business of murderous war.

#### Ordered Industry.

"The camp is a place of regular ordered industry. Everybody is at work. There are no drones in this hive of men. Companies at drill, goods being brought, recruits being outfitted, gunnery and bomb practice, the busy cooks; the orderlies, the miners, the A.M.C. stretcher bearers drilling, school of instruction where eager students are acquiring knowledge — every one of these is intent on his job with, a serious devotion that is eloquent of a determination on the part of each man to thoroughly learn how to do his bit when the time arrives. So much so is this the case, so absorbed are the men in the task before them, that one hears hardly anything about the war in the camp. In all the conversation at the officers' mess. I only heard it mentioned twice, and then only in a casual way. It struck me that this attitude was an object lesson of great value; that instead of worrying and reading and talking so much about the war, if we all gave ourselves with all our hearts to our duties and the new duties of the hour it would be a much wiser, more Christian attitude.

#### The Duration of the War.

"Whatever impression we may get from various sources as to the possible duration of the war, the feeling that comes over one from the atmosphere of the camp is that in the minds of the authorities, it may last a long time. Nothing is being left to chance. Large strong galvanised iron structures are being erected to take the place of tents for the shelter of the men, as if the war might last for years. This idea seems to be continued by the newspaper reports, making it apparent from the numbers, vigor, and resolution of the enemy, that unless some unforeseen event happens, hostilities will last a long time yet.

#### More And More Men !

"This fact emphasises the need of more and yet more men coming forward. One realised this need also in another way. The camp seems a wonderful thing and the men many, but there were only something over two thousand. Now when one reads of 10,000 and 15,000 and 1,000,000 and

more being used in a single battle, our numbers are but a drop in the bucket. It does seem as if the rate of enlistment must be accelerated by conscription, and that before long the Commonwealth will follow the example of the Mother Country and New Zealand.

The Y.M.C.A.

"In order to understand the value of the Y.M.C.A. to the men, one has to witness the various benefactions. How it would rejoice the heart of its founder, George Williams, were he able to witness this happy extension of the usefulness of the institution he gave to the world. Originally it was intended to provide a place of refuge, friendship, rest, and help for friendless young men in great cities. I can remember the time when the Melbourne branch was in great financial difficulties, and the question whether the idea was not a mistake was seriously discussed, even in religious papers. But if never before, the Y.M.C.A. has come to its own, and proving a greater blessing to our men everywhere than, words can tell. At Claremont the main building has seating accommodation for about eight hundred. Every night this hall is thronged with men — sometimes playing games, bagatelle, quoits, ping-pong, draughts ; sometimes listening to a good concert provided by themselves or well-wishers from Hobart. There are two splendid pianos. Then there is another large building fitted out with seats and desks, where hundreds may be seen every night writing letters, and it does one's heart good to see them, pens, ink, and paper being provided gratis. Over two thousand letters were written there on "Mother's Day." There is also a room for devotional services, and an officers' room containing a billiard table. A coffee stall is also attached, which is wonderfully well patronised. I couldn't help thanking God for the difference from the time when the wet canteen was the only place besides, their tents where soldiers could spend their leisure. Thank God for the dry canteen! I never saw a soldier the worse for drink.

"The Salvation Army is also doing a very helpful work within the camp. They have two large tents, and provide the soldiers materials for games and letter writing. They also have a coffee stall, which is well patronised at night. Evangelistic services are also conducted."

Mr. Rankin concluded His address by a description of the Sunday services he conducted in the camp. Mr. Bert Thomas' famous drawing,

"Arf a mo', Kaiser," portrays not only the imperturbability, the supreme confidence of our soldiers, but also the happiness that "something to smoke" gives them.

We commend to our readers the appeal for funds on behalf of the Overseas Club's Southern Cross Tobacco Fund. The men on active service have to content themselves with the mere necessities of life, but as long as they have cigarettes and tobacco they are in good spirits. The Southern Cross Tobacco Fund has been inaugurated by the Overseas Club, who themselves bear the whole cost of administration, for the purpose of supplying Australian-manufactured tobacco and cigarettes to the men of the A.I.F. Mr. H. E. Budden (the Australian Comfort Funds Commissioner)

who distributes the fund's gifts to Australians, has reported so favorably of the organisation, and work of the fund, that many of the principal trench comfort funds in Australia now use the Southern Cross Fund as a medium for their tobacco gifts, and it has thus become the main channel through which our men in the firing line are

provided with "smokes." The happy idea of giving the men an opportunity to send a postcard of thanks to the contributors has proved very popular.

Many thousands of these post cards are now being collected in all parts of the Empire to form a very interesting memento in days to come of the great European war.

We publish a characteristic specimen from an Australian at the front, and also a letter of appreciation from a Tasmanian commanding officer;

"Anzac, Gallipoli, 29/10/15. — Dear Sir, Thanks so much for the 'smokes,' which were especially welcome on this occasion, as the men had all been out of cigarettes for over a week when these three cases arrived. C. H. Elliott, Lieut. Colonel, commanding 12th Battalion."

"Dear Miss McLeod, I received your very welcome gift of tobacco and cigarettes to-day. They were welcome, I can tell you. The most miserable night I ever spent on Gallipoli was the night of the big snow storm and blizzard. That night I never had

a smoke of any kind. I was lying in my dug-out longing for a smoke. I raked the corners of my pockets out for bumpers, and made a sort of a cigarette out of newspaper. We were always looking out for Turkish cigarettes. I wish you the best of luck.

I remain, your loving friend, Pte.

Tom Hehir, 15th Batt., 4th Brigade,  
A.I.F."

All that need be done to help is to pay in an amount, large or small, at

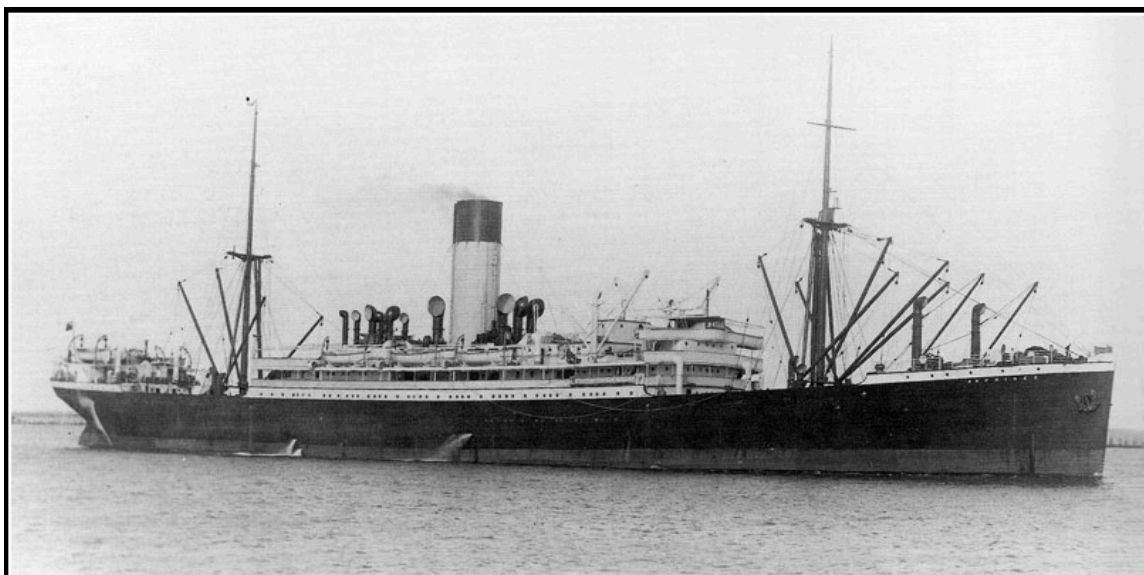
Any post office, or bank, in Tasmania.

Every 1/ sends 50 cigarettes and 2oz. of tobacco of good Australian brands and some matches to the trenches, and a post-card of acknowledgment will arrive in due course straight from the firing line.

- *The North Western Advocate and the Emu Bay Times*  
**Saturday 3 June 1916**

## Embarkation

On the 8 August 1917 he sailed from Sydney to England. His rank was private in the Army Medical Corps. The army records his age as 26, religion Brethren and his occupation engineer. He was to be paid at a rate of pay 5 shillings a day. These Reinforcements consisted of 168 members who embarked on the troopship HMAT A68 Anchises on August 8, 1917 from Sydney, NSW.





Colds and influenza were prevalent at the commencement of the voyage. The vessel arrived at Colon, Panama on September 2, 1917 departing six days later. Halifax, Nova Scotia was reached on the 18<sup>th</sup> and after three days in port departed on September 21, 1917.



The final journey to England was completed after a 55 day voyage when they docked at Liverpool on October 2, 1917.

## Parkhouse

Walter's Form of Active Service shows that he was sent to "Pkhouse" which was shorthand for Parkhouse or Park House" which was a military training base at Tidworth near Salisbury. There was also an Australian hospital at Park House. The Australian Reinforcements left by train from Liverpool arriving the following day.



Tidworth House

Walter was at Parkhouse for roughly a month where he probably received final training. On November 2, 1917, he was transported to Southampton by train and then by boat to France, then marched to the Aust General Base Depot at Rouelles on November 5, 1917.

## At Passchendaele

He was first assigned to the 1st. Australian Field Ambulance Corps, but three days later reassigned to the 3rd. AFACorps who had the greatest need for reinforcements. By the 10th. of November he was at the front at Passchendaele where the major battle, part of the Third Battle of Ypres, was ending.

The Third Battle of Ypres was, like its predecessors, a costly exercise. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) incurred some 310,000 casualties, with a similar, lower, number of German casualties: 260,000. The salient had been re-widened by several kilometres. A sense for the circumstances around the time Walter arrived is seen in an article in the *Launceston Examiner*, October 1917.

### BATTLE CONTINUES

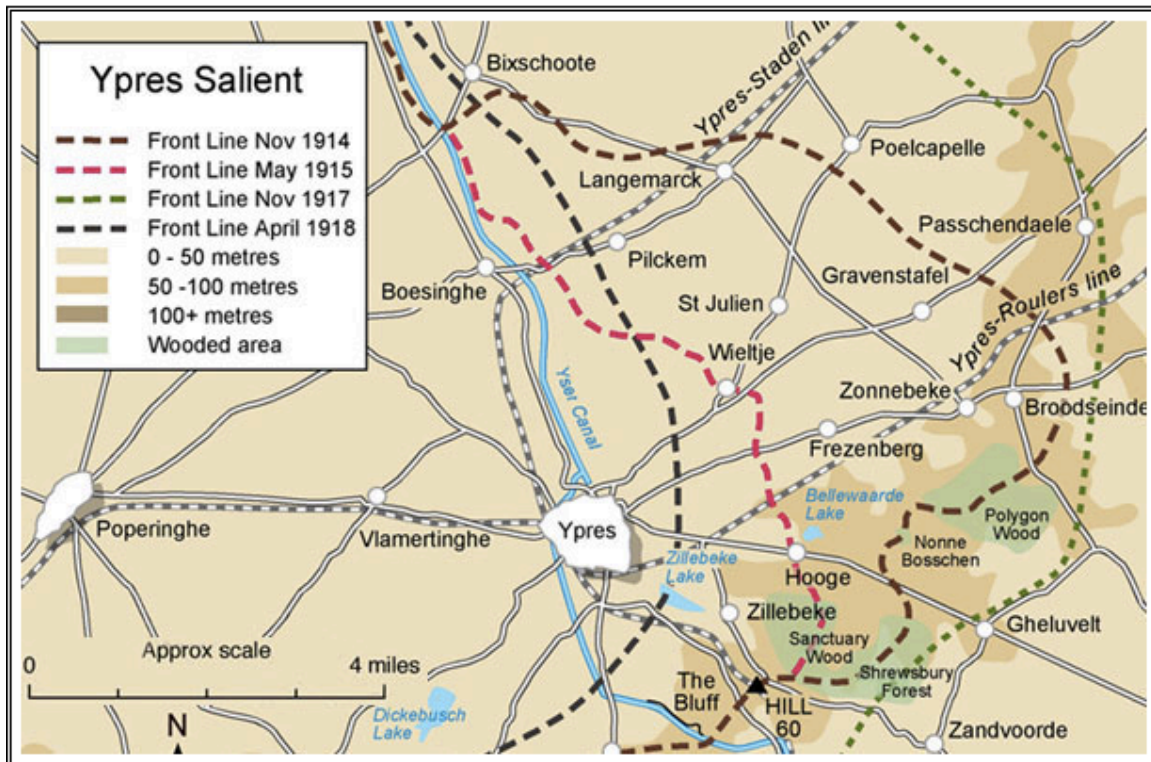
Mr. Percival Phillips writes that the fifth battle on the slopes of Passchendaele ridge resulted in fighting as determined as any in the war. The enemy made a superhuman effort to prevent our taking more ground, and met an attack on a six-mile front with an abundance of picked infantry, supported 'by the heaviest bombardment the British troops have yet been confronted with in Flanders.

Though some of our men seemed to have reached the edge of the Passchendaele village, the forward slopes still bristle with unsilenced strong posts, while the houses of Passchendaele shelter many other machine guns. The attack commenced at 5.5, and the German batteries immediately redoubled their fire.

They laid a curtain across our front while other groups of German guns sought to break the infantry that was storming the outer redoubts. There was sharp fighting in Augustus Wood which was defended by young, well-trained Jager troops, who stuck to

their post. We also had a hard time trying to get forward along the flooded banks of Lekkenboterbeek, which flows alongside the road from Poelcapelle to Westroosbeken. It is a stretch of open country, commanded by a few redoubts and machine-gun barrage from Passchendaele. We went easily through the village, and re-took the brewery ruins; pushed along the road towards Westroosbeken Aug 1. the battle continues on the entire front, and we are everywhere attacking with unabated resolution, while the Germans are fighting better than usual. All the wounded state that there has been a great amount of bayonet work.

- Examiner (Launceston, Tas. Monday 15 October 1917



The disastrous turn in the climate could not have been predicted: that the rainfall was by far the heaviest for many years. Indeed, fighting had taken place around Ypres since 1914 without the kind of problems experienced during Third Ypres.





The work of the stretcher bearers at the front was dangerous. The first aid posts were within a few hundred yards from the lines and because of the constant shelling the transfer to the hospitals some miles away was usually done at night to prevent losses of motorised ambulances. Horse buggies were used during the day for critical cases. Retrievals from no-mans land were hazardous.

## Australian Field Ambulance Corps at Passchendaele





## The First Battle of Villers-Bretonneux (30 March – 5 April 1918)

This battle was part of the wider First Battle of the Somme (1918), which took place amidst a strong German offensive on the Western Front in the final year of the war. Falling initially against the British troops in the Somme, throughout the month the German offensive had pushed the Allies back towards Paris. The capture of Villers-Bretonneux, being close to the strategic centre of Amiens, would have meant that the Germans could have used artillery there to shell the city. In late March, Australian troops were brought south from Belgium as reinforcements to help shore up the line and in early April the Germans launched an attack to capture the town. Heavy fighting followed which saw the Germans slowly gain the upper hand before a counterattack by British and Australian troops late in the afternoon of 4 April broke up the attack.

According to Roy Ramsay<sup>1</sup>,

the 3rd. Brigade hadn't been able to get into Amiens at first because the brigades ahead of them were coming under fire at the station. The Germans might have been stopped but their artillery was still close enough to shell the train station.

When the 3rd. Finally got to the station, the shelling was still going on. One shell whistled over the train and landed 100 yards away. Then the shell landed among the troops and the call went out for stretcher-bearers, who ran out to treat the injured. Eventually the dead were removed, the wounded were treated and put on the train, and the brigade left for the north still under artillery fire.

In May, Walter was with his brigade in a dugout in reserve trenches, materials packed, relaxing while waiting a call to go to the front and relieve the 2nd. Brigade at Hazebrouck. At 1:00 pm on May 6, the 3rd. Field Ambulance, moved up the trenches with the whole 3rd. Brigade to the front.

At this time the Australians had developed a new form of tactics on the line which they called “peaceful penetration”, a more guerrilla style of smaller surprise attacks, rather

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsay, Roy. *Hell, Hope, and Heroes*. (2005), pp 231-2

than the direct “over the top” charge. It suited the Australians very well and the result was more successful with less casualties.



As the year passed, the front line advanced, not without casualties, but with little resistance from the young German reinforcements. While there were less casualties, there were a number of men sick with Spanish flu.

In July, the Americans entered the war and some of their ambulance personnel joined the 3rd. Australian Ambulance Corps.

## Battle of Le Hamel

Perhaps the greatest battles fought by the Australians was the battle at Le Hamel. The Australians divisions were all combined under General Monash, the first Australian officer to lead Australian troops. More efficient tanks were added to the strategy as well as artillery and air support. Monash developed an approach that used air support,

artillery , and tanks in an initial attack followed by the infantry, a departure from the British approach which had carried over from earlier centuries. The battle of Le Hamel was a resounding victory involving the combined Australian divisions with Americans.

Following the battle of Le Hamel, the Germans were disorganised allowing the Australians and New Zealanders to increase “peaceful penetration” raids at a variety of locations along the Somme.

Increased victories were not without cost, however, and the number of wounded evacuated by the 3rd. Ambulance with the other two field ambulances in July 1918, was almost 2200.

## The Capture of Mont St. Quentin

The following is a description of the Australian capture of Mont St. Quentin in the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

The end of August found German troops at their last stronghold at Mont St Quentin - overlooking the Somme River and the town of Péronne. Mont St Quentin stood out in the surrounding country, making it a perfect observation point and a vital strategic area to control. This area was key to the German defence of the Somme line. As it was such an important area, Lieutenant General Sir John Monash was keen to capture it and thus possess a valuable position.

The Attack



Capture of Mont St Quentin, by Fred Leist. [ART02929](#)

This Australian operation is sometimes regarded as the finest achievement of the AIF. The 2nd Australian Division crossed the Somme River on the night of 31 August, and attacked Mont St Quentin at 5 am, from the unexpected position of northwest. It was a difficult position as it was an uphill fight for the troops, across very open ground where they were vulnerable to attack from the German-held heights above.

Rifle grenades and trench mortars were employed to outflank outpost positions. The battalions positioned to the right made a lot of noise to distract the Germans, while the centre and left battalions got a foothold on the hill and in Feuillaucourt.



Péronne, heavy artillery advancing through the town 1918, by Louis McCubbin.  
[ART03043](#)

By 7 am, the troops had gained the village of Mont St Quentin and the slope and summit of the hill, by working in small groups. The five German divisions were confused and dispersed, and many had fled. By midnight on 31 August, Monash's troops had captured 14,500 prisoners and 170 guns since 8 August. Allied troops also broke through lines to Péronne by 8.20 am on 1 September.

However, the Germans quickly regrouped and launched a counter-attack, and the first day of September saw fierce fighting and heavy losses. Germans attacked and heavily shelled Péronne. Much of the fighting was hand-to-hand combat.

The outnumbered Australians were pushed back off the summit of Mont St Quentin, and lost Feuillaucourt. Relief battalions were sent, and with their reinforcement, all the areas were retaken by the Australians, but at the cost of 3,000 casualties. Private Alex Barclay of the 17th Battalion was shot in the head by a sniper's bullet during the attack. Miraculously the bullet passed right through his skull, and he survived to re-enlist in the Second World War!



Members of the 6th Australian Infantry Brigade about to renew the assault on Mont St Quentin on 1 September 1918.  
[AWME03139](#)

After heavy and exhausting fighting, the Australians established a stronghold on the area and forced the complete withdrawal of the Germans from Péronne. By the night of 3 September, the Australians held Péronne. They captured Flamicourt the next day, and advanced 2 miles to the east.





Soldiers from a machine-gun position established in the fighting in the ruins of Péronne, photographed on 2 September 1918.  
AWME03183

Monash said of the Mont St Quentin and Péronne campaign that it furnished the finest example in the war of spirited and successful infantry action conducted by three divisions operating simultaneously side by side.

The fight had also included battalions from every Australian state. British Commander General Lord Rawlinson remarked that this feat by the Australian troops under Monash's command was the greatest of the war.

Forced out of Péronne, the Germans had to retreat to their last line of defence- the Hindenburg Line.

## Leave and Reassignment

On the first of November, 1918, a year after he had joined his division in France, Walter was granted leave in England until November 20.. Upon his return, Walter was assigned to the 1st Australian Transportation Company until he was T with the 3rd Field Ambulance and then in March, 1919, assigned to the 2nd Field Ambulance as a driver. At some point in these battles, Walter was gassed. He was probably not in a direct hit, but the ambulance personnel were often gassed in the toxic environment after an attack.

On June 5, 1919, he was moved to England and boarded the hospital ship, Takada, at Southampton to be returned to Australia.



Hospital ship Takada, on which Walter was repatriated in June 1919 from France to Australia, via the UK.

**‘THE IRREGULARITY OF KILLING PEOPLE’: TASMANIAN BRETHREN  
RESPONSES TO WORLD WAR I<sup>1</sup>**

Elisabeth Wilson

On a May afternoon in 1917, in the Australian army camp at Durrington in Wiltshire, a tall (6 feet 2 inches), broad young Australian soldier refused to go on parade. First his sergeant, then his lieutenant, tried to make him change his mind, reminding him of the serious nature of his action. As he remained obdurate and made no move to go on parade, nor to state his intentions, he was placed under close arrest. The stand-off had clearly been in the wind, because the sergeant later stated that when he did not turn up on parade, ‘I suspected myself that he would be an absentee’. In the end his officers had no option but to charge him with ‘disobeying a lawful command given by his superior officer’, for which, of course, he was court-martialled.<sup>2</sup>

The young man was David (Dave) George Wigg from Marrawah in the far north west of Tasmania, and a first cousin of the author’s grandmother. The story came down through the family that, having enlisted for non-combatant service, he refused to carry a gun, and as a result of the court martial was sentenced to be shot, but was reprieved when the Prime Minister Billy Hughes intervened. Like many such stories, it had grown with the telling—Hughes was not even in England in May 1917 and the record shows no suggestion of shooting<sup>3</sup>—but Wigg was certainly court-martialled and the court

<sup>2</sup> A longer version of this article, which incorporates material from the BAHNR articles listed in n.4 below, will appear in *Tasmanian Historical Studies*, vol. 14 (2009).

<sup>2</sup>National Archives of Australia [henceforth NAA], A471/1, Court martial records, no. 21742, Court martial of Private David George Wigg no. 4088, 1917.

<sup>3</sup> Shooting was the penalty for desertion, but no Australians were shot during World War I, at the insistence of the Australian government despite pleas from Sir Douglas

record provides a fascinating glimpse of how he came to take this drastic step. How did he come to be in this position?

In previous articles in this journal I have discussed the Brethren attitudes to the authorities and to war and their response to the two world wars.<sup>4</sup> This article draws on newly available material to look at the Tasmanian Brethren response in much closer detail. Evangelists from Britain had come to the island state of Tasmania in the 1870s and were particularly influential on the north-west coast. As a result of their meetings and conversations, many people were converted and formed into assemblies. The proportion of Brethren in the population is usually less than 0.1% even in countries where they are well-established.<sup>5</sup> On the north-west coast of Tasmania the figure for the total population would be closer to 0.5%, and there were clusters of meetings in the Circular Head and Kentish areas. Some of these were large (100+) but restrictive fellowships at the time of the First World War. Wigg was brought up in this church circle at Montagu and then Marrawah.<sup>6</sup>

One window into Australian Brethren response to the war is the reaction to the pre-referendum call-up. A month before the first conscription referendum at the end of October 1916, Prime Minister Billy Hughes put into effect by proclamation a call-up of all 21-35

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Haig. This may have been as a result of the execution of Morant and Handcock in the Boer War. See [www.awm.gov.au/wartime/18/article.asp](http://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/18/article.asp).

1. “‘Your citizenship is in heaven’: Brethren attitudes to authority and government’, BAHNR, vol. 2, no. 2 (2003), pp.75-90, and “‘The eyes of the authorities are upon us’: the Brethren and World War I’, BAHNR, Vol. 3, no. 1 (2004), pp.2-17.
2. It is about 0.1% in Australia, but because there are few nominal adherents in these figures, their proportion of churchgoers would be much higher. The most accurate figures I have seen are those for New Zealand in Peter Lineham, *There we found Brethren* (Palmerston North, NZ, 1977), p. 163. Humphreys and Ward, *Religious Bodies in Australia* (Melbourne, 1986), p. xi, give the percentage for Australia per the census as 0.15% in 1981. I believe that some Brethren would come under the headings Protestant (undefined) (1.51%), and Other Christian (1.72%).
3. Family information, John Wigg, Somerset, 2009. Montagu, Marrawah, and Smithton assemblies were all part of the Hopkins group of meetings which were evangelistic, but restrictive as to whom they accepted into communion.

year old single males or widowers without children, for home service. Not only was this of dubious legality,<sup>7</sup> it was also, as Lloyd Robson observed, ‘not the cleverest of moves’ on the eve of the referendum, and the New South Wales premier thought it was probably one of ‘Hughes’ greatest blunders’,<sup>8</sup> giving the nation a foretaste of what might be expected if conscription were approved.

As a corollary of the call-up, Exemption Courts were established. In Tasmania, they were held all over the state, and a survey of newspaper reports<sup>9</sup> reveals that the vast majority of appellants were single sons or the only one left at home, medically unfit, or those who

had business or farming interests that they felt could not be left. Many of this last group received short shrift from the magistrates or army officers attending. However, a handful of men claimed exemption as conscientious objectors: two Seventh Day Adventists, two members of the Church of Christ, one Christian Scientist, one Christian Israelite, one Quaker, one member of the Communist party,<sup>10</sup> several of no stated religion, and at least seven or possibly nine Brethren.<sup>11</sup> Because of their aversion to a formal name Brethren are notoriously hard to identify. Some of those who stated that they were ‘followers

of Christ’ or ‘Christians’ were probably Brethren.

These numbers, small as they are in total, show that in relation to other groups, and in indeed to their proportion of the population, Brethren were in higher numbers than might be expected. The highest

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4. Bobbie Oliver, *Peacemongers: Conscientious objectors to military service in Australia, 1911-1945* (Fremantle, 1997), p.33.

5. Lloyd Robson, *The First AIF* (Melbourne, 1970), p. 108.

6. Hobart: Mercury; Launceston: Examiner; Circular Head: Circular Head Chronicle; Scottsdale: North-East Advertiser; Devonport and Burnie: Advocate. The cases were reported in varying detail, although names, ages and occupations were generally given, to support the claim that the court process was open to scrutiny.

7. This was W. Baguley, a draughtsman on the Stanley-Trowutta railway, who said that ‘industrialism and capitalism cause all wars’ and that he objected on a ‘humanitarian basis’. His application was refused. *Circular Head Chronicle*, 8 November 1916, p.2.

8. The only comparison I have found is with Western Australia, where one of the five appellants to a higher court was Plymouth Brethren. He stated that he was prepared to do non-combatant service. Oliver, *Peacemongers*, p.3

concentration of Brethren men was in the far north west—Dave Wigg’s territory—where the Circular Head Chronicle had earlier commented that ‘Sergeant Hardy has had an uphill fight with recruiting in the area’.<sup>12</sup> This may be partly because it was a dairy farming region, needing intensive and continuous labour, but also because there were several fairly conservative Brethren meetings in the area. Such was the perceived difference in community attitude that a great-uncle of the author moved to Marrawah from Melbourne during the war, because he had been subjected to so much harassment (including being presented with white feathers) for not enlisting.<sup>13</sup>

Reasons given for claiming exemption were various. They included membership of the Plymouth Brethren: V. L. Lucas of Burnie stated that, ‘being a member of the Plymouth Brethren congregation, he was opposed to bearing arms,’<sup>14</sup> as did Oswald Wigg, of Marrawah.<sup>15</sup> Another reason was that bearing arms was contrary to the teaching of the New Testament; and the fact that killing went against their conscience: Clive Morse of Sheffield said that he ‘would not feel justified in taking life under any circumstances’.<sup>16</sup> He was ordered to join the ambulance corps. William Kay of Irishtown, almost certainly Brethren although not identified as such, said ‘I do not wish to take up arms’.<sup>17</sup> Charles Kay, also of Irishtown, embodied the Brethren attempt to reconcile their duty to God and the lawful government: ‘I am willing to go, but not as a combatant.’<sup>18</sup> Charles Ling, of Smithton, echoed the same idea: ‘I am willing to do my duty as long as it does not clash with these

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9. Circular Head Chronicle, 27 September 1916, p. 2. It had also carried an article on a conscientious objectors’ camp in England (20 September 1916, p. 4), which stated that nearly all of the men there ‘are of the religious sect known as the Plymouth Brethren’.

10. Robert Harris Smith.

11. Launceston Examiner, 20 October 1916, p. 3.

12. Circular Head Chronicle, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

13. Launceston Examiner, 31 October 1916, p. 3.

14. Circular Head Chronicle, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

15. Circular Head Chronicle, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

principles'.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly, only one of those who said they were willing to take up non-combatant service appears to have ended up enlisting in any capacity.<sup>20</sup>

The debate between the Police Magistrate and the appellant followed the predictable lines of these tribunals—what if the Germans attacked your sister, or invaded your farm, and have you ever been in a fight and reacted? Some men showed that they had not thought through their position very thoroughly: in Stanley, Oswald Wigg was told, 'You have some hazy ideas about conscience...'.<sup>21</sup>

W. Ferguson was asked if he could reconcile the teaching of the Old Testament with his beliefs. He answered, 'No, but I read the Bible every day. [And probably in answer to another question] I do not understand the Sermon on the Mount.'<sup>22</sup> Herbert Ling quoted Scripture to back up his case,<sup>23</sup> and indeed, the Brethren reliance on the Bible is evident in the frequent mention of the teachings of the New Testament. Robert Charles H. Clayton of Evandale, who described himself only as a 'follower of Christ' and so cannot be definitely named as Brethren, said that he 'would not kill anyone.' In fact, he was not even prepared to do non-combatant duty, because the Lord had said to 'keep unspotted [from the world]'. He also 'refused to be sworn and give his thumb print'. The exasperated magistrate said he was liable to arrest.<sup>24</sup> His statements sound typical of Brethren teaching, but there has never been a Brethren assembly in Evandale, so he may have been connected with another small group, such as the Church of Christ, Christadelphians, or even Cooneyites,<sup>25</sup> all of which could use the same arguments.

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16. Circular Head Chronicle, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

17. Clement Alfred King of Wynyard.

18. Circular Head Chronicle, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

19. Circular Head Chronicle, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

20. Matthew 26:51 is cited in the newspaper account, but should almost certainly be 26:52. Circular Head Chronicle, 8 November 1916, p. 2.

21. Launceston Examiner, 28 October 1916, p. 9

22. For these last, also known as the Go-preachers, see Doug and Helen Parker, *The Secret Sect* (Sydney, 1982)

The Exemption Courts sat for the two or three weeks either side of October 28, the date of the first conscription referendum, arguably one of the most bitter and divisive episodes in Australia's history. Considerable courage must therefore have been needed to take this stance at such a time, when feelings were running so high, and most newspapers were devoting more than half their pages to war coverage of some kind, including news from the front, referendum debates, casualty lists, and war support activities of every sort.

Reports in *Tidings* show that prayer meetings were held for world conditions and for young men affected by recruitment and the pre-referendum call-up: 'Realising the need of special waiting upon God in these solemn days, a week of prayer was arranged [in Brisbane], ... and on the day of the opening of the Military Court ... a meeting was held for prayer at 6.45 a.m., on behalf of

the young men...'.<sup>26</sup> The Brisbane correspondent wrote, 'Up to the time of writing only one of our young men has been called upon to face his tribunal, but we are thankful to say that his case for partial exemption (non-combatant service) was considered genuine from the outset, and the magistrate granted what was asked for on conscientious grounds.'<sup>27</sup> Magistrates were often reluctant to grant total exemption on religious grounds; it seems they thought that this would encourage a rash of similar requests from malingerers, as the depth and sincerity of such convictions were notoriously hard to test.

The digitising of the World War I service records by the National Archives of Australia and their online availability has provided another window into the response of Tasmanian Brethren to the war. Tasmania's relatively stable population and the strong continuing affiliation to Brethren of many families over several generations enabled the identification of over 100 surnames.<sup>28</sup> Using the 'Find'

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23. *Tidings*, November 1916, p. 869:

24. *Tidings*, December 1916, p. 884. Also p. 887: '... the eyes of the authorities are going to be upon us and our conscientious objectors.'

25. To elicit names I used personal knowledge from four generations of family involvement in the Brethren, information from elderly members, and books such as Alan F. Dyer, *God was their Rock The story of Christian Brethren pioneers in the north-west*



option to then select by state made a painstaking task possible, but it was not a feasible method for those family names which had thousands of examples across Australia. The spelling of the word 'Brethren' on attestation papers reveals the lack of knowledge of the Brethren in the community: it is variously given by the army clerks as Breathen, Breathern, Bethren, Betheren, Brethern, Bretheren and Bretheran—in one instance Breth~ as a despairing scrawl ends the word!<sup>29</sup> The variety of appellations under which they went no doubt added to the confusion of officialdom: Brethren men variously gave Brethren, Christian Brethren, Plymouth Brethren, Protestant (Gospel Hall) and assembly of God as their denomination.

This search identified at least thirty-six Tasmanian Brethren men who enlisted.<sup>30</sup> It is not possible to use a religion as a search term, so this list is not exhaustive, relying as it does on my personal knowledge and the use of some historical sources. It was added to by browsing through the main 'Tasmanian' units in the Embarkation Rolls held by the War Memorial, which list the religion of the men. Sixteen went into the Medical Corps [AMC] or Field Ambulance and twenty into combatant units, one of whom was a driver and signaller. Twelve were discharged as medically unfit or because the end of the

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Kentish District of Tasmania (Sheffield, Tas., 1974), Kerry Pink and Annette Ebdon, *Beyond the Ramparts: a bicentennial history of Circular Head* (Hobart, 1988), and Kenneth J. Evans, *To the Ends of the Earth: A Christian Pioneering Journey through Circular Head* (Smithton, Tas., 1988).

26. To be fair, the clerks had difficulty with Presbyterian also, and at least once spelled Baptist as 'Babtist'.
27. Atkinson, Reginald Charles; Blackwell, Walter Leonard; Brough, Elias Augustus 'Gus'; Cumming, Harold William and Renel or Reuel Douglas; Cunningham, Cyril John William and David John; Cure, Alfred and Oriel (whose brother Enoch said he was Roman Catholic!); Deans, Harold James; Ferguson, Cecil and Colin; Haines, Stanley; Hay, Roland Thomas Dudley; Horton, Claude and Lionel; Hull, Hubert Donald; Hutchison, Alexander James; Kay, Robert Latimer; King, Clement Alfred and Reuben; Knowles, George, George Stafford, and James Henry; Ling, Herbert; McCormack, Frederick; McGinty, Alexander Henry; Medwin, Lemuel; Murfet, Charles Joseph; Parker, Lyall Hadden; Reeve, David Charles; Rogers, Cecil Charles; Shoobridge, Max Giblin; Smith, Arthur Albert; Wigg, David George and James Leonard.

war came before they could be attached to a unit.<sup>31</sup> One was discharged because his parents would not consent to him joining the general service. Some were quite definite about their intentions: on the attestation paper for David Reeve from Boat Harbour, his father wrote 'AMC or non-combatant service' underneath his signature for permission to enlist.<sup>32</sup> On the form for Hubert Hull from Burnie, an officer has written 'This man was the one I wired to you about, re

AMC and wants to join such.'<sup>33</sup> Cecil Ferguson's file contains a typed note to the Camp Commandant from the recruiting sergeant saying 'The bearer is one of the specially enlisted men for the A.M.C. I received instructions to notify you.'<sup>34</sup> Colin Ferguson had 'a conscientious objection to bearing arms but is willing to volunteer for service abroad if allotted to the A.M.C.'<sup>35</sup>

Some sons of Brethren leaders, who listed themselves as Methodist or Baptist, also joined the Medical Corps.<sup>36</sup> A son of Allen Innes, a Brethren leader from Smithton, is listed as Presbyterian, and there is a hand-written note on file giving his father's permission for him to enlist: 'I am willing for my son Laurence Innes to go to the front.'<sup>37</sup> Stephen Reeve, of Wynyard, whose father was a leading Brethren speaker and elder and whose younger brother David is mentioned above, joined up in the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion as an Anglican.<sup>38</sup> It is possible that some Brethren young men found it simpler to avoid the questions and incomprehension and gave a different

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28. Four of these had been put down for the AMC.

29. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, David Charles Reeve.

30. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Hubert Hull.

31. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Cecil Herbert Ferguson.

32. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Colin Andrew Ferguson.

33. E.g. Elton Button (father C. E. Button of Launceston); Frederick Tuffin (father Josiah Tuffin of Launceston).

34. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Laurence Henry Innes. He survived Gallipoli, shell shock, and mumps, and returned to Australia.

35. NAA, series B2455, World War I service records, Stephen Alfred Reeve. He contracted gonorrhoea in Egypt.

