

MM

ANOTHER MAN'S WAR

Recently I had the priviledge to read a diary and some 75 year old letters from a soldier from the First World War commencing with his departure from Sydney in November 1916 on S. S. Benalla. These letters were mainly to his young pregnant wife of only a few months and embody the highs and lows of this young man with his lofty expectations of a great adventure and travel and finishes in the filth, degredation, and misery of the trenches in October 1918.

I suppose if placed in similar circumstances as this man was most young men would surely seize an opportunity to travel and taste adventure.

These notes in diary form and occassionally with extracts from letters record the events and at times his thoughts and yearnings for those two years. Because of censorship requirements he was unable and did not indicate precisely where some of these military actions took place but most were on the Somme where geat battles took place over the war years.

9/11/16	Passed through Sydney Heads at 2p.m. Very calm. Great excitement. Everybody looking forward to the fun.
10/11/16	White shoes issued. Scramble for hammocks.
12/11/16	Morning passing through Bass Strait. Cape Otway in sight earlier. Threw bottle overboard addressed to "Sydney Sun" with signature of several mates. If found to be sent to my wife (Neita).
12/11/16	Making lots of new friends though many Maitland boys whom I went to school with are here as well. Everybody in great spirits.
14/11/16	Very cold. Rough seas. Many sick. Our first lifeboat drill.
15/11/16	Lectures on shells and battery formation. Concert. Boxing.
18/11/16	Washing day. Lifeboat crews selected. Saw 3 whales.
24/11/16	Stowaway discovered in a filthy state.
25/11/16	Having never been at sea before this is quite a pleasant experience so far. 4 p.m. Pte Geoffries of 1st Battalion died. Aged 20. Buried at sea. Night signalling.
27/11/16	Death of Pte. Styles 24 of 1st Battalion. 3 cases of meningitis. Everybody to gargle throat with Condies Fluid.

28/11/16	First pay day. One shilling a day so I got a pound. Terrible rush for the canteen. Very hot. Vaccinated today.
29/11/16	7:30 p.p. saw lights of Durbin.
30/11/16	Two men Osborn and Thomms died and buried at sea. Entered Durbin Harbour. Negros everywhere in water. We threw coins. Took rickshaw around town. A beautiful city of 30,000. A great place for a holiday for my little wife and will it be son or daughter.
2/12/16	Everybody gargling with salt and water to prevent meningitis. 5 now dead.
4/12/16	Cape Town. Great reception but we are very restricted and can hardly go anywhere. Officers only can see the town. Men furious. Left Cape Town at 11:30 p.m. 28 deserters.
5/12/16	Fatigues. Sea water soap and brooms. Preparing for the tropics.
9/12/16	Green colour of Atlantic differs from the blue of the Indian Ocean. We are getting further away from home. Wish I could be with my dear wife. Can't expect any letters until we reach England. With luck by end of next year we will all be home again. Am looking forward however to England France and a go at the hun.
12/12/16	Very hot. Crossed the line at 11:30 a.m. King Neptune made an appearance. Great fun. Flying fish everywhere. We are eating well and feeling very fit.
15/12/16	Two war ships to port. Highflyer and Kent. Five transports and one armoured cruiser. Hot as hell. Economising on water.
25/12/16	LETTER:-"This is christmas day and we are all in a happy mind but dear old home and our loved ones are constantly in our thoughts. Feeling fit-hope this next christmas will be spent with you my darling and our babe. What fun we will have. Every mile we go we are further away from one another. I will try and make up with all this when I come home."
1/1/17	New Years day. No high jinks. No lights. We are in the danger zone now.
3/1/17	LETTER:-"Am told that in another ship a few days ago an officer fell overboard. The ship stopped and picked him up. In the mean time another ship in the convoy was sent to the bottom. It makes you think."
4/1/17	Two months today aboard ship. Escort Kent fire on an unidentified steamer. Off she went. Came back latter with siren whooping but do not know the reason.
5/1/17	Pay day. Everybody very merry at canteen. We are the only ship with a wet canteen as far as I know.
6/1/17	General clean-up for port.

8/1/17	England sighted at last.
9/1/17	Entered port at 1 a.m. Entrained at 2 p.m. Arrived Amesbury 11 p.m. Four mile march to camp on Salisbury Plain.
10/1/17	Camp awful. Filthy. Everybody doing fatigues. No drill. Snowing. Bitterly cold. Food poor. Numerous flying machines about.
13/1/17	Innoculated. Camp routine.
20/1/17	Inspected by General Brunker.
23/1/17	Joined signalling and riding school.
3/2/17	Word "Blighty" universal. Means recuperation leave from France in England or just England. Leave coming up I hope. Disembarkation leave. How I wish I could spend it with my dear wife.
9/2/17	Left camp for London at 6:30 a.m. and arrived London 12 noon. Saw all the sights and will tell you all about it in a letter. But wherever I went there was another bit of history I had read about.
12/2/17	Back in camp. There are a great number of German Prisoners of War near by. Received news that the bottle I threw over outside Melbourne has been picked up and was referred to in the Sydney "Sun" on 11/12/16.
16/2/17	Food very poor and not enough. If it were not for the canteen and occasional food parcels from home and friends in England we would starve.
23/2/17	Lots of mail. 15 letters. Wonderful. So glad my darling is well. Expecting about 27th June. Great sensation at 5 p.m. 400 men required immediately for something unusual. I was selected. Only the tallest men. Marched to Amesbury. Train to South Hampton. Then to Bournemouth West at 11 p.m.
24/2/17	Breakfast. Marched up and down the town then back to camp and eventually to Amesbury. This was a show of force to a strike and riot of soldiers at Warcham Camp 15 miles from Bournemouth. It must have worked because it was all very quiet after we arrived.
27/2/17	Camp routine. Fatigues. We are numbers now not men or even animals. Food poor. Officers the worst lot. Papers are full of two British victories. Is this the big offensive we have been expecting. Hope so. The sooner the better and we can go home.

2/3/17	All units on strike on account of kit inspection at of all times 11 o'clock at night. The men were furious and with good reason. We march and march all day. Do constant fatigues and then when we expect to get some sleep they put this on. The CO saw reason. Some officer was full of his own importance won't occur again. We hope.
5/3/17	Signalling and semaphoring. They say signalling is dangerous. Other say it is a good job. We shall no doubt find out in France.
6/3/17	First batch of our men now en route to France. Signallers stay here until we finish school.
9/3/17	Airplane crashed nearby. Little damage. Pilot OK. Very cold and wind bitter. Have got six blankets at night now.
14/3/17	Baghdad has fallen. Great news. Papers full of it. Expect Bapaume and Perrone to be ours any day now. Everybody excited. I don't think there is one man who doesn't want to see this end soon so that we can go home to our loved ones.
18/3/17	Big French advance. Destruction of Zepplin Airship. Russia determined to defeat Germany. Papers full of it.
19/3/17	Visited flying school nearby. 31 machiines. I think they are French "Farnums". Cousin Sid hopes to take course. Has appplied. They need small men so he should fit that requirement.
20/3/17	Food scarce. Allowance of bread only 4 small slices a day. No butter. Sometimes dripping. Good news from France. Germans on the run.
25/3/17	Not a particle of food wasted. Left overs made up into hash or pudding. Am told inedible food is used in the making of munitions. A lot of my mates are in France now. Will also go soon. Am not looking forward to it so much now. I have seen so many wounded hereabouts in hospitals and in London. It seemed every second man in uniform in London was carrying an injury. Men I have spoken to who have been in the tenches say it is just murder.
1/4/17	Preparing for inspection by King.
9/4/17	Five months since leaving Sydney. 3 months since we arrived in England. The mail is everything for us. We just dwell on letters from home. Takes up to two months to get a letter now and so four months to get a reply about how things are at home.
15/4/17	Now that America is in the war we should really hit the hun. Aeroplane down. Pilot killed.
17/4/17	All spit and polish today. The King inspected us. About 40,000 of us. Didn't get the promise of a day off as we expected.
18/4/17	Opportunity to join flying corp. A dangerous business. Past as first class signaller.

- 27/4/17 Gas instruction. Issued with overseas clothes.
- On day off visited Heale House residence of Hon. L. Greville. It was here that Charles II was hidden after the battle Worcester.
- 1/5/17 Well it finally came. Left Lark Camp at 6:30 a.m. On board ship to Boulogne and arrived in France at 11 a.m.
- 3/5/17 Marched to Etaples arrived 4 p.m. Some 22 miles. We were beat.
- 4/5/17 Issued with gas mask and bullet proof helmet.
- 5/5/17 We are about 80 miles from Somme front. Rations are "hard tack". That is bully beef and biscuit.
- 6/5/17 LETTER:-"Must not forget to tell you about Boulogne and the "Bullring". Whilst we were at Boulonge the town was out of bounds. But being so that is probably the reason a bunch of us decided to see the town. Had a good look. The French very happy to see us. Hard to walk through on the cobbled streets especially as we were carrying full pack and rifle. Didn't see an MP at any time.

Now for the "Bullring". This was where we were tortured by a pack of British and Australian drill instructors. They didn't let up day and night for 17 days. Day and night they marched us or ran us and we had to undergo awful exercises with full battle kit up to our knees in mud and slush. They were a sadistic lot and we hated everyone of them. We are told that a previous draft got so mad they put one instructor in hospital. There was a hell of a to-do. Anyway we had to do all this on bully beef and biscuit. We are starving. There is averse doing the rounds that goes like this:-

"Somewhere in France soldiers are seen Walking about all very lean Walking about with bowed down head Praying to god they will be fed.

Somewhere in France in mud and rain Soldiers are saying 'never again' Never again in one deep breath will they come to France and starve to death "

Well we finally survived the running and marching and the odd hun aeropplane which came over and dropped a bomb on the parade ground which did no explode."

23/5/17 Camp routine. Letter from Nellie informing me that brother in-law Frank and my wife's dear brother has been killed in action. She will be heart broken and the family will take this very hard. (Note:- there was no mistake this time. Previously the family had been advised that Frank had been killed and they had held a memorial service for him. Shortly after they were advised that it was a mistake and that he was alive and well.) 26/5/17 Heard British have a great vistory. What are the Russians doing. They could help more that they are doing at present. Rain, rain, rain. Everything is wet. Clothes-even our bedding does not dry from one day to the next. Tents leaking. It is hell. Passed through gas test. Now attached attached to 2nd Division as gunner. So much for signalling. 28/5/17 Left Etables. Then Abbeville - Amiens - Albert. Then on to Bouzincourt. We are nearing the front now. 2/6/17 Joined 2nd Division. Division now out of line. Have had a hard time. Replacements badly needed. Heavy bombardment can be heard and flashes visible. We are near Bullecourt and heard that Frank has been killed in th great battle of Bullecourt. He was such a fine chap. 11/6/17 Now attached to 15th Battery 2nd Division, 5th Army Australian Field Artillery. 19/6/17 Getting ready to move up to the line. 21/6/17 Batch of us raided a strawberry and cherry garden. We had quite a feast. 24/6/17 Cricket match. We won. Believe Americans are now in France in force. Now will the hun whato. 8/7/17 Still no word of a move. There are all sorts of rumour flying about. Can't believe any of them. Oh for home and away from the filth. Even this rest camp is not a rest camp and only in name. Terrible storm. 100 horses killed by lightening. 9/7/17 Grand news - received cable that my son has been born at 11:25 p.m. on June 23rd. How I wish I could be with my dear wife. I feel so far away. Seems that I am living two lives. But the life at home is gradually fading and I do not want it so. 12/7/17 Hospital. High fever. They say it is "flu". 2/8/17 Now discharged. Feeling much better but still weak. Every man needed. Had to catch up with Division and did so. Raining heavily. 4/8/17 Flooded out and had to seek a fresh home in middle of night. 6/8/17 Can't help thinking of my son and how clever my darling wife is. I am overjoyed they are

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both well. Am thinking of the great times we will all have when I get home.

7/8/17	Went into line. Heavy firing on both sides. The shells make a terrifying sound and Jerry is using many 5.9s and some gas shells. Dug out is feet deep with mud. Had to dig another one. We are wet through and covered with mud. Can't get dry.
9/8/17	Exchange of fire. Supported raid over trenches with a creeping barrage. Numerous planes. Shelled heavily.
12/8/17	Have spent 24 hours on Observation Post on hill 60. Spotting our shells. Fritz plane down.
13/8/17	Another plane down. Heavily shelling by hun - all classes of shells. Many gas.
14/8/17	Terrible shelling of our position. A 5.9 HE burst on our trench. Five killed three wounded. Yours truly buried but unharmed. Later gassed. We were in bad shape. Then at 2 p.m. further shell killed three and wounded nine including yours truly. Two wounds in back and several in buttock. First aid station. Hospital at Etables by midnight. Several of my mates are gone.
16/8/17	In ward A6 No. 5 USA based hospital. Xrayed.
20/8/17	Apart from wounds have not been well. Came out of hospital too soon and have not really recovered but all men were needed. Had operation today for removal of shrapnel from buttock.
24/8/17	Still in hospital food very poor.
27/8/17	Stitches taken out.
29/8/17	Recieved my ticket for "Blighty". Oh to be away from it all. So many men at the hospital with all sorts of injuries. Many are dying daily. They in so much pain it is heart breaking to hear them in their agony. I have been so lucky so far.
30/8/17	Left hospital-train to Boulogne-steamer to Dover. Arrived Napsbury Hospital 3 p.m. Beautiful hospital - 2000 beds.
4/9/17	Went before medical board. Recommended for convalescent leave.
7/9/17	Am now in Australian hospital Harefield, Middlesex.
11/9/17	Wounds xrayed. Walked out the front gate and had a day out. Great time just walking around. Nobody seemed to miss me or maybe knew and let me go.

- On leave. Left hospital. Train to Goudhurst. Met by cousin Nellie at station. It is wonderful to be in a home again and to receive such loving care from someone whom I have known about and corresponded with but never met. Cool fresh sheets. Clean clothes and where she gets the food from I do not know but it is wonderful. Must write home and tell Neita how well I am being cared for. She may stop worrying for a while.

 LETTER:-(To an old friend back home) This break has given me time to think and to realize how fortunate I have been so far. I haven't really seen that much of the trenches as
 - how fortunate I have been so far. I haven't really seen that much of the trenches as compared with others but I cannot forget the mud, the filth, the dead mates, the lice and the fear constant all the time and of course the relief when the hun lets up. He suffers the same of course because we are giving him a real belting. The sooner this is over the better for us all. We have been taught to kill and we do it so thoroughly.
- 18/9/17 Of all things I went hop picking today despite my back. Will go up to London in a few days. Nellie so good. As soon as one relative leaves she has another one coming. She is an Angel.
- 19/9/17 Whilst I am staying here with Nellie I must write you in more detail about various things must tell you I had a letter from your brother George. He seems to be having a good time with the girls or so I presume. The letter was signed George and there were kisses, rows of them, around the edge of the paper. I guess he got mixed up with whom he was writting to.. A mate of mine tells me that George was as "happy as larry" the night before he left for France. Can't blame him.
- 27/9/17 London. Saw investiture at Buckingham Palace. Visited Richmond Palace, Kew Gardens, Hampton Court, and Old Curiousity Shop.
- 1/10/17 Camp life again. Mumps in hut. Went into isolation.
- 19/10/17 Isolation lifted. Drafted for France again. Now I have to face it all again. Our hopes of seeing the end of the war by christmas now gone. A big push coming.
- 23/10/17 Great day. 18 letters from home. Several letters from London tell of many people leaving for the country because of air raids.
- 31/10/17 LETTER:-"Lucky to be out of France. Australian casualties for August, September and October said to be 70,000. We heard today that 4th and 5th Divisions are being disbanded and will be used to reenforce 2nd and 3rd. There should never have been these two divisions as there would always be insufficient reinforcements. Papers are raving about breakthrough of Hindenburg Line. Hope this leads to a big breakthrough to end it all."
- 2/11/17 Still expecting to go any minute. Letter from Nellie with several pounds. I was broke.
- 3/11/17 All leave cancelled. News that Germany is mobilising for a great offensive.
- 4/11/17 Wonderful photo of my son today and on my birthday as well.

- 13/11/17 Now at Sandhill Camp. Food poor. Bought some apples 20 for a penny. Sweet too.
- 23/11/17 Off draft because of dental problems.
- 25/11/17 LETTER:-"Was very sorry to leave Hurdcott camp for this one. It was great. Rose at 7 a.m. Breakfast at 7:45 a.m. Fall in at 9 a.m. Route march for 45 minutes. Half hour physical jerks. Then 1 hour football. Dinner at 12:45. Fall in at 2 p.m. March till 3. Foot ball till 4 p.m. Tea 4:45 p.m. Concert or Vaudeville or pictures at night. Weekends off from Saturday noon to Sunday midnight."
- 5/12/17 Papers say that some mines have been found off Gabo Island. The way the war is going can't see when it will end. Miss my darling wife and that son I have yet to see. Over 12 months since I left.
- 19/12/17 Had hoped to get a job as auditor at HQ but missed out.
- 25/12/17 Still here at Sandhill. Had a real feast today but missed my loved ones and wondering where they will spend christmas. Am a bit down today.
- 1/1/18 New Years day. Great party. Camp was in uproar. Plenty of beer for the boys.
- 2/1/18 At last I have two weeks leave and am off to Scotland.
- 12/1/18 Great trip to Scotland. Believe George and Sid had a wild time in London. Girls galore. Can just imagine how they would go through London. In a letter from his mother (George) I was asked to tell George that there were many better girls in Australia. Little notice he would take of that.
- 2/2/18 LETTER:-"Fritz has been over London a good bit lately. Everyone greatly excited. No doubt you have read a good deal about the strikes in Germany. Hope they are true. The military power in Germany is so strong and the people believe that they are winning so little is likely to come of it all at present."
- 10/2/18 LETTER:-"Yesterday we had a big muster for the purpose of finding who were all these spare men the units had. A couple of hundred were caught who had attached themselves unofficially to some staff companys. Simply did nothing but walk around or played cards or boozed up. Did they get a rocket. I am known as 'Old King Coal' as I am in charge of the fires. Can eat at the Officers' Mess. Good tucker. Things are very quiet at the front. The papers are saying that Fritz will not be ready for a big push for another fortnight. What do you think of the Russians. Never did put much faith in them. I am still hanging on by the skin of my teath. Hundreds from here have gone over to France so my time will come. Both sides seem to be waiting for the other to start something."

24/2/18 This is a poem that is going the rounds:-"My Tuesdays are meatless My Wednesdays are wheatless

> My home it is heatless My bed it is sheetless

I am getting more eatless each day.

They're all sent to the YMCA

The bar rooms are treatless My coffee is sweetless Each day I get poorer and wiser.

My stockings are feetless My trousers are seatless My how I do hate the Kaiser."

6/3/18 LETTER:-"Heytesbury Camp. Note my new address. My good time has gone at last. On Monday came word to Sandhill Camp that every artillery man had to go on the draft immediately. Now the trouble was caused by an artillery man who was put on guard duty against the usual rules. The fool wrote to General Birdwood direct and complained. Well within minutes the word had come through that the whole lot of us were on the draft. Leave cancelled etc. There was a hell of a stir. There is no way to express the fury of the men particularly towards the fool who wrote the letter. I tried to get out of it but no luck. A definite order from the General. So I am off to France. Am not looking forward to it but I know more about what to expect."

25/3/18 Back on the Somme and in reserve. Living in an old farm house. We are however close to the front. Heavy firing. Many casualties passing to the rear. They all look so wretched.

NOTE: Unfortunately there are no further diary entries as most of the pages after the above have been removed. There are also no more letters to his young wife and one can only conclude he was unable to write or they have been lost over the years. From the many he wrote it is most unlikey that he would stop writting unless force to by circumstances. There are however a few letters several to a friend in Maitland and several to cousin Nellie.

19/6/18 LETTER:-"Dear Fred. Have been attached to this battery for two months now and have had three weeks in the line, then out, then back in again, and now in reserve and can write a few lines. We have been given a bad time. The hun will not give up even though we have given him more than he has given us. It is impossible to describe the constant shelling we have had. Shells falling all around us. We did nothing for days on end but fire. Very little rest and hardly any sleep and then to be waken with alerts. Just heard we have to go up to the line again for another push. I sometimes wonder will I ever escape to a rational world again. I despair sometimes. Don't let Neita see this."

- 15/8/18 LETTER: -"Dear Fred. We are near Amiens. I cannot describe how we are suffering and certainly cannot write Neita along these lines. Have had a touch of gas, eyes and chest, but only a few days off and now while there is a lull I can write to you. I am definitly not well but then many others are worse and we are still coonsidered ablebodied. It is beyond words to describe the constant shelling and all we do is dig and dig and as one shelter is destroyed we dig another. Then we have the constant movement of the guns as they get stuck in the mud, we use the horses that are left and of course push and shove ourselves. The horses are exhausted and frequently if not hit by shrapnel will just fall down and die. Their terror is awfull. They stop, bolt around crazed. It is hell on earth. The dug outs are frequentl half full of water and whilst in the line it is impossible to change clothes and for days on end we are soaked and covered with mud and have to sleep like that as well. From my dugout on this lovely clear day with hardly a cloud in the sky I can see several dead horses that helped pull our gun carriage. They are covered by rats eating the flesh and surrounded by millions of flies. They will just be left there to rot. The stench is nearly unbearable. There are several of our boys lying out there as well that have died during the day. We cannot go out and get them until it is dark. For what it is worth we have advanced about 5 miles and many prisoners are being walked to the rear. They all look shatttered and defeated I guess we must look like them as well for we are a dispirited lot. Still we are advancing so lets hope something will come of it."
- 18/10/18 LETTER:-"Dear Nellie. Am in No 2 Stationary Hospital France. Have a case of Trench Fever. Brought on by the infernal lice and have a bad cough as well. Have to have something done to my earlier wounds as they are infected. The hospital is like a hell on earth with many men dying each day and others moaning or screaming or crying. Others just look blankly at you. Some blinded others shell shocked. I have lost so many of my good mates. Please write to Neita I am unable to do so at present. Tell her I will get home yet and see that son of mine and we shall have such a wonderful time."
- 20/10/18 LETTER:-"Dear Nellie. Have the 'flu' but getting better I think. Have been here 4 days. Can't remeber if I have written to you for some time and am sorry I haven't. I can't remember. Will you please write to Neita. If she saw a letter like this she would go silly. No hope of "Blighty". Your loving cousin Don"
- 16/11/18 LETTER:-"From Rev. H. W. Mackay, 3rd Stationary Hospital Rouen. I find in our records that 30280 gunner D.C. McDonald was admitted here suffering I presume from the prevailing Influenza and Pneumonia epidemic and died at ten minutes past 9 on the morning of October 22nd. The epidemic was at its worst at the time. I assume if he were able to write to you on the 20th his case took a sudden turn for the worse. He was buried in the British Section of the Rouen Cemetery on October 24th with military honours."

Eighteen days later on November 11th 1918 an armistice was signed by the Germans."

What is it that we know about this man

We know that he was born on November 4th 1888 in Maitland NSW. His father was born in Australia of Scotish parents and his mother was of Welsh extraction. He attended maitland Boys High School and progressed from there to an accountant's position with a large Neewcastle wholesale firm.

He was a tall outgoing man, six feet in height, and he described himself in one of his letters as being 12 stone 3 pounds "those rounded shoulders have gone and I am as tough as a tack".

From his letters home we consider him to be somewhat conservative in outlook yet prepared like most Australians to buck authority on occassion which he did at times with great delight.

He was beyond doubt a gentle man and with all the hopes and fears that beset men who are called on to leave their loved ones and face an uncertain future.

His letters refer longingly to the times in the future when he and his wife and son would be together again. He long to see and cradle his son but this was not to be and one can only share his anquish late in October 1918 so near to the conclusion of the war, when it no doubt dawned on him that all his hopes and asperations of a joyful reunion and a long happy life would be forever denied him.

It is a sad story, but of course, only ne of many more.

Some five miles or so on the outskirts of the French City of Rouen is the Imperial War Graves Cemetery of St Sever where the bodies of so many British and Commonwealth soldiers lie.

Above the grave of one such soldier stands a grave stonbe which reads:

30280 DRIVER
D.C. McDonald
Aust. Field Artillery
22nd October 1918
Age 28
He sleeps. Then God smiled
and it was morning matchless
and supreme

This man was my great grandfather.

Acknowledgements

I must of course acknowledge the letters and diary entries of my great grandfather without which the above could never have been written.

I must also acknowledge with great thanks the assistence my grand father has provided. I acknowledge that many of his words appear here. My sincere thanks.