

# REPORT ON JULY MEETING.

**Speaker:** Wendy Nunan.

**Topic:** “For the Love of Will” written by Wendy Nunan.

## **For the Love of Will – Aspects of World War I by Wendy E Nunan**

About 15 years ago, I was given a box of letters, with the suggestion to read through them for family history information. These were the letters sent home by my grandfather, to my grandmother, during WWI. About 10 years ago I put them into folders and began typing them up with the hope of one day having copies available for other family members to read. Two to three years ago, I began to realise that I was not just working on my grandparents love letters but was seeing first hand the realities of the First World War and the impact it had on a generation. Not only was it the story of my grandfather but also the story of his schoolmates, his army mates; a generation of young men.

The aspects I prepared to present were many of the little things you don't read about or aren't made aware of in the history books.

### **What were rations like for the men in the army? Where did the men receive the better rations, in England or in France?**

During 1918, the allies ensured that the men fighting at the front were fed well, whereas the men in training in England relied on the food parcels sent from home. "We just had tea at 4 pm. so you can guess it's a long time till 7am breakfast & a bit of supper abt. 9 pm. will be needed - I won't have any more Condensed Milk as it's gone under the food controller yesterday - No jam, syrup, sugar etc sold to troops & we have ½ lb. a week in our tea, puddings, sauces etc. so don't recognise it dearie." "My friend who rec<sup>d</sup> a parcel last week - rec<sup>d</sup> it in a biscuit tin such as you send eggs to "Randalstown" in - & had the following in his but I wouldn't send anything such as I've crossed off & you know what other foodstuffs keep for 4 months in reaching me - we eat all we can get - woolens & sox are not needed so much - I have plenty & can't take them to France or use them. The tin was sewn in calico & addressed in ink.

1 Cake (homemade)

Tin of short bread.

Tin of Butter (specially packed by factory)

Tin of Chocolates & one of Caramels

Tin of Butter Scotch, Cocoa & Milk (Milkmaid)

Handkerchiefs.

Bootlaces. (Kangaroo)

Biscuits & Cake dearie are well worth putting in - such as gingernuts - a tin of pudding etc. Anything my girlie sends me is treasured & I'll look forward to receiving it."

Each area set up a Comfort Fund to supply parcels of food, magazines, socks etc to the men who went from their area. My grandfather nominally lived at Cronulla when he signed up so he was supported by the people of Cronulla.

Whilst in France, the men at the front had plenty of food. "Whatever you please to send dearest - we have plenty food here - some luxury like biscuits, cakes in particular, & some sweets & honey are OK. ...

I obtained a pair of sox through the company's comforts, and jam, tinned fruit, & smokes (to give away.) & with the sox in parcels I can't touch any I left in England yet but I'll be able to let Tom Jefferson have some as he is short. I've been enjoying the 2 lbs. of Honey & eating up some of the "issue" biscuits as well as the bread ration daily. The large tin of Pears was worth having & two of us had a good helping & passed some on to 2 others for lunch on Friday, dearest. I don't need the sugar now but can use it I guess in some manner or hand it to the cook if unused. I have the cocoa to use up -. The cheese & paste will be handy one of those days. The couple of cakes of chocolate soon went & the few biscuits crushed to crumbs with the Goldenia Tin they were in."

By August, the men were again short of food. "01.12.1918. An early August parcel came on Friday so thanks to you & mother, dearest for it. Honey, cheese, butter-scotch, biscuits, apricots, cough-lozenges, ... are all just O.K. - we are short of rations just at present. - not too much bread & no butter today. Chocolate at Y.M.C.A. & canteen occasionally. - no biscuits for a few days though."

**What was the army postal service like?** The Army Postal Service issued a list of instructions regarding the mail. One of those instructions was to make sure all mail was properly addressed through army channels and none sent to civilians otherwise there would be delays. My grandfather organised for his mail to go via friends in England, and received his mail a week ahead of his mates. Letters mailed through the Army postal service were naturally censored, but there were ways to get around this. My grandfather wrote an extremely detailed letter during his trip from Egypt to England. To avoid the Censors purple pencil, he waited till he had leave in England and mailed this letter home from a public post box.

The postal service was extremely slow, especially by today's standards of Air Mail or email. Letters took 6 weeks to get home so a reply took 3 months from when the original letter was sent.

The men had various forms of stationery to use. There were Army lettercards, Field Service post cards (with tick or cross out the appropriate pieces), paper supplied by the YMCA, Salvation Army or the Comforts Funds with various headers printed across it and an enormous variety of post cards available for purchase. Some of the varieties of post cards available included those encouraging patriotism, support for the soldiers, excerpts from the popular songs of the day and those sketched by May Gibbs in support of our soldiers. The Army also supplied some paper and the various units produced their own Christmas Cards. My grandfather sent home cards from both 1st Divisional Engineers and the 1st Field Company, Parkhouse Camp, where the men first trained in England, also produced its own postcard with the camp poem.

### **When was ANZAC Day first celebrated?**

It was celebrated at least as early as 1918. ANZAC Cove had already been named by then as could be seen in a postcard of a painting of ANZAC Cove. On ANZAC Day 1918, my grandfather was still at Parkhouse in England. On "ANZAC Day" (Thurs.) the sports went well & the fancy dress procession, our tug-o'-war team obtained prize money for 2<sup>nd</sup> place. In the morning we had a short memorial "ANZAC" service on the parade ground till 9.30am & then came round & wrote to dad till lunch. The sports were from 1pm till abt. 4.30pm & then we had tea." In 1919, there was an ANZAC Day march through London, followed by a march of overseas troops on Canada Day, 3rd May. For these occasions, Australia House was draped with placards, listing all the battlefields in which the Australian troops saw action.

### **What did the men do for entertainment or leave?**

If they had a few hours off, these were spent at the pictures or in the YMCA tents being entertained or just writing letters. If they had a day pass they could cycle around the countryside, visiting friends or making new friends. Various activities were organised both in England and in France. Whilst training at Brightlingsea, the Engineers organised an Aquatic Sports Programme containing both serious races and fun races. Will sent home the printed programme,

noting that he had won the Breaststroke and that Sapper Bolton, also from the Lands Dept, had come third. Whilst in France, they spent a period of rest, away from the Front, at Abbeyville. During this time a Divisional Sports Day was organised at Surcamps on 29th September 1918. The First Field Company Unit Diary (in the AWM) listed the events of the day. Two interesting events which were captured on photos were the Wrestling on Horseback and Best Sustained Character Event with many Charlie Chaplin look-alikes.

**In 1918, how long were men expected to fight at the front? A day, week, month, year, till they died?**

The Allies treated their men very well. They made sure they had plenty to eat. They had them fighting at the front for only a week then had reinforcements fight the next week whilst they rested. Every so often, some of the troops would be rested well back from the front. During this time they also improved their skills. Meanwhile the Germans kept hammering their army with no rest. Eventually they were on the run, faster than what the allies could go after them.

**The Armistice was signed on 11.11.1918. When were the men able to go home? Why did it take so long for some of them to get home? What did they do whilst they were waiting to go home?**

Initially many of the men were sent into Germany as occupying forces. My grandfather headed for Germany with his Field Company but he and 2 others received orders to report to London, to work in the Pay Office. At the same time as the soldiers were headed for Germany, the officers were planning retraining schemes for the men to learn trades for when they returned home. The reason it took so long to get home was the fact that there were hundreds of thousands of men to ship home, but only the shipping capacity to send about 20,000 per month. "(16.03.1919) In February of 20,000 odd troops to send home only abt 5000 left, on account of shipping troubles. This month 23,000 are due to sail, of the 120,000 estimated as now being in France & England." "(28.05.1919) I'm hoping I will see you about mid-September as we are No. 48 quota

& only 27 have sailed to date.” After working at the Pay Office for a short while, Will was able to get into the Surveying School at Southampton. Some of the men were those he had previously worked with at the Lands Department in Sydney or at Forbes. Others were men he knew from his schooldays. The aim was for the men to start their studies in England and continue them on the ship until reaching Australia, where they would do their exams.

The “Norman” left Devonport, England on 6th July 1919, travelled via Cape Town in South Africa and arrived in Sydney on 20th August 1919. This was 2 yrs and 1 month after William enlisted at Tamworth. It was 21 months to the day since he had left Australia for the war.

What cannot be put into words here are the many photographs Will took in Egypt, England, France and travelling on the ships. He continued establishing his life on film during his many years of travelling NSW for the Lands Department. A small selection of these photographs, plus copies of all the postcards he sent home, can be found in the book “For the Love of Will”.