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## **‘By Diggers Defended, By Victorians Mended’: Australian Soldiers and the Reconstruction of Villers Bretonneux**

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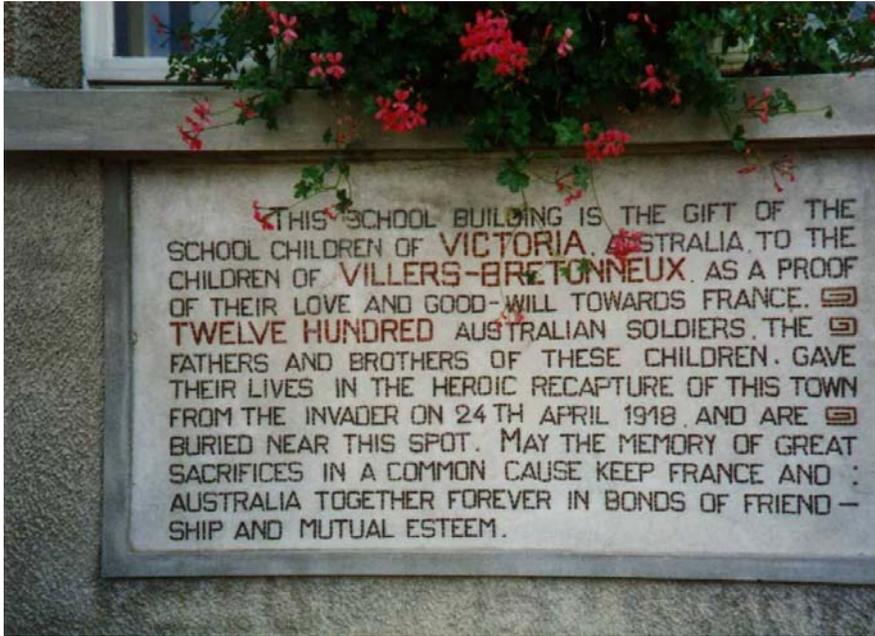
The city of Melbourne adopted the French town of Villers Bretonneux under the auspices of the British League of Help in 1920. Money was raised in Victoria and sent to Villers Bretonneux to help with rebuilding the town after it was destroyed in fighting during April 1918. Many Australian soldiers had been involved in that fighting, and had lived in the cellars and dilapidated homes there. They had also helped the local population flee from the advancing Germans, and to pick up the pieces of their lives when they began returning to the area, such that the Australian men were welcomed into French families. The emotional attachments the Australian men thus formed with the town and her people translated into support for the adoption scheme once they returned home. In this way, the Australian ex-soldiers were carrying out the roles and obligations placed on them by dint of their positions within their adopted French families.

Shortly after Lance Corporal Roy Malcolm arrived in France in 1916, he was given a hamper of cakes by a French woman. The woman wrote to Roy later in the year, and asked whether she could assume the role of ‘god-mother’ to him while he was in France, explaining that many French women were caring for Australian soldiers in that way.<sup>1</sup>

Recent research by historians highlights the way the war — and especially wartime losses — helped to unify people: networks of help were formed among groups of civilians in Australia, and stretched out to the soldiers serving in the distant theatres of war. They endured into the post-war years, with soldiers visiting the families of their dead mates when they returned to Australia; and with proxies visiting, and caring for, the faraway graves of the Australian soldiers, for instance. Jay Winter has referred to these networks as bonds of ‘fictive’ or ‘adoptive kinship’, arguing that strangers, unified by their shared war experiences, joined together in surrogate families.<sup>2</sup>

Roy Malcolm’s story fits in neatly with the concept of fictive kinship. But his story also extends our understanding of how and when these bonds were formed. While historians have so far concentrated on the way death and loss led to the formation of bonds, Roy’s experience is evidence of the way these networks of help were formed when the Diggers lived alongside the French civilians. These fictive family bonds, although rooted in the experiences of the war years, endured beyond 1918. In 1920 an organisation called the British League of Help for the Devastated Areas of France was established in London. The organisation aimed at pairing up ruined French towns with the relatively wealthy and unscathed towns and cities of Britain. Money and goods were to be sent across the Channel from the British, with the French — in a conscious reference to family — considered to be ‘adopted’ by their benefactor town under the scheme.<sup>3</sup>

The adoption idea struck a chord in Australia, and the city of Melbourne formally adopted the town of Villers Bretonneux in 1920.<sup>4</sup> More than £22,000 was sent from the state of Victoria to Villers Bretonneux over the next two and a half years.<sup>5</sup> This made the adoption of Villers Bretonneux the most successful adoption, in financial terms, of the British League of Help. Almost half the money sent from Victoria was used to supply the townspeople with seeds, grain, stock, and various household goods; the other half was used to finish the job of rebuilding the local school, which a group of Diggers had started before they returned to Australia.<sup>6</sup> The school was named Victoria College, and plaques outside the school refer to the Australian soldiers who had fought and died to save the town, and to the generosity of the Victorian people in helping to rebuild it.



Plaque on Villers Bretonneux Primary School

The Australian soldiers had spent many months stationed in and around the town of Villers Bretonneux during 1918. Villers Bretonneux was an area of great strategic importance during the war, and was highly prized by both the Allies and the Germans. The Germans tried to take the town from the Allies during the first few days of April 1918, but were unsuccessful. They tried again in the early hours of 24 April, and this time they took it from the British. Later that day six Australian battalions were hastily moved to the area, and charged with the task of retaking the town.

The counter attack launched by the Australians was risky: there was no artillery barrage before the attack to soften the German defences, and it was a night manoeuvre across territory that had not been properly reconnoitred. But by dawn the Australians had possession of the town. This battle is often referred to as the turning point of the war — the counter attack at Villers Bretonneux saw the end of the successes the Germans had been enjoying during the early months of 1918, and a demarcation stone, which lies just outside the township of Villers Bretonneux, marks the extent of the

German advance west in their Spring offensive.<sup>7</sup> Although the counter attack is generally referred to as a great success, it was an expensive one, with over twelve hundred Australian casualties overnight, and with the almost complete destruction of the town of Villers Bretonneux.

Ironically, the devastation of the town that night was a God-send for the men of the AIF. Bombs and grenades exploded in the town, buildings caught fire, and these served as a landmark for the troops as they advanced across the unfamiliar countryside in the darkness.<sup>8</sup> But with daylight many of the men were moved by the scene. Corporal Noel Keating thought it was 'pitiable' to see the way the houses at Villers Bretonneux had been 'knocked about'. Gunner Ralph Keegan made his way along what had been the main street of the town, and described it as 'a mass of wreckage'. When he visited one of the chateaux of the town, he noticed 'the priceless furniture, carpets, paintings ... that had been utterly destroyed by shell fire, dust and the elements', and he commented that the town was 'a shambles'.<sup>9</sup> The reactions of both Keating and Keegan are typical of the comments made by the Diggers about the destruction of France.

When Lieutenant Edgerton arrived in France in 1916 he was immediately impressed with France, commenting on the beauty of the countryside, and the 'quaint' villages. Two years later he lamented that: 'The villages around here are pitiful to see. Day by day they are being crumbled up and blown to bits, whereas a month or so ago they were happy, prosperous houses of the French people ... The ruined houses and gardens — both flower and vegetable — look horribly desolate and mutilated.'<sup>10</sup>

Captain Bill Braithwaite was disgusted by the devastation of the French countryside, which he thought was entirely the fault of the Germans:

Fritz is a dirty dog. All the villages he has absolutely ruined. I don't suppose this is so bad but in some places he has cut down fruit trees and other beautiful trees which are of no military value to either side. Of course he has blown up roads and railways; that is all in the game, but I quite agree with all writers now who place Fritz among the lowest of the low. He poisoned some wells and in any place at all decent, he left filth over everything.<sup>11</sup>

The Diggers were also moved by the effects of the war on the civilian population. Private Arthur Sindrey wrote to his wife in Australia about the civilians who were being forced to leave their homes as he made his way to the front line in the chaos of April 1918: 'Old men and women were there, scarcely able to walk, indeed some could not walk for one old lady I saw was being wheeled along in a wheelbarrow.' He wrote that he 'felt very sorry for these poor people', and he asked his wife to 'try and put ... [herself] in their place'.<sup>12</sup> J.J. Bull recalled, years after the war, the 'appalling sight' of

innocent inhabitants fleeing from their homes with a few precious possessions ... The moving column was chiefly composed of old men and women accompanied by bare-footed, weeping children. One poor old soul, old enough to be a grandmother, with her worldly possessions in a perambulator, and an old man leading a cantankerous goat were in the vanguard. It would have been ludicrous had it not been so poignantly pathetic.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to feeling sorry for the French civilians, the Australian soldiers also took care of them. Dead French civilians were buried by the men of the AIF. For instance, when Brigadier General Henry Goddard arrived in Villers Bretonneux in early April 1918, he found the body of an elderly woman. The woman had evidently been blown out of her bed by a shell, and his diary details the way he arranged for her to be buried.<sup>14</sup>

The Australian soldiers also helped French civilians escape to safety. Henry Goddard wrote of a 'pathetic case of an old woman' who had somehow been left

behind in the village of Villers Bretonneux. The woman had lived there for nearly eighty years, and was bedridden. Goddard made sure 'the boys' did all they could for her, and — despite the fact that she said she refused to leave her home — he arranged for an ambulance to come and collect her, to remove her to a position of relative safety.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Major Trousselot 'helped an old lady' as she fled from the advancing German army. As he assisted her she told him about how she had been sheltering in her cellar when the Germans arrived, and how she had managed to escape. She also told him about the way her husband and three daughters were all shot in front of her.<sup>16</sup>

While the Australians were in France they were also billeted with the local population, in this way joining French families in a very real sense. Sergeant Cyril Lawrence kept returning to visit one of the families he had been billeted with, and dined with them frequently. He could not get over the generosity of his French hosts and the way they plied him with 'all sorts of good food', and plenty of beer, wine and cognac. He confided to his family back in Australia that he was 'always half squiffy' when he left. Likewise, Roy Kyle was welcomed into one of his host homes, and was included in the confirmation dinner for one of the daughters of the family, which was also, according to his diary, a very drunken affair.<sup>17</sup>

Children were important in the development of kinship bonds between the Australian soldiers and the French civilians. Roy Kyle played hopscotch and 'catch' with the daughter of one of the families he was billeted with, and Cyril Lawrence found great delight in having 'a romp with the kiddies' of his surrogate family.<sup>18</sup> For him, spending his time playing with the French kids was, he said, 'just like being at home again'.<sup>19</sup>

The sharing of food, such an integral part of family and home life, worked in both directions. When Gunner Keegan arrived in France in Spring 1918, the first thing he noticed were the French children, asking him for bully beef. Years later he recalled that the children 'were always found near the troops waiting for food'.<sup>20</sup> And Private L.E. Willey recalled after the war that many of the French who had been forced to leave their homes were starving, so he and his mates 'gave up a lot of tucker to help feed the poor beggars'.<sup>21</sup>

These acts of helping the French escape to safety, of living with them, sharing food and drink with them, and of spending time with the children, overcame cultural and linguistic barriers, and — as we can see through the stories of Cyril Lawrence and Roy Kyle — they also paved the way for emotional attachments to be formed between the men of the AIF and the French civilians. And there is evidence that the French felt just as attached to the Australians. When Madame Malfait, a French woman who billeted Australian soldiers on the Somme, wrote to the mother of an Australian soldier when the war was over, she commented that she cared for the men as if they were her own boys.<sup>22</sup> Her sons were serving with the French army, so the Australian soldiers were taking the place of her own boys — in a physical, as well as an emotional, sense.

Such strong bonds often made the soldiers' return to Australia bitter-sweet. When the Commandant of the Australian Base Depot prepared to leave France in 1919 he wrote of his 'regretful sadness' over leaving the land that had 'sheltered' the Australians for so long, and over leaving his French friends. 'Good-bye, dear France ... Good-bye, dear comrades and friends' he wrote, stating that 'greatest among the memories' of war 'will be the memory of the France we are leaving where we have lived, loved, lost, and won so much'.<sup>23</sup>

Corporal Henry Taylor's memoirs highlight the way he had also become part of a French family by the time the war was over. He recalled that when he went to the station to leave France, 'mother, father and daughter' were all there to farewell him. He was not the only Australian with an entourage, and he commented: 'As the long train slowly pulled out of the platform with hands waving fond farewells, one would have thought that we were leaving home, not going home.'<sup>24</sup>

The Australian soldiers knew that when they left France there was little likelihood that they would ever return. But the scheme to 'adopt' Villers Bretonneux in 1920 offered soldiers the opportunity to make an emotional connection with the place and the people they had formed such strong attachments to during the war. Ex-soldiers were heavily involved in Melbourne's adoption of Villers Bretonneux. General Sir John Monash, Brigadier Harold 'Pompey' Elliott, and General Sir John Gellibrand, all of whom had led the Australians in the fighting around the town throughout 1918, were involved in lobbying the Lord Mayor of Melbourne to get the adoption scheme off the ground, as well as being involved in the attempts to promote the scheme amongst the general public. Monash was elected President of the Victorian Villers Bretonneux Fund Committee; Gellibrand and Elliott were his Vice Presidents. They spoke at lunches and meetings, they wrote letters to the editors of the *Age* and the *Argus*, and to regional and suburban mayors, asking them to promote the cause within their own local government areas.<sup>25</sup>

Other ex-AIF men served on the Committee for the adoption of Villers Bretonneux.<sup>26</sup> James Martin, President of the Victorian branch of the RSSILA, promised the support of the returned men of the state.<sup>27</sup> Lieutenant Colonel Watson — who had fought at Villers Bretonneux in April 1918 — made repeated appeals to the Director of the Victorian Education Department to donate to the adoption Fund.<sup>28</sup> Lieutenant Lee, who had been stationed at Villers Bretonneux while he worked as the Inspector of Australian graves on the Somme, spoke at meetings and wrote in newspapers about the way the townspeople visited the nearby graves of the Australian soldiers every week.<sup>29</sup>

The pattern of support for the adoption from the men of the AIF was reflected in the suburbs and rural areas across Victoria. In Brighton, the mayor's son, a returned man, urged his father to support the adoption, and told him about the terrible destruction of the town.<sup>30</sup> And in Woodend, Allan Johnson, who had also fought in the area, gave a lecture on Villers Bretonneux — complete with 'lantern slides' — so that people who had stayed in Australia during the war could get an understanding of the scale of the destruction.<sup>31</sup>

Returned soldiers were also involved in the hands-on fundraising for Villers Bretonneux. A special 'French Week' of fundraising activities and events was hosted in Melbourne in September 1921, culminating in a button 'day'. The city of Melbourne was transformed for button day, with signs declaring 'By Diggers Defended, By Victorians Mended'. Special buttons, or badges, had been cast to be sold on the day — they took the form of miniature replicas of the commemorative tablet paid for by the people of Villers Bretonneux, and which had been presented to Australian soldiers still stationed in the town in July 1919. The day saw the streets filled with people rattling collection boxes in aid of the cause. Concert parties and bands paraded through the streets, and ex-soldiers had a prominent presence. They staffed stalls, sold donated goods, and the badges, and they called on passers-by to build a mile of pennies. They also tried to convey a sense of the devastated areas of France by constructing a 'ruined village' from the charred remains of a building recently destroyed by fire. Ex-soldiers

continued to collect money for Villers Bretonneux after button day, with various returned soldiers' groups across Victoria sending money to the committee in Melbourne for the remainder of 1921.<sup>32</sup>

The involvement of ex-soldiers' in the fundraising for Villers Bretonneux departed from the orthodox gender roles associated with voluntary work. On the one hand the act of physically rebuilding, or constructing, allowed the ex-soldiers to perform a masculine role. But extending help to Villers Bretonneux also has feminine, or nurturing, undertones. Fundraising and voluntary work was seen as an avenue for women and children to contribute to the war effort while the men were upholding their 'masculine' role of fighting.<sup>33</sup> Where men *were* involved in the wartime Patriotic Funds, they generally took on the more public roles involved in promoting an appeal, or held the 'difficult' positions on the executive committees, such as Treasurer. The committee of the Victorian Villers Bretonneux Fund bears this out — men held the positions of President and Vice Presidents. A man held the role of secretary; men spoke at meetings to publicise the cause, and it was a male who was appointed as 'organiser' of the Committee — even though it was a woman, Charlotte Crivelli, who was actually responsible for a great deal of the 'organising'.<sup>34</sup>

According to the orthodoxy, while the men were making the speeches and managing the money for Patriotic Funds, women were to organise behind the scenes, and to endure the more menial and unsung tasks for the cause. They undertook the door-to-door canvassing, they cooked for and staffed the cake stalls; they served the food and then they washed up afterwards at the numerous fundraising events; and they collected money on the various fundraising 'days' held during the war. Women certainly did all this, and more, for Villers Bretonneux, but, as we have seen, they were assisted in these tasks by returned men on button day.

One explanation for the departure from the more traditional gender divisions in relation to fundraising for Villers Bretonneux, and the male involvement in some of the roles usually left to women, lies in the fact that the Diggers had seen first hand the effects of war on the French civilians, and were therefore motivated to help.

But they were also motivated to help because they had formed familial attachments with the French, especially with the French women like Madame Malfait, who sheltered the Australians and cared for them as if they were their own sons. Most of the men of the AIF were young and single.<sup>35</sup> The Australian soldiers transferred their ideas about family relationships to the families they joined in France. The Australian soldiers took on the role of son when they allowed the French women to cook and care for them, and when they were outraged by the destruction of family homes in France; again when they ensured that the elderly 'mothers' were protected from the Germans. By involving themselves in the adoption of Villers Bretonneux they were again taking on a position within the 'family' that they had been conditioned to accept: the act of 'providing for' their adopted French families was consistent with the gender roles and expectations of the day. And with such a sense of family in France, it must have been easy for the Diggers to continue to think of northern France as being 'home'. The ongoing attachment of the men of the AIF to Villers Bretonneux therefore demonstrates that the return to one home after the war did not diminish the affections for the other, faraway home.

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<sup>1</sup> Lance Corporal Roy Malcolm, letter, reproduced in the Riverina Recorder, 16 August 1916, p. 2; 30 August 1916, p. 2.

- <sup>2</sup> J.M. Winter, 'Communities in Mourning' in *Authority, Identity and Social History of the Great War*, eds., Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin Coetzee, Providence: Berghahn, 1995, pp. 325-350; Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, chap. 1; Tanja Luckins, *The Gates of Memory: Australian Peoples' Experiences and Memories of Loss and the Great War*, Fremantle: Curtin University Press; Bruce Scates, 'The Unknown Sock Knitter: Voluntary Work, Emotional Labour, Bereavement and the Great War', *Labour History*, Vol. 81, November 2001, pp. 29-49; Scates, *Return to Gallipoli: Walking the Battlefields of the Great War*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006; Bart Ziino, *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War*, Crawley: University of Western Australia Press, 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> British League of Help, *Second Annual Report*, London, 1922, Glenesk-Bathurst Papers, MS 1990/1/2040, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds; Panorama, supplement, 15 August 1922, p. 3, in Glenesk-Bathurst Papers, MS 1990/1/2051.
- <sup>4</sup> *Argus*, 8 October 1920, p. 6.
- <sup>5</sup> Victorian Villers Bretonneux Fund, *The Golden Book*, Victoria: Victorian Villers Bretonneux Fund, 1925.
- <sup>6</sup> *Robinvale Sentinel*, 5 May 1984, p. 2.
- <sup>7</sup> See for example F.M. Cutlack, ed., *War Letters of General Monash*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1935, pp. 236-38; C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, Vol. V, The AIF in France, 1918*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1939), 604; Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, Ringwood: Penguin, 1974, p. 197; Ross McMullin, "'Perhaps the Greatest Individual Feat of the War': The Battle of Villers-Bretonneux, 1918", *Wartime*, 2, April 1998, pp. 51-55.
- <sup>8</sup> Bean, *Official History*, p. 587.
- <sup>9</sup> Noel Keating, Diary entry, May 5, 1918, AWM PR 00561; Keegan, Ralph M (Gunner), 'An Even Break', AWM MS1333. CHAPTER 8: 7-8, 22.
- <sup>10</sup> E.H. Edgerton, Lieut., Diary extracts, 1 April 1916, 8 April 1916, 1 May 1918, AWM 3DRL/6582.
- <sup>11</sup> Bill Braithwaite, Capt., Letter, 26 March 1917, AWM PR 00349.
- <sup>12</sup> Arthur Sindrey, Letter, 26 September 1918. AWM 3DRL/7514A.
- <sup>13</sup> J.J. Bull, 'Beloved of the Valkyries', AWM MSS 1359.
- <sup>14</sup> Henry Goddard, Brig.-Gen., Diary extract, 8 April 1918, AWM 3DRL/2379.
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>16</sup> H.E. Trousselot, Maj., Diary extract [undated], AWM 2DRL/0088.
- <sup>17</sup> Peter Yule, ed., *Sergeant Lawrence goes to France*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1987, pp.16, 30; Bryce Courtenay, *An Anzac's Story: Roy Kyle AIF*, Camberwell: Penguin, 2003, p. 238.
- <sup>18</sup> Courtenay, *An Anzac's Story*, p. 239.
- <sup>19</sup> Yule, *Sergeant Lawrence goes to France*, pp. 16, 30.
- <sup>20</sup> Keegan, chap. 6, p. 5. (Keegan begins each chapter at page 1.) Keegan, Ralph M (Gunner), 'An Even Break', AWM MS1333.
- <sup>21</sup> L.E. Willey, 'War Experiences 1916-1919', AWM MSS 1471, 21.
- <sup>22</sup> Madam Malfait, letter to Emma Goldsborough, 15 November 1918. In author's possession.
- <sup>23</sup> Col. C.H. Davis in *The Digger*, 13 May 1919. Transcribed by Rose Venn Brown, AWM 2DRL/0598.
- <sup>24</sup> Cpl. Henry Gordon Taylor, 'The Mob That Shot the Camel', 184. AWM MSS 0863.
- <sup>25</sup> See for example Charlotte Crivelli to John Monash, 4 August 1920, Monash Papers, NLA MS 1884, Series 1a, Box 21, Folder 189; 15 September, 1920, Series 1a, Box 22, Folder 193; T.G. Ellery, Melbourne Town Clerk to John Monash, 28 September 1920, Monash Papers, Series 1a, Box 22, Folder 193; *Herald* (Melbourne), 7 July 1921, p. 7; John Gellibrand to Mayor of St Kilda, 26 July 1921, Robinswood Collection, Robinswood Homestead, Robinvale; John Gellibrand, letter to Editor, *The Age*, 27 July 1921, p. 10.
- <sup>26</sup> For a list of members of the Executive Committee of the Victorian Villers Bretonneux Fund see Victorian Villers Bretonneux Fund, *The Golden Book*.
- <sup>27</sup> *Herald* (Melbourne), 7 July 1921, p. 7; *Argus*, 8 July 1921, p. 7.
- <sup>28</sup> Minutes, Victorian Education Department War Relief Fund meeting, 12 September 1921, Public Records Office of Victoria VPRS 14009/P/001, Unit 1.
- <sup>29</sup> *Brighton Southern Cross*, 1 October 1921, p. 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Brighton Southern Cross*, 15 October 1921, p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Woodend Star*, 20 August 1921, p. 2; 27 August 1921, p. 2; 10 September 1921, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> *Argus*, 3 September 1921, p. 18; *Age*, 3 September 1921, p. 14; Victorian Villers Bretonneux Fund, *The Golden Book*.

<sup>33</sup> See Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Victoria: Nelson, 1980; Sir Ernest Scott, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, Vol. 11, Australia During the War*, Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1941; Melanie Oppenheimer, *All Work, No Pay: Australian Civilian Volunteers in War*, Walcha: Ohio Productions, 2002; John McQuilton, *Rural Australia and the Great War: From Tarrawingee to Tangambalanga*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 2001; Carmel Shute, 'From Balaclavas to Bayonets: Women's Voluntary War Work, 1939-41' in *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia, 1788 - 1978*, ed., Elizabeth Windschuttle, Sydney: Fontana/Collins, 1980; Ian Willis, 'The Women's Voluntary Services: A Study of War and Volunteering and Camden, 1939-45', PhD Thesis, University of Wollongong, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Victorian Villers Bretonneux Fund, *The Golden Book*; *Herald* (Melbourne), 7 July 1921, p. 7; *Argus*, 8 July 1921, p. 7; Charlotte Crivelli to General Sir John Monash, 4 August, 24 August, 15 September 1920; 5 July 1921, Monash Papers NLA MS1884, Series 1a, Box 21, Folders 189 and 191; Box 22, Folder 193; Box 24, Folder 213.

<sup>35</sup> L.L. Robson, 'The Origin and Character of the First AIF, 1914-1918: Some Statistical Evidence', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 15, 61, 1973, p. 743; McQuilton, *Rural Australia and the Great War*, p. 173; Jennifer Hawksley, "'Days of Tears and Longing": War, Grief and Memory in the Illawarra 1914-1925', Honours Thesis, University of Wollongong, 2004, p. 2.