



Newcastle

Family History Society Inc.

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Newcastle Family History Society acknowledges the First Nations peoples and we pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging. We acknowledge the people of the Awabakal and Worimi nations, the traditional custodians of the land on which our Society is based. NFHS also acknowledges and pays respect to the other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations from whose lands our members and readers are drawn.

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Monthly Meetings

The society meets on the first Tuesday of each month (December and January excepted) – February, March, October, November at 7.30 pm, and April to September at 2.00 pm.

Library Hours

Thursdays	1.00 pm – 3.00 pm
Saturdays	10.00 am – 3.00 pm
Meeting nights	6.00 pm – 7.25 pm
Meeting days	12.30 pm – 1.55 pm

Use of the Library is free to Society members. Visitors are asked to pay a fee for each visit of \$5 per person on Thursdays and \$10 per person on Saturdays.

The Library closes over the Christmas/New Year period.
This Journal has been printed in-house by NFHS Inc.



Membership March to February	Full Year	From 1 Sep
Single or Primary Family (Journal collected)	\$45.00	\$22.50
Additional family member (No Journal or Newsletter)	\$30.00	\$15.00
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Joining Fee (New members)*	\$15.00	*

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Winner of the Nick Vine Hall Award in 2013, 2016 and 2019; Runner-up in 2009

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Home Birth Nurse in her 'walking out' uniform, from the Crown Street Women's Hospital, Sydney

Themes For Our Next Journals

December Journal (252): As stated in the last newsletter, we were unsure whether we would be publishing a second Journal with the theme of **Heroism**. Well we have been very fortunate to have received many articles. Therefore the December Journal will be **Heroism Part 2**. We would still love you to send in articles on this theme. Please have them to the editor by **Saturday 25 October 2025**.

March Journal (253): The theme of this Journal will be **Writer's Choice**. Always popular, this theme gives you the chance to share your writing on any topic related to family history – your research, family stories, houses – the list is endless. Please start thinking about what you might write. Articles would need to be submitted by **Saturday 24 January 2026**.

Advice for Contributors

Format: Typed articles can be sent to nfheditor@gmail.com or delivered to the Society library, addressed to the editor. Handwritten items will also be accepted.

Illustrations: Photographs and other illustrations are especially welcome. Their sources must be provided.

Guidelines:

- Articles on the stated theme are given priority.
- So everyone has a chance to have their work published, it's helpful if articles are less than 2,000 words.
- One column of text is about 470 words; a page about 950.
- Images – portrait format takes up about 280 words; landscape format about 135.
- References are important but are more reader friendly if incorporated into the text instead of as footnotes.

Personal information:

- No personal information, e.g. addresses and phone numbers, will be included in the Journal.
- Any enquiries or responses about the Journal or its contents should be made via nfheditor@gmail.com

All website addresses recorded in this Journal were accessed on 9 August 2025.

Cover Images: Front Cover: Image: Ken Shilling. For details see p.4

Back Cover: Mine and flood images: Ken Shilling Collection

From the Editor's Desk

Once again, the eTeam bids farewell to one of our long-term members, Jim MacDougall. You can read more about Jim's contributions to the eTeam and the Society on page 3 of this Journal.

Our theme of Heroism has elicited a wonderful response from our members, with the contributions not only causing us to extend the theme over two issues of the Journal, but encouraging us to really analyse the concept of heroism itself. As one would expect, we have wonderful stories of sacrifice and service in war time but it has also brought to light many heroes from less obvious arenas. Some of our writers are even inviting us to re-examine those we have considered heroes – while they may have been products of their times, do their activities and 'achievements' fit with what we consider heroic today? In saying that, we also have to warn our readers that in these re-examinations, we are confronted with language and attitudes related to the stories that we would find intolerable today. We must also warn that some articles include the names and stories of Indigenous people who have died.

Even our incoming exchange journals provided food for thought on this issue. In *Timespan*, December 2024, No. 177 from Nepean FHS, we found an article that fitted into our ideas. With the permission of the author, their member **Denise Newton**, we share this:

Harold's heroism stemmed from the sort of personal and mental strength that allows a man to deal with the blows of life with quiet dignity and determination. He was a small man in stature, and in his place in the world.

It was not his doing that his nation's economy went belly-up just after his first child was born. It was not his fault that his family was evicted. There was certainly nothing he could have done to prevent the world convulsing into war.

The responsibility – the blame for those devastating events lies elsewhere.

It is people like Harold who must pick up their shattered lives and try to make the best of things; to do what must be done for family or their nation. They are the quiet heroes.

We recommend reading the whole article to fully understand Denise's thoughts about her grandfather.

The eTeam enjoys producing this quality Journal and we always welcome comments on our work. If you would like to be involved in any aspect of the production of the Journal, from your own writing through to its physical production, please let us know either personally or by email to nfheditor@gmail.com

Margaret Ashford

From Our President

We head into spring with the first of our Journals on the theme of Heroism, with the eTeam receiving so many excellent articles on that theme that it was necessary to devote an entire second volume to the topic. I look forward to reading both!

Our winter this year has been conducive to lots of family history work while snuggled in a warm room with a hot cup of tea or coffee. Short, cool days make the thought of staying indoors researching very appealing.

I have been working on the history of the early years of colonial settlement in Newcastle and the Hunter Valley. I learn so much as I trace the lives of the female convicts and those whose paths they crossed as I develop new podcasts for our *Felonious Females* series.

Through the hard work and enthusiasm of our Podcasting Team, including our IT Manager, and a number of other members and guests, we are recording our family and local history to ensure it is available to all. If you have not yet visited our [NFHS YouTube channel](#), where you can access our guest speaker recordings as well as our podcasts, you may be pleasantly surprised by what has been recorded and preserved for the future.

I would once again like to draw your attention to the wonderful selection of exchange journals available in our [Members' Area](#) of the website. You will need to access this area by using the current password – see each month's NFHS Newsletter for the password. I feel sure that you will find something of interest amongst the current and past journals and bulletins from around 70 other family history and historical societies throughout Australia. I can highly recommend them.

I would also like to take this opportunity to welcome Liza Moss and Paul Cooke, who have jointly accepted the position of NFHS Librarian. Liza and Paul, who both have library qualifications, have been members of the Library Group since they joined our Society. We are most fortunate to have such a dedicated and hardworking team to oversee the management of our resources.

Despite the speed with which 2025 is disappearing we still have many interesting and enjoyable events to look forward to in the final quarter of the year: the Family History Mini Conference in our rooms on Saturday 13 and Sunday 14 September where we can hear speakers at the 40th NSW & ACT Association Conference in Wollongong via Zoom link; the Mayfield Heritage Walk with Julie Keating on Monday 29 September; and our annual Christmas luncheon on Friday 5 December. Please check the [NFHS website](#) as well as our closed Facebook Group and read your newsletter to keep abreast of all our activities.

Mel Woodford

Farewell Jim MacDougall



Our eTeam again says farewell to a long-term, valued member. Jim MacDougall, who passed away on 5 May last, has been a member of the eTeam for about the last ten years. During his time with the eTeam Jim has written for the Journal on topics as varied as his childhood memories of growing up in Canada, which was his first contribution; the locations of many Newcastles of the world; elements of Canadian history and his own family links; through to coincidences of birthdays – combining two of his great loves, mathematics and family history – as well as playing an active part in the editing and production of the Journal.

Jim has also been Society Librarian for quite a few years, which ensured that our impressive Library collection continued to be brought to the attention of our members and others, through the Journal. As Librarian and an eTeam member he was heavily involved in the ongoing project of indexing our Journals, the results of which to date can be found on the main computer in the reception area.

Also active in the Sandgate group, Jim has researched and written for the souvenir booklet, including for this year's planned tour, as well as actively participating in the day's activities, ensuring that the path of the tour was well marked with his arrows.

Jim will be missed by members and by his family, to whom the eTeam extends condolences.

From Exchange Journals

Once again, the latest group of exchange journals provide some interesting reading for our members. These issues will be found on the 'New Journal' Shelves in the little walkway between the two sections of our building. Notable among them this time are:

Links 'n' Chains, Liverpool Genealogical Society, June 2025, No. 140. This issue includes a most interesting article entitled 'Relationships – and their historical meanings'. It gives some delightful examples of how utter confusion could occur in interpreting relationships found in old documents: in early America 'son-in-law' meant stepson, which gave rise to some difficulties in interpreting wills mentioning both relationships. Then there is the phrase 'natural children' meaning those related by blood, whether 'legitimate' or not, with this phrase often being interpreted as only meaning 'legitimate'. For assistance they refer us to 'The OED and Your Family Tree' pdf, to be found at <https://digital.library.villanova.edu/files/vudl:384580/M-ASTER>.

This Journal also mentions a number of notable articles from our issue of June 2025: Richard Ollerton's 'Wedding Bells and Dents'; Pamela Harrison's 'Advances in Medicine' (both of these are also cited in Nepean FHS' *Timespan* No. 178 of March 2025); and from the March issue: Liza Moss's 'Extra! Extra! Read all About It!'; Jim MacDougall's 'The Hunter's Own Postmaster General'; Sandra Boyd's 'The Baker Family of Dinton, Wiltshire'; Paul Kiem's 'Forget Me Not'. This is very positive recognition of our writers and the Journal as a whole. Congratulations to all involved.

Timespan from Nepean FHS, No. 178, March 2025 provides excellent advice about reading, understanding and evaluating handwritten documents, provided in a talk to that society by Gail Davis, a retired archivist from NSW State Archives.

For anyone having difficulty finding information about Hunter involvement in the Korean War, please refer to *The Patrick Plains Gazette* Vol 42, No. 1, 2025 from Singleton's Family History Society, in which you'll find a list of 25 men from that area who served in Korea, along with a story about one of them, **Edmund George 'Sonny' Bourke**.

Feedback on Journal 250

Our 'Celebrations' issue was certainly well received by members, some of whom commented on how much they appreciate and look forward to receiving their Journal, even 'devouring' the content!

We also received a request for more 'How To' sections and will try to include more in the future.

Can you help?

Firstly, why not let us know exactly what you'd like to learn about? Then we would try to find someone who could write about that specific topic. Or, even better, if you are really familiar with a particular aspect of family history research, why not consider writing it up for inclusion in the Journal?

Both these things would help us meet the needs and interests of our members. Meanwhile, if you happen to have family with Canadian, Russian or Ukrainian links, you'll find some information on looking for them in this issue.

A Father's Courage

Ken Shilling

During the time I was teaching at Dudley Public School I had the opportunity to organise a number of, for want of a better name, Grandparents' Days. On these occasions the students of my sixth class would meet senior citizens from the local community and ask them questions about their own school days and times past. I also had the great pleasure to meet some very interesting people who had marvellous tales to tell.

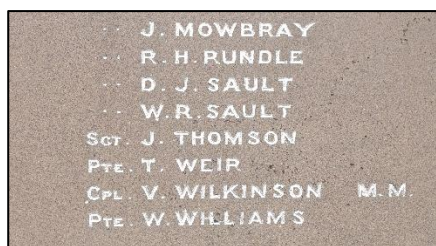
One such story is directly connected to the picture on this issue's cover. The image shows part of the ceremony at the opening of the Dudley War Memorial. The unveiling was performed by Mr **A.R. Cant**, the superintendent of the Dudley Coal Company, on Anzac Day, 1922 with about 250 people attending the ceremony.

The monument cost £360, a very large sum for the time, while Meldrum and Markey of Newcastle were the contractors. Although there have been suggestions in the past that the monument be moved, it still stands proudly at the busy intersection of Ocean Street and Redhead Road.

In the photograph we can see an elderly gentleman with an umbrella gazing down at the names inscribed on the monument. He was the subject of the story I was told back in the 1970s during a Grandparents' Day at Dudley Public School. An old man was telling me about his school days, notably when he was a student in the class of Mr **Wilkinson**, the headmaster.

One day in late 1917 a telegram boy arrived at the classroom door. He handed Mr Wilkinson a telegram. The headmaster opened it and read the message it contained. He then folded the telegram, put it in his coat pocket, and proceeded with the lesson.

The students later learned that the telegram contained the dreadful news that Mr Wilkinson's son had been killed on 14 October and one, at least, had retained a life-long memory of the courage of a father displayed on that day in that classroom.



This was the part of the monument
Mr Wilkinson was looking at.

Corporal **V.B. Wilkinson** was a popular member of the Cooks Hill Surf Club and his name also appears on their memorial above Bar Beach. He was a member of the 34th Battalion in which other people connected to Dudley Public School served, including **Clarence Jeffries VC**.

Ken Shilling (Member 461)

Society Events

Over the period since the last Journal, we have only had one guest speaker. Our May meeting was the Annual General Meeting and our July meeting was a fun-filled Christmas in July and trivia afternoon. Many thanks go to John and Judy Mulhearn who ran the trivia for us. The questions garnered a lot of laughs and quite a few 'errs', and were enjoyed with yummy chocolate prizes. Mel Woodford put together some fabulous prizes and we finished off the afternoon with a delicious spread of treats. Thanks to those who helped make the afternoon special.



Heather, Clelia and Sharyn with the afternoon tea

At our June meeting, our member Julie Keating presented to us on her latest book *Newcastle in the 1800s ... from penal settlement to coalopolis*. Coalopolis was a term applied to Newcastle in the late 1800s due to its importance as a coal producer and exporter. Three main factors led to the town becoming the largest coal exporter in the world – the high-quality Borehole coal seam underneath several suburbs, government decisions about the penal settlement and coal mining, and world events, especially the demand for coal due to the industrial revolution and gold rushes.

Julie gave us an in-depth overview of the early years of coal development in Newcastle and showed many fascinating photos and maps of the time. She also gave some very interesting figures about the amount of coal exported from Newcastle. Amongst other things she discussed land grants, free settlers, the Australian Agricultural Company, the development of the railway, and the many mines in the Newcastle region. This presentation is well worth watching and can be done by viewing it either via the NFHS website, under the YouTube tab, or by searching YouTube for Newcastle Family History Society.

Zell Meehan v Newcastle City Council: The right of women to work after marriage

Jude Conway



6 May 1974 *Newcastle Morning Herald* (NMH)
Newcastle Region Library
Hunter Photobank

Zell Meehan was born **Amy Gazell Burke** in the working-class Newcastle suburb of Plattsburg, an old coal mining village, on 22 August 1918, to **Esmond Edward Burke**, aged 27, originally from Singleton, and **Amy Gazell Burke** (née **Bennett**), 29, whose parents lived on the corner of Clarke and Ranclaud Streets, Plattsburg. Other than the school, Plattsburg is now subsumed under the umbrella of Wallsend.

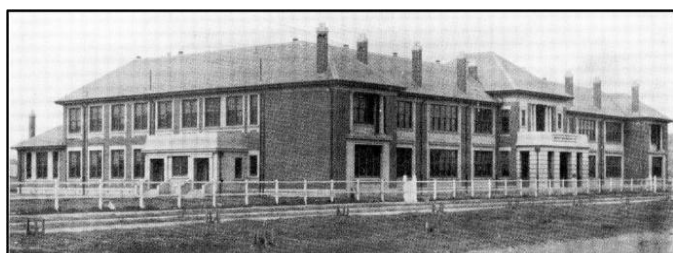
Zell was born in her parents' miner's cottage also in Clarke Street, number 38.

Zell's only sibling, a sister **Olive**, was born in 1920. Their father Ted Burke was a horse trainer, in particular the horses owned by his parents-in-law. Among those he raced were *Lyn Olive*, *Lord Zell*, *Beau Zell*, and *Lady Zell*.



The Burke family home
Image: Jude Conway 2025

The Burke family were parishioners at St Luke's Church of England, Wallsend. Zell's parents married there, as did Zell's sister, and both parents' funeral services were held there. Displaying her innate organising abilities, in 1937 Zell helped establish St Luke's Younger Set which arranged dances and fun activities. The following year she was chosen as the church's candidate for an inter-parish queen fundraising competition. The New Lambton parish candidate raised the most money, probably because it was the most affluent suburb of the nine parishes. Despite Zell's abilities, Wallsend parish raised the second smallest amount.



Newcastle High School: The First 75 Years,
75th Anniversary Committee, Newcastle, 1983,
Audrey Armitage, p.44

The Burke children attended Plattsburg Primary school, directly across from their grandparents' house, and a hop, step and jump from their own home. As the dux of the primary school, Zell was selected to attend Newcastle Girls High School in 1930, the first full year of its operation.

Each of the 500 girls who enrolled that year received a souvenir booklet which listed Zell in class 1D. Whatever that grading might signify, Zell won prizes and certificates throughout high school, e.g. she came second in the whole year in her 3rd year, and first in Mechanics in 4th year. In Zell's 5th year, in August 1934 and aged only 14, her father died in Wallsend Mining District Hospital. He had been in ill-health for some time, but his death was unexpected. His early death of course affected the family's finances. **Jack Lang's** NSW government had introduced widow's pensions in 1926, so Zell's mother would have received a pension, but her father's death impacted on Zell's dream of being a teacher.

Her Leaving Certificate results that year of two As and four Bs were not sufficient for her to gain the vitally necessary scholarship to study at Sydney Teachers' College. It had to be Sydney because there was no Teachers' College in Newcastle until 1949. So Zell repeated 5th year, in 1935. She had always been a year younger than the average student so this was fair enough age-wise, though it would have cost her mother money to keep her there. Zell dropped French and replaced it with Chemistry, perhaps aiming to be a Maths/Science teacher.

With a hint to the future, Zell won a prize in February that year in an essay competition conducted by the Newcastle City Council's Electricity Supply Department. She also did well in the school exams, coming first in Maths I and impressively, in the recently taken up Chemistry, and she was second in English and Maths II. So Zell was not only brainy, she was an all-rounder.

Although only achieving two As and four Bs again in the Leaving Certificate, this time she was awarded a scholarship. However, the decision was that her mother could not afford to cover her living away from home expenses, so Zell gave up on her dream of teaching and opted to do a secretarial course at Newcastle Business College in Telford Street. This would have included shorthand, typing and business principles.

The first headmistress of Newcastle Girls High had a bias against commercial careers and when the accountancy college Hemingway and Robertson offered a free accountancy and secretarial course to the commercial student with the highest pass in the Intermediate Certificate, she turned it down. (A little family history interlude. Hemingway and Robertson, based in the AMP chambers in Hunter Street, was managed by my maternal grandfather at the time, so it was likely he who made the offer.)

The second Girls High headmistress (from 1931) thought the purpose of a High School course was 'not to create a human typing machine to do an incredible number of

words a minute ... but to train intelligence, taste and character.¹ So, it is ironic that after six years at an academically-oriented high school, Zell was forced to choose the secretarial pathway. **Robin Gordon**, who knew Zell through the Newcastle Girls High School Ex-Students Union, recalls Zell saying that she received a scholarship to the Business College and, given their scholarship exam only tested English and Arithmetic, Zell would certainly have had excellent results.²

After her course, she had no difficulty in finding employment and in mid-1936 started work as a typist at the aforementioned Electricity Supply Department, then based in the still quite new Town Hall, only opened seven years previously.

Then, in September 1939, her department transferred to the totally new NESCA House, NESCA standing for Newcastle Electricity Supply Council Administration.



Ausgrid Archives, Facebook

In 1940 Zell moved up the career ladder by being appointed private secretary to the manager. World War II was underway and as shown in the picture, NESCA House was protected in case of attack (and of course we know that Newcastle was shelled, though to little effect, by the Japanese in 1942).

In 1950 Zell applied for the position of secretary to the Lord Mayor. **Bill Burges**, the young Town Clerk (these days called Chief Executive), selected Zell because of her 'outstanding' qualifications.³ Burges was later to become an antagonist, for a time at least.

Zell took up her new duties in September 1950 as secretary to the Lord Mayor, Alderman **Harry Quinlan** (Independent) who had the distinction of becoming Newcastle's first LORD mayor after the council received Royal assent to use the title in 1948, the first Australian city that was not a capital to be allowed to do so.

Three months later **Frank Purdue** from the Citizens Group became Lord Mayor. The Citizens Group represented the interests of the local business community and mainly existed to run for Newcastle council elections.

Aside from the usual secretarial tasks, Zell became the 'stop-gap between the ratepayers and the Lord Mayor', whose office was visited by an 'unending stream of citizens'.⁴ It was said that she had the 'charm and ability to soothe the most raucous person who came in wanting the Lord Mayor's throat over a pothole'.⁵



Bill Burges, Frank Purdue and Zell
NMH, 12 November 1952
Hunter Photobank

She became popular with the NMH Topics journalists for humorous anecdotes. For example, when Zell asked one visitor his name, he said 'That's between God and me.' Asked why he wanted to see the Lord Mayor, he said: 'That's between the Lord Mayor and me.' Eventually, she found that the man had not paid his electric light bill but wanted to see the Lord Mayor 'about God's business'. Then, on his way out he signed the visitors' book, 'God hath spoken'.⁶

Zell dealt with requests for information. In 1953 she was asked 'What year was the model of the jockey removed from out [the front of] the Centennial Hotel?' Zell was able to ascertain that each year, after the running of the Newcastle Cup, the model's shirt was repainted in the winning jockey's colours, and that the model was removed after a lorry had knocked it over.⁷ I learnt from Trove that the Centennial Hotel in Hunter Street was the home of the Newcastle Jockey Club and that the cast-iron model lost a couple of limbs in the crash and was unrepairable.⁸



The 1922 Newcastle Cup, Ted Burke (r)
Sydney Mail, 10 May 1922, p.35

As mentioned, Zell's father was a horse trainer. His most notable victory was when *Lord Zell* won the Newcastle Cup in 1922, so that year the model jockey's shirt would have been painted yellow and white.

Zell played an integral role in many fundraising appeals. In 1952 the brother of the late boxer **Les Darcy** from Maitland, opened an appeal in aid of the family of the late Dunghutti boxer **Dave Sands**, who was killed in a car crash, aged only 26. Originally from Kempsey, Sands had trained in Newcastle. Zell was secretary for that appeal.

¹ 'Prize Day At Girls' High', *Newcastle Sun* 11 December 1935 p.9.

² Robin Gordon, email, 20 January 2025.

³ 'Tributes, Presentation to Zell Meehan', *NMH*, 16 June 1976 p.2.

⁴ 'Secretary To City's First Citizen', *Newcastle Sun*, August 1958, p.18.

⁵ 'Tributes, Presentation To Zell Meehan'.

⁶ 'Today's Topics', *NMH*, 19 July 1952 p.2.

⁷ 'Today's Topics', *NMH*, 15 August 1953, p.2.

⁸ Tom McLaughlin, 'Verax', *NMH*, 1 September 1950, p.4.

She was also secretary-treasurer for the annual Lord Mayoral Debutante Balls. One of her tasks was to interview possible debutantes and accompany them to rehearsals at Lambert's dance studio run by well-known husband and wife teachers on the first floor of the Hamilton Council Chambers in Beaumont Street. As a member of the official party at these balls she met many notable people including the Governor-General in 1952 and in 1953 the NSW Governor, at the Lord Mayoral Coronation Ball, when a large tinted photograph of the Queen was the centre piece of the City Hall stage, and the debutantes danced the Coronation Minuet with their partners. That year Zell was accompanied to the ball by Mr **P. J. Meehan**, the first newspaper mention of her and her future husband together.



'Weddings', *NMH*,
9 April 1956, p.3

Zell considered herself a 'careerist' and that was 'partly the reason why she delayed marriage'.⁹ But on 7 April 1956, aged 37, she married **Pat Meehan**, a divorced Department Manager, aged 48. Zell was Anglican and Pat was Catholic so they probably chose St Andrew's Presbyterian church as neutral ground. Zell and Pat settled in Merewether.

Her marriage and its aftermath were significant not only to Zell's personal

life but also to her working life, and the career paths of women employees of Newcastle City Council and undoubtedly the wider community. In Newcastle, for far longer than in Sydney, married women were 'largely excluded from the labour market' because of the belief that the man was the breadwinner and wives should stay at home.¹⁰ This belief was shared by the ALP, trade unions, councils, public utilities, and many employers. But since World War II, when women worked in a wider range of jobs than ever before, and many worked after marriage, women had begun refusing to accept stereotypical gender roles and limitations.

Zell Meehan was one of those women. She refused to follow the Council custom to hand in her resignation after her marriage. When she informed the town clerk, Bill Burges, he reckoned her continuing to work was 'unfair to single female members of the staff who desired to advance to her well-paid position of secretary'. Burges told the aldermen that the Council's 'well-defined and long-established practice' was that 'the services of a female

were deemed to automatically end on marriage' and he recommended that Zell be suspended.¹¹ A controversy began in the council and raged for weeks. Zell was on her honeymoon but her friends kept her posted with the media reports.

The Lord Mayor at the time, Ald. **Doug McDougall** from the Citizens Group, thought the council's policy was 'outmoded' and strongly opposed 'any move to dismiss Mrs Meehan'. 'I believe in equality of the sexes', he said. 'If it is right for a man to marry and continue at work, why is it not right for a woman? Mrs Meehan is a most capable secretary with many years' experience. It would be a pity if her training were to be wasted because of old-fashioned prejudices.' Very admirable words though slightly marred by his complaint that the Council would 'finish up with a lot of old maids'. Ald. **Charlie Jones**, a boilermaker and trade unionist, representing the Labor Party, did not believe that wives should go out to work. 'Let's face it,' he insisted, 'in any society the man is looked on as the breadwinner'. Burges was asked to compile a full report on the matter.¹²

Barbara Curthoys, a local member of the Union of Australian Women, wrote to the *NMH*, 'Women's rights are affirmed in the United Nations charter, proclaimed for the entire world in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, but evidently Newcastle City Council regards Newcastle as isolated from the rest of the world as it prevent[s] the employment of married women. Mrs Meehan has my sympathy in becoming the centre of this age-old controversy', she added.¹³

When the Burges report was presented to the council meeting, the Lord Mayor was amazed to learn that the council had 'no specific resolution regarding the employment of married women'. Ald. Jones dismissed that, 'The policy was known to everyone whether it was an actual resolution on the books or not.' Burges thought it would be 'dangerous for council to deviate from its policy'. Ald. **Rundle**, a Citizens Group member and a draper from Wallsend, thought she should resign because 'her husband should keep her'. His wife had a 'full-time job' looking after him, 'without going out to work. Her place was in the house,' he said.¹⁴ Ald. **Nesbitt**, also Citizens Group, declared the reason for married women wishing to work was 'usually greed'. And 'married women working raised the vital issue of neglect of homes,' he said, and 'as you know, modern women are fond of the grog.'¹⁵ What can I say!

Ald. **Skelton** (Independent), in refreshing contrast said he was 'brought up in a modern age and had a modern wife who believed in equality'.¹⁶

⁹ Anne Coombs, 'Council stalwart to the end', *NMH*, 2 January 1984 p.2.

¹⁰ Ann Curthoys, 'The Sexual Division of Labour: Theoretical Arguments', in Grieve and Burns (eds), *New Feminist Perspectives*, p.328.

¹¹ 'Exact policy query on married women', *NMH*, 18 April 1956 p.3; 'Keep Job Vote By Committee', *NMH*, 2 May 1956, p.2.

¹² 'Secretary's job in doubt', *NMH*, 12 April 1956 p.2.

¹³ Barbara Curthoys, 'Letters: Married women's job', *NMH*, 23 April 1956.

¹⁴ 'Keep Job Vote By Committee'

¹⁵ 'Mrs Meehan to keep job', *NMH*, 9 May 1956 p.2.

¹⁶ 'New Job Policy by Council', *NMH*, 23 May 1956 p.2.

When it came to the vote of whether Zell would retain her position, two aldermen abstained. Disappointingly, one of them was **Mary Pepperall**, the first woman elected to Newcastle City Council, a woman who had grown-up married children and was active in the ALP and many community organisations. She was against married women working, but on learning that the council employed a few with specialised skills (whose employment had to be extended every three months), Pepperall thought if it was good enough for one, it was good enough for another. However, she did not vote in support because she said she was 'this way and that way'.¹⁷

Zell Meehan won the day. The Council decided, by 13 votes to five, that she should retain her position, and later that month rescinded any resolutions on its books regarding employment of married women, a move which Ald. Rundle described as 'against everything decent, Christian, and moral'.¹⁸ Words fail me.

Ironically the following year Charlie Jones became Lord Mayor. He recalled in a 1980 interview, 'Zell and I got on very well together [when I was] Lord Mayor and we've got on very well since.' Married women working 'was an issue in those days', he said, 'It's no longer an issue.' When the interviewer commented that they were both straightforward people, Jones responded, 'Oh God yeah, she tells you the time of ... day.'¹⁹ Certainly Zell believed, 'If you are not going to assert yourself you are going to be servile for the rest of your life.'²⁰

Jones was only Lord Mayor for one year because in 1958 he won the federal seat of Newcastle and went on to become the Minister for Transport under the **Whitlam** government.



NMH, 2 October 1974, p.4

'Frankly I think we are in for an interesting time.'²¹ She helped Cummings 'find her feet' and they shared many interesting events.²²

Zell and her husband never had any children and she continued working for many years as a commonsense confidante and adviser to Newcastle's Lord Mayors. She had the opportunity in September 1974 to welcome **Joy Cummings** as Newcastle's (and Australia's) first woman Lord Mayor. Asked her reaction to Cummings' election, Zell said,

On Christmas Eve that year Cyclone Tracey devastated Darwin and on Christmas night the Lord Mayor opened a fundraising appeal on the radio. Zell went to work on Boxing Day, and found people queued up waiting to donate. They didn't even complain about waiting, she remembered. All in all, she helped collect over \$350,000, a generous contribution from working class Newcastle and the region.

According to Joy's daughter **Margaret Badger**, Zell was a conservative woman, a member of the Victoria League, who remained devoted to Frank Purdue from the Citizen's Group, but she and Joy Cummings, a Labor Party stalwart, became great friends and had the same wicked sense of humour. The council usually gave celebrity visitors to the city a small gift, so when Dame **Edna Everage**, who often referred to her jam making, came to perform at the Civic Theatre in 1979, after discussion with the Lord Mayor, Zell found a holder for a jam drip spoon as his present. Dame Edna was delighted.

In 1976 Zell Meehan celebrated 40 years of service with the council and congratulatory telegrams poured in. Ald. **Jenson** from Wyong council wished her a long and happy retirement. Zell replied, 'I have no intention of retiring. I am well, healthy and cannot see any reason why I should not use my brains.'²³ That could have been her argument in 1956. Also in 1976, Zell was awarded an MBE in the New Year's honours list for her years of work. One lovely tribute she received was a floral arrangement from the council's gardeners, because she'd helped them win many awards for their displays.

In 1977 council staff moved into the new administration building, the roundhouse. Zell had good reason to complain. She had to leave her 'roomy, tastefully decorated office to go to something a lot smaller'.²⁴



Zell's two workplaces as Lord Mayor's secretary
Newcastle Herald (NH), 2 January 1984, p.2

Outside of work, Zell's favourite recreation was golf. When asked how she found time to play she said, 'well

¹⁷ 'Mrs Meehan to keep job'.

¹⁸ 'New Job Policy by Council'.

¹⁹ Ron Hurst, 'The Valley's People', NBN Television, May 1980, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?t=86&v=5JGhJV4NEYw&feature=youtu.be>.

²⁰ Sally Croxton, 'Newcastle secretaries divided over duties',

NMH, 1 August 1981 p.19.

²¹ 'Our New Lord Mayor Likes To Dress Up', NMH, 2 October 1974 p.4.

²² Margaret Badger, Messenger, 20 January 2025.

²³ '41st Year As Secretary To Mayor', 11 June 1976 NMH, p.5.

²⁴ 'Todays Topics', 24 June 1977 NMH, p.3.

you only work six days a week you know. I play golf on Sundays.’²⁵ From at least the early 1950s she had belonged to the Steelworks golf club at Shortland in which, like all golf clubs of the time, men were members, and women were associates who were not allowed to play on Saturdays. There was a Ladies Day on Wednesdays but as a working woman, Sundays were Zell’s only option. She was an occasional prize winner. Her first ever prize was six cake forks for a medley four-ball stableford. The lowest handicap Zell achieved was a fairly impressive 14 but she couldn’t maintain it. She did have the pleasure though of playing at the opening of the council-owned Beresfield Golf Club in 1983 with the Lord Mayor as her caddy.

When Zell Meehan retired at the end of that year, Joy Cummings said that farewelling her was one of the saddest moments of her life.



Zell with Joy Cummings and Frank Purdue at her farewell party, *NH*, 14 February 1984, p.8

Only a few months later Joy Cummings sadly suffered a stroke and had to retire herself.

Because Zell won the battle to continue at the council after her marriage, she had been secretary to eight Newcastle Lord Mayors between September 1950 to December 1983.

			
Harry Quinlan (Independent) Until Dec 1950	Frank Purdue (Citizens Group) Dec 1950-51 Dec 1952-55 Dec 1959-65	Tom Armstrong (Independent) Dec 1951-52	Doug McDougall (Citizens Group) Dec 1955-56, Dec 1957-58 Dec 1965-Sept 1973
			
Charlie Jones (Labor) Dec 1956-57	Ernest Dunkley (Independent) Dec 1958-59	Gordon Anderson (Independent) Sept 1973-74 Sept 1976-77	Joy Cummings (Labor) Sept 1974-76 Sept 1977-Dec 1983

All Hunter photobank images, except Doug McDougall's which is from <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/mcdougall-douglas-gordon-10942>

‘They were all different personalities,’ Zell commented, and had to be ‘treated differently. You had to be adaptable and completely impartial. The first three months were always the hardest. You’re sizing them up and they’re sizing you up ... You never refer to what the previous Lord Mayor did and you need a lot of patience and a sense of humour’, which it seems she had.²⁶ ‘It had been very refreshing to have a woman as Lord Mayor’, Zell said. ‘A woman gives you more credit.’²⁷

Zell Meehan died on 15 February 1998, aged 79 and her funeral service was held in St Augustine’s Anglican Church, Merewether. However, she was buried with her husband Pat, who had died 20 years earlier, in the Catholic section of Sandgate cemetery.

Conclusion

Zell Meehan had considered herself ‘fitted’ to work for local government because she was ‘Newcastle through and through’ which, I hope, this article has demonstrated.²⁸ I think also she was fitted because she displayed the ‘intelligence’ and ‘character’ her headmistress at Newcastle Girls High had wanted to cultivate in the students. During her long career Zell watched Newcastle growing up, as she said, ‘culturally, educationally, commercially, and industrially’.²⁹ Zell herself contributed to Newcastle’s growing maturity by helping change attitudes to married women. As the *Newcastle Herald* said in an editorial tribute after her death, ‘Newcastle was all the better for her determined stand.’³⁰

Jude Conway (Member 961)

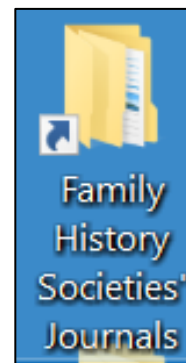
Extra References

NSW BDM

Various articles from the *Newcastle Morning Herald*

Looking for Russian or Ukrainian Ancestors

An excellent resource for finding ancestors with Russian and Ukrainian connections has been found in one of our exchange journals, *Bundaberg Family Ties* of June 2025. The article is titled ‘Find Lost Russian and Ukrainian Family’ and explains the records found in the USSR Archives. The journal itself can be located in our computer room, by using the icon for incoming journals on the main screen of each of the computers. Thanks to our Library Group member Alison Morris, who checks the incoming journals for these helpful items.



²⁵ ‘The Valley’s People’

²⁶ ‘The Valley’s People’

²⁷ ‘Council stalwart to the end’

²⁸ Joan Cairnes, ‘Newcastle’s first liberationist’ *NMH*, 5 May 1974.

²⁹ ‘The Valley’s People’

³⁰ ‘Editorial: Zell Meehan’, *NH*, 17 February 1998 p.2.

Canadian Genealogy – How to use the Resources

Su Carter

When climbing your family tree, you might find you have a Canadian or two hiding there. Here are some ways other than Ancestry or Find My Past, to search for more information about who they were.

The first Europeans who arrived in Canada were the French in 1608; at the time Canada was called New France. The Scots and British arrived around 1620. Over time large waves of immigrants arrived in the Port of Halifax, Nova Scotia. There you will find the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21. Their website is a good place to start. Their shipping records cover 1928–1971. There are few records prior to 1865, at which time the Nova Scotia government started keeping immigration records. The Museum also offers genealogy services for a fee: <https://pier21.ca/>

Library and Archives Canada holds the census records from 1825 to 1931, but there are records of early censuses with some going back to 1671. Not all of these are available online and you may need to contact the website. The later censuses hold a wealth of information. Besides name, date of birth or address, you will also find where they were employed, the hours they worked, their earnings, if insurance was held, their education and any infirmities – a true wealth of information to get to know an ancestor. There are also many tips to be found at the Library and Archives website:

<https://library-archives.canada.ca/eng/collection/research-help/genealogy-family-history/censuses/Pages/censuses.aspx>

If your ancestor was a child taken to Canada by the British Home Children Canada charity, you will find their website valuable. It gives an insight to the history of the charity which between 1869 and 1948 took over 100,000 children to Canada. There is a database of names, which will give you their approximate date of birth, their year of arrival, the ship they came on, the organisation which sent them out, and also where they went. There is even a virtual museum to visit. Home Children Canada:

www.britishhomechildren.com

If your ancestor was from the prairie provinces (Alberta, Manitoba, Saskatchewan), then Peel's Prairie Provinces is a valuable digital resource including historical records, books, pamphlets, postcards and other materials representing the diverse cultures and peoples who live in the Canadian Prairies. This resource from the University of Alberta can be found at peel.library.ualberta.ca.

David Obee's site Can Genealogy: www.cangenealogy.com is a free resource that offers links to talks on Canadian genealogy and classes. It does carry advertising.

The ancestor hunter site contains links to about 4,335 historical newspapers available online for free. There are also many advertisements and it tends to be a bit busy for

my personal taste, but they do list many newspapers and obituaries, so it may be worth the effort:

<https://theancestorhunt.com/blog/free-online-canada-historical-newspaper-links/>

Su Carter (Member 1239)

Heroines of Denman and District 1914–1918 War

From '1914 Denman Red Cross' by Myra Baines, in *Denman and District History Book: 150 Years 1853–2003*, co-ordinated by Ray Barry and Cliff Johnston.

The mothers, wives, sweethearts and daughters who patiently waited, suffered terrible mental agony ... Connections to Europe were virtually impossible. They were cut off from news of their menfolk ... The women quickly learned to dread the arrival of the bright yellow envelopes. The message always started: 'We regret to inform you ...'.

... The work of the Red Cross is very well known to us all, but the War Chest Fund was a marvellous organisation whose work has undeservedly faded into the mists of time. Its purpose was to provide warm clothing, meals and recreational facilities for the man at the front. There were 206 branches of the War Chest with the largest numbers of supporters in the bush.

Their work included:

- 80,000 perfectly made pairs of socks within weeks of General Birdwood's appeal in 1916
- 150,000 pairs sent to France in 1917
- Funded a recreational club in London for the Diggers, serving 24,000 meals per week
- Set up front-line coffee stalls, staffed by volunteers; sometimes set up in shell holes. (Seven volunteers were killed in this work.)

A book published in 1918 listed 93 names of women in the Denman district who were involved while pointing out that the knitters and shirt makers, amongst others, were not included.

The article concludes, 'They worked privately and unsung in their own homes. Bless them all!'



Australian Red Cross workers preparing crates and sacks that would be sent overseas as comfort parcels to Australian military personnel, Sydney, about 1916 (AWM H11579)

Heroes: Knitting Socks for Soldiers

Dr Des Lambley

In an era when superlatives abound we need to come back to earth. How often does the media refer to someone as a hero? *The Oxford Concise Dictionary* (1964 version) that I ate as a youth defines hero as ‘a man of superhuman qualities favoured by the gods, an illustrious warrior, one who has fought for his country, a man admired for achievements and noble qualities’. Firstly, note the gender-specific noun. So, women can never be classified as heroes? Times have changed Mr Oxford. The modern media is frequently predisposed to pronounce that some athlete is a hero. Self-aggrandisement and aspiration for illustriousness is seen as a virtue of character by some people. Many Australian soldiers were acknowledged for their conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty. They truly were military heroes. If the word ‘hero’ can be used in so many ways it is justifiable to tell you this piece of history. Sorry folks. Herstory.

For six years I bicycled 14 kilometres each day to attend Seaham Public School in the Hunter Valley of New South Wales in summer and winter and rainfall. There were slippery clay tracks up and down hills, sharp gravel roads that punctured tyres, and the occasional red-bellied black snake to be avoided. Twice each day I rode past a World War I (WWI) Monument and Flagpole erected on Mr Boag's property *Burnbrae* at East Seaham. We knew it had a tablet that said it had been erected by the Seaham Knitting Group. Today its future is secured by its inclusion in the list of the heritage sites by Monument Australia.³¹

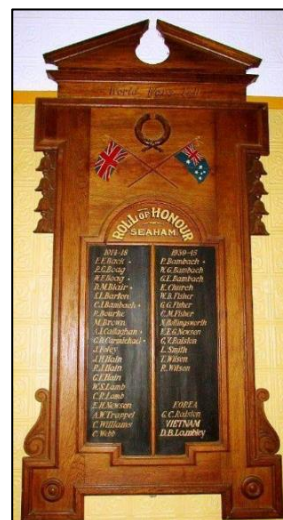


Seaham Knitting Circle Monument 2015
Image: Sandra Brown, courtesy
Monument Australia website.

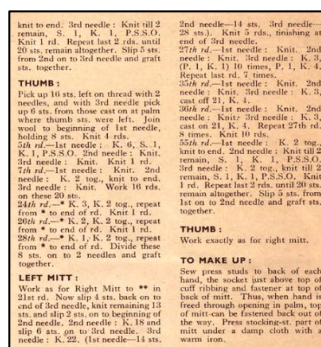
The inscription reads, ‘Honour to whom honour is due. Erected by The Knitting Circle in Remembrance of the Boys who enlisted from Seaham. European War 1914–18’. The memorial was dedicated in April 1921. Nearby, in the School of Arts and Community Hall, 10 Warren Street, Seaham, a Roll of Honour was dedicated a little earlier, in October 1917, and contains the

names of 20 men who enlisted for WWI from Seaham. Seven of them were killed in action or died from wounds. These men were heroes as distinct from a sportsman. However, the women in the Seaham Knitting Circle and their like all across Australia were heroes too for demonstrating patriotism and support, by knitting protective garments for their men at war.

Twenty-years later came World War II. Lever Brothers Pty. Ltd. of Sydney, the soap manufacturers, joined in a similar patriotic effort to assist Australian soldiers. In 1941 they published a LUX Book Supplement entitled, *Is Your Man One of the Lucky Ones? Knit for him from these simple LUX instructions*. It contained patterns for socks, a shaped scarf, service mittens, a heavy service pullover and a balaclava helmet. This fragile small pamphlet was found in family estate papers some 40 years ago.



Roll of Honour,
Seaham School of Arts
and Community Hall



A 1941 LUX Book pattern for mittens (with palm opening)

The women in our retirement village craft group were asked whether they had ever knitted these items for soldiers or had seen the pamphlet. None had. They wondered why a woollen mitten knitted for a WWII soldier might have a slit built into the palm. The explanation? One can imagine the very cold soldier waiting in the frozen trenches, hoping that the enemy would not attack. Ever watchful, hands in mittens and thrust deep into their greatcoat pockets, with balaclavas on their head, and a rifle slung on a shoulder. They would stamp their feet to keep the blood flowing in an attempt to prevent frostbite to their toes, in wet socks and boots. They would always try to wear two pair of socks to help insulate their feet. If an enemy attack began, the soldier could extract his fingers easily without removing the mitten entirely. Warm fingers and hands were needed to handle their weapon mechanisms and ammunition safely and promptly.

³¹ <https://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/ww1/display/>

23000-seaham-knitting-circle-memorial

I believe the knitters on the home front were heroes too. Their loving support for the men and nurses in the field with the products of their labours were very welcome gifts from 'home'. The LUX pattern for the mittens (with palm opening) is included on the previous page. How many of the current generation know how to knit? Is anyone game to try knitting a pair?

Dr Des Lambley (Member 1341)

'Knitting Girl' memorial



This memorial is situated on the beach promenade at Collaroy Beach, north of South Collaroy Surf Club. It tells the story of a little girl knitting socks for soldiers, sitting on a 'care package' destined for the WWI battle fields. Commissioned by Warringah Council for Anzac Day 2015, it is composed of Moruya granite (as for the Harbour Bridge pylons) with bronze rope and 'identity tag' stamp.

https://reddustdesigns.com.au/portfolio_page/war-memorial

From Our Shop

BEHIND THE SANDSTONE

Hidden Stories of Sacrifice

Compiled by Margaret Ashford



A Newcastle Family History Society Publication

One of our Society's most recent publications tells the stories of heroism and sacrifice of the 73 men buried in Newcastle War Cemetery at Sandgate between 1942 and 1947. *Behind the Sandstone: Hidden Stories of Sacrifice* is an A4 book printed in colour throughout. Along with interesting supporting material, the stories reveal some of Newcastle's contribution to the war effort. The history of the

cemetery itself is told, along with information on other war cemeteries in the Hunter region and a few from overseas.

The publication is available for purchase for \$30 at our reception desk or postage can be arranged if ordered through our website (<https://nfhs.org.au/>).

This publication may also be purchased as a download for \$23 from our online shop (<https://nfhs.org.au/shop/>).

Accounts of Heroism in our Library

Unsung Heroes & Heroines of Australia (A3/60/05) – Editor Suzy Baldwin proudly declares that the names in this book are not those of 'great men' directing 'great events' but of 'the people', people such as convicts and inner-city welfare workers, war heroes and mothers of twelve. The entries, typically each a couple of pages long, are divided into eight chronological sections. The first, Exile 1788–1847, includes such names as Aboriginal warrior **Pemulwuy** and convict **Esther Abrahams**; the second, Opportunity 1848–1883, painter **Adelaide Eliza Ironside** and merchant **Lowe Kong Meng**. There are some Novocastrian connections. Convict **Emanuel Solomon**, sent to Newcastle for three years hard labour, became a successful merchant and politician in the fledgling colony of South Australia, opening Adelaide's first theatre, promoting the Burra mine, and supporting the Sisters of St Joseph after **Mary McKillop** had been excommunicated. **Mert** and **Nell Thomas** survived everything the 'great events' of the 20th century threw at them. And **Albert Edwin 'Totty' Young** was a lifesaver who rescued more than 400 swimmers at Newcastle Beach in 1948 alone.

Victoria (1), the Newcastle Lifeboat 1867–1897 & Coxswain William Ahern & the heroic crews that manned her (A4/AHE/01) – Newcastle's location meant that bravery was required to rescue not only swimmers but also ships' crews. This book examines how the Newcastle Lifeboat Service came about and details some of the rescues attempted by its members. It focuses on the life and deeds of **William Ahern**, including his involvement in the effort to rescue people from the wrecked steamer *Cawarra* in 1866.

Venturing into No Man's Land (A4/MAX/02) is a biography by NFHS member and retired historian **John Ramsland** about **Joseph Maxwell** VC, who spent his childhood on the Hunter Coalfields and was the second most highly decorated Australian soldier of World War I. He was a great storyteller and wrote of his wartime experiences in the best-selling *Hell's Bells and Mademoiselles*. His 'humorous scenarios and caricatures masked the emotional pain of the Great War'. Ramsland's book is subtitled 'an elegy of mud, blood and darkness'.

Our heroes need not, of course, be so obviously people of action. We may look up to musicians or artists among our forebears. In *Music and world-building in the colonial city* (AH7/35/01), Helen J. English looks at music-making in the Lower Hunter between 1860 and 1880, with a focus on brass bands and church choirs and how they helped to create and strengthen communities in unfamiliar territory. Margaret McBride's *Early visions* (AH7/35/05) uncovers a wealth of women artists active from colonial days until 1969. Even women as privileged as **Dorothy English Paty** and Lady **Isabella Parry** in the 1830s overcame the tyrannies of distance, strangeness and isolation to depict the colony's fascinating natural history.

Paul Cooke (Co-Librarian)

Heroic Feathered Messengers

Frank Maxwell



Dickin Medal. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dickin_Medal

Two pigeons that served in the South-West Pacific during World War II (WWII) were awarded PDSA Dickin Medals. The People's Dispensary for Sick Animals medal was instituted in 1943 in the United Kingdom by the organisation's founder, **Maria Dickin**, to honour the work of animals in WWII. It is a bronze medallion bearing the words 'For Gallantry' and 'We Also Serve' within a laurel

wreath, carried on a ribbon of striped green, dark brown, and pale blue. It is awarded to animals that have displayed 'conspicuous gallantry or devotion to duty while serving or associated with any branch of the Armed Forces or Civil Defence Units' and is referred to as 'the animals' Victoria Cross'.

The *Weekly Times* of Melbourne on 16 July 1947 noted that this was the first occasion on which the medals had been won by Australian birds and that the medals would be entrusted to the Australian National War Museum for display with the birds themselves, while the donors of the birds received replica medals.

The owners were Mr **G. Adams** of Footscray, Melbourne and Mr **A.J. Favell** of Elwood, Melbourne, who donated them to the A.I.F. Pigeon Service, as patriotic gestures to assist with the war effort. Mr Favell had bred his pigeon, while Mr Adams's was bred by Mr **Gordon Whittle**.

The *Weekly Times* reported the citations as follows:

D.D. 43 T. 139 (Mr. Adams):-

During an exceptionally heavy tropical storm in June, 1945, Army Boat 1402 foundered on Wadai Beat in the Huon Gulf [eastern Papua New Guinea]. This pigeon was released with the following message: "Engine failed. Washed on beach Wadai owing heavy seas. Send help immediately. Craft rapidly filling with sand." The pigeon homed to Madang through heavy rain a distance of 40 miles in 50 minutes. As a result, a rescue ship was sent, and the craft together with its valuable cargo of ammunition and stores, was salvaged. This pigeon had flown a total of 23 operational flights, totalling a distance of 1004 miles.

D.D. 43 Q 879 (Mr. A.J. Flavell):-

During the fight for Manus Island, the U.S. Marines sent a patrol to the village of Drabito. The patrol was strongly attacked by Japs while returning with the information that a strong counter attack was in preparation. The patrol's radio was rendered



Blue Bar Cock Pigeon 139
Source: AWM 30785

inoperative during the action, so two pigeons were released warning headquarters of the impending attack. These pigeons were shot down immediately as the Japanese intensified their efforts to annihilate the patrol. This left one pigeon and D.D. 43 Q 879 was the sole remaining means of contact with headquarters. It was released during a temporary lull. And despite heavy fire immediately directed at it reached headquarters 30 miles away in difficult country in 46 minutes. As a result Drabito was heavily bombed and the patrol extricated from its perilous positions.



Blue Chequer Cock Pigeon Q879
Source: AWM 30792

The leg rings visible in the photos carry each bird's unique identification number.

Frank Maxwell (Honorary Member)

AWM's pigeon nest

This pigeon seems intent on making its own memorial to the pigeons at war. This photo, in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial, was publicised on 9 November 2019, just in time for Remembrance Day!



<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/pigeons-at-war>

Snippers' Snippets

GIVEN TO ENEMY

Dying Soldier's Bible

SENT BACK TO MOTHER

MELBOURNE, Wednesday

A Bible handed by a dying Australian soldier, Private E.W. Parham, to a wounded German on the battlefield of Ypres, has been returned to Parham's mother, who is now 83. Mrs. Parham gave the Bible to her son just before he sailed for France.

The incident on the battlefield was re-collected a few months ago by the German soldier, who, on his deathbed, asked his brother to return it. The mother was advised of this by the High Commissioner's office and the Repatriation Department, and she intends expressing her thanks to the German family.

Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate, 6 May 1937

Karilyn Pawley (Snippers Co-ordinator)

Nine Days Entombed

Frank Maxwell

The Daily News (TDN) from Perth, dated 20 March 1907, carried this alarming story:

This afternoon Mr. Gregory the Minister of Mines Western Australia received a telegram from Mr. Joseph Crabb, Inspector of Mines, Coolgardie.

“Westralia Mine, Bonnievale, became flooded yesterday. One Italian miner named Varischetti now entombed in workings above No. 10 level. He can be heard sounding; and everything is being done to rescue him.

“I consider chances of rescue very remote.

“Twenty other men had a very narrow escape.

“It is estimated that it will occupy about ten days to unwater to No. 10 Level provided, everything goes as anticipated.”

Modesto Varischetti was aged 33 years and a widower with five children, two brothers also on the gold fields.

On hearing a diver was wanted Frank Hughes, working South Kalgurli mine, offered his services and was accepted.



Frank Hughes

Cecil Albert Francis Herbert (Frank) Hughes, son of **Thomas Edward Hughes** and **Mary Thomas**, born 11 November 1861 in Wrexham, North Wales. He was educated at Ruabon Grammar School and trained in the Merchant Navy.

The *Coolgardie Miner (CM)* of 22 March reported that Mr Hughes left work and caught a train to Coolgardie and a buggy onto Bonnievale. On arrival at the Westralia Mine he studied the plans of

the mines and was informed that he would need to go to the 900 feet level then through water down the ladderway to the 1,000 feet level, proceed about 200 feet along the level until he came to the rise which was driven to a height of 30 feet to where Varischetti was imprisoned. Hughes, described as a practical miner and diver summed up the position, but did not consider the difficulties insurmountable.

He stated that his diving gear weighed 180 lbs [81 kgs] and that he would have to drag the air pipes with him along the drive over 200 feet plus the length down the shaft, another 100 feet. He stated that he could stay down about three hours, and that it would be necessary to go slowly as the pressure of water would be great and trying.

Hughes had obtained a length of piping constructed in sections to allow it to be put together underwater and long enough to reach the top of the rise where Varischetti was

imprisoned. He also took specially prepared condensed foods etc. for Varischetti.

The *West Australian (WA)* of 23 March 1907 reported that a train from Perth had conveyed two divers, **Thomas Hearn** and **John Curtis** and two assistants with two diver suits and all gear had arrived at Coolgardie and were at once taken to Bonnievale.

The paper continued with Inspector Crabb's explanation of the circumstances and the work to be done:

The party was lowered to No. 9 level with officers of the mine.

Hughes was first to descend through the water. He cleared the shoot, got into No. 10 level and returned to No. 9 level. A run of hanging ladders was placed in the pass and Hughes went down again followed by Hearn and they went to No. 10 level where Hearn stayed while Hughes made his way through knee deep muck towards the drive where Varischetti was immured.

Following the pipeline Hughes eventually reached the elbow where the pipe turned up. Hughes shook the hose several times and on the fourth shake received a reply from Varischetti. By this time, he had to make his way back: being under water he was almost overcome and needed fresh air. The divers came to the surface amidst a loud cheer.

At 4 pm divers were lowered and by 5.30 pm a message from below stated Hughes had shaken hands with Varischetti caused more cheering. Hughes delivered a special electric light, food, candles, slate and pencil and other articles. On standing upright at the level in the rise he found his head was above water so the whole rise was filled with compressed air and Varischetti had plenty of room to move about.

Hughes was not able to stay long and it took most of his remaining strength to return to No. 9 level. Rescue operations were suspended for the night.

According to *TDN* of 23 March, a message was received from Count **Zunini**, Italian Consul, praising the divers and all others in the rescue.

Various newspapers continued to report on the diving and the eventual rescue.

Hughes dived each day to deliver food and other supplies to Varischetti. On Thursday 28 March Hughes made three dives and on the last dive, after explaining the position to Varischetti, the latter expressed his willingness to come, and came down from his perch in an apparently strong condition.

The *Kalgoorlie Miner* of 29 March reported Hughes's story:

I fastened the lifeline to him and held him around the waist and for a few feet he was all right. When the water reached his middle, I felt him collapse so put him on my shoulder and carried him to the pass 70 or 80 feet distance. I take it that the sudden release from

confinement and immersion in the cold water unnerved him.

When I reached the pass Tom Hearn was there and I put Varischetti in the shoot and Hearn pulled him through. Doctor Mitchell was at the pass and having felt Varischetti's pulse pronounced it all serene. Both Hearn and I were attired in simple old clothes.

No one is more satisfied than we are that the man was got out alive.

The story was continued by the *CM*:

The skip was raised and 'Varischetti was well wrapped in blankets, had his eyes covered with wool and dark glasses and with a fortnight's growth of black whiskers on a colourless face looking as the ordeal has played havoc with him, although the shock and excitement of coming out probably accounted for his sickly appearance.'

WA concluded the story, saying that Doctor Mitchell re-examined Varischetti at the manager, Mr **Rubischum**'s house, *The Bungalow* and gave him a sleeping draft, stating that he would feel better when he woke and may not need to go to hospital.

Varischetti eventually went back to work and later died in Kalgoorlie Government Hospital on 3 September 1920 of miners' Phthisis [fibrosis]. His death was reported across the country, including various newspapers in the Hunter region.



Albert Medal Second Class

Awards were made to many of the people involved in the rescue, and reported in *CM*, 17 December 1907:

- Mr Gregory, Minister of Mines, WA – Chevalier Cross of the Order of Italy
- Hughes – Italian Gold Medal for Civic Valour; Albert Medal for Lifesaving, second class, from the King
- Hearn – Silver Medal

- Mr Rubischum, Manager; Inspector Crabb, Diver Curtia – letters of thanks
- Clarke – Gold Medal and Certificate of the Royal Humane Society

Other awards included the Order of St. John of Jerusalem Silver Medal and the Certificate of Credit from Mine Managers Association WA.

Testimonials and complimentary functions were also held.



Diver Hughes being paraded around the streets of Coolgardie after the rescue of Varischetti

Afterwards:

Hughes – did blasting work in Queensland Railway. Returned to check a misfire and sustained nasty injuries. *Kookynie Press* 24 April 1909 (WA).

Hughes died of Spanish flu in Brisbane, 1 June 1919 (Qld Registration B/29681).

In the feeling that prompted Hughes to attempt to save the life of an utter stranger, even at imminent risk of sacrificing his own life, lies the gist of human psychology. Heroism feels and never reasons and therefore is always right.

Frank Maxwell (Honorary Member)

Images:

<http://www.outbackfamilyhistoryblog.com/hughes-the-hero-of-Coolgardie>



- | | |
|------|---|
| 1368 | Adel Firth-Mason, Hamlyn Terrace, NSW |
| 1369 | Michael Tanner, Stanford Merthyr, NSW |
| 1370 | Lloyd Clark, Speers Point, NSW |
| 1371 | Geoff Stannard, Weetangara, ACT |
| 1372 | Karen Lonsdale, Rochdale, ACT |
| 1373 | Jan McLeod, Kahibah, NSW |
| 1374 | Cheryl Stratham, Seaham, NSW |
| 1375 | Glenys Flegg, Engadine NSW |
| 759 | Peter Poole, Merewether, NSW (rejoined) |
| 1120 | Dean Barrett, Kahibah, NSW (rejoined) |
| 1324 | Kathy Russell, Merewether, NSW (rejoined) |

We look forward to meeting you.

Ruth Sewell (Membership Registrar)

A Heroic Delirium of Bravery in the German New Guinea Campaign, 1914

John Ramsland, OAM

‘All the delirium of the brave’,
W.B. Yeats, September 1913

13 September 1914:

A forgotten victory in the Great War 1914–1918 was celebrated as early as 13 September 1914 in Rabaul, German New Guinea. The assembled troops of the Australian Navy and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) in the town square after the German surrender in the south-west Pacific proudly raised the Union Jack and sang with great gusto ‘God Save the King’.

At the time, Australians keenly felt a close belonging to the motherland of the British Empire, especially after making their first blood sacrifice in the hard-fought successful raid on the Bita Paka wireless station, also on the island of New Britain. The battle was widely celebrated soon after throughout Australia. At the time, there was a swelling crowd of enlisted volunteers.



The Bita Paka Road
where the battle
was fought

Press reaction

Among the front pages of reports confirming the battle across the length and breadth of Australia at the very beginning of the war were two in the local Hunter Valley press celebrating both victory and the ultimate price paid: *Maitland Mercury*, 19 September 1914 and the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate*, 23 September 1914. With compelling interest, most people in the area would have read such accounts.

Already, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Bulletin* had provided front page reports, both on 14 September 1914. Like the usual wildfire of a sensation, a national celebration had taken place and the hero of the hour was Dr **Brian Pockley**, a medical officer of the AN&MEF.

The accounts of the raid on the German wireless station were grippingly breathtaking and held national attendance, that is until stories of the enormity of the death rate of Gallipoli began flooding the Australian press from 1915, whipping the earlier stories away from the people's minds. These were then followed by a worse situation on the Western Front.

Thus, the threatening presence in the Pacific of the small but formidable German Squadron under Admiral **von Spee**,³² with its potential to harass Australia's troop convoys as well as trade routes, was forgotten.

³² David Wilkins, *The German New Guinea Campaign in Rally the Troops. A World War I Commemoration*, Ku-Ring-Gai

Rally round the flag

On the outbreak of the war, the Australian government received an urgent and compelling request from Britain to destroy the German wireless network that was directing battleships in the western Pacific and to take possession of German New Guinea – a German colony since 1884. German New Guinea was known as Kaiser Wilhelm's Land on all German maps, both civil and military.

A motley force was hastily raised and put together with Royal Australian Navy Reserve men combined with recruited infantry from New South Wales. It included a machine gun crew and medical section. It was named AN&MEF under the command of a military officer Colonel

William Holmes. It was despatched from Sydney on the steamer *HMS Berrima* on 19 August as a formidable invasion force. They landed at two points south of Blanche Bay, suffering the first Australian deaths of the war, on 17 September 1914.



Captain **Brian Colden Antill Pockley** in a studio portrait in full dress uniform. He grew up in Wahroonga at *Greystanes*, his father's mansion. Source: *Rallying the Troops*, Rieth et al (eds), p.130



Members of the AN&MEF aboard *HMS Berrima* en route to German New Guinea. All were Sydney University men, graduates or undergraduates; three were from the Ku-ring-gai suburbs: Capt Brian Pockley (seated 2nd from left); Capt **John Donaldson** (seated on far right); and Corporal **Clarence Collier** (far left, second row). Both captains were medical doctors. All three were killed during the Great War: Pockley in German New Guinea in 1914, Collier (later 2nd Lieutenant) in France with the 53rd Battalion in 1916 and Donaldson with the 19th Battalion in 1918. Source: *Rallying the Troops*

Why the wireless station was important

The AN&MEF – therefore Australia – had been faced with a real threat from the active and elusive German Pacific

Historical Society, vol 1, 1–28.

naval squadron with their own wireless stations like the one at Bita Paka which had to be destroyed as soon as possible.

The jungle attack at Bita Paka caused ten casualties – six dead and four wounded – but was a great success as the station was completely destroyed. The battle was a fierce one, but successful and worth celebration.

The German defence of the station consisted of 60 German troopers, some drawn from the local police force, and 240 well-trained New Guinean natives, all armed with rifles. The fight was over by 7 pm on 11 September. There were about 43 German and New Guinean native casualties.

Individual bravura

The newspapers in Australia centred on the bravura of Dr Brian Pockley who became celebrated as a cultural hero because of the circumstances of his death. Pockley had been chosen by Lieut-Col **Neville Howse** VC as the sole medical officer to take part in the raid into the jungle with the fighting men. Early in the raid, he became concerned with a German prisoner-of-war who was losing much blood, a police sergeant known in the press as Sergeant **Manderer**. Most newspapers described how the energetic Pockley amputated his bullet-smashed hand and dressed it well, thus saving his life.

Later in Sydney as a prisoner-of-war, Manderer was interviewed by the Sydney press. He described Pockley as a brave, cool and 'very humane man'. Such words celebrated Pockley's public image considerably. After treating the German, Pockley sprinted off through the jungle to care for other casualties. He was under heavy fire from the ambushers.

Another casualty he came upon was Able Seaman **Billy Williams** who had received what was to be a fatal bullet from an enemy hidden in the trees as he advanced along the roadway to the wireless station.

The bravery of the stoker

His mate, Stoker **William Kember**, a powerful ex-wrestler, had bravely carried him back to Pockley who immediately examined him. Williams's wound had entered the right side of his chest and exited on his left side, leaving a gap the size of a man's fist. Pockley realised there was little he could do. Williams was barely conscious and in great distress with what was a mortal wound. Pockley told a stretcher-bearer and Stoker Kember to take him back to the *Berrima* moored near the wharf. Pockley's actions then became most famous. To protect the Stoker from enemy fire, he removed his prominent Red Cross brassard (arm band) and wrapped it around Kember's white naval cap.

Traditions of the 'Rosy Cross'

To the general public Pockley's brassard became a spiritual talisman that had its tenuous origins with the ancient knightly Templars of the Crusaders: that is, the 'Rosy Cross' blood-red on their white tunics meant to

protect them from death in battle. It symbolised their affiliation with Christ but celebrated the ideal of blood sacrifice made eternal.

Pockley's brassard was rescued from the battlefield by one of the soldiers and passed on in Sydney to his grieving mother **Ellie (Helen Pockley)**. **Charles Bean**, realising its symbolic significance, persuaded her to donate it to the Australian War Memorial for display purposes as a military icon. (Somehow, it has disappeared from the collection.)

The Australian public, judging from the hundreds of press accounts, were bedazzled by Pockley's bravura in a delirium of the brave – his supreme athleticism and, finally, sacrifice in the dense mosquito-ridden jungle of the first battlefield of World War I for Australians. Nothing was more admired in Australian culture.

The German officer who had shot and killed Pockley was captured shortly after the incident and taken on board the *Berrima*. A court martial was held. He was able to prove he was unaware that Pockley was a non-combatant medico as he was not wearing his Red Cross brassard to distinguish him from the other frontline soldiers – the other combatants. He thus escaped execution – the extreme penalty.³³

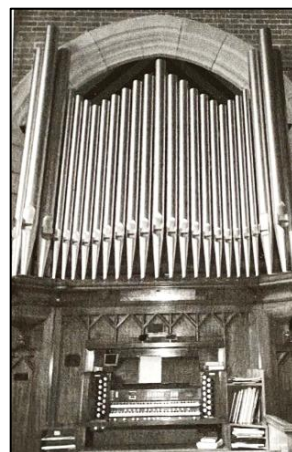
Pockley's action in giving up his Red Cross brassard to protect another man's life – that of Stoker William Kember – at the price of his own was widely viewed as consistent with the best traditions of the Australian Army and thus celebrated.

More than that, it afforded a noble foundation for those of the Australian Medical Corps as part of its history. While Able Seaman Billy Williams was the first Australian hit during the war,³⁴ Brian Pockley was the first heroic medical officer and the first soldier from the Sydney Ku-ring-gai (Northern) suburbs to make the ultimate sacrifice.

John Ramsland OAM (Member 1094)



Brian Pockley's memorial window at the Shore School chapel. There were several other memorials to him in Sydney and Bita Paka.
Image: Ross Mullin



Shore School chapel organ, dedicated to Jack Pockley, Brian's younger brother who died heroically on the Western Front in 1918. He sacrificed his stretcher-bearer to another soldier badly wounded. Soon after, he died on the battlefield.

Image: Ross Mullin

³³ *Register* (Adelaide), Thursday 24 Sept 1914.

³⁴ *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney), Thursday 29 Dec 1927.

Exchange Journals

John Hubert Plunkett – a hero to family historians!



State Library of NSW
GPO-1-01382

This article is a summary of information from *History*, RAHS, March 2025, written by Mark Tedeschi AM KC.

J.H. Plunkett was Attorney-General of NSW from 1836 to 1856; he was also an MLA and an MLC. During his time in those functions, he achieved a lot for the citizens of NSW, such as:

- ending the assignment of convict labourers to private landowners
- restricting the power of magistrates to order the flogging of convicts
- severely limiting the number of offences for which the death penalty applied
- replacing military men on juries with civilians
- writing the first textbook on criminal law for colonial magistrates
- with Governor **Richard Bourke** achieving the Church Act of 1836 placing all religions on an equal footing, making the colony secular (compared to England, with a religion of state), thus accepting the convention that the colonial government would never interfere in matters of religious belief and would maintain a strict neutrality between religions, ensuring that the new state formed under Federation would be a secular state
- bringing five Sisters of Charity from Ireland in 1838 to set up the first private hospital (and funding it almost entirely) to serve all faiths with no proselytising allowed. This hospital was St Vincent's.
- establishing the first State public education system for primary students, along with a teacher education system, in 1848
- prosecuting 11 men (all convicts) for the massacre of 28 Aboriginal men, women and children at Myall Creek Stations, leading to seven men being hanged
- the passing of the Marriage Act of 1855 which legitimised civil marriages and gave equal recognition to marriage celebrants of all Christian denominations.

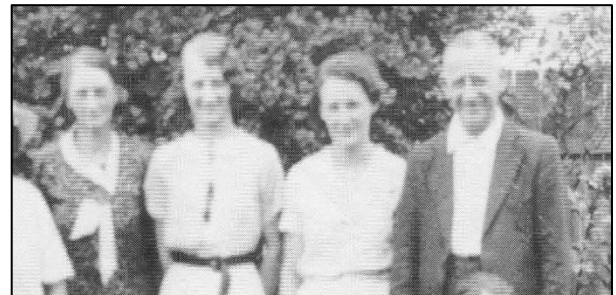
While these actions helped lay the foundations for the democratic country we know today, for family historians perhaps the most notable, rewarding and appreciated action of J.H. Plunkett was the passing of the Births, Deaths and Marriage Act of 1855. This Act centralised the public record system of these vital stages of life, eventually leading to the indexed system of BDMs which we family historians rely on and enjoy.

Hunter Nurse's Harrowing Death

Liza Moss

Mona Margaret Anderson Tait was born in Ipswich in Queensland on 6 February 1915. Her parents were **Robert Tait**, who had emigrated as a child from Scotland, and **Maggie Alexandria Ripley**. Maggie (also known as Lexie) was a member of the large Ripley family who lived at Hexham. She probably ended up in Queensland thanks to her sister **Christina**, (for whom she had been principal bridesmaid), who had moved there because of her husband **Paul Cooke's** work. By 1913 the Cookes had two children under four, so it seems likely that the unmarried 32-year-old Lexie came to visit her sister and family, perhaps purposefully to help the sister with no family of her own close by, to prepare for the move from Queensland to Corrimall where Cooke had gained a new job. Once in Ipswich Maggie must have met Robert Tait and they married in 1914.

The Tait family remained in Queensland and Mona's sister **Auriel** was born in 1917. Robert Tait was a grocer and the family lived in Booval, a suburb of Ipswich, moving to Kedron in Brisbane in about 1922. Here Mona enrolled first in East Brisbane State School and then Chermiside State School. The following year, 1923, she and Auriel began at Woolloowin State School but the family moved back to Ipswich in 1924 where Mona and Auriel enrolled in Central Girls School. Their names appear in the *Queensland Times* of 13 December 1924 when Mona came seventh in second class and Auriel came second in first class. A year later the same paper reported Mona was third in her class of the Presbyterian Booval-Silkstone Sunday School.



The Tait family. Left to right: Lex, Auriel, Mona and Bob

The electoral rolls show that the Tait family remained in Booval until at least 1926 but by 1928 they had moved. It seems the girls left Central Girls School at the end of 1927 so it is likely that it was at this point that the family moved to Newcastle. Robert's mother, **Margaret Anderson Tait**, who also lived in Booval, died in 1927, and his father and many of his siblings were already dead. Maggie's mother had died in 1924 but **Daniel Ripley**, her father, was still living in Mayfield in a house made of Hunter cedar that had been floated down the river from Hexham. In 1928 he too died and when Auriel enrolled in Newcastle Girls High School in 1930 the family's address was 17 Nile Street, Mayfield – the same house that Daniel had lived in.

In 1936 when Mona was 21, she appears on the electoral roll as a nurse at Cessnock District Hospital so she was clearly in training because her next appearance on the public record was in 1937, when the *Newcastle Morning Herald and Miners' Advocate* of 26 June reported the names of those nursing candidates in the area who had passed their final exams. At the time nursing training involved three years of hospital training. Her cousin **Margaret (Madge) Ripley Cooke** was also a nurse in Cessnock, having qualified in 1935. She too had been born in Queensland and was one of Christina Cooke's young children when Mona's mother had gone to Ipswich. The Cooke family was by now living in Bellbird and there were five children. In 1938 Mona moved to Canberra, where she was appointed sister-in-charge of the X-ray department of Canberra Community Hospital. She stayed there for three years so she was in Canberra when World War II broke out in 1939.

Mona seems to have enjoyed a healthy social life amongst the hospital staff in Canberra. Her name comes up in the social pages of *The Canberra Times* as one of the hostesses of various hospital functions. Perhaps this is why she was chosen as the Hospital and Ambulance Queen for a war time fundraising initiative of Lady **Gowrie**, the wife of the Governor-General. Four Queens were chosen representing different areas of life (the others were 'Sport', 'Air' – meaning broadcasting, and 'Commerce') and they led fundraising teams which held numerous social functions like dances, whist drives, and sporting events to raise money. It was also a competition between the Queens to be voted the Queen of the Fair and crowned at the culminating garden party and fair held at Government House on 20 April 1940. One of Mona's fundraisers was a dance at which a couple of the latest dances were introduced – the 'Blackout Stroll' and the 'Siegfried Line-up'. Unfortunately, Mona came fourth in the competition, but as she had been a late starter and was ill during the competition, it was not surprising that she did not raise as much as the other competitors, who don't appear to have held such responsible professional positions either.



Mona Tait
payroll photo AWM

Later in the year Mona visited family in Queensland as reported by *The Telegraph*, a Brisbane paper, noting her return to Canberra in September but on 15 January 1941 *The Canberra Times* noted in its 'About People' column that Mona (incorrectly referred to as 'Agnes') had left Canberra as she had been accepted for active service. Mona's payroll picture shows a happy 26-year-old brimming with life who was embarking on a more active means of

helping the war effort than frivolous activities reported in the social pages.

On her enlistment papers, Mona put her permanent address as 100 Darby Street, Cooks Hill, her parents having moved there from Mayfield. She enlisted in the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) in Sydney and spent the next several months training at Victoria Barracks before being sent to Malaya. She was seconded to the Second Australian Imperial Force for overseas service with the AANS on 19 August 1941, and embarked on the *Wanganella*, which picked up further personnel in Melbourne and Fremantle before heading to Victoria Dock on Singapore Island. On the ship the nurses would have had lectures on tropical medicine.

On arrival on 15 September, Mona and nine other nurses from her unit, the 2/13th Australian General Hospital (AGH), including **Joyce Bridge** (another Hunter nurse who came from *Stoney Creek*, Belltrees near Scone), **Vivian Bullwinkel**, **Veronica Clancy** and **Nancy Harris**, were immediately detached to the 2/10th AGH, based in Malacca on the Malay peninsula. Here they were protected by troops of the 8th Division who were garrisoned there. For the next few weeks, the new arrivals learnt from their more experienced colleagues before rejoining the 2/13th AGH. Mona was to rejoin the 2/10th AGH once more before returning to the 2/13th in December. The units moved around as the Japanese grew ever closer. On 8 December 1941 the Japanese had invaded Malaya.



St Patricks, the school used as a war hospital

For the next couple of months fighting continued with British, Australian and Indian troops moving southwards retreating to Singapore and attempting to prevent the Japanese from advancing to the island. The hospital at St Patricks, the boys' school where the 2/13th had been based, was overwhelmed with arriving casualties. By 8 February 1942 the Japanese had reached the island. News of atrocities perpetrated in Hong Kong had also reached the island and 8th Division command was under pressure to evacuate the nurses despite Major General **Gordon Bennett's** reluctance to do so for the sake of morale. Nevertheless, on 10 February evacuation of the nurses began with six of them leaving on the *Wah Sui*,

a further 60 left the following day on the *Empire Star*, and on Thursday 12 February the remaining 65 nurses, including Mona, left on the *Vyner Brooke*. She had just turned 27.

The *Vyner Brooke* was a cargo ship which normally took only 12 passengers in addition to its 47 crew members. On this mission it had 181 passengers mostly women and children, including the last of the Australian nurses. It was bombed by Japanese aircraft and by 14 February exposed and worse for wear, it finally sank with about 150 survivors making it ashore to Bangka Island where most were captured by the Japanese who already had control of the island. Some of the survivors ended up on Radji Beach joining other civilians and Commonwealth servicemen whose own ships had been sunk. Unable to get help from local villagers, the group decided to surrender to the Japanese and a party was sent to do so. A few hours later Japanese soldiers arrived at the beach. They shot and bayoneted all the men and then drove all the women – 22 nurses including Mona, Joyce Bridge and one British civilian who had remained – into the sea and shot them from behind. There were only two survivors – Sister Vivian Bullwinkel, and a British soldier, Private **Cecil Kinsley**. After evading capture for a few days, Bullwinkel and Kinsley had no choice but to surrender. Kinsley died soon after of his wounds and Bullwinkel was interned for the remainder of the war, and survived to bear witness to the horrific deaths of her colleagues, including Mona Tait.

As Sister Bullwinkel was the only surviving witness, the fate of her colleagues was not known until 1945. In July 1942 Mona's record noted that she was missing and in June 1944 the Tait's were officially notified that she was missing presumed dead which was noted in Newcastle and Canberra papers. *The Cessnock Eagle and South Maitland Recorder* reported that the Cessnock District Hospital board had voted to send a message of sympathy to the Tait's as Mona had trained there. In September 1945 when survivors were released after Japan's surrender the truth was finally known as papers across Australia reported interviews with Sister Vivian Bullwinkel who said:

We all knew we were going to die and stood there waiting ... There were no protests. They died bravely, and their marvellous courage prevented me from calling out when I was hit. I couldn't let them down. (*The News*, 17 September 1945)

Mona Tait is memorialised in many different places. In 1946 the board of the Cessnock Hospital decided to have a memorial bed and plaque established in the new maternity wing in recognition of her sacrifice and connection with the hospital. The Canberra Hospital Auxiliary also installed a plaque (now relocated to RSL headquarters in Campbell, ACT) and instituted a memorial prize named for Mona and another Canberra nurse, **May Hayman**, killed by the Japanese in New Guinea. The scope has changed over the years but it is currently awarded to a high-achieving first year nursing student in the School of Nursing at the University of Canberra in conjunction with the RSL. Mona's name

appears on the Singapore Memorial at Kranji War Cemetery with more than 24,000 others, including her fallen colleagues, who have no known burial site. She is also listed on Commonwealth Honour Roll in the Nurses' Chapel in Westminster Abbey and at the Australian War Memorial.



Panel from *Vyner Brooke* Memorial AWM

On 2 May 1999, The *Vyner Brooke* Australian Nurses' Memorial was unveiled by Mrs **Vivian Statham** (née Bullwinkel) and another of Mona's 2/13th AGH colleagues, Mrs **Wilma Young** (née **Oram**) in Bicton, Western Australia. The RSL has also named an aged care facility 'Mona Tait Gardens'. Even though she was not to grow old her memory will live on.

Auriel also became a nurse, training at Newcastle Hospital. She married **Graham Hick** in 1942 and had four children. She lived until 2005. Mona and Auriel were first cousins once removed of **Paul Cooke**, NFHS member 1253B and grandson of **Christina Ripley Cooke**.

Liza Moss (Member 1253A)

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All newspaper articles about Mona Tait referred to are collected in this Trove List:

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National Archives of Australia: B883, NX76281
<https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/ViewImage.aspx?B=4621828>

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The Family Ghost Story

Del Foster

This story was told by **Cyril Lumsden** to his daughter, Del Foster. It was corroborated by Cyril's brother **Oswald**, their father and their mother **Georgina**, née **Toll**.

It was the Spring of 1917.

Their father had gone to Halton Camp in Buckinghamshire to join the Royal Flying Corps. To escape the bombing where they lived in Tyneside Jarrow, Georgina had packed up, taking the boys and baby **Olga** to live in Bonsall in rural Derbyshire for the duration of the war. She had taken a house around the corner from where her sister, **Hannah**, lived.

The house was a two up, two down place. The two boys had one bedroom, their mother and Olga the other, where their bed was pushed up against the wall so Olga wouldn't roll out.

The family was agog with news from Australia. Aunt **Nancy**, wife of their mother's elder brother A.F. (**Albert Frederick Toll**, always referred to as A.F.) who had migrated to Australia years before, had written to say that their son, **Thorold**, was expecting leave and would like to visit. Thorold had volunteered to join the army in June 1915 and was by then serving in France in the 4th Machine Gun Company (MGC), part of the 4th Brigade, 4th Australian division. It would be the first time any member of the Australian family had come back 'home'. To ten-year-old Cyril and eight-year-old Oswald, their cousin was a war hero and there was much excitement and anticipation.



4th MGC Rugby League team 'The Mudlarks'. Thorold Toll second back row, fifth from left. Image: Del Foster

Then a strange thing happened.

Cyril and Oswald were woken up by loud knocking on the front door. They heard heavy footsteps on the stairs, Cyril called out, 'Ma'am, there's a man in our house!' and saw him go into their mother's bedroom. He came out, back down the steps and they heard the front door shut.

The next morning their Mum wrote to their father recounting the event. She said the man was in uniform and

wore 'a funny hat'. She drew it. She had drawn a slouch hat. She said she hadn't felt scared. He had stood between the bed and the wall, head bowed with hands on the butt of an upturned rifle. It hadn't been a dream because the boys were full of it: 'I saw him first!' 'No you didn't, I did!' 'I heard him first!' 'No, I ...'. She'd had trouble getting the children back to sleep.

Spring and summer came and went. No Thorold. Then a letter arrived from Australia saying that on 3 October the Sydney bureau had received word from the British Red Cross that Thorold had died on 1 May.

Full details of Thorold's death became known only at the end of the war after the return of other members of the 4th Machine Gun company. They had been captured in the debacle of the First Battle of Bullecourt and while being made to unload ammunition from a train, Thorold had been killed, along with some mates, by an Allied shell. They had been collectively buried in the Corbehem cemetery, near Douai.

Particulars Required for the Roll of Honour of Australia in the Memorial War Museum.	
1. Name (in full) of Fallen Soldier	Toll, Thorold No. 2695
2. Unit and Number (if known)	4th MGC, No. 2695
3. With what Town or District in Australia was he chiefly connected (under which his name ought to come on the Memorial)	Wickham, District, Newcastle, State, New South Wales
4. What was his Birthplace	Wickham
5. Date of Death	1.5.17
6. Place where Killed or Wounded	Killed whilst P.O.W.
Particulars Required for the Nation's Histories.	
1. What was his Calling	Electrician
2. Age at time of Death	23 years
3. What was his School	Wickham, Superior Public School
4. What was his other Training	Technical College
5. If born in Britain or Austral, at what age did he come to Australia	
6. Had he ever served in any Military or Naval Force before Enlisting in the A.I.F. (Please state particulars)	No; He was exempt from Military Training, owing to a defective right hand, diagnosed The
7. Any other biographical details likely to be of interest to the Historians of the A.I.F. or of his Regiment	He was a member of the N.S.W.C.W. one time County champion of 14.5 miles
8. Was he connected with any other Member of the A.I.F. who died or who distinguished himself (Please state Relationship)	
9. Name and Address of the Parent or other person giving this information	Albert F. Toll, 122 Hammett St, Wickham, Newcastle
10. Name and Address of any other persons to whom reference could be made by the Historians for further information	

NOTE—This Folder is addressed to the Officer in Charge, Base Records, Victoria Barracks, Melbourne. Please fold in front, and stick down. Enclosed flap on that the addressed portion is outside. The information is required urgently. In A.F.'s hand.

Excerpt from A.F. Toll's submission for the Roll of Honour of Australia in the Memorial War Museum. Note that Thorold was killed whilst a POW.

Footnote

The Lumsdens migrated to Australia in 1921. Uncle A.F. met them at the dock in Sydney, bringing them and their baggage back to Newcastle. They lived with him in Hannell Street while looking around for a house of their own.

Del Foster (Member 1176)

Unsung Heroes: Ending the Witchcraft Act of 1753

Helen Duncan, described as a fraudulent psychic, claimed that a drowned sailor had told her of the sinking of HMS *Barham* in 1941. Charged on seven counts under the Witchcraft Act, she was imprisoned for nine months after which she continued to hold seances. After this trial of 'absolute tomfoolery' according to **Winston Churchill**, the act was repealed and women were finally safe from being charged as a witch, after nearly 200 years.

Source: *Normal Women – 900 Years of Making History* by Phillippa Gregory

The Story of an *Engelandvaarder*

Bert Groen

On 3 September 1939 the United Kingdom and France declared war against Germany. Declarations of war by other nations were to follow but the Netherlands, because it was neutral in World War I (WWI) and because it had tried to establish a neutral stance in European affairs between WWI and World War II (WWII), felt that its neutrality in any new European dispute had been established. This was particularly so when, on 6 October 1939, Germany made a declaration guaranteeing Dutch neutrality. Thus, it was with great surprise to the Netherlands when it was invaded by Germany without warning on 10 May 1940. This was an event for which the Netherlands was very much unprepared. Its army had mostly outdated weapons and equipment. Its air force only had 140 aircraft consisting mostly of outdated biplanes. And its navy was mostly in its colonies or at sea. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlands_in_World_War_II)

It did not take long for the Netherlands to capitulate to Germany. On 15 May 1940, after a German *blitzkrieg* attack against the Dutch city of Rotterdam and a threatened *blitzkrieg* attack on Utrecht, the Netherlands surrendered. However, before its surrender, there had been some spirited Dutch resistance at The Hague which allowed the Dutch monarch, Queen **Wilhelmina**, and some high Dutch government officials to be spirited away to England on 13 May 1940 by the British destroyer HMS *Hereward*. There, in London, Queen Wilhelmina established the Netherlands government-in-exile for the duration of WWII.

Official German occupation of the Netherlands commenced on 17 May 1940. After a period of martial law Germany had wanted to establish a puppet government under the leadership of Prime Minister **Dirk Jan de Geer** who was in exile with Queen Wilhelmina, similar to the one in Vichy France. Although de Geer had expressed interest in the idea Queen Wilhelmina vetoed the proposal and de Geer was replaced by **Pieter Gerbrandy** as the Prime Minister of the Dutch government-in-exile. Instead, Germany appointed **Arthur Seyss-Inquart**, an Austrian, as Reichskommissar of Occupied Netherlands. (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dutch_government-in-exile)

German occupation of the Netherlands was initially relatively benign. In fact, the Netherlands experienced somewhat of an economic boom because of orders from Germany for Dutch goods and services. However, from June 1941 until June 1944, as the reality of the war began to bite Germany, Germany began to demand more and more contributions from its occupied territories such as the Netherlands. As a result, living standards in the Netherlands began to decline and declined even further towards the end of the war up to May 1945 leading to starvation and lack of fuel in the Netherlands. (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Netherlands_in_World_War_II)

After official German occupation a significant number of Dutch people volunteered to join the Nazi Waffen-SS but, equally, a significant number of Dutch people attempted to escape. In particular, a number left the Netherlands with the specific purpose of joining the Dutch government-in-exile in England. These people became known as *Engelandvaarders*.

Engelandvaarders can be defined as:

Dutch nationals who, after the capitulation of the Netherlands on 14 May 1940 and no later than 6 June 1944 (D-day), left occupied Dutch territory or hostile (occupied) territory against the will of the enemy, with the intention of making a personal contribution to the Allied war effort.

(www.oorlogsbronnen.nl/engelandvaarders)

The exact number of *Engelandvaarders* is unknown. Initial estimates were of just over 1,700. However, the Netherlands National Archives has more recently, '[a]fter studying the sources and the journeys of these people' classified 2,150 people as *Engelandvaarders* as '[i]t is known that they arrived in England and were interrogated there. Among these *Engelandvaarders* were 2,082 men and 68 women'.

(www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/engelandvaarders-1940-1945#collapse-8003)

Engelandvaarders (in Dutch it means something like 'England sea voyagers') were so named because the first attempt to escape to England was to cross the North Sea by boat because it was the shortest route. However, that journey was extremely difficult and dangerous. Only about 10% of *Engelandvaarders* reached England via the North Sea. It seems that out of a total of 136 attempts to sail to England from the Dutch coast only 23% were successful. Soon after these attempted escapes the German occupiers tightened all land and sea exits from the Netherlands and in 1942 started building the Atlantic Wall and declared the coast a prohibited area.

(www.museumengelandvaarders.nl/engelandvaarders/routes/).

Most *Engelandvaarders* (about 58%) took the so-called Southern route which ran from occupied Dutch territory via Belgium, France, Spain and Portugal, and sometimes with a stopover in neutral Switzerland.

The remaining *Engelandvaarders* escaped via Sweden. These *Engelandvaarders* were mainly sailors and also non-seafarers who signed on to coastal vessels with the predetermined plan to run away from the ship in neutral Sweden. For these *Engelandvaarders* the passage to England could only be accomplished by a plane carrying mail and only a few *Engelandvaarders* could travel on such flights. In the meantime, they had to make themselves useful by chopping wood in the Swedish forests. (www.museumengelandvaarders.nl/engelandvaarders/routes/)

Upon arrival in England *Engelandvaarders* were normally housed in the Royal Victoria Patriotic School (RVPS) in London after which they were firstly interrogated by the

English security service, MI5, to assess them for their political reliability and to ensure they were not German spies, and then by the Dutch security service. The interrogations by the Dutch security service sought to obtain the following kinds of information:

- personal and family data of the *Engelandvaarder*;
- a description of any resistance history in the Netherlands;
- a description of the journey to England; and
- a list of people in the Netherlands or on route who were reliable or unreliable according to the *Engelandvaarder*.

(www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/zoekhulpen/engelandvaarders-1940-1945#collapse-8000)

If the putative *Engelandvaarder* successfully passed the interrogation process they would be personally received by Queen Wilhelmina. The Queen herself would serve tea and speak to each one of them individually about his or her journey to England and about the situation 'at home'. In this way, she hoped to receive information about the situation in the occupied Netherlands.

(www.museumengelandvaarders.nl/engelandvaarders/in-engeland/)

After their interrogation it would be determined how best an *Engelandvaarder* could serve the Dutch government-in-exile. According to one source 332 *Engelandvaarders* joined the Royal Netherlands Army, 118 the Royal Netherlands Air Force, 397 the Royal Netherlands Navy, 176 the Royal Netherlands East Indies Army, 164 the merchant navy, 129 served with the Dutch government-in-exile in London and 111 became secret agents and returned to occupied Netherlands.

(en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Engelandvaarder).

The records of the interrogations by the Netherlands security services of many of the *Engelandvaarders* can now be found in the Netherlands National Archives (www.nationaalarchief.nl/).

To illustrate how just one Dutch person became an *Engelandvaarder*, reference will be made to Interviewee 128 who was interrogated by the Dutch security service on 14 January 1943. For the purposes of this article, he will be referred to as Interviewee 128. The interrogation is available at:

www.nationaalarchief.nl/onderzoeken/archief/2.13.71/in_vnr/2517/file/NL-HaNA_2.13.71_2517_0161.



Interviewee 128 escaped occupied Netherlands on 30 June 1942 by way of Sweden. He had been employed as a deckhand, sailor and helmsman on ships both within and outside the Netherlands. From the age of 14 to 17 he had worked on his brothers' barges that mainly worked in the European canal system. After he turned 17, he

found work on ships such as the motor ship *Arbo* and the *De Vecht* that both sailed outside of the Netherlands. When WWII broke out in 1939 the owner and captain of *Arbo* was too afraid to sail anymore. Interviewee 128 had formed the intention before 30 June 1942 to leave the Netherlands but he had heard a rumour that the parents of sailors who were minors were responsible for the actions of their children, so decided not to. He had expected to be called up for Dutch Military Service in 1939 but the outbreak of war hindered that. Instead, for two years he was forced to sail on behalf of the Germans, partly because he wanted to attend nautical college which required three years of practical sailing and also because he could avoid being sent to Germany to work there.

Interviewee 128

In March 1941 it was decided that the *Arbo* would sail again but under a different captain. The ship sailed out of Delfzijl, a Dutch seaport in the north-east of the Netherlands. From March to August 1941 the *Arbo* made three trips to Sweden to bring back wood. After August 1941 Interviewee 128 sailed on the *De Vecht* and made three more trips to Sweden and one to Finland carrying salt and calcium chloride (a white, crystalline solid used as a de-icing agent, a drying agent, a food additive, and for other various industrial processes (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calcium_chloride)) and returning with wood. From Christmas 1941 until March 1942 no ships sailed out of Delfzijl as the harbour was frost-bound. Ships just lay in the harbour until 13 May 1942 when a cargo of calcium chloride could be taken from Delfzijl to Gothenburg in Sweden using the *Arbo*, with a return cargo of wood on 8 June 1942. It was on this voyage that Interviewee 128 and a fellow sailor decided that, on the next trip to Sweden, they would jump ship, then make their way to England.

Deserting from a coastal sailing ship was not an easy matter. Such ships were under guard by the German occupiers, a guard that was intensified from one guard to two guards after the disappearance of the *Nautilus* on a trip to Sweden and rumoured to have gone to England. On trips to Sweden two guards were on board ships as far as the Kiel Canal in Germany. If a person attempting to be an *Engelandvaarder* was caught escaping they could easily be given a prison sentence or even suffer the death penalty. (www.museumengelandvaarders.nl/engelandvaarders/in-engeland/)

The journey on which Interviewee 128 and his sailor mate effected their escape was on the *Arbo*, which next left Delfzijl on 17 June 1942. On 23 June the *Arbo* arrived at Gavle in Sweden to unload its cargo. It then sailed to Bolsta on 26 June 1942 to pick up wood. At Bolsta on 30 June 1942 whilst their boat was still at dock, the pair told the captain of the *Arbo* that they needed to go and buy some shoes after they had visited a friend whom they had arranged to meet. The captain agreed with their proposal.

Thus began a clandestine journey in Sweden to ensure they would not be arrested by Swedish police and returned to their ship. First, Interviewee 128 and his friend went to

a coffee house in Bolsta. There they ordered a taxi which took them to a town named Nijland, six kilometres from Bolsta. From there they took another taxi a further 30 kilometres to a place called Langsele. From Langsele at about 8 o'clock they caught a night-train to Stockholm and arrived at 8 the following morning. Immediately they went to the Netherlands Consulate in Stockholm where they were personally met by the Dutch Consul in Sweden, **Mr de Jong**. Dutch Consul de Jong gave them money and directions to go to a safe house about six kilometres from Stockholm at Sotertelle. From there they were told to take the night-train to Gothenburg and the next night from Gothenburg to Stockholm. They arrived back in Stockholm on 3 July 1942 where they again made contact with the Dutch Consul who informed them that the *Arbo* was still in harbour at Bolsta. The Dutch Consul gave them further instructions about another safe house in Stockholm where they should stay out of sight of the Swedish police. After staying there for the weekend, they went to a sort of pension in the afternoon of Monday 6 July. They were then given the information that the *Arbo* had sailed. Their furtive journey had ended. It was now safe to be released to Swedish police.

Interviewee 128 and his friend were placed under arrest and imprisoned for ten days in a Stockholm prison. They were released on 16 July when, with the assistance of the Dutch Consul, they were found work on a turf farm with over 100 workers, none of whom were Dutch but all Swedes with one Norwegian. This work finished on 21 August. After consultation with the Dutch Consul, work was found for the two of them as wood cutters near the forest at Ulft-Odestage. There they could earn between 50 and 55 kronen working with Swedish and Norwegian workers.

On 12 December they were summoned by the Netherlands Consulate to come to Stockholm. A plane to take them to England had been found. However, for some unknown reason the flight did not take place. The pair had to be put up in a hotel at the cost of the Netherlands Consulate until other flights could be organised. So it was, at 10.30 pm on 27 December, on separate flights, Interviewee 128 and his friend were flown to somewhere in Scotland where they arrived at 4 in the morning. That evening, under police guard, they were put on a night-train to London and were housed in the RVSP.

From the RVSP, Interviewee 128 and his mate were taken for interrogations by MI5 and the Dutch security service. The conclusion from the Dutch security service interrogation was that Interviewee 128 *'is een flinke, echte Hollandsche jongen, die politick alleszins betrouwbaar wordt geacht'*. ('is a fine, real Dutch boy, who is considered politically reliable in every way'). As the interrogation for Interviewee 128 was successful he went on to meet Queen Wilhelmina.

Given his seafaring background it was logical that Interviewee 128 enlisted in the Royal Dutch Navy. From 1 February 1943 until 4 August 1944, he served on Motor Torpedo Boat (MTB) 240. Operating from Dover in

England, the main duties of the Dutch MTBs were to attack German convoys travelling through the English Channel and dropping different types of mines as close as possible to French ports. Dangerous work. On other occasions Dutch MTBs had to pick up air crews from planes shot down over the English Channel. Dutch MTBs were also involved in protecting supply fleets sailing from Scotland to the invasion front in France after D-Day. From 10 August 1944 until 10 April 1946 Interviewee 128 served on HMS *Macoma*, a tanker converted into a fly deck ship capable of carrying four airplanes used in scouting duties, whilst the tanker was used to refuel convoy ships.

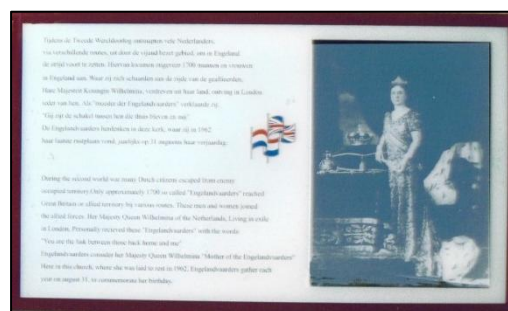
Germany surrendered to the Netherlands on 5 May 1945. Interviewee 128 was demobilised from the Royal Netherlands Navy on 15 May 1946.

The name of Interviewee 128 was **Hendrik Groen**. Hendrik Groen (1921–2011) was my father.

On 9 November 1949 Hendrik Groen seamen first class was awarded the War Remembrance Cross with Buckle for his war time services by the Netherlands Minister of the Navy.



On 11 November 1999 he received a Diploma of Honour from the French Ambassador to the Netherlands in recognition of his role in the landing at Normandy during WWII that led to the liberation of France.



In Delft Cathedral, the burial place of Queen Wilhelmina, there are two plaques recognising the link between Queen Wilhelmina and *Engelandvaarders* in exile in WWII.

Bert Groen (Member 1292)

Images: Bert Groen

Rethinking the Heroes in our Family Stories

Dr Kim Gray

Note about language and place: Some of the terminology in the historical quotes I have referenced is outdated and offensive. I apologise to anyone who is offended by any of the language used. This paper was written on the unceded land of the Awabakal, Worimi and Wonnarua peoples, the Traditional Custodians. Readers are also advised that the article includes the names of Indigenous people who have died.



Bulga bridge, April 2025

Recently I revisited the place where some of my **McAlpin**, **Eather** and **Onus** ancestors settled at Bulga, NSW in the early 1800s. Although I had been here with family a number of times – the most memorable being an extended McAlpin family reunion in the

90s – this time it felt very different. I was much older of course, my parents were now dead and lots of life experiences had passed like water under the bridge, as they say. Growing up, ancestral heroes had weaved their way through our family's stories. One story was about my Scottish 2x great-grandfather, **William Glas McAlpin** who arrived in Australia in 1812 on the *General Graham* as a not quite two-year-old with his parents **Peter** and **Elizabeth McAlpin** and siblings, **Sarah** and **Peter**. As a 16-year-old in 1826, William Glas joined his sister Sarah and brother-in-law **Thomas Eather** on their expedition to Bulga and settled there permanently with his wife, **Susannah Onus**, in the early 1840s. On my recent visit the township of Bulga did not appear to have physically changed much at all – the pretty church with its historic, well-tended graveyard and community hall still takes pride of place in the centre of the village. The 90s reunion was held in the community hall, this public space said to be William Glas's idea, to erect a School of Arts on land he sold for two pounds in 1893.

But it felt different to be here this time because I looked at the whole area with fresh eyes informed by society's changing and diverse attitudes about the people who make up our history, and particularly about our Indigenous peoples' connection to Country. We now have relatively easy access to vast amounts of online historical information where once we may have been confined to our family and community's views, or what we may have found in our local library or Historical Society. Of course, the quantity of historical information available does not mean that it is of equal value or is accurate – a quick look at the variance in Ancestry information about the same person reminds us to check where the data has come from. And we also have to keep in mind, as the saying goes, that history is always written by the victors. So, I'm also

wondering whether in the tales about our family heroes we are missing some crucial voices who would give us a much more nuanced story. An obvious example here of course is how women throughout our history have been portrayed – they mostly appear in historical documents as spinsters, wives or mothers – omitting their much broader influence and contributions to the community. In my family, the deeds and generous character of William Glas, for example, are well documented – his skills as a blacksmith, drover and farmer, his famed ride from Bulga to Windsor to cast the deciding vote for Mr **G. Bowman** to represent the people of the Hunter in the Legislative Assembly, his breeding of prized Clydesdales, building of the first steel flour mill at Bulga and the first school, amongst other notable events, make him worthy of his 'Grandfather of Bulga' title and a family hero. Apart from his heroic deeds though I'm sure there is much more to know about William Glas. But of his wife Susannah's contributions, in the public records we read that she bore eight children, sadly losing the first three as infants, and apart from a brief mention in the *Singleton Argus* (19 April 1879), that she lay the foundation stone for the new school, her accomplishments remain elusive. Perhaps I just need to dig a little deeper into the family archives.

Digging deeper leads me to ask questions about whose voices are mostly heard and to try to uncover others who may have been overlooked, misunderstood or deliberately buried amongst our family histories and official accounts. I'm also thinking about references to our First Nations peoples in the family accounts given how much we now know about our history of colonial violence – how did my ancestors interact with the local people? How might rethinking about the heroes in our family stories contribute to the bigger project of truth telling and the healing we need to do as a nation?



Newcastle Writers Festival
Kate Grenville and David Marr, April 2025

These were the big questions I was mulling over when choosing the author talks I would attend at this year's Newcastle Writers Festival (5–7 April 2025) and lucky for me a wide array of talented writers was speaking about their family histories. I've read and enjoyed much of **Kate Grenville's** work – her exploration of the early days of the

colony have been mostly fictional accounts informed by some of the characters in her family stories. Her most recent book though is a memoir, *Unsettled*, where she takes a road trip, a kind of ‘pilgrimage’ she calls it, to travel to the places where past generations of her family lived. Grenville is trying to expand the frame to include our First Nations peoples and understand bigger truths beyond the stories her mother had told her. In the process of rethinking her family heroes Grenville starts with her 3x great-grandfather, **Solomon Wiseman** who ‘took up’ land at what is now Wisemans Ferry and became the main character in her successful novel, *Secret River*. Since her last trip here she notes that someone has considered Solomon Wiseman worthy of a bronze statue but as his descendant she feels ‘nothing but distaste for the statue and all it stands for’. She continues, ‘he was no hero and by all accounts not a good man’ and whilst she reads information on another plaque about the convict-built Great North Road that runs through the town there is, ‘not a single solitary word! – about the Dharug or the Darkinjung’.

On my recent trip to Bulga I was looking for acknowledgement of the Wonnarua and what I found made me question why their presence on Country hadn’t been a more prominent part of my family’s stories. So, I had another look at the written family accounts and found quite a few mentions of ‘friendly aboriginal guides’, without whom my ancestors and other early settlers would never have found their way through the mountains to the fertile plains and life-giving Wollombi Brook. Are these Aboriginal guides some of the overlooked heroes in my family’s stories? In one family account a sentence or two about the first settlers in Bulga in 1826 seemed to jump off the page. It describes how some men were fitting shingles on the roof of a slab hut and, ‘because of the hostility of some local blackfellows these men were obliged to take their guns onto the roof with them for protection’ (Phillips 1991). Wonnarua ‘hostility’ to the invasion of their land would seem to be completely understandable. Historian **Mark Dunn** – another speaker at the Newcastle Writers Festival – says that it was access to the rich alluvial soils along the flat lands beside the river that fuelled much of the conflict and violence that occurred during the 1820s and 1830s in the Hunter Valley. For tens of thousands of years prior to White settlement these fertile valleys, mountains and the sea had sustained generations of Aboriginal communities. Dunn details the conflicts in his book, *Convict Valley*, and a further look at the historical research shows that this period was particularly brutal. Just one example on the extensive University of Newcastle site, *Colonial Frontier Massacres in Australia*, exposes the brutality of this period on the Wonnarua.

<https://c21ch.newcastle.edu.au/colonialmassacres/detail.php?r=570>

In *Killing for Country: A Family Story*, **David Marr** also graphically outlines the impact of frontier violence on the local people and their resistance. He says:

the Wonnarua resisted the invasion of their land by stripping farms of crops and robbing travellers on the road. From hilltops, they rolled boulders down on their pursuers ... When a stockman known for beating blacks was killed near Putty in 1825 and two more deaths followed in the nearby mountains, soldiers from Windsor killed at least six blacks in a dawn raid in Garland Valley. It turned out they had nothing to do with the deaths of the stockmen (2023:18).

The broader context around the obscure references about ‘troublesome blacks’ in my family’s records was starting to become a little clearer. At the Writers Festival David Marr spoke with Kate Grenville about family secrets, the different ways they went about exploring their ancestors and how they felt about what they found. In an effort to uncover the secrecy around his great-grandmother, Marr finds that her father, his 2x great-grandfather Sub-Inspector **Reginald Uhr** and his brother, **Darcy**, were part of the colonial massacres. Uhr was ‘a professional killer of Aborigines’ – he and his brother rode with the Native Police. Marr says he was at first ‘appalled and curious’, then later ‘my sense of myself and my family shifted’. He describes how his family, like mine, talked about family heroes. He says ‘I grew up in a tribe of engineers. We celebrate a blacksmith who came from Scotland’ – as my family also does – but ‘were never very curious about who else might be up in the tree. Occasional discoveries were a source of amusement. My mother was disturbed – and we were delighted – to find convicts lurking up there’. He continues, ‘we can be proud of our families for things done generations ago. We can also be ashamed’. Indeed.

In my digging to find out more about my 2x great-grandmother, Susannah Onus, I came across young ‘**Kitty**’ who was said to help Susannah with the housework and look after the children. I wonder, what was her Aboriginal name? According to one family account, ‘Susannah’s brother **Joseph (Onus)** had left Kitty with her after he had been droving sheep from one of the outlying stations and had found the young girl lost in the bush’ (Phillips 1991:208). But it was the mention of Kitty in a 1914 memoir written by **Elizabeth Collins** (née **Clark**, born 1842), that I found particularly poignant. The Clarks were neighbours and good friends of the McAlpins from the 1840s and in 1863 Elizabeth’s brother, **Macdonald Clark** married **Susannah McAlpin** (jnr), the daughter of William Glas and Susannah Onus. Elizabeth’s memoir relays the hardships, triumphs and tragedies of the time, describing the relationships and everyday life of the settlers. She speaks of the generous nature and kindness of Susannah and William who at one time crossed the swollen river on logs at night to help one of the Clark’s young daughters who was seriously ill and later died. Elizabeth also describes with humour how Aboriginal ‘Kit’ was her playmate and protector swimming with them in the river and that she ‘used to have a lot of fun too at our expense’. She continues:

dear old black Kit, she was like a Newfoundland dog with us kids bathing. She was a brave, true kind woman – her black skin covered a kind and noble

heart. Year in and year out she toiled there for Mrs Mack. Would wash and cook and scrub as no white woman she could get would ... Mrs Mack was kind to her and she worked like a slave for that kindness ... but she was really an exile. At some of the big station raids on the blacks, this girl was taken alive and kept, was made a servant of ... She told Mrs Mack she was married and had two children in her Tribe and begged and implored of her to let her go back to her babies, but it was no use ... Mrs McAlpin told her to find another husband amongst the Bulga blacks, but Kitty was true to her own ... Then she consented to marry **Jack Wickety**, a very smart man amongst the Bulga blacks at that time. So, Kitty became Mrs Jack Wickety. She had one child – **Annie**. (Elizabeth Cole Clark, 1914)

Contrary to Phillip's account that Kitty had been found 'lost in the bush', Elizabeth's memoir describes how she was actually stolen from her family, 'she was really an exile'. And also that this was just a part of the wider practice of 'big station raids on the blacks'. I can understand Marr's feeling of shame about the actions of his Native Police ancestors – when I read about Kitty's plight, I also feel disgusted and incredibly sad about such discriminatory practices that continue to reverberate through the generations. In 1914 Elizabeth is looking back on her earlier life and seems to show empathy for Kitty's situation but as Dunn mentions in *Convict Valley*, the relationships between Aboriginal workers and guides and the colonial settlers in the Hunter from the 1820s to 1840s were complex.

The Wonnarua did have some allies in this period – perhaps they are our uncelebrated heroes? David Marr tells of some sections of the media at the time reporting on the injustice of the raids on the local people and missionary **Lancelot Threlkeld** features in many historical accounts as a tireless advocate. Threlkeld built relationships with the local people by recording language and stories from Wonnarua culture with the help of local man, **Biraban**, who acted as his interpreter. Reverend **John Dunmore Lang** reacted to the whitewashing of Aboriginal culture, through the ignoring of existing river names and replacing them with names of Governors. He says:

Preposterously enough! For all three rivers had native names much more beautiful and highly significant, as all native names are, from time immemorial. Every remarkable point of land, every hill and valley in the territory, had its native name, given as far as can be ascertained from particular instances, from some remarkable feature of the particular locality – insomuch that the natives can make appointments in their forests and valleys, with as much accuracy in regard to place, as an inhabitant of London in the street in the metropolis. (Dunn 2020:145)

But it does seem that learning about Aboriginal knowledge of Country including about language and place

names was mostly 'beyond the reach or curiosity of many of the settlers' (p.146).



Baiaame Cave, Milbrodale, April 2025

I found out a little more about my ancestor, William Glas's interactions with the Wonnarua in his conversation with **R.H. Mathews**, an amateur anthropologist who presented a detailed description about Baiaame Cave to the Royal Society of NSW in 1872. It is now considered to be a state heritage significant site. Mathews suggests the site had been known to white colonisers at least since the 1840s. He says:

I was informed by Mr W.G. McAlpine [*sic*], who is now eighty-four years of age, and has resided in the neighbourhood for the last fifty years, that the figures in this cave were there when he first came to the district; and even at that time the drawings were beyond the knowledge of the local blacks. Mr McAlpine further stated that the figures on the rock are now in about the same state of preservation as when he first saw them upwards of fifty years ago, having suffered very little in that time. (Mathews, 1893, pp.356–7) in:

<https://apps.environment.nsw.gov.au/dpcheritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5061940>

Mathew's report on William Glas's observation that 'the drawings were beyond the knowledge of the local blacks' suggests he may have spoken with the local people about the age of the rock art and perhaps its significance. I would have liked to have visited the cave and learnt of the family's connections when attending the 90s reunion, 100 years after anthropologist Mathew's observations and his conversation with William Glas was published. But it obviously wasn't the right moment in history for me or my family's amateur historians to think about that – now of course, thinking about it is well overdue.

Access to Baiaame Cave is along a boggy, pot-holed, dirt track on Wonnarua country, now a private property in Milbrodale but widely known to be open to anyone who may wish to visit.



Road to Baiaame Cave, April 2025

So, on a clear sunny autumn day I had the privilege of visiting the sacred site of Baiame Cave and seeing the image of Creator God Baiame, with outstretched arms resembling the wings of a wedge-tailed eagle, standing proud and protecting all in the district. I stood where my ancestor William Glas had come for the first time some 180 years before and wondered whether, like me, he stood in awe of Baiame, the rock art believed to be over 2,000 years old.



Creator God Baiame, April 2025

On that day I felt connected to my 2x great-grandfather across the generations. And perhaps more significantly, I wondered how many others had experienced this brief glimpse into Wonnarua culture and felt like me, how privileged we all are to be connected to this ancient culture. A chance meeting with some Wonnarua women gave me hope that more widespread knowledge about First Nations cultures and better connections may be a part of our future.



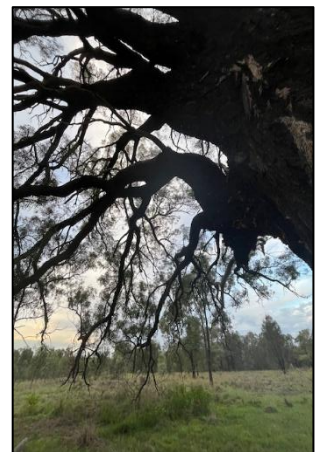
Minimbah Teaching Place, Bulga, April 2025

Minimbah Teaching Place, opened in 2022, is the vision of elder, Auntie **Barbara Foot** who dreamed of establishing a place to showcase Wonnarua culture, to engage the community and store artefacts. It is situated on

a 116-hectare ecological and Aboriginal conservation area at Wollombi Brook, a waterway important to sacred sites nearby such as the Bulga Bora Ground, Baiame Cave and Lizard Rock. Interestingly, the Bulga Bora Ground also features in my family's accounts, the last combined Bora ceremony held in 1852 said to have occurred on the land McAlpin's resided on (Phillips, 1991). It is also described in *The Eather Manuscript – The History of Bulga 1820–1921*. Alexander Eather tells of the 'many beautifully made stone implements' and the remains of the ancient Bora ground with its sacred circle and ring of carved trees where he says, the last initiation ceremony 'was attended by between 500 and 600 blacks from the various tribes as far away as Mudgee and Goulburn'. Sadly nothing remains of the ceremonial ground today.

I had read about Minimbah Teaching Place prior to my visit – the website says that if the Teaching Place is not in use, you can enter the grounds around the building and learn about the Wonnarua story from the interpretive signs. I was lucky to be greeted by a group of Wonnarua women preparing for a barbeque – a few chairs were lined up in front of a welcoming fire in anticipation of a later yarn, the women cooking and chatting while I read the information boards in the grounds. I mentioned how peaceful it felt to be here and they said 'yes, this place has good energy'. The Teaching Place has been over 20 years in the making – Bulga is surrounded by open cut coal mines and the community has fought long and hard to curtail the encroachment of the mines on their tiny village. Auntie Barbara Foot and others are rightly remembered as heroes in their battle to reclaim this special place. One of the women spoke about the spirit ghosts of the ancestors coming up from the Bora Ground at night – 'this was men's business', she says and then laughing, 'we're not supposed to know about that but we can see them and hear them'.

Then she excitedly mentions that a meeting place for the women is soon to be established and encourages me to spend time with the Grandmother tree, a massive ironbark around 250 years old. The beautiful tree gives us a glimpse of what the landscape may have looked like before it was impacted by colonial farming practices. Minimbah Teaching Place seems to me to be a beacon of hope – the website says that it is used by schools, universities, Indigenous and government organisations, corporate companies and not-for-profit groups for cultural and environmental education; cultural camps; and mental health programs. This place seems to be a good way to bring Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together and to learn a new way forward.



Grandmother tree, Minimbah Teaching Place, April 2025

Learning about our ancestors' lives can be so interesting and joyous. We may hope to find some of their traits in ourselves, marvel at their courage, feel proud of their achievements and celebrate them as heroes. But in revisiting family memoirs and other archives about my Bulga ancestors I have been reminded that heroes are not always the ones with the loudest voices or the ones who are more likely to appear in the historical documents. Sometimes it's only on digging a little deeper that we find other unlikely and uncelebrated heroes and also realise that human beings are complex characters – both courage and prejudice can exist in the same person. Truth telling is about listening to the voices who have been silenced, acknowledging that bad things have happened in our past and that trauma can reverberate through generations. Then we can move forward together in truth. I think Marr's thoughts about how times change but people remain the same, is a good way to conclude. He says:

... the good among us are much the same as they have always been. They listened to the Aboriginal people. They called the killings murder as they happened. Journalists were the most persistent voices. But lawyers, missionaries, stockmen, a few magistrates, and a cohort of decent squatters also argued from the start that the conquest of this country, though inevitable, did not need to be so savage – the most brutal colonial invasion in the nineteenth-century Empire. (2023:410)

Kim Gray PhD (Member 1355)

Images: Kim Gray

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Unsung Heroes

A British Court of Law

Emily Hall married **Edmund Jackson** in 1887 but left him after a few days. He won a court order that she must return (and have sex with him) but she defied him. He kidnapped her in 1891, holding her against her will. Her sisters sued and the case went before three senior judges, to decide whether a runaway wife could legally be kidnapped and held by a violently abusive husband. To the

surprise of everyone in the court, the wives of the three judges decided to observe the proceedings. The judges had to make their decision 'under the steely gaze of their wives', with the judges deciding that the husband's action was not legal and Emily was released to her family.

In Suffrage

Dame **Millicent Fawcett** (1847–1929) as well as dedicating her life to her blind, much older husband, academic, economist and statesman **Henry Fawcett** (1833–1884), was a leader of women's causes. She was responsible for uniting 17 suffrage organisations into the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, helping found Newnham College Cambridge for women, supporting the abolition of the slave trade, supporting women and children endangered by the Boer War. She lived long enough to see all women in England get the vote.

In Education and Medicine

The first English woman doctor was **Elizabeth Blackwell**, who had to practise in the US. The British Medical Act 1865 tried to prevent women doctors training abroad by forcing all doctors to register with the government. **Sophia Jex-Blake** was refused admission to study medicine at the University of Edinburgh, as they could not make provisions for a single lady. She advertised for women to join her. Six others studied with her, despite verbal and physical abuse from male students. A mob of 200 men barred the exam room; when they passed their finals the university refused to allow them to graduate. Jex-Blake qualified abroad, returned to Edinburgh and put up her brass plate, then established Scotland's first hospital for women.

In Aviation

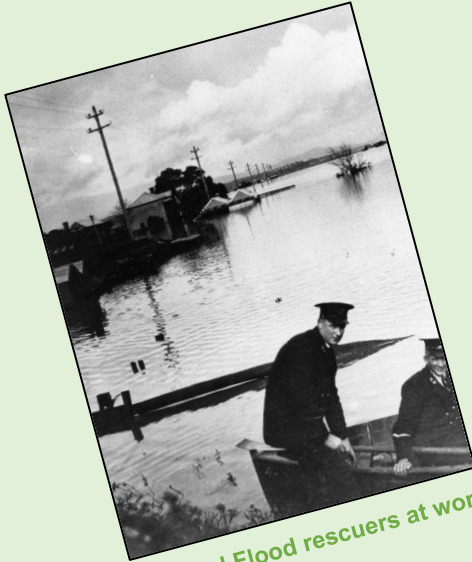
The Women's Auxiliary Air Force was formed in 1939. The Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) were known as 'Attagirls', tasked with delivering planes to airfields around Britain. **Joy Lofthouse** commented, 'You'd get out of a Tiger Moth after delivery and then into a Wellington bomber. After that you could be flying a Spitfire.' They did not use instruments, being instructed to stay within sight of the ground and use maps, a compass and a watch to navigate – extremely dangerous in bad weather. **Jackie Moggridge** joined ATA aged 18 and ferried 1,438 planes of 82 different types, to their pilots. She went on to become the first female commercial airline captain.

In science

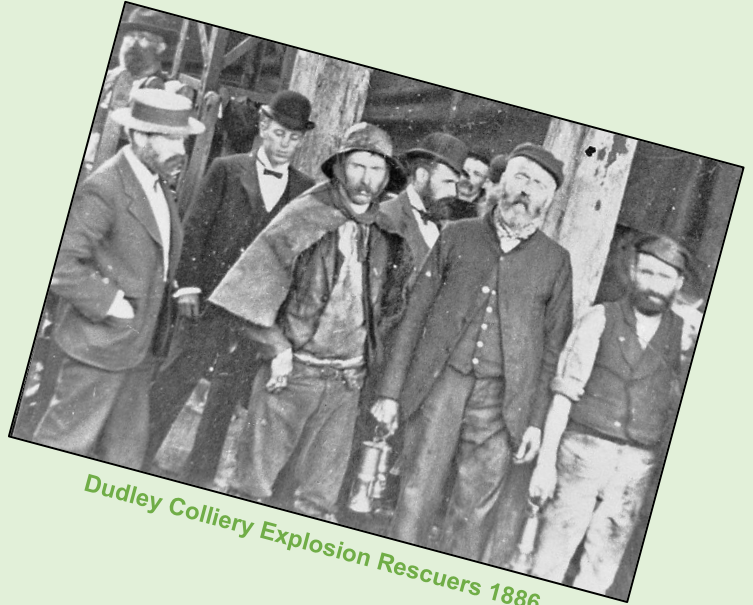
Augusta Ada King Countess Lovelace (1815–1852), mathematician, daughter of Lord **Byron**, friend of **Charles Babbage**, the 'father of computers'. She translated from Italian a description of Babbage's analytic machine and added her own notes, suggesting that this 'engine' could do more than calculating; in fact she described an operations sequence, in effect the first computer program.

Source: *Normal Women – 900 Years of Making History* by Philippa Gregory

Quiet Heroes and Heroines



Maitland Flood rescuers at work



Dudley Colliery Explosion Rescuers 1886



Marita Cheng, 2012 Australian of the Year, co-founder of Aipoly, an app for blind people to recognise objects via their mobile phone (Getty Images/Brendon Thorne)



Grace Bussell, one of the rescuers of survivors of the SS Georgette shipwreck in WA in 1876, as a 16-year-old (Wikipedia)



A coal train struggling through flood water, driver and fireman keeping it going



Rescuers involved in the Stockton Mine disaster of 1896