



William John Armstrong

"Uncle Willie Who Died in the War"

Janita and Paul O'Neill

William John Armstrong

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Dedicated to the memory of Private William John
Armstrong (6276), 18th Reinforcements, 24th
Battalion, AIF.

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(Front Cover) William John Armstrong (19 December, 1894 - 31 August, 1918).



(Back Cover) William John Armstrong (right) and comrades in Paris, August, 1918.

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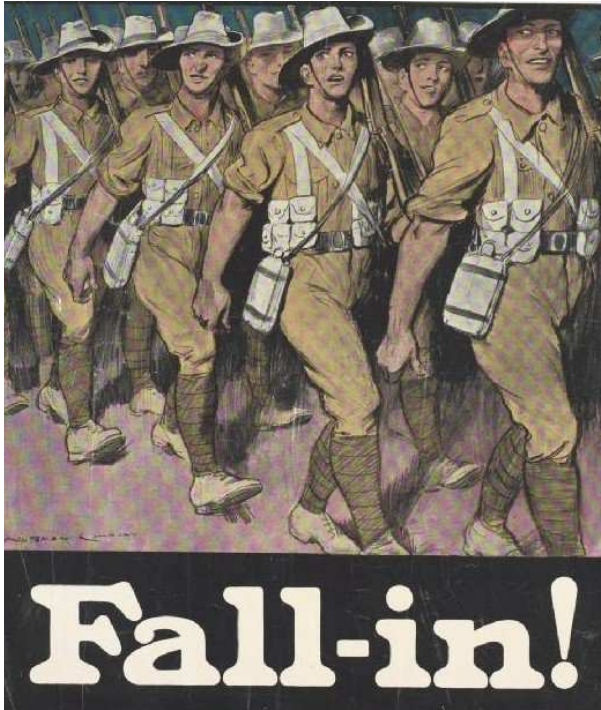


It was just over two months before the war would end on November 11th, 1918, that Pte. William John Armstrong was killed in action at Mont St. Quentin, while serving with the 24th Battalion, AIF. William was eventually buried in the Péronne Communal Cemetery Extension.

In January 2009, his great-niece became the first of his family (as far as we know) to visit his grave in almost 100 years. As a child, all she knew of her great-uncle was that he was "Uncle Willie who died in the war".

This book is a record of as much of William's life as can be reconstructed after all those years. In the course of research, William's war-time diary was discovered in the collection of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

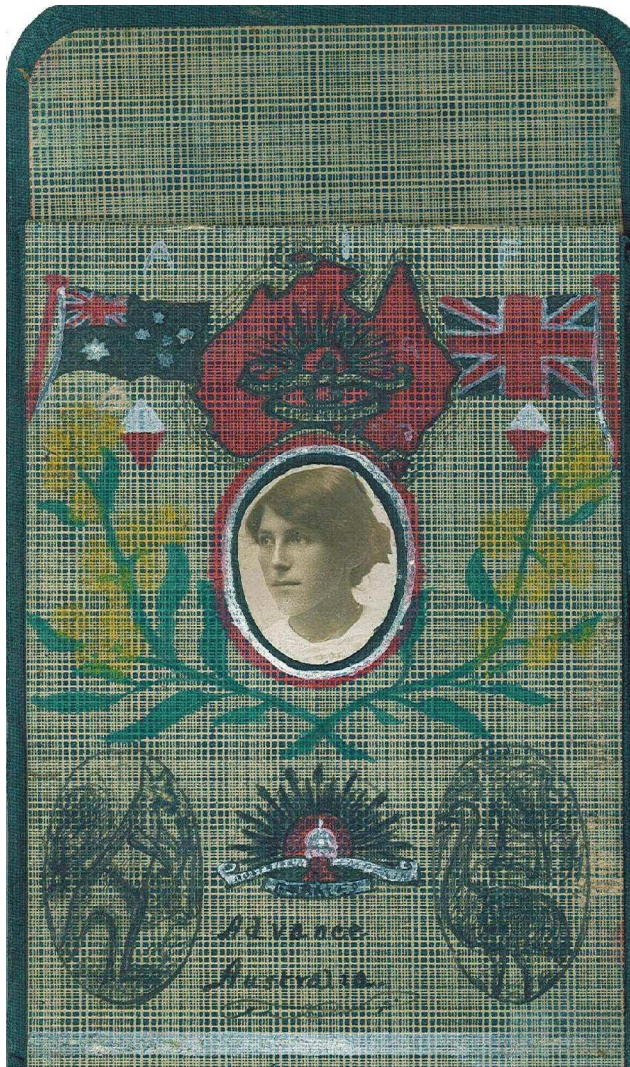
The diary, its contents, its return to Australia after the war, and then its move to the Australian War Memorial, add a very human touch and some further insight into the short life of William John Armstrong.



William the Man

William John Armstrong was born on December 19th, 1894 at North Carlton, Victoria, second of the three children of Donald and Miriam (nee Fitnam) Armstrong. Miriam died in 1900, when William was just five years old. It would have been fairly normal at this time, in the event of a mother's death leaving such young children, that a female relative would step in and so Alexander, William and Donetta (Ettie) went to live with their aunt, Elizabeth Fitnam. However, William's correspondence with his father during the war is evidence that a strong relationship with his father was retained.

It was in 1910, the same year that his father, Donald, re-married, that William qualified as a teacher and was posted to Preston, then Camberwell in Melbourne, before taking up appointments as teacher-in-charge at Dagamero, Glenmore, Edi, Delatite and Howquadales, small country schools around the Mansfield-Whitfield district of Victoria. Victorian Department of Education records state that William was “*a good teacher, who took keen interest in the school and its surroundings, besides being a keen sportsman and universal favourite.*”



Diary cover page with photo of Irene Macklan



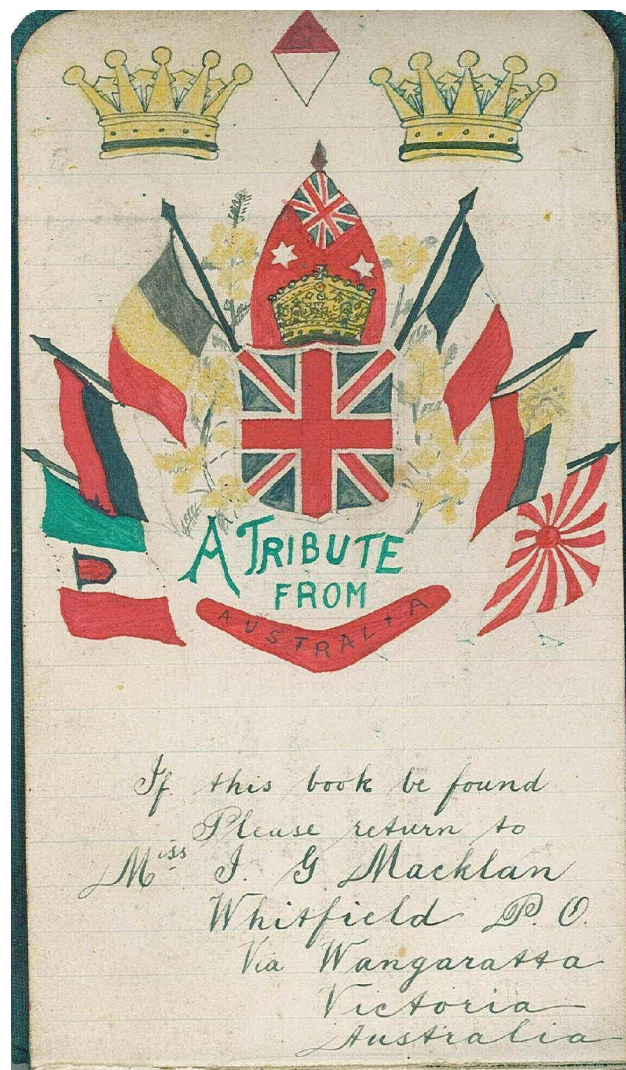
While working and living in the Whitfield district, William formed a relationship with Miss Irene Gladis Macklan, the daughter of a local farmer and owner of the Whitfield Butchery. It may be wild speculation, but William and Irene may have been engaged, either officially or unofficially. William's diary was probably given to him as an embarkation gift by Irene. Her picture graces the colourfully illustrated cover of the diary and there is a handwritten note on the dedication page stating "*If this book is found, Please return to Miss I. G. Macklan, Whitfield, Via Wangaratta, Victoria, Australia.*"

There are many references in the diary to letters to and from Irene and the newspaper clippings of events from home, inside the diary, were probably enclosed in her letters. Further support for the notion of the strength of the relationship is the common interest in horse racing, shared by William, Irene's father, Isaac and her brother, Albert. William's diary has several entries relating to Albert and they even meet up in England before William is posted to the Front. Army records also show Irene as William's 'allottee', a term that refers to a person who is the recipient of all or part of a soldier's pay.



Perhaps the clearest indication of the depth of this relationship is the Mizpah* dedication in the front of William's diary. It seems to be in his hand and the illustrations are indicative of his desire to capture and record some iconic Australian images. It is by far the most romantic entry and it is fairly safe to assume that Irene is the subject.

* Mizpah is an emotional bond between people who are separated (either physically or by death). Mizpah jewellery is worn to signify this bond, and the word "mizpah" can often be found on headstones.



Tribute Page, Diary, William John Armstrong.

Despite what appears on his enlistment form, William was 21 and 10 months when he enlisted. William may have been a little excited when this document was completed, or perhaps the clerical staff were rushed. This inaccuracy wasn't the only error on this form. Mansfield was incorrectly identified as his place of birth, an error that has compounded through the years, leading to the recording of this incorrect birth place location on many documents that we studied. It also led us to Mansfield, rather than Melbourne, in our initial search for information on the young William Armstrong.

We know nothing of William's time in training at Broadmeadows, although, given some of the entries in his diary, we can be sure that he was heavily involved in whatever sport was going. We pick up a more detailed account once he begins writing in his diary, just after embarkation, en route to England. His first entry is probably the most sensitive of any that he made over the two years he was away. Like many young men, he was probably struck with the enormity of the situation as well as the grand adventure on which he was embarking. Yet, he was also a very perceptive young man, who was able to see beyond his own excitement and uncertainties, exposing an honest empathy for what may have been felt by those he was leaving behind.

23 November 1916. At Sea

.... We pulled out a little after 12 and then came the break away from home, friends and most of all Irene. I often think what it must be to those who are left behind. We have plenty of changes of scenes and events and our minds are not always in one state of anxiety like those who are waiting & longing for us at home in Aussie. Lt Col Pope of the boat (H.M.T.S Hororata). Lt Wilcox and Lt Stuart were i/c of our battalion. About 1760 were on board. Diary, William John Armstrong.

AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES

AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.

Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad.

No. 6276 Name (Surname) ARMSTRONG
 in full (Christian Name) William John
 24 Btn/18 Rein Unit 24th BATA
 Joined on 24/10/16

Questions to be put to the Person Enlisting before Attestation.

1. What is your Name? RAY BOOK NO. 13447 William John ARMSTRONG

2. In or near what Parish or Town were you born? Mansfield

3. Are you a natural born British Subject or a Naturalized British Subject? (N.B.—If the latter, papers to be shown.) Natural born British Subject

4. What is your Age? 22 years 10 Months

5. What is your Trade or Calling? School Teacher

6. Are you, or have you been, an Apprentice? If so, where, to whom, and for what period? No

7. Are you married? No

8. Who is your next of kin? (Address and relationship to be stated) Father Donald Armstrong
Rubra 60 Mon Alport Road
Letter 208 6/16 Sung Hill
Leithfield Melbourne

The answer to this question shall not be construed as in the nature of a will.

9. What is your permanent address in Australia? Via Wangaratta
Via

10. Do you now belong to, or have you ever served in, His Majesty's Army, the Marines, the Militia, the Militia Reserve, the Territorial Force, Royal Navy, or Colonial Forces? If so, state which, and if not now serving, state cause of discharge No

11. Have you stated the whole, if any, of your previous service? Yes

12. Have you ever been rejected as unfit for His Majesty's Service? If so, on what grounds? No

13. (For married men, widowers with children, and soldiers who are the sole support of widowed mother)—Do you understand that no separation allowance will be issued in respect of your service beyond an amount which together with pay would reach eight shillings per day? Yes

14. Are you prepared to undergo inoculation against small pox and enteric fever? Yes

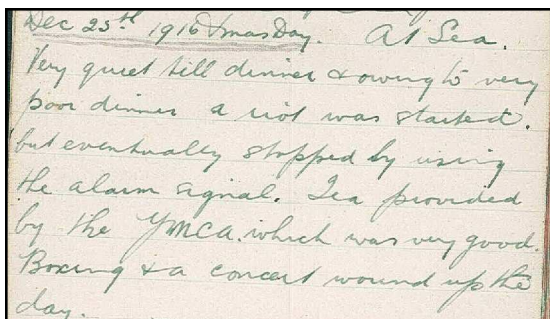
I, William John Armstrong do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and I am willing and hereby voluntarily agree to serve in the Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Australia within or beyond the limits of the Commonwealth.

And I further agree to allow not less than two-fifths of the pay payable to me from time to time during my service for the support of my wife and children three-fifths

Date 24-10-16

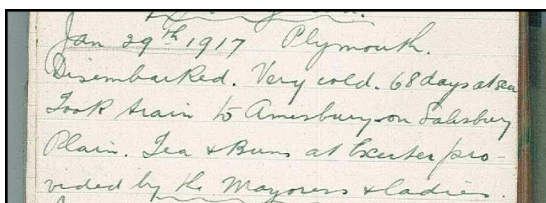
William Armstrong
Signature of person enlisted.

* This clause should be struck out in the case of unmarried men or widowers without children under 18 years of age.
 † Two-fifths must be allocated to the wife, and if there are children three-fifths must be allocated.



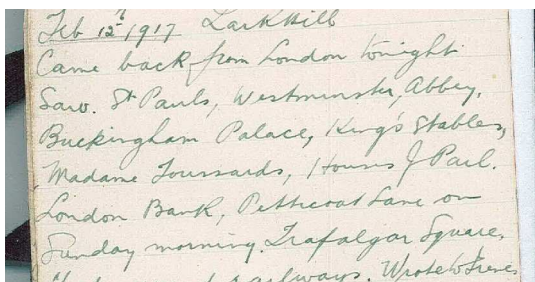
Dec 25th 1916 Xmas Day. At Sea.
Very quiet till dinner & owing to very poor dinner a riot was started. but eventually stopped by using the alarm signal. Tea provided by the Y.M.C.A. which was very good. Boxing & a concert wound up the day.

December 25 1916 Xmas Day. At Sea
Very quiet till dinner and owing to very poor dinner a riot was started. but eventually stopped by using the alarm signal. Tea provided by the Y.M.C.A. which was very good. Boxing & a concert wound up the day.



Jan 29th 1917 Plymouth.
Disembarked. Very cold. 68 days at sea. Took train to Amesbury on Salisbury Plain. Tea & Buns at Exeter provided by the Mayor's & ladies.

January 29th 1917 Plymouth
Disembarked. Very cold. 68 days at sea. Took train to Amesbury on Salisbury Plain. Tea and Buns at Exeter (sic) provided by the Mayor's and ladies.



Feb 15th 1917 Larkhill
Came back from London tonight. Saw St Pauls, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, King's Stables, Madame Tussards, House of Paul. London Bank, Petticoat Lane on Sunday morning. Trafalgar Square, Underground Railways. Wrote to Irene.

February 15th 1917 Larkhill
Came back from London tonight. Saw St Pauls, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, King's Stables, Madame Tussards, (sic) Houses of Parliament, London Bank, Petticoat Lane on Sunday morning Trafalgar Square, Underground Railways.. Wrote to Irene.

Diary, William John Armstrong.

The journey from Melbourne to Plymouth via Albany, Durban, Cape Town, Sierra Leone and St Helena took sixty-eight days, hard to imagine in this age of jet travel. However, what was probably much the same for the young, well-educated, well-read William Armstrong, was the excitement of visiting places that most men his age couldn't even imagine. His diary entries, once in England, read almost exactly as those written by his great-niece nearly 60 years after his death, when she, at

almost the same age, thrilled at her first visit to the famous places she had read of and seen through her aunts' slide nights.

Reading William's diary for the period, the war seems far away from London's streets, Westminster Abbey, Madame Tussards and the London Underground. Seeing the sights, competing in cricket, football and other sporting events, as well as catching up with old mates and making new ones, dominate diary entries in these early days in training at Larkhill on Salisbury Plain.

(SERVICE AND CASUALTY FORM Part II).						
Regiment or Corps <u>18/24 Rfts</u>		Regimental Number <u>6276</u>				
*Substantive Rank <u>Pte</u> Surname <u>ARMSTRONG</u> Christian Names <u>William John</u>						
*Acting Rank <u>Gpl-</u>						
(* To be entered in pencil to facilitate alteration.)						
(A) Report		(B) Authority of Part II. of Orders	(C) Record of promotions, appointments, reductions, casualties, transfers, postings, &c. All acting as well as substantive promotions to be shown, for method of entry of which see A.C.I. 1816 of 1917. Corps and unit to which transferred and posted to be invariably named.	(D) Place of casualty	(E) Date of promotion, reduction, reversion, casualty, &c.	(F) Remarks, and initials and rank of an officer
Date.	From whom received.					
1.	OC Troops		A20 "Hororata" Emb.	Melbourne	23/11/16	
2			Disemb.	Plymouth	29/1/17	
3	4/2/17 OC 6 Tng Btn		M.I. from Aust.	Larkhill	30/1/17	
4	11/2/17 "		Reverts to ranks	Eng.		D018/E877
5	6/5/17 "		Sick to Fargo Hosp	"	"	D021E1397
6	3/5/17 OC Hosp		Appendicitis	"	5/5/17	
7	20/7/17 "		Adm Fargo M. Hosp	Eng.	"	
8	OC 6th Tng Btn	22/7/17	Appendicitis	Fargo	20/7/17	
9	13/11/17 "		Disc. to duty from Fargo	Rollestone	22/7/17	
			Mil. Hosp 20/7/17			
			M.I. from Fargo Mil Hosp			
			Proc O/S to France to			
			Reinf. 21st Btn ex			D086/E
			Fovant via	Southampton	14/11/17	
10	15/11/17 2 ADBD		Adm from Eng.	Havre	15/11/17	
11	24/11/17 CO 24 Btn		TOS	Field	23/11/17	D084/7893
12	22/7/18 "		Still with unit	"	22/7/18	
13	7/9/18 "		Killed in action	France	31/8/18	VL830
	30/11/18					D057/5527
			Sgd Sgt L.M. MACLEAN <i>Lieut.</i>			1918
			for Officer i/c Records			
	AUSTRALIAN SECTION 3rd		ECHELON G.H.Q.			
	B.E.F.					

Typed copy of collated service record of William John Armstrong. This record was compiled from the original handwritten record, at the end of November 1918, just weeks after the end of the war. (Source: Service Records, William John Armstrong, Australian War Memorial). Of special note is the overtyping of the acting rank of Corporal.



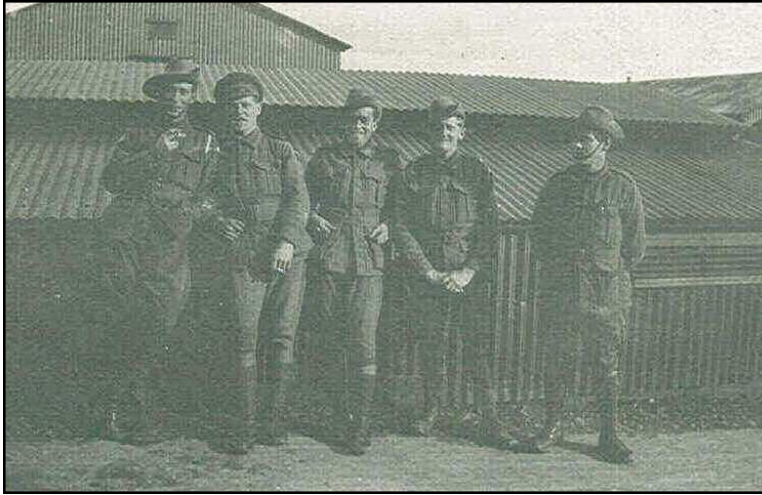
24th Battalion Signals School, Rollestone, UK, 1917.

Back Row: Bill O'Connor, Stan Weatherill, Harold Rashleigh, Sam Stonehouse. Albert Edwards

Third Row: Charlie Watts, Charlie Tillig, Stan Tipping, Bill Slatter, Bert Tuckett, Percy McKenzie, Andy Wyllie, Tom Welsh

Second Row: Charlie Wilson. Bill Taylor, Les Thomasson, Percy Tuckett, Cpl. Allan Martin, **William Armstrong**. Perc Carter, Jimmy Cloke, Jack McKenzie

Front Row: Walter Stanbrook, Tom O'Connor, Jack Mitchell, Harold Rawlings, Bill Tickell, Sgt. Val Watts



Casual group of five, Larkhill, 1917. William far left.

William's war changed fairly dramatically, on May 3rd, 1917, when he was admitted to Fargo Military Hospital with appendicitis. Today, this would have meant keyhole surgery, a day or two in hospital and back to work. In the early part of the 20th century, it was obviously a serious operation. Perhaps as some indication of a realisation of his own mortality, William noted in his diary that another patient died of the same complaint. Recovery took a slow two months, stalling William's army training and putting a temporary hold on his athletic pursuits.

Whether by choice or army edict, William found himself in Signals School after his release from Bulford Manor Convalescent Home in Wiltshire. The majority of photos William kept with his diary are from this period. Many of the names that recur in his diary can be linked to this period of his service.

William finally embarked for the Front on November 15th, 1917. His diary from this point on indicates a subtle change in focus. Sporting and social events still hold the fore in the early weeks and months, but as time goes on, there are more descriptions of daily events at the Front and steadily increasing references to the deaths or wounding of friends and comrades. Detailed descriptions of action or the horror of the front are few and are reported in a fairly detached manner. Even the deaths of friends from training back at Broadmeadows, warrant little more than the name and occurrence. Albert Macklan's death was a different matter and, again, this hints at a strong relationship with the Macklan family.

September 26th 1917 Rolleston

Albert (Macklan) at Hurdcott

Shortly after this we shifted to Fovant and I met Albert. I classified here. Shortly after, had leave to Manchester and shortly after was drafted for France together with Tom Hogg & Bert Rowe. We spent one night at Southampton and next evening embarked for France. I met Albert and he lent me 5 pounds to go on leave with until we cabled for more (money). (Diary, William John Armstrong.)

Jan 22nd 1917 (1918) Belgium

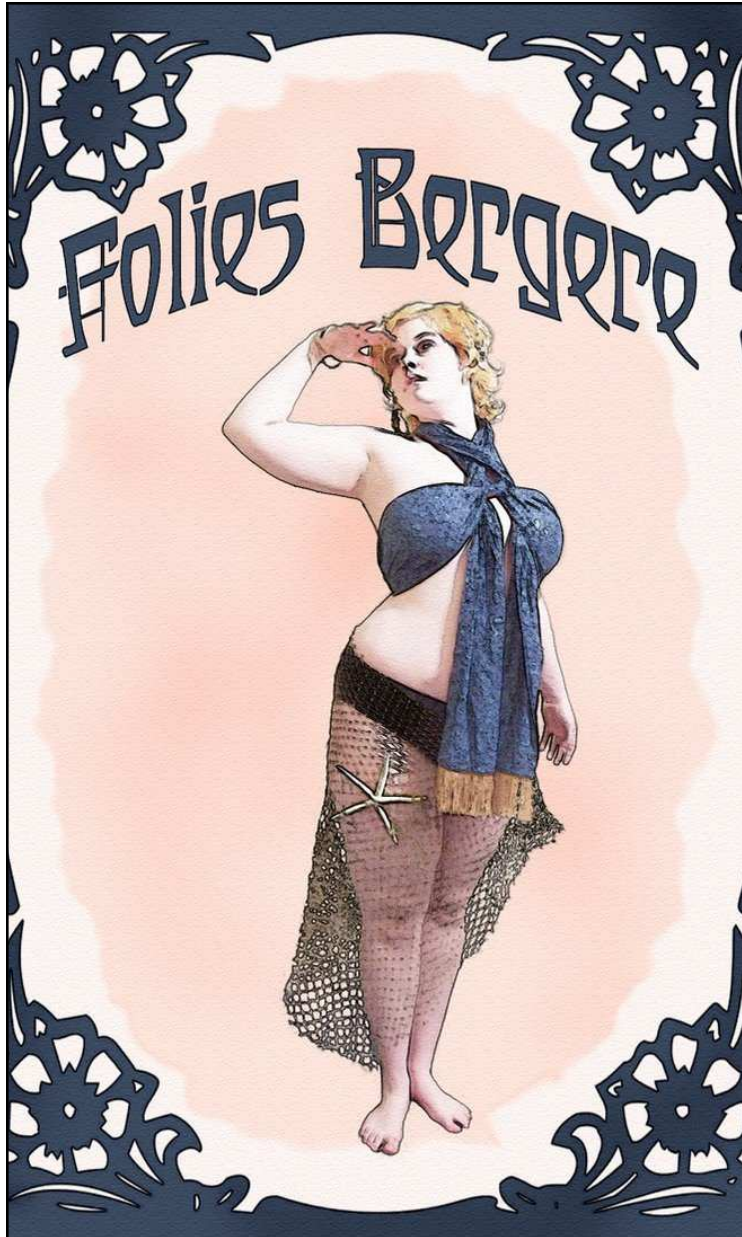
During our stay in Loere we had the battalion sports & I managed to get 3rd in the hurdles & 2nd in high jump. And later in the Brigade sports ran 4th in the 3 miles, 50 starters. We then came to Hertepyp near Neuve Eglise & not far from Ballicu. Played with the battalion against the 23rd (battalion) but sprained my ankle. We had plenty of fatigues up the line & in Ballicu lumping shells..... (Diary, William John Armstrong.)

March 8th, 1918. Friday, Front Line

We opened a barrage at 9 pm & the enemy replied heavily. Cpl Collerson & Pte Horan of our company were wounded. At 12 midnight he (the enemy) opened again and Butterfield died of wounds and Tommy Wels who came over with us were (sic) killed. Tommy was on his way back for I.Bs when he got hit. 5 others from B Coy were also wounded. Had bother with lines (cables) owing to the heavy shelling. (Diary, William John Armstrong.)

May 18th, 1918 at Berteaucourt

Sports Corp at Vignacourt. It was hear (sic) that I heard that Albert had been killed at Villiers Brittainaux (sic) on the 26th April. After the hopover he & a mate were down in a shelter when a shell burst on them. Albert was hit in the head and died on the way out. He was unconscious. He was buried at Al Bigny. Am writing to Irene and Mum tonight. Such is war that even an only son must pay the supreme sacrifice. Albert's death will cast a gloom over his people for a long while as everyone thought well of him. He was greatly liked in his battalion and was a good soldier. (Diary, William John Armstrong.)



Had William become hardened to the horrors of what was going on around him? Perhaps he could not bear to put into words the things he had seen and heard. Or was he recording events in a non-dramatic way, assuming that his diary would be read by Irene or other family members when he returned home? The predominance of sporting events and his successes in competition may well support this supposition.

As 1918 draws on, there is a distinct change in the diary entries. Deaths of comrades come almost daily. Comments about sleep increase and the tensions brought about by life in the trenches are obvious in the language, content and even the handwriting of the later entries.

Then sanity breaks through. Paris. William the tourist surfaces from the mud of the trenches. All the sights that one would expect to visit in the City of Light today were on his agenda. With two Sergeants, MacDonald and Ainsworth, William has a few days enjoying a life that would have been beyond his wildest dreams as a teacher in country Victoria.



6th August Paris.

We changed our Hotel & came in more central to Hotel Suisse in the Rue de la Fayette which proved to be an ideal place for us. We went to the Follies Bergeres (sic).

7th August Paris

Went to Grand Roue & Invalides by tube & tram & taxis. Jim & Tom (Ainsworth & Mac Donald) went to another theatre & I went to the Follies again with Gustave - the son of the proprietress of the hotel who can speak fairly good English. We made the acquaintance of "Joe" from Nice a nice chap (Italian) who is very enthusiastic about diggers. Had our photos taken. (Diary, William John Armstrong)

Last Diary Entries

Group Photo, Paris, August 1918. Left to Right: Sgt. J. Macdonald, Sgt. J. Ainsworth, Pte. W. Armstrong.

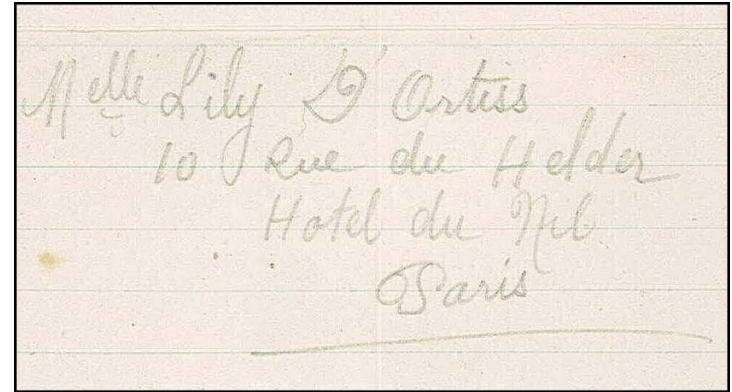
Now we hit an interesting point in our attempt to understand William John Armstrong from our limited sources. It is clear he is a sportsman, close to his family and that of his sweetheart, educated, sociable and looked up to by his peers. Now we see a glimmer of a different side of William, as a typical soldier of the time, off to the Folies Bergere with his mates, then back again the next night with the son of the proprietress of the Hotel Suisse, Rue de la Fayette, and his Italian buddy. Was this because of Mlle Lily, who wrote her name and address in his diary? Does it matter why, in the end?

The last entry in his diary was August 7th, 1918, Paris. William John Armstrong was killed in the Battle of Mont St. Quentin, August 31st, 1918.

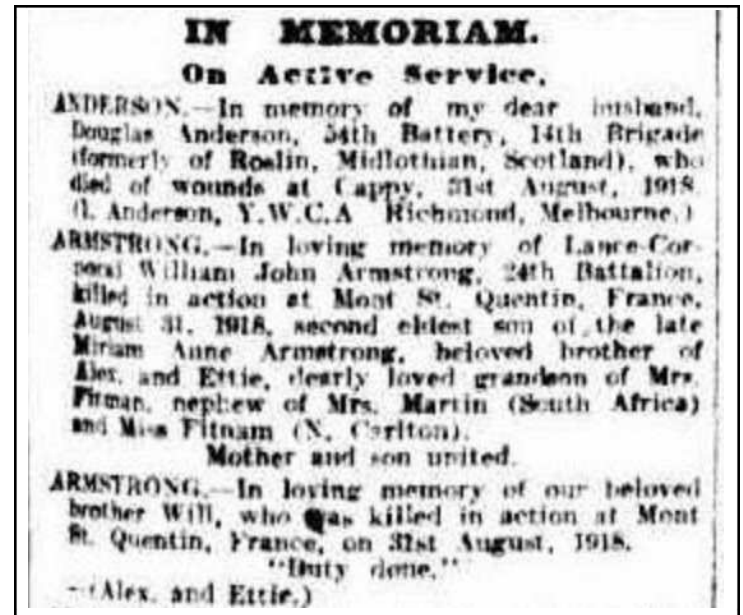
One of the questions that will remain unanswered is what drove William to enlist in late 1916? He expresses no strong dedication to the Empire, Britain or the King, though his Australian patriotism is fairly apparent. Surprisingly, there is no open hatred of the Germans, only a sort of professional soldier's detachment and an almost workman-like commitment to his duties. Neither does he present as a naive, gung-ho adventurer. Was he simply caught up in the notion of duty that was so strong throughout the Empire at the time?

Two years after William was killed, his family remembered him in a Memorial listing in the Melbourne Argus. Two separate entries remembered him on the anniversary of his death. One was from his father. This entry included reference to William's brother and sister, his late mother, Miriam, his grandmother and two aunts, Elizabeth, who brought the family up after Miriam's death in 1900, and a Mrs Martin (assumed nee Fitnam) of South Africa. The second was from Alex and Ettie, his brother and sister.

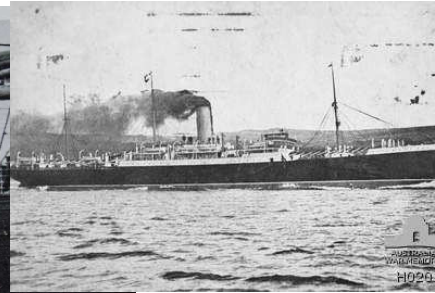
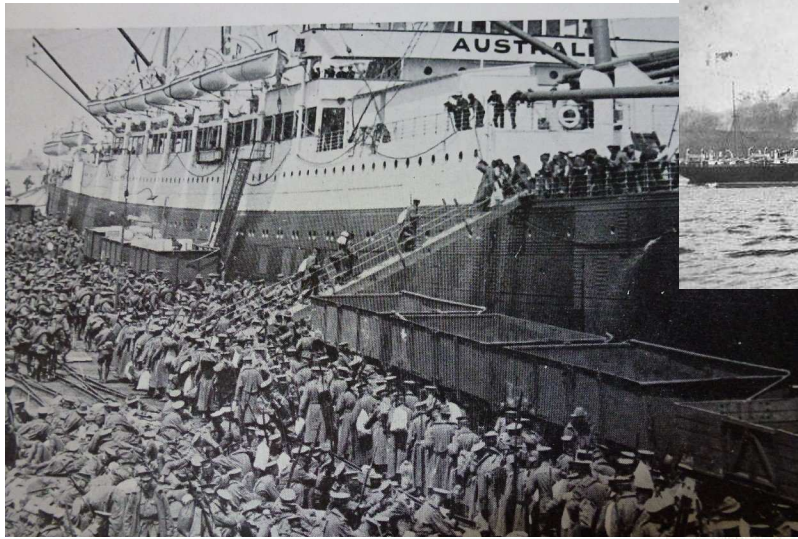
William's father, Donald, finally parted with William's diary and other papers in 1928 when he donated them to the Australian War Museum.



Paris, Date Unknown, Diary, William John Armstrong.



Melbourne Argus, 31 August, 1920.



Troop transport, Melbourne, 1916. Inset: SS Hororata at sea.



AIF Reinforcements training, Larkhill, Wiltshire, 1916.

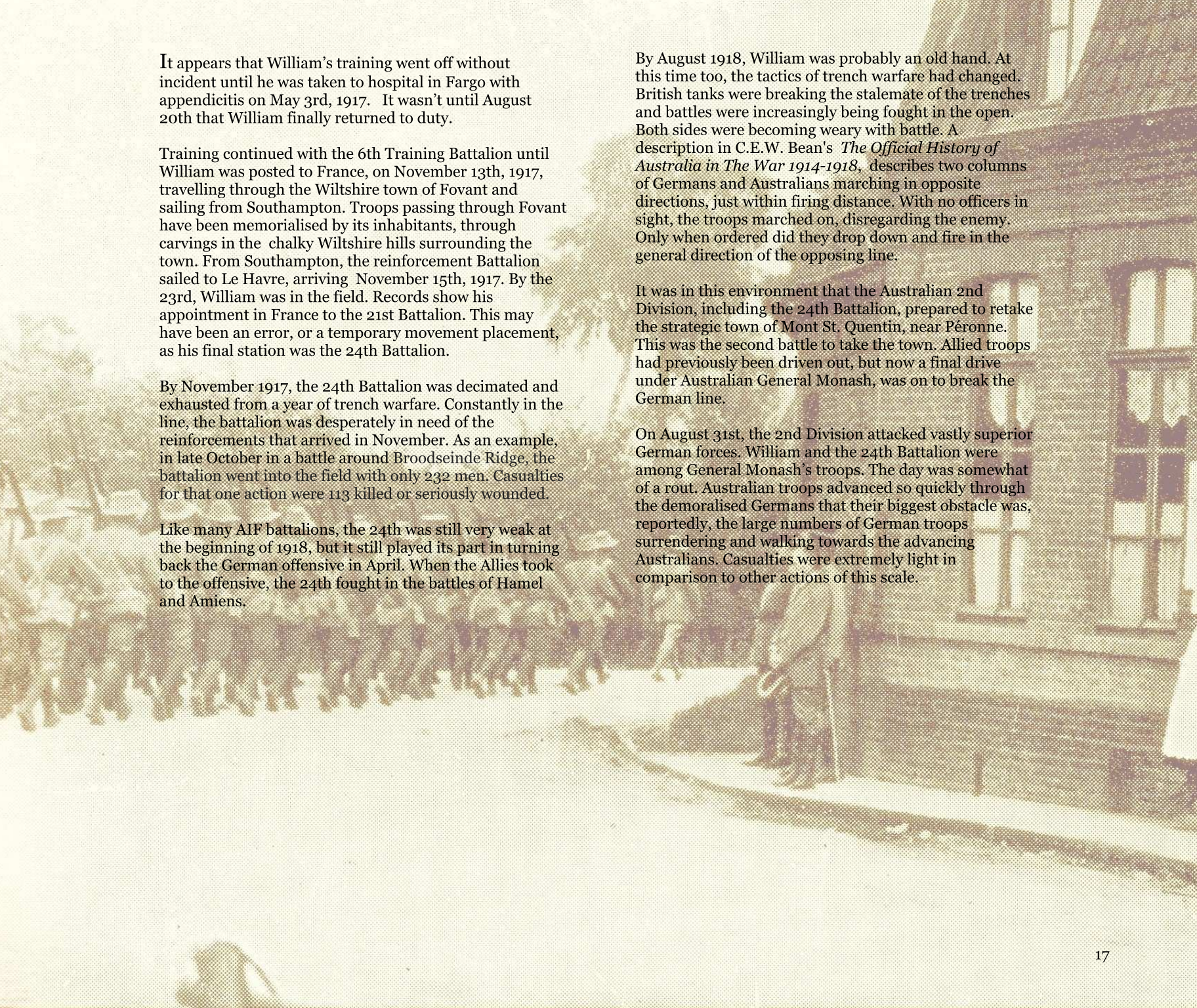
William's War

SS Hororata sailed from Melbourne, November 23rd, 1916. William Armstrong was not yet 22 years old as he climbed the gang plank along with thousands of other young Victorians on their way to the Front.

It was one day short of a month since William had signed his enlistment papers.

Hororata was a New Zealand commercial ship co-opted to ferry ANZAC troops to Turkey, Europe and the Middle East. She had been part of the flotilla that took the original ANZACs to Gallipoli. The journey to Plymouth took over two months. William disembarked on January 29th, 1917.

Australian troops trained at Larkhill in Wiltshire on the edge of Salisbury Plain. William's training group was the 18th Reinforcements for the 24th Battalion, AIF. The fact that this was the 18th group to reinforce the original Battalion is indicative of the casualty rates Australian units were experiencing.



It appears that William's training went off without incident until he was taken to hospital in Fargo with appendicitis on May 3rd, 1917. It wasn't until August 20th that William finally returned to duty.

Training continued with the 6th Training Battalion until William was posted to France, on November 13th, 1917, travelling through the Wiltshire town of Fovant and sailing from Southampton. Troops passing through Fovant have been memorialised by its inhabitants, through carvings in the chalky Wiltshire hills surrounding the town. From Southampton, the reinforcement Battalion sailed to Le Havre, arriving November 15th, 1917. By the 23rd, William was in the field. Records show his appointment in France to the 21st Battalion. This may have been an error, or a temporary movement placement, as his final station was the 24th Battalion.

By November 1917, the 24th Battalion was decimated and exhausted from a year of trench warfare. Constantly in the line, the battalion was desperately in need of the reinforcements that arrived in November. As an example, in late October in a battle around Broodseinde Ridge, the battalion went into the field with only 232 men. Casualties for that one action were 113 killed or seriously wounded.

Like many AIF battalions, the 24th was still very weak at the beginning of 1918, but it still played its part in turning back the German offensive in April. When the Allies took to the offensive, the 24th fought in the battles of Hamel and Amiens.

By August 1918, William was probably an old hand. At this time too, the tactics of trench warfare had changed. British tanks were breaking the stalemate of the trenches and battles were increasingly being fought in the open. Both sides were becoming weary with battle. A description in C.E.W. Bean's *The Official History of Australia in The War 1914-1918*, describes two columns of Germans and Australians marching in opposite directions, just within firing distance. With no officers in sight, the troops marched on, disregarding the enemy. Only when ordered did they drop down and fire in the general direction of the opposing line.

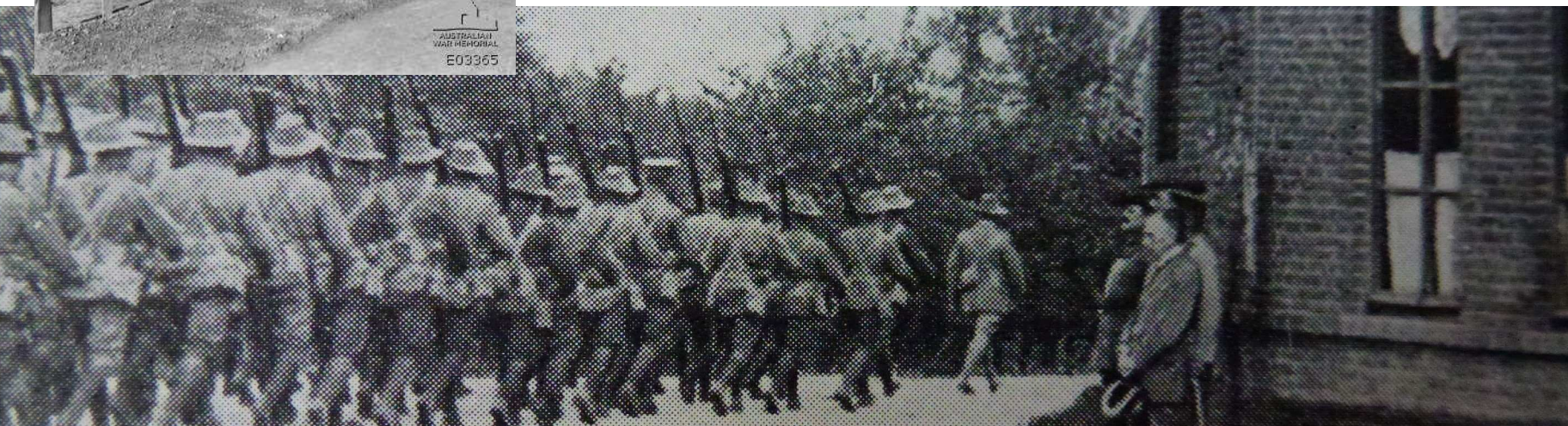
It was in this environment that the Australian 2nd Division, including the 24th Battalion, prepared to retake the strategic town of Mont St. Quentin, near Péronne. This was the second battle to take the town. Allied troops had previously been driven out, but now a final drive under Australian General Monash, was on to break the German line.

On August 31st, the 2nd Division attacked vastly superior German forces. William and the 24th Battalion were among General Monash's troops. The day was somewhat of a rout. Australian troops advanced so quickly through the demoralised Germans that their biggest obstacle was, reportedly, the large numbers of German troops surrendering and walking towards the advancing Australians. Casualties were extremely light in comparison to other actions of this scale.

William John Armstrong



Temporary burials, Mont St. Quentin, September 1st, 1918.



24th Battalion troops, near Amiens, 1917.

Soldiers of the 24th Battalion
preparing for battle at Mont St.
Quentin, August 31st, 1918.



German Officers with stalled
British Tank, 1918.





6276 PRIVATE
W. J. ARMSTRONG
4TH BN AUSTRALIAN INF
11 AUGUST 1918

Killed in Action

Some time around 6:00pm on August 31st, 1918, a H.E. (High Explosive) German shell landed in or near a trench where Australian troops of the 24th Battalion were preparing for a major assault on the strategic village of Mont St. Quentin. Pte. William John Armstrong (6276), Pte. C. I. Doble (340) and Company Sgt. Maj. W. Love (6831A) were all killed instantly. Somewhere between 11 and 14 other officers and soldiers also died as a result of this explosion.

Based on accounts recorded later by the Red Cross, William Armstrong, Charles Doble and William Love were buried together in or near the trench where they were killed. A cross bearing their names marked their graves as the momentous events of the assault on Mont St. Quentin rolled on over the next three days.

According to the most graphic description of his death, William died with mortal injuries to his body and head as a result of the shell. Another account simply stated that he died instantly.

Accounts of the deaths of William and his comrades are remarkably consistent, aside from a few variations that can be easily reconciled, given the time that had expired between the event and the taking of statements and the "fog of war" that must have prevailed at the time.

Red Cross witnesses to William's death included Pte. I.M. Duggan 6300 (Duggin on the record) and Pte. M.L. Dawson (6303). Duggan had come to Europe as part of the same unit as William. He knew William well. Matthew Dawson was also in the same unit. Both Duggan and Dawson returned to Australia in 1919.

It is fairly clear that the Red Cross investigations were to determine the exact location of the graves of William and his comrades to allow for their exhumation and re-burial in permanent graves in Péronne.

"Killed in Action 31-8-16"

I knew Armstrong well. He came over with me. I saw him killed by an enemy shell in the line at Mont St Quentin about 5 a.m. He was killed instantly, about 17 other men were killed by the same shell. He was buried and a cross was put over the grave.

Eye-witness:- Yes.

Description:- Tall, thin chap. A school Teacher.

Home address:-

117 Pockington St.

Geelong West.

Victoria.

Informant:- Duggin, I.M. 6300. Pte.

(Accurate and Intelligent)

24th Battn. A.I.F.

King George Military Hpl.

Alice Mcare Ward.

LCM3cn.

6-3-19.

D.W.B.

M.



Top: Eye witness account of the death of Pte. William John Armstrong, Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau files 1914-1918, March 1919.

Bottom: Troops of the 24th Battalion advance, August 31st, 1918.

A.I.F.
24th Bttn.

ARMSTRONG
W.J. 6276.

"Killed 31.8.18. D.t.J/E"

The night before we went over, when we were just settling down into our trench, about 14 of my Coy. (including officers) got killed by a shell - Armstrong was one who was killed instantaneously. I knew him very well. It was Mont St. Quentin on Aug 31.

Informant:- 6939 Pte. W. Fielding,
Aust. Vet. Corps. L. 11.
late with 24th. Bttn.
A.I.F. 1st Div.
M.L.D. 11.
(Quite intelligent)

A. Umlin.
London.
15.2.19.
J. ...

A.I.F. 24th Bttn.

DOBLE, L. 340.
Armstrong, W.J. 6276.

"Killed 31.8.18."

I saw Doble's body (A. Coy Runner) after he had been killed instantly by shell at Mont St. Quentin on August 31st about 6 p.m. About 20 men were killed by the same shell. One Platoon was passing another in Gattled trench; just before that, Deble had rescued a comrade under fire and had done very good work; he was runner to Captain Mahoney M.C. (since killed) and was an exceptionally good runner.

Pte. Armstrong who was a volunteer runner (originally signaller) was killed instantly by same shell. They were all buried in the trench where they were killed and crosses were erected.

Deble:- Small, snowy-headed, about 23 years, from 19, Cookaminster Street, Brunswick, S. Victoria. Armstrong:- From Whitfield, School teacher, good athlete and a good fellow, about 23/26 years.

Informant:- Lieut. W.B. Gow,
24th Bttn. A. Coy,
France.

H.C.H.
London
19.12.18.

Note:- Both above were mentioned in previous report (T.H. Ellen).

Nearly 100 years after the event, it is difficult to imagine the scene in the A.I.F. trenches outside the small Picardy village of Mont St. Quentin on the evening of August 31st, 1918.

From early 1916, the Australian Red Cross carried out investigations into the status of sick, wounded and missing Australian soldiers in response to enquiries from their families. The Red Cross Society Wounded and Missing Enquiries Bureau gathered eye-witness accounts on incidents involving more than 33,000 troops during the First World War. It is from these first hand reports that it is possible to piece together how William was killed.

During preparations for an advance by elements of the 2nd Division AIF, including the 24th Battalion, a German shell exploded in an Australian trench killing a large number of soldiers. Witnesses are fairly consistent on the timing of the explosion. Most state that the event occurred around 6:00pm. Only Pte. I.W. Duggan (6300) is reported to have said the attack occurred at 5:00am.

What is most consistent in the accounts is that the men died instantaneously.

"... he (Armstrong) was killed instantly.." (Pte. Duggan: 6/3/1919).

"... Armstrong was one who was killed instantaneously." (Pte W. Fielding (6939):15/2/1919).

"...just prior to our advance, when an H.E. shell exploded along-side (him) pieces penetrating his body and head killing him instantly." (Pte. M.L.Dawson (6303): 28/3/1919).

The scale of such an event must have been fairly unremarkable as the only records seem to be those captured during the later investigations by the Red Cross.

"... about 14 of my Coy. (including Officers) got killed by a shell.." (Pte. Fielding:15/2/1919).



A.I.F. 24th Battn. ARMSTRONG
W.J. 6276.
"Killed 31.8.18"

Mont St. Quentin. killed by concussion, when in the trenches. He is buried in the trench with C.I. Doble, 340 sgt W. Love, 6831A; were killed same time and buried in the grave with a lot of 18th men. I saw them buried, but I don't remember their names on the cross. The grave is right in front of village. I knew them well; were in my Coy.
C.I. Doble, 340, Killed 31st August 1918.
W.J. Armstrong 6276, Killed 31st August 1918, are the same as above. Inquiry should be made if the names are on the 18th Battalion. Cross erected over 20 of 18th Batta. men. carries these names.

Informant:- 4656 Balehie,
Acte Buffet.

D.P. Dickson.
London
23.1.19.
J.E.A. Note:- 340 Doble C.I. 24th Battn. Buried 62.C.M.F. 187.
30. H.S.H. Red Cross Searcher,
Battalion Orderly Room.
B.F.F. 4.12.18.



"... 17 other men were killed by the same shell.." (Pte. Duggan).

"... about 20 men were killed by the same shell. One platoon was passing another..." (Lieut. W.B. Gow:19/12/1918).

Descriptions of William himself, as with others in the Red Cross records, are fairly simple and somewhat impersonal.

"... Pte. Armstrong, who was a volunteer runner (originally signaller) Armstrong:- From Whitfield, School Teacher, good athlete and a good fellow, about 23/26 years." (Lieut. W. B. Gow: 19/12/1918).

"... tall thin chap. A School Teacher..." (Pte. Duggan: 6/3/1919).

"I knew the casualty (Armstrong). He was a slight built man, about 5ft 10ins in height, fair complexion, about 24 years of age." (Pte. M.L. Dawson:28/3/1919).

Data gathered from Red Cross investigations was also intended to be used to assist the Army recover bodies that had been buried in temporary graves. Records of the interviews conducted with witnesses to the deaths of William and his

comrades contained important information on the location of these burial sites.

.... he (Armstrong) is buried in the trench with C.I. Doble (340), C/S/M W. Love (6831A)buried in the grave with a lot of 18th (Battalion) men. I saw them buried but I don't remember their names on the cross... The grave is right in front of (the) village." (Pte Balehie (4656):23/1/1919) .

.. he (Armstrong) was buried where he fell." (Pte. M.I. Dawson: 28/3/1919).

".. they were all buried in the trench where they were killed and crosses were erected." (Lieut. W.B. Gow:19/12/1918).

"...Inquiry should be made if the names are on the 18th Battalion. (list?) Cross erected over 20 of 18th Battn men carries these names." (Pte. Balehie (4656):23/1/1919).

It is fairly safe to assume that the bodies had not been exhumed and moved to their final resting place in Péronne at the time these interviews were conducted in late 1918 and early 1919. However, the actual dates of exhumation and re-burial have not been found.



NNE COMMUNAL CEMET



On what was probably one of the least perilous days in his time at the Front, William John Armstrong was killed in action. His final resting place is the Péronne Communal Cemetery Extension.

Between September 1st and 2nd, the Germans managed a significant rally and fighting was much more intense. The 2nd Division, however, won the day and Mont St. Quentin and Péronne fell to the Australians.

In early October 1918, a little more than a month after William's death, the 24th Battalion and most of the Australian Divisions were progressively being withdrawn from the Front.

By late October, fighting was all but over. The Armistice was signed on November 11th, 1918, but more than 50,000 Australians, including William Armstrong, lay dead in Europe and another 10,000 had died in the Middle East and in Turkey.





Finding William

On a steel grey day in 2001, while driving through northern France, we unexpectedly came across a magnificent monument, with a digger standing proudly atop. The French and Australian flags flapped in the icy breeze, but we braved the cold to read the inscription on the 2nd Div. Mont St. Quentin Memorial and take a couple of quick photographs. We remembered that the monument was near the town of Péronne, but not much more.

Some years later, the Australian War Memorial released the War Records of WWI soldiers. It was an opportunity to find out about “Uncle Willie who died in the war,” a description remembered from Janita’s childhood, in fact, all she knew of her great-uncle. Through the AWM, she was able to get copies of William’s war records and learn a little more. We were intrigued to learn that, not only had we been to the site of the battle in which William died, but also to the town in which he had finally been buried.

Fast forward to 2009 and we became the first of William's family (as far as we know) to have visited his grave, leaving two small Australian flags and some gum leaves to keep him company.

But we still knew nothing about the man; there was not even a photo.

Then, in 2010, while on a trip round Australia, we visited Mansfield, Victoria and the local Historical Society. The very helpful folk there, (despite being officially closed till the next day) found a manila folder of WWI documents, opened it and there, gazing calmly at us, was "Uncle Willie who died in the war." The Victorian Education Department had recorded the photographs and a brief history of the men and women of the district who had served their country. The Historical Society volunteers were almost as excited as we were and were able to access further records about William's mother's family. This inspired us to keep digging.

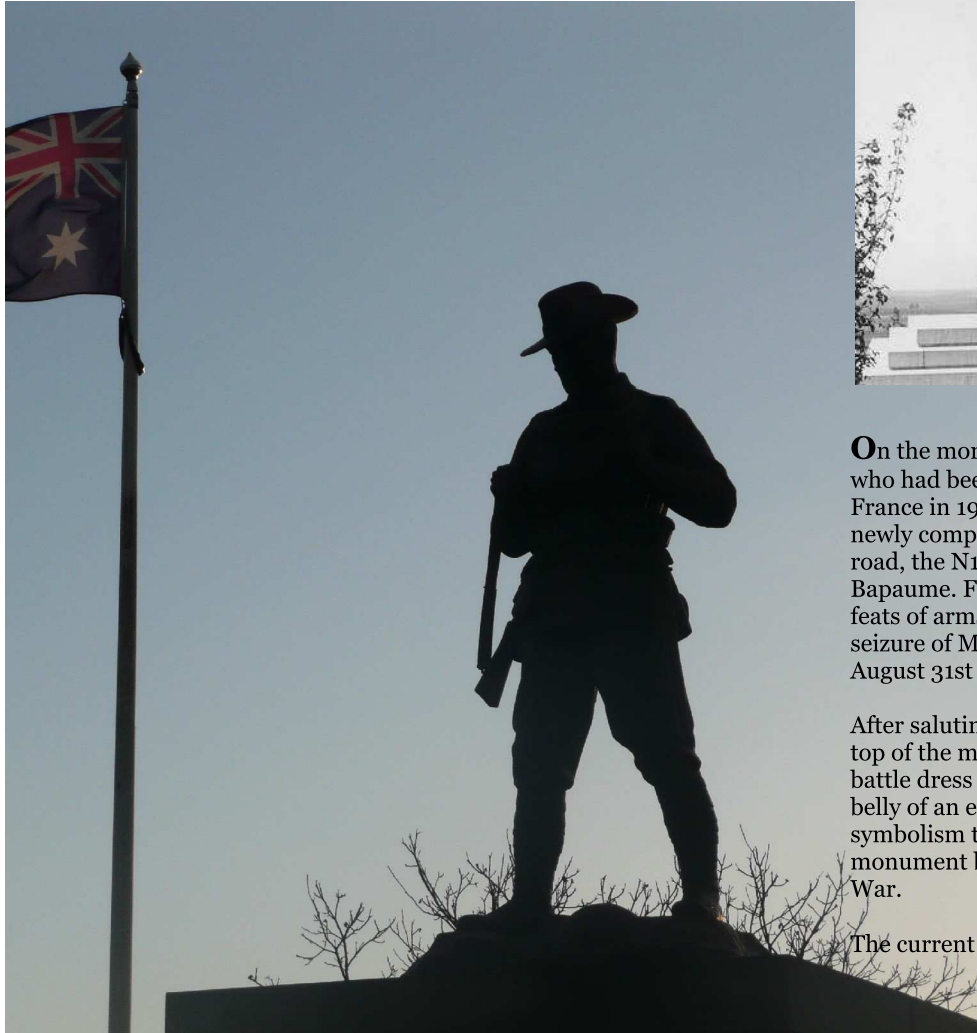
A further spur came in the form of contact from the great-grandson of William's father and his second wife. He was searching for information to build his Family Tree and had found our Round Australia blog and its reference to finding William's photo.

In mid-December 2011, we learned that William's diary was in the AWM and we could access it. We were also able to download copies of Red Cross files of interviews conducted with soldiers who had witnessed the death or injury of Australian soldiers. These primary source documents were invaluable in developing the picture we now have of William's short life.

Almost eleven years after that accidental sighting of the proud, yet humble soldier on a cold, lonely plain in France, we were able to see photos of William and his mates and read his record of the almost two years between setting sail to go off to war and his death. We feel truly honoured to be part of the family of Private William John Armstrong, 6276.



Péronne Communal Cemetery Extension



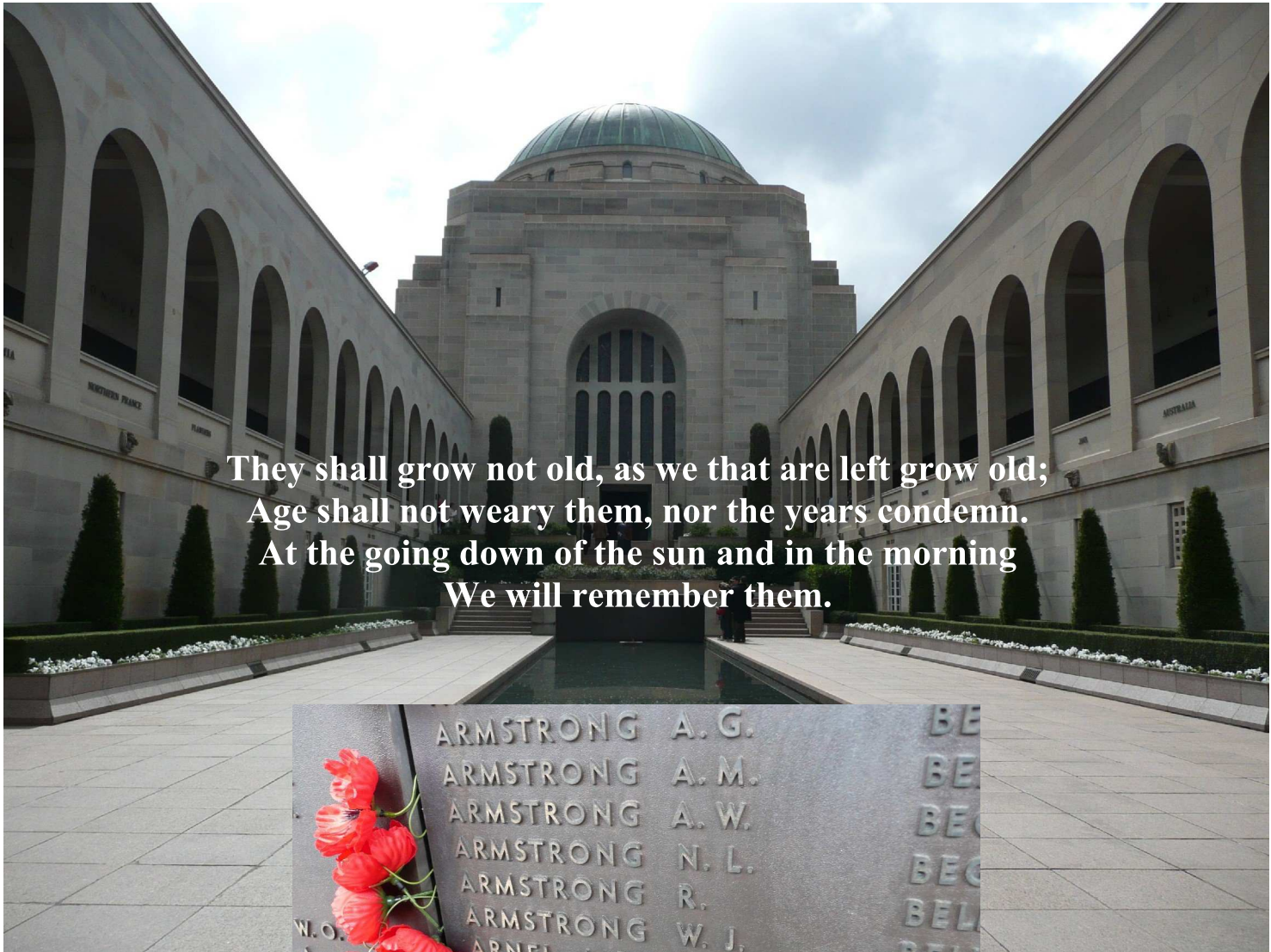
The Memorial

On the morning of August 30th, 1925, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, who had been the Supreme Commander of all Allied forces in France in 1918, stood and faced a large crowd gathered before a newly completed monument. It stood on the high point of the road, the N17, leading north–westwards out of Péronne towards Bapaume. Foch spoke of what would rank as one of the "finest feats of arms in a time rich in innumerable deeds of heroism," the seizure of Mont St. Quentin and Péronne by the AIF between August 31st and September 3rd, 1918.

After saluting, Foch pulled away a large Australian flag from the top of the monument to reveal an infantryman of the AIF in full battle dress powerfully thrusting down with his bayonet into the belly of an eagle which lay on its back on the ground. It was this symbolism that led to the destruction of this, the original monument by occupying German forces during the Second World War.

The current statue of an Australian 'digger' was completed in 1971.

Top right: Original Mont St. Quentin Australian Memorial.
Above: New Australian Memorial at Mont St. Quentin.



They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old;
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
At the going down of the sun and in the morning
We will remember them.



SOURCES

Australian War Memorial, "Nominal Roll World War I".
Australian War Memorial, "Roll of Honour World War I".
Australian War Memorial, 1DRL/0060 Diary of William John Armstrong (6276).
National Archives of Australia, "World War I Service Records (William John Armstrong, (6276)".
Australian Red Cross Society "Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau Files, 1914-1918 War". 6276 Private William John Armstrong: 6831A Company Sergeant Major William Love: 340 Private Charles Leslie Doble.
Argus Newspaper Melbourne, August 31st, 1920 - Family Notices, In Memoriam - On Active Service.
Bean, C.E.W., 1937 The Official History of Australia in the War, Angus & Robertson Ltd, Sydney.
Mansfield and District Historical Society, Mansfield, Victoria.
Public Records Office Victoria (Birth, Deaths and Marriages), Education Department: Teacher Records.
Victorian Education Department, "Record of War Service 1914-1918".

NOTES

William Armstrong's grave is at Péronne Communal Cemetery Extension, Ref. IV. A. 7.
Diary Reference: Australian War Memorial, 1DRL/0060 - Diary of Pte. W. J. Armstrong.
Red Cross files Ref. Australian War Memorial, 1DRL/0428, 6276 Pte W. J. Armstrong.
Memorial Panel, Australian War Memorial , Canberra, Panel 100. W. J. Armstrong.



Other books in this series include:

Our South East Asia
Our Southern Africa
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Our Corner Shops

Private William John Armstrong (6276), 24th Battalion, AIF, was killed on 31st August 1918, at Mont St. Quentin. He was all but forgotten, until a chance email from The National Archives sparked a chain of events which enabled his great-niece and her husband to discover his service records, visit his grave in France, chance upon a photo, eye-witness accounts of his death, then his diary and finally piece together these glimpses of the short life of this young, Victorian school teacher.

