

## The 6<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade of WW1: Corporal White and the 'Fair Dinkums'

©Sam Battams 2010

Stephen William White was born 18<sup>th</sup> Nov 1883, Glanville, Port Adelaide, a third generation 'colonial.' He was the first member of his family to travel back to Europe since his great grandparents arrived in the colony of South Australia sixty-six years earlier. At 31 years old, White joined the first Australian Infantry Force (A.I.F.) on the 13<sup>th</sup> July, 1915 that was to serve in Egypt, France and Belgium in World War 1. Upon enlistment at Keswick, he states he is 30 and a 'Bridge Carpenter'. The enrolment officer's description: dark complexion, brown eyes, dark hair, 5ft 9in and 148lb, tattoo both forearms, single.



Photograph: Corporal Stephen William White, author's private collection

The spirit of adventure and curiosity about Europe, as well as the propaganda of war, could be well understood but there may well have been material reasons for White's enlistment because as a Carpenter, the building industry had been affected by shipping supplies causing many to be unemployed. July 1915 was also the peak time for enlistment in the war in Australia, with three times as many enlistments as in the previous month, spurred by the news of the Gallipoli landing, the June announcement that there had been 10,000 Australian casualties, and the June call from Britain of 'every available man wanted.' This group who enlisted after the casualty figures were announced were known as the 'fair dinkums' as they knew their chances of survival.

It was the handwriting of his mother Linda on the enlistment form for her son Stephen to join the call to arms where 65% of soldier would become casualties. Propaganda posters around this time were targeting mothers of potential soldiers. An Australian recruitment poster for World War 1 read 'Whose son are you?' Under this slogan, pictured at left, is a man with waistcoat and hat with his fancily dressed mother's arms wrapped around his neck, declaring 'I didn't raise my son to be a soldier'. A second big bosomed mother on the right, with plainer clothing, is more distantly spaced from her soldier son, shaking his hand whilst patting him on the back and replying to the first mother 'I did'. Between the divide of these clearly distinguished women are the words 'Enlist today'.



'Whose son are you?' Propaganda poster, WW1

White served in the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery, 6<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade, first Australian Imperial Force. A copy of the story of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery was to provide some details of his war experiences. This account by fellow Carpenter and later 'Driver' Dyer describes the battery first training as the 34<sup>th</sup> Battery at Artillery Base Camp at Mitcham. They later transferred to Glen Osmond for further training where it became the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery led by Major Dean (later Colonel), and then left Adelaide on the 18<sup>th</sup> October, 1915 to join and form the 6<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade in Essendon North, Victoria. A larger group comprising Victorians and Tasmanians then formed the 6<sup>th</sup> brigade, including the 16<sup>th</sup>, 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Batteries. The brigade left Australia on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1915 via Port Melbourne on the cargo passenger liner *Persic*. The 18<sup>th</sup> Battery 6<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery Brigade was declared to be the 'first and only complete Field Artillery Battery to go on active service from South Australia.'

The Battery arrived on the 18<sup>th</sup> December at Pt Suez and spent months near Cairo and Tel-el-Kabir, Egypt, fighting on the Sinai Peninsula. Gunner Melville of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery repeatedly tells of the 'hard days work' here as well as some illicit pleasures

*August 23<sup>rd</sup> (Monday)*

*Did hard days work and managed to steal a tin of sardines, 2 tins of treacle, 2 loaves bread and a tin of sardines from Quarter masters store. This might keep us going for a day or two. By the way it is not called stealing here. The goods stick to your hands.*

*(Diary of Gunner Melville)*

The Battery left Alexandria for France in March 1916, arriving in Marseilles, then crossed France via a 58 hour train journey to Le Havre.



PRG 280/1727/48

No publication of this image in any form permitted without permission: contact the State Library of South Australia.

Photograph: Australian Troops in Egypt negotiating a price for the hire of donkeys near the pyramids at Giza, c1915, Source: State Library of South Australia

The initial battle of the Somme began on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1916 where the 1<sup>st</sup> ANZAC corps suffered 23,000 casualties. Stephen White is first listed as a 'Wheeler' (24/7/1916) and then is promoted to Bombardier (04/08/1917) just before the Menin Gate battle.

In Sept 1916, the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery relieved the 1<sup>st</sup> ANZAC corps at Menin Gate, where they spent the next 17 days and were to eventually spend the winter in terrible conditions. Gunner Colin Twist from the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery describes these days

*3.9.16 Took Thiepval & Moquet Farm. Had to retire midday from Thiepval with heavy casualties. Fighting all night. Saw two of our planes descend near our lines. One engine trouble and one wounded pilot. 6 wounds from Fokker.*

*4.9.16 Guns came out of action at 4pm. Fritz started shelling us at 7pm. One horse wounded. Raining cats and dogs..mud up to ankles. Harnessed up and moved out. Fritz still shelling. Moved about 1 mile and stayed there till morning Absolutely the worst night I have ever experienced. Wet through and foot deep I walked about all night. I think rum saved out lives.*

After a break from the Somme, the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery marched back to the to the region

*28<sup>th</sup> to 31 Oct What happened between these dates I don't rightly remember. What with forced marches, nothing to eat and no sleep. Mud up to our thighs. It was an absolute nightmare.*

*1.11.16 Arrived firing line Longneval<sup>1</sup> – Again in the Somme battle. Shot one of our horses – broke his leg in the mud. Shell just missed our dugout and killed 3 men.*

*2.11.16 Shelling all around. Oh! What a hole – a hell hole. Saw a 'Tank'.*

*(Diary of Gunner Twist)*

Bombardier White was wounded on the 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1916. Gunner Twist and Private Melville wrote in their diaries of the event

---

<sup>1</sup> Should read Longueval

[Top of page] (Gunner Pearce reported missing)

15.11.16 Fritz strafed our trenches like hell. Bdr White wounded with bomb dropped from Taube. Shell dropped 10 yards away whilst I was asleep and wounded one horse which had to be shot.

(Diary of Gunner Twist)

Nov 14<sup>th</sup>

Big stunt in morning. Our lads took some trenches on right. Pearce killed at wagon lines. Recently came in from D.A.C<sup>2</sup>. Fritz strafed pits in evening and killed one wounded one in 16<sup>th</sup>. Did all night stunt. Barrage.

Nov 16<sup>th</sup>

Bomb White wounded at ammunition dump. Fierce weather. Plenty doing. All night barrage.

(Diary of Gunner Melville)

Stephen White would later tell the story of this wounding and the horse being shot.



Photograph: Somme, Winter 1916, Source: AWM

In early Sept 1917 Stephen White spent some time on leave in the UK, returning just before two of the heaviest battles the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery would face....

*Known as the Menin Road Battle it was the most strenuous, drawn out, and dangerous the Battery had been in. Seven members of the Battery were killed and twenty-two wounded)...Menin Road was known as the first step, and Polygon Wood, the second...the Battle for Polygon Wood on the September 26<sup>th</sup> [1917] was an epic of courage and bravery for all Australian troops engaged...German guns searched and swept the area and only one gun was left in action. Casualties were heavy..The Battery was relieved after twenty-three days in action on the 3<sup>rd</sup> October and moved back to rest area La Motte near Hazebrouck.*

(Dyer, 1965, p 21)

The Menin Road battle sent Private Melville back to England due to a severe wound which were known as 'blightys' as they could bring soldiers back to England which was known as 'Blighty.' His cover of shelter in a ditch was almost blown by a 'Lark'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> DAC – Divisional Ammunition Column, 1<sup>st</sup> AIF

Sept 24<sup>th</sup> 1917

*Started a stunt at 5.30am and Fritz retaliated. Result I get a blighty in the back and Sal Gordon in the head. Lark shelters in a trench where I had crawled and thought my last hour had come. After the strafe was over was carried on stretcher to 2<sup>nd</sup> Dressing Port. From there was taken to Dressing Stn on Menin Road. Had to wait a long time for ambulance. Wound pained a bit. Had a rough ride to Dressing Stn outside Menin Gate where wound was dressed. Then got another bus on to the Canadian CCS.<sup>4</sup> Had a long painful wait there. Underwent operation at 9pm and came to, freed up about 10 with nice little souvenir in my leg. Waited until morning for train.*

*(Diary of Gunner Melville)*

On 26<sup>th</sup> September 1917 Corporal Carr from Port Adelaide, Gunner Hensen from Glanville, Gunner Bodholdt from Rosewater, and Bombardier Paterson from the UK, all in the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery, were killed in action at Menin Rd, and buried at the Hooge Crater Cemetery, Zillebeke, Belgium. Bombardier Gray was acknowledged for his efforts on the same day in packing ammunition under heavy fire at Hooge via a meritorious service medal. A story was later told by White that he had just left a trench to have a smoke when it was subsequently blown up with three of his mates in it... he claimed his hair went white overnight.

The 26<sup>th</sup> September 1917 marked the commencement of the Polygon Wood battle which included 23 continuous days of fighting. Weather conditions were atrocious around this time, with mud and rain considered to be worse than the Somme. On the 1<sup>st</sup> October, White was wounded in action. The Battery resumed action on the 18<sup>th</sup> October near Zillebeke and White was again wounded on the 21<sup>st</sup> October. On the same day a letter is dated to Mrs Linda White from the Australian Military Force (Base Records Office, Victoria Barracks) which informs her that her son Wheeler S.W. White is wounded, with no further information. On the 29<sup>th</sup> October 1917 she responds to this information with a letter ...

*Dear Sir*

*I have just received your notification informing me that Wheeler S.W White no 8427 6<sup>th</sup> Army Brigade is reported wounded.*

*I would be glad if you could give me any information as to the nature of his wounds and when he was wounded. For which I will be very thankful to you.*

*Thanking you in anticipation.*

*I am yours Faithfully,*

*Mrs L White*

*Church Street West*

*Port Adelaide*

*South Australia*

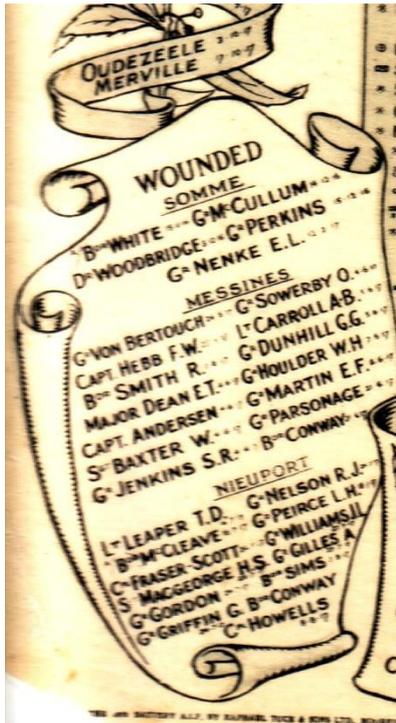
(National Archives record 1850441)

On the 1<sup>st</sup> November 1917, Mrs Linda White receives a reply from the Base Records Office saying that there is no further information, that it was reported to them that her son's condition was not 'serious' and therefore it could be assumed he is making satisfactory progress. White was sent back to the trenches on the 17<sup>th</sup> November, however fellow soldiers Twist and Melville by this stage were both in England due to injuries. In Dec 1917 White is promoted to temporary Corporal.

---

<sup>3</sup> A lark is a noisy bird that gave rise to the expressions 'happy as a lark' and in French is known as the 'alouette' the subject of the song sometimes known in English 'Alouette, gentille alouette' about plucking the bird in preparation for cooking.

<sup>4</sup>Casualty Clearing Station. Later in the diary he reports he was at Poperinghe CCS on the 24<sup>th</sup> September 1917.



Extract from 18<sup>th</sup> Battery Honor Roll Second Year's Record Indicating wounding of Bombardier White on the Somme, author's private collection

Christmas 1917 was spent by the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery in a camp between Bailleul and Armentiers in Normandy, France, being a white Christmas where snow commenced early on Christmas day. The troops enjoyed turkey followed by pudding and a parcel for each soldier and thanks to the 'Australian Comfort Fund' it was deemed the best Christmas ever by these troops, according to Dyer. The Battery received special parcels prepared by the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery Club, formed from the wives, mothers and sisters of troops in Adelaide.

By 20<sup>th</sup> February 1918 a set of gun pits had been built ready for occupation. Just prior to this many men lost their voice from gas affected timber used to build the pits. In Feb 1918 White is promoted to Corporal, and shortly after that he is hospitalised in the field hospital on the 20<sup>th</sup> February with 'Bronchial Catarrh'. On the 28<sup>th</sup> February was declared to have 'Trench Fever' and sent to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian General Hospital in Boulogne. He embarked for England 4<sup>th</sup> March via the ship '*Pieter de Conick*' and was admitted to East Suffolk & Ipswich General Military Hospital, Colchester on the 4<sup>th</sup> March and then to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Auxiliary Hospital in Dartford, Kent on the 21<sup>st</sup> March.



Photograph: Hospital near Boulogne, Source: AWM

On the 10<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1918, Lynda White receives a note stating that her son Bombardier S.W. White has been admitted to the General Military Hospital in Colchester, a good 6 months after he is hospitalised. On the 10<sup>th</sup> April, 1918, Linda White receives another letter stating that Bombardier S.W. White has been admitted to the hospital in England. She responds to the letter regarding her son's hospitalisation ...

*Dear Sir*

*I today received notification of my son Bmdr S.W. White's illness of trench fever and as he is in a lodge or Benefit Society could I get a Drs certificate to treatment to the lodge, as I cannot get his sick pay without one, also a certificate for the time he was wounded last October, as according to the lodge rules a certificate on and off the funds must be privated to the lodge, and if you could supply me with same I will be very thankful to you,*

*Thanking you in anticipation*

*I am yours Faithfully*

*Mrs L White*

(National Archives record 1850441)

Many families at this time were receiving financial support from their son's regular payments from part of their war service income, with minimum and maximum specifications suggested by the army going to men with wives and children. Lodge or Benefit Societies have been likened to other fraternal groups such as Freemasons societies and trade unions, and historically many working class people were organized in these, which provided a kind of insurance in the event of sickness and other events.

On 6<sup>th</sup> June 1918, White was sent back to Australia via the ship 'Barambah' departing from Liverpool with 'Debility - Trench Fever'<sup>5</sup>. He was 'full of shrapnel' and had 'trench feet' or gangrene (which in 1914 had caused 20,000 British casualties) and was told he had only 6 months to live. He had a total army service of 3 years and 91 days, and service abroad was 2 years and 252 days. White went on to live for another fifty years. He married a woman whose fiancé had died in the war, and unable to have

---

<sup>5</sup> A highly contagious infectious disease caused by bacteria carried by lice, associated with high fever, muscle pain especially in the legs, severe headaches - around one fifth to one third of British troops in WW1 were affected.

children, they received a baby from the Queen's Home in 1926 that was officially adopted in the Port Adelaide Court House in 1929 (their only child). Stephen White was given a war service home/state bank loan in 1919 and lived at Cheltenham and then Minnipa on the West Coast of South Australia (from around 1924)<sup>6</sup>. However, he may have lost this house in 1927 in the lead up to the Great Depression (which first hit South Australia and Port Adelaide very hard, as described in the book *Hunger Town*). He worked on land under the Soldier Settlement Act at Minnipa, where he is also described as a blacksmith and wheelwright. His 'blacksmithing and wheelwright' plant equipment was for sale in the West Coast Sentinel, July 1939. He returned to Port Adelaide in 1938/39.<sup>7</sup>



Photograph: War memorial unveiling at Glanville by Sir Henry Galway (Governor), 1918 Source: SLSA

Locally, the significant number of men from Glanville, Port Adelaide, who died during the war were remembered in a ceremony led by the South Australian Governor Sir Henry Galway in 1918, with the unveiling of the Glanville War memorial. Every year former members of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery marched in the ANZAC day parade followed by a drink at the Gresham Hotel (until it was demolished in 1965), which was on the corner of North Terrace and King William Street, near Gresham Lane. The 18<sup>th</sup> Battery Men's Club held their main annual function on the 22<sup>nd</sup> November, the date they had disembarked from Australia.

The enduring Western Front battle was one of the bloodiest of all and many allied soldiers were lost here. A total of 46,000 Australian soldiers perished on the Western Front, the highest number of casualties for WW1 (14,000 died elsewhere). A total of 313,000 (out of 4.5 million in Australia) had volunteered for military service. There is the Australian National War Memorial in Villers-Bretonneux, France where Anzac Day is still commemorated. The Thiepval Memorial to the Missing of the Somme is the largest of all memorials and carries the name of 73,357 unknown British and Commonwealth (including Australian and South African soldiers). At Menin Gate there is now an impressive memorial carrying the names of over 6000 Australian soldiers killed there with no known

<sup>6</sup> Mr S. W. White delivered the first load of new season's wheat in 1924 at Minnipa, according to the West Coasts Sentinel of 6 Dec, 1924.

<sup>7</sup> His son's Quarterly Review of 1938 lists him living at 9 College Street, Portland, a place later purchased by S.W.White.

grave and a total of 54, 896 Commonwealth soldiers with unknown graves. Menin Gate led to ‘Hell Fire Corner’ where

*there is a small stone by the road side stating that this is where the German Army were stopped in their advance. The Menin Gate memorial, built into the ramparts of Ypres, has on the East side a figure of the British Lion with the words “they shall not pass”.*

(Dyer 1965: 23).

Eighty years after these events, in August 1997 I had the opportunity to visit these former Western front battle fields in Belgium, Flanders fields, the Menin Gate Memorial and around Ypres, and was extremely moved. It certainly put into perspective the shock of hearing the death of Princess Diana of Wales announced on the tour bus early that morning. My diary extract from this visit reads...

Aug 1997

*We went to the battlefields around Ypres where Grandfather White fought – Paschendale, Messines – There were many trenches, pill-boxes, cemeteries, shells/ammunition left – so much active ammunition is still buried underground – around 3-4 fatalities per year still occur through farmers hitting some live shells with a plough or similar. So much more keeps being found or is dug up. The Belgian [tour] guide’s two uncles were in the war – his grandmother gave birth to his father in a refugee camp. He was passionate about it – he tried to give us a picture of what conditions were like – hell on earth. How does a human survive these conditions? We saw a trench that was ‘4 star’ – an underground hole with beds packed in – it would have been rat and flea infested – they called the rats ‘trench rabbits’ they were so huge. The Aussie diggers – sewer-rats – dug massive underground trenches – as the Germans fought on top of them – many died by drowning in mud. The Tyne Cot cemetery is huge – but there are so many others full of white stone graves.*

*At first gas was combated only by dipping a hanky or sock in water – or urine – then women’s sanitary pads were sent over for the gas. We read stories of people who dragged mates out of mud and had to leave them – had to kill them to put them out of pain and go on.*

*How did they survive this bloodshed? I can’t understand – but if Grandpa White hadn’t survived – hadn’t gone home with trench fever and ‘6 months to live’ – hadn’t survived being blasted with shrapnel – I wouldn’t be here today.*



Photograph: Menin gate, Ypres, 1997, author’s private collection

## Key Sources:

### Australian War Memorial Research Centre

- Private record 3DRL/7566A, Diary of Private C.P Melville, 18<sup>th</sup> Battery, 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Field Artillery, 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Division (154 pages).
- Private Record PR00314. Diary of Colin C Twist, 18<sup>th</sup> Battery, 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Field Artillery, 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Division, (57 pages).

Dyer, J (1965) *The Story of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery 6<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Field Artillery, 1<sup>st</sup> AIF, 1915-1919*, 1965, unpublished document, private collection.

Honor Roll of the 18<sup>th</sup> Battery, 6<sup>th</sup> Field Artillery, private collection, S Battams

National Archives of Australia World War 1 record 1850441, digital copy accessed [http://www.naa.gov.au/the\\_collection/defence/conflicts/ww1/ww1.html](http://www.naa.gov.au/the_collection/defence/conflicts/ww1/ww1.html)

West Coasts Sentinel, 6 Dec, 1924. Trove.

West Coast Sentinel, July 1939. Trove.