



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



# SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2021 Winner | Victoria

**Anna Howell**

GOULBURN VALLEY GRAMMAR SCHOOL

# Simpson Prize 2021

Anna Howell

Year 10

Goulburn Valley Grammar School

“How do lesser-known stories from the Western Front expand our understanding of the Australian experience of the First World War?”

Most people's understanding of the First World War (WWI) does not extend far beyond the geographical and statistical details. By exploring the lesser-known stories from the Western Front, we can appreciate the genuine perspectives of soldiers, offering an insight into the perpetually treacherous lives of servicemen and women during the Great War. WWI is regarded as one of the turning points in the history of civilisation. Yet still, this worldwide cataclysm, 106 years after the first gunshot, is an enigma to those who did not experience it. When one thinks of the Great War, the initial, and for many final, thought is of the scale on which the violence occurred. Such statistics are difficult to comprehend and can diminish one's true appreciation of what transpired. To truly understand the experiences of those who fought for our nation, WWI cannot be viewed as a singular event, but rather a conglomeration of individual anecdotes. Stories of Indigenous Australians, heavily ostracised during this time, help us to both better understand the true experiences of Australians during the First World War and assist to expose the prejudice on the home front. Additionally, the role of Australian stretcher-bearers in WWI was imperative, revealing the valour and heroism of these individuals. Archivers preserved the horrors of war through records and souvenirs, further accentuating that lesser known wartime experiences can reveal hidden stories of war.

1914 marked not only the beginning of the Great War, but also 126 years after the invasion of European settlers onto land considered 'Terra Nullius'. This initiated 126 'years of misery and degradation imposed on the original native inhabitants by white invaders', and white Australians' palpable sense of superiority over Indigenous Australians.<sup>1</sup> However, over 1,000 Indigenous Australians still enlisted to serve in WWI.<sup>2</sup> During this period, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders received few rights within society, forced to live segregated lives in deplorable conditions. As Edmund Barton, Australia's first Prime Minister, stated in 1901, 'in comparison with white races, [people of colour] are unequal and inferior', illustrating the racial ostracization felt by many Indigenous people.<sup>3</sup> However, enlistment guidelines stated that only 'half-castes may be enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force provided that the examining Medical Officers [were] satisfied that one of the parents [was] of European origin'.<sup>4</sup> Yet, this did not deter Indigenous Australians from the opportunity to receive equal pay and prove their worth, encouraging individuals of native descent to enlist under false names.

Private Alfred Jackson Coombs, a Wergaia man, was the most well-known Indigenous soldier to fight in WWI.<sup>5</sup> Coombs enlisted and served in the 59<sup>th</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion, but in

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<sup>1</sup> M. Easton et al., *Oxford Big Ideas Humanities*, 1<sup>st</sup> edn, ed. I. De Baets & H. Koehne, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2016, p. 359.

<sup>2</sup> 'War Service', *Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander* [website], 30 August 2018, World War 1: 1914-1918, <<https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/articles/serving-their-country>>, accessed 24 May 2020.

<sup>3</sup> B. T. Jones, 'Australian politics explainer: The White Australia policy', *The Conversation* [online article], 10 April 2017, <<https://theconversation.com/australian-politics-explainer-the-white-australia-policy-74084>>, accessed 24 May 2020.

<sup>4</sup> S. Furphy, 'Aboriginal Enlistment During World War I' *Australian National University* [website], 2 May 2017, <<https://history.cass.anu.edu.au/news/aboriginal-enlistment-during-world-war-i-month-history>>, accessed 26 May 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Simpson Prize Source 3: *Australian soldiers after a snow fight at a training camp*, 1916, [photograph], Australian War Memorial, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C997245>>, accessed 25 May 2020.

March 1917, was shot and sent to England to recover.<sup>6</sup> Upon return, Coombs fought in Bapaume, Bullecourt, Passchendaele, Villers-Bretonneux, and the Battle of Le Hamel.<sup>7</sup> He fought and killed for a country that did not yet recognise him as one of their own. On September 2, 1918, Private Coombs was amongst the 3,000 soldiers gassed during the Battle of Amiens, resulting in his evacuation from the battlefield.<sup>8</sup> Yet, when Alfred Coombs returned to Australia, he and so many other Indigenous individuals who had fought for a nation they could not call their own, were again subjected to racial discrimination and prejudice.<sup>9</sup> Under the Soldier Settlement Scheme, returned soldiers were issued a small piece of land to farm. But, as in the years before the war, Indigenous soldiers were excluded from this payment, highlighting the inequality that continued to exist in Australian society.<sup>10</sup> They were refused treatment for war trauma, nor were they given soldier compensation payments.<sup>11</sup> The plight of Indigenous Australians has been neglected in Australian history for centuries. It is only recently that their stories have become known, and we can gain a true understanding of their role in WWI. People often see the war as a time that forged Australian independence and identity, with indications of an emerging, progressive nation. However, despite this rapidly developing country, Indigenous Australians were still perceived to be of lesser worth, forced onto the peripheries of society to live segregated and isolated lives.

*'Out amongst the tangled wire*

*(Where they thickest fell)*

*Snatching back the threads of life*

*From out the jaws of Hell;*

*Out amongst machine-gun sweep*

*And blasts of shatt'ring shell.'*<sup>12</sup>

*'Stretcher Bearers'* – Anonymous

This excerpt of a poem exposes the unheralded role of stretcher-bearers, and their invaluable valiance. These men, unarmed, untrained and unprotected, are frequently overshadowed by the men whom they were risking their lives to save. Thomas Edols, an Australian soldier, quoted, 'in areas that had suffered heavy artillery barrages, it was literally impossible to walk

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<sup>6</sup> 'Jack's Journey to War', *The Wimmera Mail Times* [website], 4 August 2017, <<https://www.mailtimes.com.au/story/4829232/braving-the-western-front/>>, accessed 26 May 2020.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> 'World War I and Australia', *State Library New South Wales* [website], 10 September 2020, <[https://guides.sl.nsw.gov.au/wwi-and-australia/indigenous\\_soldiers](https://guides.sl.nsw.gov.au/wwi-and-australia/indigenous_soldiers)>, accessed 15 September 2020.

<sup>10</sup> 'Aboriginal Soldiers', *Libraries Tasmania* [website] n.d., <<https://www.libraries.tas.gov.au/>>, accessed 2 June 2020.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> '1918: Australians in France - Unsung heroes - Australia's medical personnel', *Australian War Memorial* [website], n.d., <<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/medical>>, accessed 2 June 2020.

between the shell holes';<sup>13</sup> yet stretcher-bearers persevered over shell-torn land to rescue the injured. Septimus Power clearly illustrates in his painting 'Stretcher Bearers', the trepidation and bravery possessed by these young Australians, personifying the experiences of Australian war medics.<sup>14</sup> In one corner of the painting a shell explodes, sending fragmented body parts in all directions. But, amongst the barbed wire and sludge, two stretcher-bearers lift one soldier in agonising pain out of the wreckage of the battle, symbolising their altruistic and valorous persona. Stretcher-bearers were the last flame of hope amongst a sea of peril, saving soldiers from the brink of death.

Stretcher-bearers have received little recognition, and scant mention has been made about these individuals in wartime history. Private John Charles Goodchild was a small-time signwriter who migrated to Adelaide in 1913 from London.<sup>15</sup> He enlisted in the Royal Australian Medical Corps in January 1917 and served as a stretcher-bearer in the 9<sup>th</sup> Field Ambulance.<sup>16</sup> However, Goodchild, along with most other stretcher-bearers, was not only burdened with the job of 'pick[ing] up the wounded and bring[ing] them to a doctor where medical treatment would begin'<sup>17</sup>, but often was also required to administer any treatment he could, all whilst being subjected to bullets and gunfire. Not only was Goodchild a stretcher-bearer in some of the most dangerous battlefields, he also aided doctors by drawing human bones to assist as models.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, Private Bill Manly, a stretcher-bearer during WWI, has also received little recognition for his service, despite making an immense sacrifice to help the war effort.<sup>19</sup> Whilst working for the 13<sup>th</sup> Australian Field Ambulance at the dressing station in Pozières Woods on the Somme, Manly set off into No Man's Land to help four injured soldiers.<sup>20</sup> However, he and his 15 comrades were taken prisoner at gun point by German soldiers.<sup>21</sup> Believing that they 'would be returned to [their] own lines [soon]'<sup>22</sup>, these innocent stretcher-bearers were wrong – it was the beginning of an agonising 15-month captivity. These young Australian men were moved to another POW camp where they suffered regular beatings.<sup>23</sup> Upon repatriation to England for medical treatment, Manly weighed a mere 38.3kg and suffered chronic eye problems.<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, he gallantly re-enlisted in WWII,

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<sup>13</sup> Simpson Prize Source 8: T. Edols, 1918, *Letter to a Friend*, [letter], Australian War Memorial, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021>>, accessed 6 June 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Septimus. H. Power, 1922, 'Stretcher Bearers', [painting], *Australian War Memorial*, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ART03645>>, accessed 1 June 2020.

<sup>15</sup> 'John Charles Goodchild', *South Australian Medical Heritage Society* [website], n.d., <<https://www.samhs.org.au/Virtual%20Museum/Notable-individuals/GoodchildandWW1/goodchild.htm>>, accessed 7 June 2020.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> H. Flynn, 'Forgotten Heroes', *The Australian* [website], n.d., <[http://thegreatwar.theaustralian.com.au/forgotten\\_heroes/](http://thegreatwar.theaustralian.com.au/forgotten_heroes/)>, accessed 7 June 2020.

<sup>18</sup> 'John Charles Goodchild', *South Australian Medical Heritage Society* [website], n.d., <<https://www.samhs.org.au/Virtual%20Museum/Notable-individuals/GoodchildandWW1/goodchild.htm>>, accessed 7 June 2020.

<sup>19</sup> E. Manly, 'Stretcher Bearers Strayed Behind Enemy Lines', *Australian Government: Department of Veterans' Affairs* [website], 3 June 2019, <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/>>, accessed 16 September 2020.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> *ibid.*

and was officially declared blind in 1941.<sup>25</sup> These stories, of seemingly ordinary stretcher-bearers during WWI, offer another perspective of war from the eyes of unarmed heroes. Goodchild and Manly are representative of all stretcher-bearers whose courageous stories may never have been told, deconstructing the ostensibly overwhelming statistics from the war into personal anecdotes.

Little would be known today about the Great War if detailed records had not been preserved. Although many would like to forget the war, gratitude is owed to those who filed away diaries and death records, for these documents change the way we perceive war and expose its brutality. It was not only the soldiers who contributed to the war, but also the underacknowledged men who worked in registry offices and collected souvenirs for the establishment of the Australian War Memorial. Lieutenant John Treloar is one individual to whom Australia will be forever indebted.<sup>26</sup> Born 10 December 1894, Treloar was an Australian Archivist during WWI.<sup>27</sup> During the Battle of Pozieres, Treloar was appointed head of the Central Registry, responsible for communications within the headquarters and delivering orders to its subsidiary units.<sup>28</sup> During this time, he gained an excellent understanding of military record-keeping skills, which subsequently assisted him to command the newly-established Australian War Records Station.<sup>29</sup> Upon return to Australia, Treloar became the second director of the Australian War Memorial.<sup>30</sup> These people preserved the history of war, ensuring that future generations be educated about the horrors and losses that result from such catastrophic events.

It is easy to be overwhelmed by the vast statistics associated with war. It is only by pausing and reflecting on the stories of the individuals involved that we gain an insight into the personal experiences, not only of the soldiers, but of all those who were affected by the conflict. The ANZAC Spirit did not solely emerge from the Battle of Lone Pine, nor was it a product of the Battle at the Somme. It was an outcome of millions of lesser known stories coalescing together to unite Australia through a time of trepidation and hardship. These stories give a face to war; without them the experiences and sufferings endured would be nothing more than haunting memories buried with the deceased.

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Simpson Prize Source 1b: *Lieutenant John Treloar working at the Central Registry Office of the 1<sup>st</sup> ANZAC Corps Headquarters*, 1917, [photograph], Australian War Memorial, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021>>, accessed 28 May 2020.

<sup>27</sup> D. Winter, 'Treloar, John Linton (1894-1952)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* [website], published first in hardcopy 1990, <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/treloar-john-linton-8846>>, accessed 29 May 2020.

<sup>28</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> 'Lieutenant Colonel John Linton Treloar', *Australian War Memorial* [website], n.d., <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P11035480>>, accessed 30 May 2020.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*

# Appendix:

## Source 1b: Photograph



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00380

Lieutenant John Treloar working in the Central Registry Office 1st ANZAC Corps Headquarters, Henencourt, France, 1917.

Anon., 'The Central Registry Office of the 1st Anzac Corps Headquarters at Henencourt', *Australian War Memorial*, March 1917, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E00380>>, accessed 7 August 2020.

## Source 3: Photograph



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P03906.001

Private Alfred Jackson Coombs with his fellow soldiers after a snow fight at a training camp.

Anon., 'Group portrait of Australian soldiers', *Australian War Memorial*, c. February 1916, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C997245>>, accessed 2 August 2020.

### Source 8: Letter

#### Lieutenant Thomas Edols, No. 4 Squadron AFC, letter to a friend, 14 July 1918 (AWM PR 86/385)

From the air the war zone of France looked like a scrawled and badly erased piece of paper. A few fragments of buildings, an odd ruin broke to monotony of the broken and shell pitted earth. In areas that had suffered heavy artillery barrages, it was literally impossible to walk between the shell holes ... There had been life here before, but it had been systematically rubbed out.

Our own conditions were infinitely preferable ... we enjoyed good food, plenty to drink and solid quarters ... At one aerodrome we were billeted next to a champagne factory and could buy its wares, until we grew bored, for a bottle.

Edols. T, 'Letter to a friend', *Australian War Memorial*, 14 July 1918, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021>>, accessed 22 August 2020.

### Source 9: Painting



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART03645

This painting, by Septimus H Power, depicts the imperative role of stretcher-bearers during World War I.

Power. S. H, 'Stretcher Bearers', *Australian War Memorial*, 1922, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/ART03645>>, accessed 3 August 2020.

*Source 10: Drawing*



This drawing, by John Charles Goodchild, was one of the many illustrations drawn to assist doctors during the First World War.

Goodchild. J. C, *South Australia Medical Heritage*, c. 1916, <<https://www.samhs.org.au/Virtual%20Museum/Notable-individuals/GoodchildandWW1/goodchild.htm>>, accessed 6 August 2020.

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