THE SIMPSON PRIZE

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Essay

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

By Matilda Hanley

The stories of Noble Black, Bernard Haines, Kitty McNaughton and countless other unnamed and unrecognised heroes from the Western Front help us to recognise and understand the traumatic experiences of those who were sent away to serve in a battle, over a hundred years prior to today, for a country thousands of kilometres away, on soil they did not know nor love. Black was an office boy who after returning to Australia suffered from PTSD and was sent away to an asylum (100 Stories Project, 2014). Haines was a young boy barely sixteen before he was crippled at the Western Front and only just twenty-eight when he died (One Hundred Stories, 2015). Kitty McNaughton was a nurse who witnessed more horrors then imaginable and was left permanently grey at thirty-six (Wyndham City Libraries, 2018). These are only three of the many untold stories of personnel who worked on the Western Front. These stories help to change our understanding of the Australian experience of the First World War. They show how many of those who returned home were isolated from their community. They expand our understanding of the experiences of medical personnel. And they make us acknowledge the unseen ailments that often plagued those who returned home. These stories make us understand that all those who served, witnessed the full spectrum of war experiences.

Many lesser known stories of Australians who return home from war help us expand our narrow view of how those personnel were treated by their communities when they return. Men who are victims of psychological and physical injuries were often ostracized because of their condition, brought on by the war. When soldier Noble Black returned home, he was one of the many who was shut out. Like Warrant Officer Harry Howling, in source 1, Noble had to wear a gas respirator to ward off deadly gas and experienced many gas attacks. However, even with the gas respirator the attacks were very deadly as seen in source 2 "I've seen chaps go out [die]. It is wicked that mustard gas. Yes, at Hill 60 I've seen quite a lot go out at there. (Lieutenant Frederick Chapman, 14/05 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HEKJ4a2z0I)". The effects of the gas led to his hospitalisation when he returned, however, Black had more pressing matters affecting him that went on unseen (One Hundred Stories B, 2015). Black was a shell shocked soldier suffering from PTSD which meant he often experienced violent outbursts toward his wife and children leaving them fearful and suffered from hallucinations where he thought he saw ghosts "stripping the flesh off his wife's body and crunching and eating her bones" and would yell out in terror (100 Stories Project, 2014). He was then isolated from his family during the Great Depression and sent to Callan Park Asylum. When admitted to the Asylum he was hidden away and drifted in and out of institutions, nerve homes, hospitals, asylums, and prisons (100 Stories Project, 2014). Many other war personnel returning home suffered from scars either physical or psychological because of the war which left them feeling sperate and disconnected from those they loved. Although the experiences of these men were not different from the other soldiers because of their injuries they were stigmatised and shunned. These untold stories show us that wounded soldiers were not always welcomed home and instead viewed as freak shows and hidden away because they were a 'disgrace'. Without the stories of Black and many others we would not know the dark side of being the returned injured war personnel. The fact that they were often not accepted by their community, family and friends who could not comprehend the horrors faced many kilometres from the shores of their home, an experience unique to Australian war heroes.

The untold story of Kitty McNaughton and other medical personnel who fought on the Western Front helps us to understand that the hardships faced there were not solely a burden of soldiers. During their time fighting many nurses fell ill, Kitty being one of them. She fell ill with jaundice and had to rest for a day, which was unheard of in the nursing industry (*Coming Together (1915 – 1916)*, 2014, Chap. 6 0:56). Not only did Kitty fall ill but she was also subjected to witnessing countless terrible wounds and illness often putting her life on the line to care for sick soldiers with deadly diseases (*Coming Together (1915 – 1916)*, 2014, Chap. 3 5:41). The nurses barely got any rest and were worked day and night (*Coming Together (1915 – 1916)*, 2014, Chap. 6 1:05). In source 3 you can see why. This diary extract tells of the men who were wounded and killed. Reporting in a sarcastic tone writing, 'So, things are pretty lively – four of our eighteen pilots gone in two days.' The nurses had to care for those who were wounded and would have to help more than just four pilots a day. Kitty's story expands our knowledge of what nurses experienced on the Western Front. It shows us that not only were soldiers injured and fell ill but also nurses. Many times these nurses were not able to rest because, as seen in source 3, the stream of the wounded was a constant that never stopped or slowed for anyone.

The many untold stories from the Western Front show us what the horrors or war can do to a person and expand our understanding of the effects of war to a person both physically and psychologically. Noble Black was one such man who suffered both visible and unseen damage from his service at the Western Front. He was gassed and suffered from PTSD which caused him to suffer from hallucinations, reduced his ability to walk, and triggered violent outbursts (100 Stories Project, 2014). There were reports of him being so vigilant he would react by jumping at events like simple light turning on (100 Stories Project, 2014). His mental condition was thought of as being disgraceful much like the disgrace that came with the cases of source 4. The soldiers who abandoned their posts and were then thought of as a disgrace and a failure. When soldiers like Bernie Haines came home with visible injuries there was "grief because disability was also a loss (*Coming Together (1915 – 1916)*, 2014, Chap. 4 1:36)." Bernie's injuries caused him to not only be unable to walk but they also meant he had to undergo forty surgeries to help fix his shattered spine (Monash University, 2018). Many of these surgeries occurred under local anaesthesia meaning that he was awake and could witness the doctors cutting away at his crippled body when he had barely reached adulthood (Monash University, 2018). Over time because they had to remove so much of his bowels and intestines waste built up, slowly poisoning the young man before he died at the terribly young age of twenty-eight (Monash University, 2018). His story shows us that not only was he dealing with a visible injury, but he would also have been terrified as he underwent local anaesthesia watching as his helpless body was at the mercy of unknown doctors.

Many of those who returned home suffered just as greatly but their signs were much less noticeable. After arriving home, Kitty McNaughton was left permanently grey at thirty-six and was a smoker until she died aged sixty-nine (Wyndham City Libraries, 2018). Although it was harder to notice, the gruelling hours of work on the front left her grey from the stress and trauma she witnessed and her habit of smoking, which she had picked up in the war, continued as a way to soothe the horrors she had viewed (Wyndham City Libraries, 2018). All three of these stories show us that no matter how big or small the affects may look from an outsider's perspective they are all varying results of the brutal service that occurred on the Western Front while they were a long way away from people they loved forcing them to face it alone making the trauma all the more brutal.

The three stories of Noble, Bernie and Kitty each teach us something unknown about the war and expand our understanding of the Australian experience. Often we are just told about the events of battles on the Western Front and if we are told about stories the only ones we hear are those of heroism and valour, and any story that does not feature these things is pushed aside so that we will never know of the horrible treatment some people received. Noble Black was a good soldier and yet when he returned home suffering from PTSD he was locked away into an asylum along with his story so Australians would never know of the mistreatment and dishonour that came from suffering from PTSD (One Hundred Stories B, 2015). Bernard Haines' story was left untold because of the war injured inflicted on him when he was only sixteen forcing him to live out his few remaining years suffering and slowly being betrayed by his body that poisoned him (One Hundred Stories, 2015). Kitty McNaughton's story was left untold because her service and the service of many other nurses was often not noted as being as difficult as a soldiers and instead it was an easier thing for a woman to do even though it was just as hard and traumatic leaving many grey before they reached their forties (Wyndham City Libraries, 2018). These untold stories are only a few of the thousands that no one mentions because they reveal something that we do not often want shared. But by reading them and understanding each of these peoples individual horrors we are expanding our understanding of what a war hero looked like, changing it from just a victorious soldier to any of the personnel that braved the Western Front no matter how small their service may have seemed and understanding that no matter how it was hidden World War I affected all those who were a part of it. The ripple effect that washed across Australian communities when their soldiers, nurses or other personnel returned home was great. Their stories made people uncomfortable and distant from each other as they had very little understanding of what the battle was like. The people were left alone and forgotten because it scared their communities to have to face their personal stories. By reading them we gain a much deeper knowledge of the battle that Australians fought in, so far from their home soil, and we acknowledge their sacrifices.

Appendix

Source 1: Photograph

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL P01315.002

Warrant Officer Harry Hoyling (of Chinese descent) wearing a sheepskin jacket and a gas respirator, France, 1916. AWM P01315.002

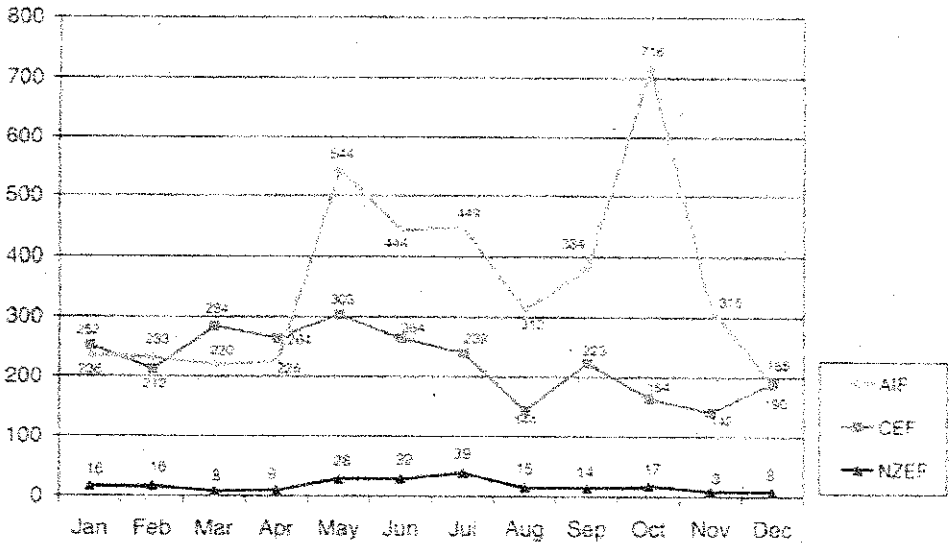
Source 2: "I've seen chaps go out [die]. It's wicked that mustard gas. Yes, at Hill 60 I've seen quite a lot go out at there. (Lieutenant Frederick Chapman, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HEKJ4a2z0I).

Source 3: Captain Adrian Cole, No. 2 Squadron AFC, manuscript memoir, pp. 27-8 (AWM PR88/154)

5 September 1917: We do offensive patrols at about 15,000 to 18,000 feet well over the lines looking for a fight all the time. Our chaps brought down 3 of theirs yesterday and 2 today. And we lost 2 yesterday and 2 this morning (killed and wounded). So, things are pretty lively – four of our 18 pilots gone in two days.

Source 4: Courts martial (book extract and graph)

The frequency of courts martial, primarily for the offence of desertion, increased during periods of intense operational activity, allowing for the delay between the dates of offences and sentencing. Within the Australian force, Field General Courts Martial on the Western Front reached a peak of 544 cases in May 1918, 80 per cent more than the Canadian total of 303 cases for that month. In October 1918 the Australian monthly total surged to 716 cases, the highest monthly total in the AIF for the entire war, and over four times the Canadian total of 164 for that month. This peak reflected the greatest period of operational stress for the understrength Australian units in late September.



Monthly Field General Courts Martial (FGCM) on the Western Front, 1918 (Australian, Canadian and New Zealand forces)

Ashley Ekins, *Fighting to Exhaustion*, in Ashley Ekins (ed.) *1918: Year of victory*, Exisle Publishing, Wollombi, 2010, p. 127

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