



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2021 Winner | Queensland

Elizabeth Williams

ST MONICA'S COLLEGE

Simpson Prize 2021

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



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00380

Source: Lieutenant John Treloar (right) working at the Central Registry Office of the 1st Anzac Corps Headquarters, Henencourt, France, 1917. AWM E00380

Name: Elizabeth Williams
Grade: Year 9
School: Saint Monica's College, Cairns
Word Count: 1471

The legends of the Anzacs at Gallipoli and soldiers in the Western Front trenches dominate the history of Australia in World War One, focusing on the altruism and valour of the infantry. As a result of emphasising this aspect of war, the service of non-front-line soldiers on the Western Front is overlooked. Lesser known stories of ancillary services supporting Australia's involvement on the Western Front present a multi-faceted understanding of the First World War, thus challenging the misconception that the Australian experience of war was limited to trench warfare. The Australian Flying Corps, Post Office and Australian War Records Section were not at the forefront of the war, however, understanding and commemorating their service forms a more complete view of Australia's experience in the war.

The Australian Flying Corps (AFC) was responsible for the acquisition and defence of military intelligence. The airmen of Squadrons 2, 3 and 4 as well as Australians serving with the British Royal Flying Corps supported the infantry through reconnaissance flights to spot artillery far behind German trenches, scouting and combatting enemy aircraft also looking to gain useful military information and strafing opposition ground troops with mounted machine guns. In addition to this, the 3rd Squadron developed the parachutes utilised to drop ammunition to soldiers in the Battle of Hamel.

The war experience of the Australian Flying Corps differed significantly to that of the infantry. A memoir of an airmen describes the conditions of the AFC to be, *"infinitely preferable ... we enjoyed good food, plenty to drink and solid quarters,"* compared to the trenches which, *"from the air, the war zone of France looked like a scrawled and badly erased piece of paper"* (Captain Adrian Cole, AWM PR88/154, n.d.)(Appendix A). Despite the better conditions, airmen faced psychological distresses that did not affect the AIF infantry. Lieutenant Owen Lewis witnessed one of his squadron's planes shot down by British anti-aircraft fire: *"I saw one of our aeroplanes go down absolutely out of control and it subsequently turned out to be Streeter and Tarent. It is thought that their tailplane was shot away by one of our archie shells in its trajectory"* (AWM PR00709, 1918)(Appendix A). Observing other squadron members die whilst unable to rescue them was traumatic for the pilots (Molkentin, 2004). The diary of 2nd Lieutenant Raymond Brownell corroborates this, showing how often pilots faced death, *"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"* (AWM PR83/231, 1917)(Appendix A). This highlights the stress of a constantly changing group of pilots and the fear induced from knowing each flight could be the last. The diary entry also recounts the other side losing airmen. Some pilots found shooting down another pilot's plane exhilarating and glorified the number of 'kills'. This idea can be seen in Lieutenant Edols' letter, *"The squadron got its 100[th]"*

Hun this morning, not bad going for 8 months work" (AWM PR 86/385, 1918)(Appendix A). Contrary to this, other pilots were anguished at seeing people killed in the cockpit, or plummeting out of the plane, covered in flames at their doing (Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2019). The diverse reactions to aerial combat expand Australia's understanding of the psychological effects of war, creating a more complete picture of the Australian war experience. Furthermore, the stories of the Australian Flying Corp's early aerial exploits demonstrate roles other than that of the foot soldier in the war.

The Post Office's role in the war was crucial to boosting soldier's morale in the face of dreadful conditions, yet the effort to distribute this correspondence is overlooked. The film, *How the Digger Gets his Mail*, highlights the journey of letters and parcels all the way from Australia to the trenches on the Western Front (Smith & Wilkins, AWM F00020, 1916-1918)(Appendix B). It shows the mail travelling by ship to the Base Post Office in London where it was sorted, and each address checked. Each delivery contained 500 000 letters with 57 percent needing to be redirected. The post office received 10 000 changes of address from soldiers each week, with a special night staff recording each alteration.

The sheer quantity of the letters and number of changes to address received by the postal service demonstrates the significance of letters to raise soldier's spirits. The film features the delight of the soldiers when their mail was delivered. This joy receiving messages from Australia can be seen in the diary of Vivian Noble, *"However I will put on record my deepest gratitude and thanks for the trouble these different people go to to let me know that altho' buried deep down in the trenches here like a rabbit I have not been completely forgotten"* (Noble, as cited in Cronk, 2015). With poor conditions on the front, the mundane in the letters was comforting when mates were dying around them. The stories of the delivery of mail between France and Australia expand the understanding of the Australian war experience to include the importance of the work of the postal service in uplifting the spirits of soldiers in the trenches.

If not for the work of the Australian War Records Section (AWRS), the stories of the Post Office, Australian Flying Corps and other services in the war would have been lost. Formed in May 1917, its purpose was, *"To collect and preserve historical records that represented Australia's participation in the 1914-18 War,"* and, *"in order that Australia may have the control of her own historical records"* ("Australian War Records Section registry files," n.d.; Dodds, 1917). Lieutenant John Linton Treloar, who can be seen working in a photograph of the Central Registry Office, was placed in charge of the section and originally had a staff of 4 which grew to 600 (AWM E00380, 1917)(Appendix C). He

advocated for the careful recording of war diaries by each unit, providing instructions for the level of detail to make the diaries useful. It was his belief that, *"A well-kept diary is the surest pledge to future recognition... Attach every interesting paper. It is the best way of preserving it for the Regiment and for Australia"* (Treloar, as cited in, Condé, 2007). This reiterates the objective of the AWRS to keep a record of Australian involvement in the war so that it would not be forgotten. This legacy of the AWRS is continued through the work of the Australian War Memorial which finds its roots in the Australian War Records Section. Through the war diaries, lesser known stories such as those of the Flying Corps were preserved, enabling a multi-faceted view of the war.

The role of the Australian War Records Section did not only involve the war diaries, but extended to managing articles, photographs and trophies. A photograph of a trophy store set up in Peronne, France shows the Australian War Records Section collecting battle souvenirs which were sent to Australia via Britain (AWM E03684, 1917)(Appendix D). According to the Brigadier General of Administration, 3109 items including guns, trench mortars, aeroplanes, and vehicles were captured by Australian troops in France ("List of trophies," AWM16 4386/1/95, 1919). In a routine order from General Birdwood, trophies other than those mentioned above would be dealt with in the same way as salvage and then dispatched to the Australian Museum's Collecting Depots ("Claims for captured war materials," AWM16 4386/1/26, 1914-1918). In addition to this, a letter from Administration Headquarters about claims on a periscope and a flare gun states that, "It has been this Section's experience such that when small trophies such as these are sent to base and claimed in the usual manner, they generally go astray and are lost to the museum" ("Claims for captured war materials," AWM16 4386/1/26, 1914-1918). The care taken so as not to lose trophies, even small battle souvenirs, demonstrates the importance placed on keeping records to preserve the history of Australia in the war. Furthermore, the items captured (vehicles) show that the AIF was involved in open warfare in addition to trench warfare (Westerman, 2016). Through the careful documentation of war diaries, trophies and other records created in the war, the Australian War Memorial preserved the history of Australian involvement, challenging the misconception that Australia only participated in trench warfare and in doing so, creates a wider understanding of the Australian experience in the First World War.

The support of the Australian Flying Corps, Post Office and Australian War Records Section in gaining and defending military intelligence, boosting soldier's morale, and protecting the record of Australia's role in the war is often overlooked, yet these stories contribute to a greater understanding of the service of non-infantrymen. Stories of ancillary services create a more complete view of the war that is not limited to fighting in the trenches.

Appendix A

Source 8: Extracts from Diaries, Memoirs and Letters of Australian Flying Corps Officers 1917-18

There was a good deal of white archie [British Anti-Aircraft fire] about this morning and I was kept constantly at it. I saw one of our aeroplanes go down absolutely out of control and it subsequently turned out to be Streeter and Tarent. It is thought that their tailplane was shot away by one of our archie shells in its trajectory. It was Sheetin's first turn on the line.

Lieutenant Owen Lewis, No. 3 Squadron AFC, diary, 17 February 1918 (AWM PR00709)

Had to make a good getaway from well over the Hun lines about a week ago. Six of us were attacked by 14 Fritzes. It makes one think of home sweet home as you see the bullets go past ...

Two of us rather foolishly wandered too far into Hunland yesterday evening and were dived on by six Huns, and once again we had to make a hasty retreat, as the wind was blowing us away from our own lines as we stopped to fight, so we did not stop for too long as the air was unhealthy.

The squadron got its 100[th] Hun this morning, not bad going for 8 months work.

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.

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.

9 September 1917: Went on my first 'show' in the PM with four other "Camels". 'It being my first real 'go' over the lines the others looked after me more or less and didn't let any Huns get near me. The funny part about it was I didn't see any hostile buses at all- at least I didn't recognise them – although all the others fired at Huns at 4 or 5 different times.

10 September 1917: Had breakfast in bed and I got up at 10am to find the sky full of clouds and haze which stopped us going on our first jobs. However, it cleared up by 3pm. I took my place in a 5-plane formation. Soon after going over the lines we attacked 7 Huns (at about 13,000 feet) some of which dived away. MacMillan (the Flight Commander) dived after these and I followed him down to 8,000 feet where we each picked out a Hun and went for them. Mac shot his down out of control and I got a good burst on the other at close range and he suddenly caught alight, turned over and went down in flames.

2nd Lieutenant Raymond Brownell, No. 45 Squadron RFC, diary, September 1917 (AWM PR83/231)

Molkentin, M. (2015). *Australia and the war in the air: Volume I - the centenary history of Australia and the Great War*. Oxford University Press Australia. Retrieved from:
<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021>

Appendix B

Source 4: Film



Smith, J. W., & Wilkins, G. H. (Directors). (1916-1918). *How the Digger gets his mail: the Australian Army postal services at work* [Film]. Retrieved from <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C188258>

Appendix C

Source 1b: Photograph



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E00380

The Central Registry Office of the 1st Anzac Corps Headquarters [Photograph]. (1917).
Retrieved November 1, 2020, from
<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021>

Appendix D

Source 1a: Photograph



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

EO 3684

The Australian War Records Section Trophy Store at Peronne [Photograph]. (1918).

Retrieved November 1, 2020, from

<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021>

Bibliography

- Australian War Memorial. (n.d.). *Warfare in a new dimension: the Australian Flying Corps in the First World War*. Retrieved from Australian War Memorial:
<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/first-world-war-flying>
- Australian War Records Section registry files and register of file titles. (n.d.). Retrieved from Australian War Memorial: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1338578>
- Broadbent, H. (2014). *Australian and New Zealand Voices of the First World War*. Ultimo: Reader's Digest.
- Carlyon, L. (2006). *The Great War*. Sydney: Pan Mcmillan Australia.
- Claims for captured war materials - instructions regarding submissions by units in the field*. (1918). Retrieved from Australian War Memorial: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2687355>
- Condé, A.-M. (2007, March). Imagining a Collection. *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, 2(1), 25-36. Retrieved from
https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_2_no_1/papers/imagining_a_collection
- Condé, A.-M. (2007, July 12). *The Australian War Records Section*. Retrieved from Australian War Memorial: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-australian-war-records-section>
- Cresswell, E. (n.d.). *The experiment: innovations at the battle of Hamel*. Retrieved from
<https://www.awm.gov.au/>:
https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/Hamel%20experiment_2.pdf
- Cronk, T. (2015, March 17). *So far from home: sending and receiving mail in the trenches*. Retrieved from Australian War Memorial: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/so-far-home-sending-and-receiving-mail-trenches>
- Cutlack, F. (1941). Australian Airmen in France. In *The Australian Flying Corps in the Western and Eastern Theatres of War* (pp. 172-182). Retrieved from
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1416910>
- Department of Veteran's Affairs. (2019). *Australian Flying Corps in World War 1*. Retrieved from DVA Anzac Portal: <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/military-organisation/australian-flying-corps>
- Dodds, T. (1917). *Australian War Records*. Retrieved from Michael Treloar Antiquarian Booksellers: <https://www.treloars.com/pages/books/114940/australian-war-records/australian-imperial-force-memorandum-to-commanding-officers-official-historical-records-drop>
- List of trophies captured position re shipment and ultimate disposal in Australia*. (1919, March 27). Retrieved from Australian War Memorial: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2687356>
- Ministry for Culture and Heritage. (2016, May 3). *Communications on the Western Front*. Retrieved from New Zealand History: <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/first-world-war-postal-service/western-front>
- Molkentin, M. (2004). Culture, Class and Experience in the Australian Flying Corps. Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia. Retrieved from
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5202&context=theses>

Elizabeth Williams
Saint Monica's College, Cairns

National Army Museum. (n.d.). *Weapons on the Western Front*. Retrieved from National Army Museum: <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/weapons-western-front>

Perry, R. (2004). *Monash: the outsider who won the war*. Sydney: Random House Australia.

Piggott, M. (1980). The Australian War Records Section and its aftermath, 1917-1925. *Archives and Manuscripts*, 8(2), 41-50. Retrieved from <https://publications.archivists.org.au/index.php/asa/article/view/6603>

Westerman, W. (2016, March 2). *Warfare 1914-1918 (Australia)*. Retrieved from International Encyclopaedia of the First World War: https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/warfare_1914-1918_australia