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'Small Brushstrokes Paint the National Portrait' - How lesser known stories from the Western Front expand our understanding of the Australian experience of the First World War

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The Great War was horrifyingly tragic, disturbingly futile, and inherently European. As the first test of a distant, fledgling nation, the war painted a picture of Australia that would last for generations. Through the lens of war, the world saw an Australian canvas hanging in a British gallery: Australia's victories were British victories and Australia's heroes were heroes of the Commonwealth. Although in reality, the nature of Australia's participation was a catalogue of the experiences and contributions of individuals and minority groups.

Outwardly, Australia's iconic stories and images from the battlefields of Europe painted our national image as we would like the world to see us. But amongst ourselves, at home, we need to reflect on those individuals who played small parts in creating our national identity. To understand and get to know our own country, time spent examining the individual brushstrokes of our national portrait was, and still is, necessary. It is the small, lesser-known stories of individuals, of despair and hope, survival and humour, diversity and adversity, that teach us about our uniquely Australian experience of the Great War. Mostly originating from the Western Front, where almost 300 000 Australians fought, and over half were killed or injured, these lesser known stories strip away the surface of our national canvas, overpainted by newsreels and heroic tales. They tell of those who did not fit the mould of the typical Australian war hero. They tell of Aboriginal soldiers, of women at war, and of soldiers from Chinese descent. These lesser known stories show us a diverse and authentic picture of *our* Australia.

Amongst the most authentic Australians are the original inhabitants of our continent, Indigenous Australians. Approximately 1000 Australian soldiers identified as Aboriginal during World War I, and there may have been many more, but surprisingly, little research was conducted into their service until the 1970s (AWM, N.D). In the absence of knowledge, Australians often assumed Aboriginal soldiers to be 'stockmen' or 'trackers', but by uncovering the stories of real Aboriginal soldiers, this is revealed to be untrue. The story of Private Douglas Grant, who was captured during the first battle of Bullecourt only two months after arriving in France, is one that illustrates this point. Far from being a stockwhip cracking horseman, Grant, a well-educated, literate man, who spoke with a strong Scottish accent, was one of only twenty known Indigenous prisoners of war from the AIF (Source 6). Cama (2013), describes him as 'a natural born leader, fiercely intelligent artist and poetry enthusiast', who in 1918, while incarcerated, wrote to his father requesting him to send works by Henry Lawson and Adam Lindsey Gordon to 'pass away a few leisure moments which are generally filled with that longing for Home Sweet Home far across the sea' (Grant, 1918 *in* Cama, 2013).

Private Alfred Jackson 'Jack' Coombs and his brother Willie grew up on an Aboriginal mission and enlisted together in 1915. They fought in some of the most ferocious battles of the war, including Bullecourt, Passchendaele, Villers-Bretonneux, and Amiens, where Private Coombs was gassed. A photograph (source 3) showing Coombs and fellow soldiers after a snow fight during 'one of the coldest European winters in memory' (The Wimmera Mail-Times, 2017), contrasts the acceptance of an Aboriginal soldier during war with the discrimination he would experience upon returning home. 'Some came back to find their children had been taken away or their homes on mission stations were carved up for soldier settlements and distributed to white war veterans – only three Aboriginal servicemen who served in World War I received a land grant.' (Franks, 2014).

As with Indigenous soldiers, those of Chinese descent also experienced much discrimination during this time. Chinese labourers came to Australia amid the gold rushes in Victoria and Western Australia, where their strong work ethic made them successful, and consequently disliked by the other miners. Racial discrimination continued for generations, and although 213 Australian soldiers of Chinese descent are recorded to have fought in World War I, there may have been many more who were not recorded due to Australia's race based enlistment policies at the time. In addition to the exemptions in the Defence Act (1909 and 1910), Chinese Australians were excluded by the military orders that governed enlistment: 'District orders sent to 2nd Military District in October 1914 stated that 'Only British subjects substantially of European origin or descent are to be accepted for service with the Expeditionary Forces.' (Smith et al, 2015).

Records show that of the 213 Chinese soldiers, 19 received bravery awards, and several even fought in both world wars. Warrant Officer Harry Hoyling spent many years as a Chinese interpreter in Victoria before enlisting in 1914 as a Divisional train driver. Hoyling spent the entire war in active service and enlisted again when World War II broke out in 1939. A photograph (source 2) taken in 1916, shows him wearing a sheepskin jacket, which may have been one of about 100 000 which were sent to the Western Front by volunteers at home in Australia. (ABC Newcastle, 2016) Another Chinese-Australian soldier who fought in both wars was Private Caleb Shang, who is recognised as Australia's most decorated soldier of Chinese descent. Shang was known as a modest, but fearless and resourceful man. He fought at Messines Ridge in Belgium, where he conducted patrols through enemy territory and acted as a runner, delivering messages under heavy fire. He also taught himself to use lamp signals to get information to battalion headquarters. Shang was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM) for fearlessness, initiative, and resourcefulness. A year later, in 1918, he was awarded again for his bravery with the Military Medal and a bar to his DCM, and when he returned home to Cairns in 1919, the Cairns Post named him 'the greatest of Cairns soldiers'. The stories of Harry Hoyling, Caleb Shang, and many others paint a small but important section of our national image.

No image of national identity is complete without consideration of females. Although women were not allowed to serve in combat, they played a fundamental part in the success of the Allied Nations in World War I. Australians often think of women in war solely as nurses and charitable workers on the home front, but in fact, the role of women in World

War I was much broader. Australian women also served on the frontline as ambulance drivers, doctors, mechanics, clerks, cooks, artists, and reporters.

Dr. Phoebe Chapple was a feminist who, similarly to Indigenous and Chinese Australians, was not allowed to enlist as a doctor in the war, as the Australian army did not appoint female doctors. Dr. Chapple was determined to help in any way she could, so, in 1917, she left Adelaide for England to work as a doctor in the British Army. Gibberd, 1979, describes how on May 29, 1918, Chapple was inspecting a camp in France when it came under attack. She spent hours in the trenches tending to the wounded, and for her bravery, became the first female doctor to be awarded the Military Medal for 'gallantry and devotion to duty'. A contemporary of hers, Sergeant Olive King, was a wealthy Australian woman who happened to be in England when World War I broke out. King supplied her own ambulance, 'Ella', and joined a volunteer field ambulance service, to help the wounded in Belgium. After being accused of spying[1], she left Belgium and re-joined the war effort with the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service, where she worked first in France and later Serbia. Perhaps inspired by John Simpson Kirkpatrick, she became famous for daring journeys to the frontline, ferrying supplies and patients. For these acts of bravery, she won the 'Serbian Medal for Bravery' and the 'Gold Medal for Zealous Conduct'.

If the great battles and renowned deeds of World War 1 painted the outline of Australia's national identity, it is the rarely told small stories that provide the texture, the detail and the colour. Often overshadowed by newsreel footage and cigarette cards printed by the million, the deeds of Australian Indigenous soldiers, of brave women saving lives in the trenches, and of 213 Australian soldiers of Chinese descent, paint a picture of a diverse, complex Australia and a national pride with many facets. These people all faced discrimination from a nation that did not know their worth. Their pride, their desire to represent their country and to help their fellow Australians took them to the terror of the Western Front. When Australians hear their stories, our understanding of the Australian experience of World War I is expanded, and our national portrait is complete.

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[1] Edith Cavell, a British Nurse in World War I, was executed by the Germans in 1915, as they believed she was a spy.

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- Source 3: Photograph, Australian soldiers after a snow fight at a training camp. The group includes Indigenous serviceman Private Alfred Coombs, England, 1916. AWM P03906.001
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