



AN AUSTRALIAN CHAPLAIN
ON THE WESTERN FRONT, 1916

EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY AND LETTERS OF THE
REVEREND CHAPLAIN JOSEPH LUNDIE

JANE GILMOUR

[...] There is a little boy here about two years old [...] and we are great friends. I jabber French and English to him indiscriminately. The people speak a good deal of Flemish here so it is hard to make out their French as they go from one to the other. We manage somehow to rub along.

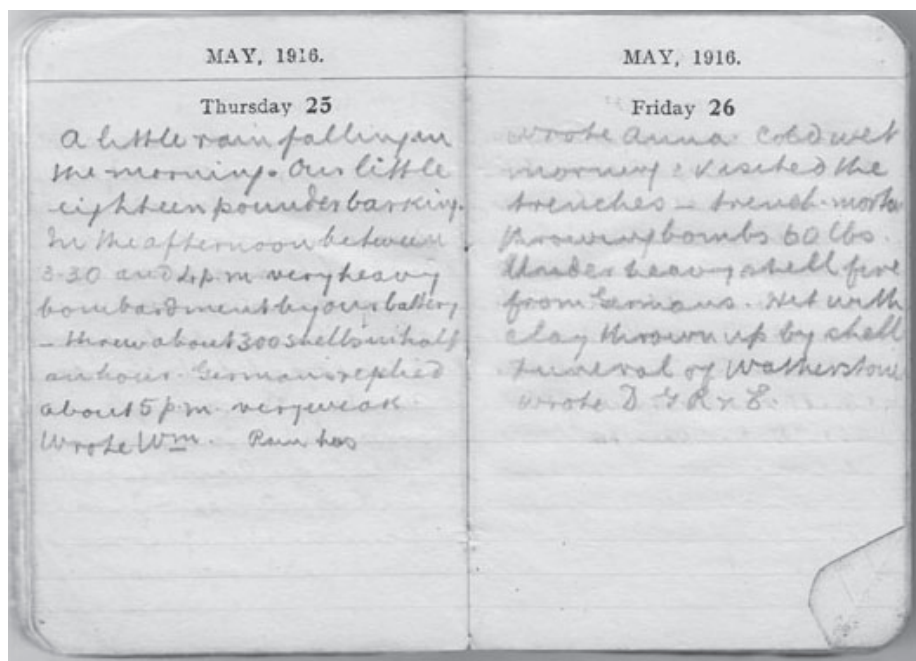
I can hear an aeroplane¹ flying over us as I am writing this and the guns booming in the distance. Indeed I was wakened this morning about three o'clock by the continuous booming of heavy artillery, but I am beginning to get used to it. Of course we are still a good distance from the firing line.

[...] It is a treat to see the green fields and trees and the hawthorn hedges bursting into leaf after the ten weeks we had in the hot barren desert where we never saw anything but sand. We also appreciate the basin of water to wash in after our starvation allowance.

This letter, dated 10 April 1916, was written by my grandfather, the Reverend Joseph Lundie, who was a chaplain with the Third Infantry Brigade of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). He was 46 years old at the time and was the Minister of St Stephen's Presbyterian Church in Toowoomba. He was attached to the 9th Battalion, which was made up of Queenslanders, some of whom he either knew personally or knew their families. This article explores the Australian experience of the First World War in France through a different lens, that of the chaplains who accompanied the AIF forces.

¹ Aeroplanes were used by both sides to 'photograph their opponents' trenches and back areas or to direct by wireless the fire of howitzers or heavy batteries upon targets hidden from artillery observers in their ordinary posts' (Bean 1941, 124).





An extract from my Grandfather's pocket diary

I had known for some time that a few letters from my grandfather had been kept in the family. I was not aware of the existence of his little pocket diary. The diary, pictured above, measures only 10 cm by 7 cm. On some pages the writing is so small that it is quite hard to decipher. On other pages, the pencil writing has smudged and faded over the years. But mostly it is legible. The daily entries are necessarily brief, generally with some reference to the weather and then a summary of the activities of the day. They are both confronting and moving. There is constant reference to shelling, sniper fire and the booming of the big guns, to planes overhead, to deaths and funerals, but also to the little details of daily life.

The letters, on the other hand, are more fulsome, although they make little reference to the reality of the situation. There are only two letters from France, both dating from the first month of his time there, April 1916. In the first, he explains that the censorship is very strict and that they are hardly allowed to say anything in their letters home other than that they are well.



Captain Chaplain Joseph Lundie (standing) with two other chaplains in Egypt before embarking for France





‘We can only deal in generalities’, he wrote. The letters do however, contain fascinating anecdotes about aspects of his life in France and the lives of the people around them.

I didn’t know my grandfather; he died many years before I was born. My mother spoke rarely of him. I always had the impression from her that he was rather remote and that their life as a family was strict and very ‘presbyterian’. The diary and letters suggest to me a different person—a warm and caring person who had volunteered to provide what succour and support he could to the young men who had enlisted, and who, in his letters home and his diary entries, expressed his deep care and love for his family, the young men on the front-line and the members of his parish back home.

As I read and transcribed the diary and letters, I referred constantly to maps, trying to identify the places in France where my grandfather had been based. I was interested to learn more about what had happened to the 9th Battalion. The diary entries were often cryptic, referring to events that had resulted in numbers of dead and injured or to senior army officers and I wanted to know more about these—what had really happened and what role these various people played. Bean’s Official History as well as various other historical accounts became my research companions. I also decided that I would visit and see for myself the places which had been my grandfather’s ‘world’ for those months when he was in France.

Joseph Lundie embarked in Melbourne on HMAT (His Majesty’s Australian Transport) A64, *Demosthenes* on 16 July 1915, leaving behind his wife, Eva, and one-year old daughter (my aunt Margaret). He joined the Battalion in Egypt and then, as he states in his diary, was appointed on 8 January 1916 Chaplain to the Third Infantry Brigade of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). After several months in the desert, where the Battalion was recovering from the horrendous Gallipoli campaign and new reinforcements were being trained, they were transferred to France, landing in Marseille on 2 April. From Marseille, they travelled by train to their destination in northern France. As they travelled north along the Rhône Valley, the landscape was a continuing delight. ‘Lovely country, trees green, fruit trees in blossom, hills terraced with vines’, he wrote. They passed through Vienne, Macon, Dijon, then on to Saint-Cyr, St Germain-sur-Oise, Boulogne and Calais before turning back east to St Omer.

Three days after leaving Marseille, they de-trained at Godeswaerswede and marched about 10 km to Merris, not far from Armentières. They





were stationed in what was known as ‘the nursery’. The 3rd Brigade was part of the 1st Division which, together with the 2nd Division, made up 1 ANZAC on the Western Front. 2 ANZAC arrived on the Front three months later (Bean 1941, 299).

The ‘nursery’ was the Fleurbaix/Bois-Grenier section of the Front, a 15 km section that stretched from the River Lys, past Armentières to a point opposite Sugarloaf, a German-held strongpoint that jutted forward from their line and rose slightly above the surrounding landscape, near the village of Fromelles. The area had seen no serious fighting for a year and the British Expeditionary Forces used it as a ‘nursery’ where new formations could be introduced to trench warfare (Pedersen 2012, xxv).

For the first couple of weeks the Brigade was behind the front-line. Diary entries record the daily routine of buying goods for the mess, visiting the various billets where the men were housed and the occasional one-off event such as the distribution of metal helmets and training sessions for gas attacks.

Chaplain Lundie was interested to observe that the local people seemed to be getting on with their lives much as though the war wasn’t happening right around them. ‘It is strange to see the farmers working away in their fields as if there was no war going on’, he wrote in one letter. ‘They must be making a lot of money as we pay big prices for milk, butter, eggs and sometimes fowls. We paid 10 shillings² for a pair of fowls for yesterday’s dinner and it was worth it as a change from our normal fare’.³ His diary entries contained many observations that were not included in letters home—the funeral of a child, the destruction of the churches and other buildings in the villages, the balloons and aeroplanes they saw regularly, the constant cold and wet and the muddy roads.

On 18 April, they left for the trenches—a ten-mile walk over muddy roads and in cold sleet.

² The equivalent of \$47 in today’s money, using the RBA’s currency converter.

³ Letter dated 10 April 1916.





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Passed Sailly-sur-la-Lys, with its church all knocked about with shells and burned. Bivouacked in room riddled with bullets—looking glass, walls, door, windows—all smashed. At Le Doulieu, the church had been burned by the Germans before they left.

The following day they rose at 4 am and left at 4.30 for Rouge de Bout⁴, arriving at 5.30 am, where the 9th Battalion took over billets in farmhouses and cottages along the surrounding lanes. They were about two miles from the front line at this point. ‘Guns firing all around us’, he wrote. ‘Went for a walk, saw the weathercock house all riddled—roof nearly all shattered. 18 shells fell the day before near the weathercock ...’⁵

20 April. Woke about 6 am by shellfire from our guns. [...] German shelling began about 1 pm. C Company lost 25-50 men. Boy with leg shattered—bravery. Burial at 9.30 pm. Had to wait until near midnight—machine guns and rifle fire all round the line and plane lights. Very sad day. Father J and I buried men in same grave.

What had happened on that day? How had they lost so many men when they weren’t even at the front? The official record for that day confirmed that one officer, Lieutenant A. E. Fothergill, and twenty-four men had been killed and one medical officer and forty-eight others wounded (Bean 1941, 139). They had been caught by shellfire behind the lines. Both sides used this practice of shelling behind the lines. A number of men had taken shelter in a building, which had taken the full brunt of the shelling. Chaplain Lundie recorded, on the last pages of his little diary, the names of all those buried, together with their burial place—some of them in the common grave in what was called the 13th London cemetery and then others on the two following days in the

⁴ In spite of Rouge de Bout being referred to by Bean in his official history, it has not been possible to locate this place name on any current map.

⁵ Weather vanes were important as they indicated the direction of the wind and therefore the likelihood—or not—of gas attack.





Merville and Sailly cemeteries. The chaplains were required to provide detailed reports to the authorities in London so that the graves could be identified in the future.

21 April. [...] Heavy shell-fire all round us—see them bursting about 200 yards away. 101 shells fell in one place in two hours. Dust of red tiles like smoke. Marched out in pouring rain. Reached billets quite soaked and very cold. 22 April. Still raining and very cold. Went to C Company to have a chat with the men. Rode to cemetery to bury men. Went in motor to Merville where funerals took place. Saw some of our boys in the hospital. [...]

23 April (Sunday). Parade service in farm. Good attendance. Memorial service for Anzac men. Beautiful sunshine. [...] Rode on cycle to Sailly for funeral of Kent. Plenty of aeroplanes.

24 April. Beautiful morning. Sat outside writing letters. Censored letters all afternoon. Went for a walk with Dr Gibson. Twilight until eight o'clock, daybreak about 4 am.

A regular task for chaplains was censoring letters. It was critical that none of the men's letters home provided any details that might have been of use to the enemy. Indeed his own letters home were headed 'somewhere in northern France' and the place names in his diary are just initialised.

On the 25 April, Anzac Day, there was a special parade of the battalion, which was addressed by Brigadier MacLagan and General Plumer. MacLagan was the Commanding Officer of the Third Brigade. He had led the Brigade at Gallipoli. General Herbert Plumer was a British military man who was appointed Commanding Officer of the Second Army in 1915. He was a meticulous planner, cautious and popular among his men, even if he was not liked by Haig, the Commander in Chief of the British Expeditionary Forces.⁶

Chaplain Lundie records the presence of other top military brass—Major-General Walker and General White. Walker, like Plumer, was a British military man, who was appointed Commander of the First Australian Division from 1916 to May 1918. General Cyril Brudenell White was Chief of Staff to Sir William Birdwood who was Commander of the AIF from October 1915 to March 1918.

⁶ www.firstworldwar.com/bio/plumer.htm, accessed March 2015.





Just two days later, on 27 April, the troops were reviewed by Sir Douglas Haig. He stopped and spoke to Chaplain Lundie, asking him if he had been at Gallipoli. He then said to him that they were both doing the same thing—‘striving to teach the men grit and endurance’. My grandfather seemed impressed by Haig. A ‘strong-looking character’, he wrote, who ‘knows his job’. History has, of course, judged Haig less kindly than my grandfather did after his brief meeting with him.

On 3 May, the Battalion moved up to the front line. They were just a mile back from the firing line. With the Battalion now in the front line, diary entries record visits to the trenches, to the different companies and nearby battalions, often in the company of medical officers or another chaplain, services held, guns roaring and the continual presence of planes overhead. Aeroplane duels were a regular occurrence and on 4 May, Chaplain Lundie saw one hit nearby and two German planes brought down. There were also trips to the hospital located in Estaires to visit the injured. To get there he would either walk or go by bicycle, crossing the Lys river by barge. On one such visit, a ‘plane dropped two bombs, one fell 30–40 yards from me in a ploughed field. Clouds very low and could hear sharp whistle before it fell’.

21 May (Sunday). At 12.30 am M.O.⁷ called to trenches. Went with him. Hamilton badly injured with bomb. Returned under fire at 4 am. Had services with platoons in reserve. Buried Private Dalton, a sniper spattering bullets around our boots.

22 May. Buried (name illegible), shot through the head. Wrote Mrs Hamilton about her husband’s wounds. Heavy bombardment by our guns. Germans replying. [...] Swallows’ nest in Headquarters’ billet and sparrows’ nest in our dining room.

Death was all around them, but the little details of nature—nests heralding spring and new life—provided welcome relief from the relentless shelling and firing and the tragedy of lost lives, the funerals and the correspondence with parents or wives.

One day, when he visited the trenches, he was able to see the German trenches. No-man’s land was anything from 70 to 450 metres wide in this area. The trenches were not really dug into the ground. The water table was

⁷ Medical Officer.



On the left is a photograph of the remains of the shelled barn at Cordonnerie Farm where George and his men were billeted. Twenty five men lost their lives and 49 were wounded, during the attack by the Germans. A postcard describing the events is on page 87.

too high to allow this to happen. So the front line was really a breastwork⁸ of earth-filled sandbags. In this area the support line was generally 70–90 metres back, supposedly far enough back to prevent both lines being bombarded simultaneously. The reserve line was then another 450 metres behind that. Communication trenches, often called ‘avenues’, spaced about 230 metres apart, led to the front-line system (Pedersen 2012, 1).

Battalion headquarters were generally in sandbag shelters 600–800 metres back from the front line on one of the main avenues of communication. The battalion commander, senior major, adjutant, medical officer, signal and intelligence officers, as well as runners were quartered there. Sometimes the

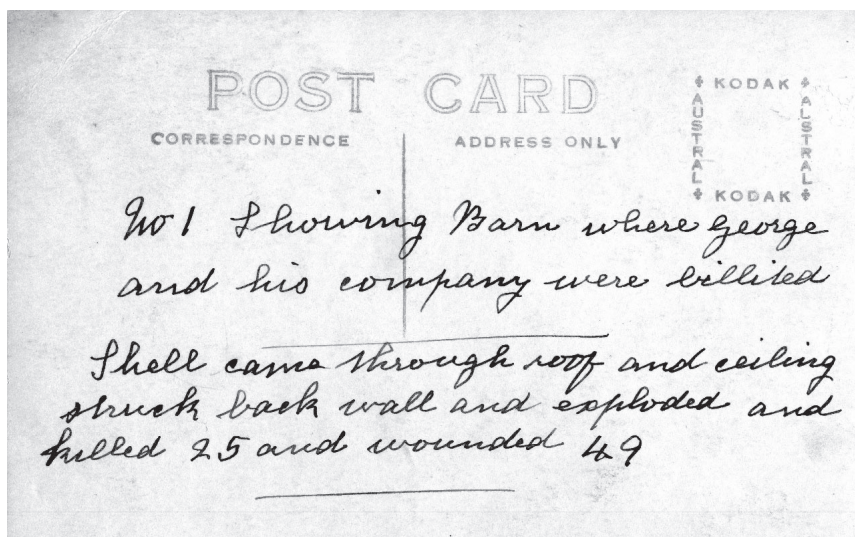
⁸ Above-ground trenches.





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chaplains were quartered there, other times with the brigade staff (Bean 1941, 80). From his diary entries, it would seem that Chaplain Lundie was quartered with the battalion staff. Each brigade had four chaplains: two Anglicans, one Catholic and one other Protestant denomination. Although chaplains were generally attached to a battalion, as Joseph Lundie was to the Ninth, they were expected to administer to all their denominational adherents across the brigade (Gladwin 2013, 34).

Initially on the Western Front, chaplains were not allowed 'up the line'. This was, however, relaxed when the commanders recognised the value of the chaplains in sustaining the morale of the soldiers when they were in the front line. Clearly, Chaplain Lundie was not prevented from going forward and indeed did so regularly.

On Monday 29 May, the doctor was called to the trenches at 1 am. 'Walker shot through the thigh', reads the diary. They waited for 'stand to' and then returned at 4 am. In the trenches 'stand to arms' was just before dawn; after an hour the order to 'stand-down' was given. Similarly at dusk.

On 30 May, Chaplain Lundie visited the trenches of B and C companies, returning after 1 pm.

Shelling from Germans began before reached dug-out and continued for 2 hours. At 8 pm tremendous artillery bombardment





on extreme right of 11th Battalion. Shells bursting over parapets. Looked like general attack. A German raiding party came over but driven back by 10 pm. Very few casualties. Townson killed by machine gun at parapet.

In fact on that day, the 9th and 11th Battalions lost 131 men when the Germans struck at Cordonnerie Farm, 3 km from Bridoux. The 9th Battalion's losses were small compared with those of the 11th, which lost 111 killed or wounded and six unaccounted for (Pedersen 2012, 3 and Bean 1941, 212).

They awoke to a hazy morning the following day with a taube⁹ overhead that was driven away by allied forces' planes. Chaplain Lundie buried Townson in Rue-du-Bois cemetery and visited the trenches of C and D companies. 'Wrote a short note to Eva and enclosed some buttercups and daisies. Shells falling very near our billet', he recorded.

The diary entries for the first week of June continue in a similar vein. The references to heavy shelling, casualties and funerals were constant. There were occasional 'quiet' days, but for the most part, the shelling and artillery attacks rarely let up. Planes were a permanent presence and from time to time there were gas attacks. He regularly visited the troops in the trenches and dug-outs of the men, recording some of the names the troops had given them: 'Home for Waifs and Strays', 'Abode of Rats', 'The Vicarage', 'Rest of the Weary'.

On 6 June, they were moved back to the reserve line to give the men a rest. They were stationed at Rouge de Bout. 'Quiet out here after the firing line', he wrote. But there was no escape from the shelling and firing. As he went to the Rue-du-Bois cemetery at 10 pm one night, to bury a man, there were bullets whizzing overhead. Shells fell in the nearby fields and bullets hit the road, as he rode around the billets. Gas alarms during the night meant getting up and dressed with gas mask on. On one night the gas passed about half a mile below them. 'Leaves of pea wilted by gas, one child poisoned, several people sick', he wrote.

Deaths of men he knew were always recorded in his diary and on 19 June it was Captain Arthur Warren, formerly a school teacher in Ipswich, who had been shot dead in no-man's land, when he was returning from a preliminary patrol prior to a major raid (Harvey 1941, 115). Two days later

⁹ A taube was a German monoplane, used primarily for observation purposes.





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Chaplain Lundie wrote to Captain Warren's mother, as he had to so many others. The funerals were becoming more frequent.

But as June was coming to an end, so too was his posting. He was to be relieved and had leave to go to England and Ireland (where he had been born and educated) and thence to return to Australia. He visited various companies to say farewell and then on his last Sunday in France, he rode out to A Company where he held a service. The Captain gave three cheers for the 'padre'.

On 26 June, Chaplain Lundie left Rouge de Bout at 3 am and was driven to Steenwerck. From there he took the train to Boulogne and then crossed the Channel—'a calm crossing accompanied by a destroyer'.

His had not been a long tour of duty. He was relieved to be leaving, but would have been sad to have been leaving behind his 'Toowoomba boys', knowing what lay ahead for them. In one letter home he asked about 'the St Stephen's folk [his parish in Toowoomba].

Tell them I often think of them and pray for them as I am sure they do for me and all our dear lads. Glad to see about the opening of the Honour Board. I am afraid a good many of them will never see Toowoomba again as the fighting here is going to be very severe' (letter of 10 April 1916).

Apart from this one reference, his letters focussed on the positive. The trees were covered in blossom, the fields were full of daisies and yellow dandelion flowers and the birds were singing peacefully, he wrote, but above it all he could hear the 'growling of the cannon'. It reminds one of the old hymn, 'where every prospect is pleasing and only man is vile' (letter of 28 April 1916).

Joseph Lundie arrived back in Australia on board *The Marathon*, on 24 September 1916. He had been away for 15 months. For those he left behind in France, the ensuing months and years were to take a devastating toll. Between April and June, the months when he had been with them, the 1st, 2nd and 4th Australian Divisions—the 9th Battalion was part of the 1st Division—had suffered 2,384 casualties. By the latter part of this period, the 'nursery' had become bloody. The troops were conducting regular raids at night to try to divert attention from the build-up of troops further south on the Somme.





Chaplain Lundie's diary, with its record of constant sniping, artillery fire and shelling bombardments, is corroborated by official records (Bean 1941, 284).

In early July, the 9th Battalion was transferred to Pozières, where it took part in the Somme offensive. This Anglo-French offensive had been in planning for some time. It was an attack on a 35-kilometre front by thirteen British and French divisions operating north and south of the Somme River. The attack began on 1 July 1916 and, while meeting with considerable success in the southern region, was a comparative failure in the portion of the line opposite Bapaume, a town which was one of the final objectives.

By successive attacks, however, the British advanced their line to a position in front of Pozières, a village on the Albert–Bapaume road, on a height commanding the surrounding country in all directions. The next step was to take Pozières which, together with Thiepval to its north-west, was holding up the left flank of the allied advance towards Bapaume. Three attempts to capture the village had failed and the 1st Australian Division was selected for a further attempt, while the British divisions made an advance on either flank (Case Study, The Scrivener Family, Australian War Memorial website).

Within just a few days, the Battalion lost seventeen officers and 299 men. The entire 1st Division sustained 5,285 casualties (Bean 1941, 593). Pozières¹⁰ had been obliterated. As the men of the 1st Division left the battlefield, to be replaced by the 2nd Division, they 'looked like men who had been in Hell', wrote Sergeant Edgar Rule of the 14th Battalion. 'Each man looked drawn and haggard, and so dazed they seemed to be walking in a dream, and their eyes looked glassy and starey.' (Quoted by Bean 1941, 599). The men of the 9th Battalion had never experienced an artillery barrage like this.

I visited the Western Front in September 2014, going to the places my grandfather mentioned in his diary. It is a flat featureless landscape. The

¹⁰ In 1922, Prime Minister Hughes suggested that Brisbane 'adopt' Pozières. Perhaps the reason this did not proceed was there was already a connection with Pozières in Queensland, with one of the soldier settlements on the Darling Downs named after Pozières, along a railway line that was called the Amiens line, that linked a small number of rural districts all named after battle sites in France—Bullecourt, Bapaume, Messine and others. The railway line was opened by Edward, Prince of Wales, in 1920.





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Church of St Vaast at Sailly, which my grandfather had seen all ‘knocked about with shells and burned’, has been rebuilt, like most of the towns and villages throughout this area. From Sailly we went on to Merville, which had been a billeting and hospital centre. There is a large cemetery in Merville and a number of the headstones carried the Australian badge of the rising sun. Amongst them were several men who had been with the 9th Battalion and who had died in April/May 1916. Some of these would have been originally buried by my grandfather.

As we continued along the narrow roads through this flat farming landscape towards Fromelles, it was easy to see how difficult and dangerous trench warfare would have been in this environment. There were ditches running alongside the roads to take the water run-off from the fields. There was no shelter other than that offered by trees. The salient known as Sugarloaf near Fromelles was nothing more than a rise of a few metres above the surrounding flatness. The battle of Fromelles, which took place here, on 19 July 1916, was the worst military disaster Australia has ever suffered. The Fifth Division had arrived in France in May, and had taken over this part of the line after the First Division left. It suffered 5,533 casualties, almost 2,000 of them killed in action, for not an inch of land gained. From their position on slightly higher ground and their machine gun emplacements in the Sugarloaf salient, the Germans were able to direct flanking fire and grazing fire (where the fire does not rise above the height of a standing man) against the advancing Australian and British troops. The following day, after the attack had been called off, no-man’s land, where we were now standing, was a scene of unspeakable horror, mutilated bodies lying everywhere. One witness described the scene in the Australian line afterwards as worse than ‘the stock of a thousand butcher-shops’ (Pedersen 2008).

We visited Rue Pétillon cemeteries and VC Corner cemeteries, both smaller than the cemetery at Merville. This landscape, with its criss-crossing of narrow departmental roads, is itself a cemetery, said our guide. It was fought over throughout the Great War and whilst there are many thousands of soldiers buried in cemeteries and common graves, there are equally many thousands more buried in the fields where they fell. The ties that bind Australia and France are bathed in the blood of those thousands of soldiers who died here on the Western Front.

On his return from the Front my grandfather spoke publicly about the need for reinforcements to be sent to the Front. The numbers of dead





and wounded were beginning to tell on morale back home and there was a serious decline in the number of volunteers. The Labor Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, realised that volunteers were not going to fulfil the numbers required to maintain the Australian divisions. Australia's Defence Act of 1903 and 1904 already provided for men between 18 and 60 to be called up in time of war and in 1911 compulsory military training was introduced for all. However, these men could not be required to serve overseas. Hughes had visited the Western Front and believed that it was a moral duty for all eligible men to serve. He was also under pressure from the British Government to maintain five divisions overseas; to do so Australia needed 5,000 men to sign up each month.

Hughes knew he didn't have the numbers in the Senate to pass an amendment to the Defence Act and so he decided to take the issue to the people in a referendum. The issue was bitterly contested. Most of Hughes' own Labor Party colleagues opposed conscription. This was an issue which divided Australian society on religious, political and social lines. There was a strong peace movement in Australia and many in the trade union movement felt that this was a war of capitalist interests. Others objected on the grounds that it was England's war, not Australia's. The fighting soldiers themselves had mixed feelings about conscription: some didn't want to be joined by those who were 'lily-livered', others thought of their brothers and others at home whom they didn't wish to draw in. Many took the line that they would not compel men to endure what they had been through themselves, whilst others believed that 'it was unfair that shirkers were not bearing their fair share' (Henderson 1919, 84; Ergo State Library of Victoria).

'Why all this talk about conscription', the Reverend Lundie asked. 'Are you going to leave those fellows in the lurch? Are you going to raise the white flag?' He talked about how lucky Australia was not to have fighting on our soil and spoke of the ruined homes and villages he had seen in France, but that did not mean we should not be prepared to be in this war 'right to the bitter end, no matter how long it will take. [...] If you could only see what I have seen you would have the same feeling as I have. We are going to win, but remember that it is going to be a hard fight and it will be a long fight and that it will be a costly fight' (*Brisbane Courier*, 19 October 1916).

The referendum was held on 28 October and the proposal was narrowly defeated, 51% to 49%, partly because it was rejected by a majority of serving soldiers. The issue split the nation, including the Labor Party, and





Hughes took his supporters to join with the Opposition in a new break-away party, the Nationalist Party. The following year, as enlistments continued to decline, and Britain was asking for a sixth Australian division, Hughes put a modified proposal to the people. Once again, the issue divided the nation and it was defeated, this time by a slightly larger majority than in the previous year. Again, most of the troops voted against conscription.¹¹

My grandfather must have been disappointed that the lack of volunteers had meant that conscription was deemed necessary to raise the numbers of troops. In urging people to vote in favour of it, he drew on his sense of fairness and obligation to the men who were there—and indeed to the memory of those who had already lost their lives. To him, this was a moral, not political, issue.

The Reverend Captain Joseph Lundie had been one of some 414 clergymen who had volunteered to accompany Australian troops into battle in this war, and one of the 70 Presbyterian ministers to have done so. The average age of the chaplains was between 30 and 40 (Gladwin 2013, 34–35). My grandfather was nearly 46 when he returned from his tour of duty, only two years short of the age limit for chaplains imposed by the army. Many chaplains served only for a year, but those who served longer believed it was important to do so as the effectiveness of a chaplain among the troops was cumulative and depended on how much time he spent with them (Report from Senior Chaplain Miles, AWM, cited in Gladwin 2013, 74).

In 1919, the Reverend Lundie was appointed Minister of the Presbyterian Church in Hamilton, NSW. In his first sermon there, he drew on his experience of the war when he spoke of the compassionate God. ‘Thousands of Australians had gone into the valley of death, but they did not suffer alone’, he said. This message of a compassionate religion, of comradeship and communion, is what had made a difference to the troops in the field.

The role of the chaplains must never have been easy. They were essentially men of peace, but were part of a military machine that was relentlessly killing and maiming people. The horror of what was happening did not make Chaplain Lundie waver in his faith; it remained a source of strength and he did his best to share this with the men around him. The Anglican chaplain

¹¹ State Library of NSW, <https://ww1.sl.nsw.gov.au/stories/australias-conscription-debate>.





Reverend Kenneth Henderson wrote about the chaplains' role when tending to the wounded and dying in the casualty clearing stations and the hospitals:

We do all we can to catch their scattered senses as they hurry past on their lonely journey: to awaken them to the love of God that is calling them [...]. (Henderson 1919, 39)

Another chaplain, Reverend Gerard Tucker, who later went on to establish the Brotherhood of St Laurence, wrote in his letters home to his mother of his experience in the casualty clearing stations, following the battle of Messine in June 1917:

Life is one long round of visiting the dying and burying the dead—no time even to write to the mourners; that will come later. Our success has been great, but all success means sacrifice. We see the sacrifice here, but oh, the heroism. (Tucker 1919, 141)

Historian Bill Gammage studied the diaries and letters of some 1000 Australians who fought in the Great War. He noted in his preface to *The Broken Years* that there were three things the diggers did not write about: religion, politics and sex, leading him to conclude that:

[...] the average Australian soldier was not religious. He was not a keen churchman: he avoided church parades, or if he could not avoid them he tended to show sudden enthusiasm for whichever denomination worshipped within easy marching distance. He distrusted chaplains, and sometimes detested them, because he was an Australian, and because they were officers, enjoying the privileges of leaders but not the concomitant risks and responsibilities of battle. (Gammage 2010, xv)

Other evidence suggests, however, that there was a broad base of religion among the men serving in the AIF. Many of them had amongst their personal effects Bibles, hymn books, prayer books and other religious material (Gladwin 2013, 77). And whilst they inevitably grew indifferent to the sight of death on the battlefield—it was the only way they could continue to function—they





were never indifferent to the burial of the dead, revealing ‘a deep instinct that burial made some sort of spiritual difference’ (Henderson 1919, 78-80).

The chaplain’s role was essentially one of spiritual succour. Sectarianism had no place on the battlefield, as Chaplain Lundie himself wrote in one of his letters when he spoke of the futility of some chaplains insisting on being able to hold their own denominational services. There was no place for evangelical enthusiasm and the battlefield was no place for recruiting souls. ‘The padre’, wrote Kenneth Henderson, Chaplain of the 12th Infantry Brigade, ‘being the only unofficial element in a very official world, is used as a sympathetic medium by all sorts and conditions of men’.

My grandfather’s diary provides a link across almost one hundred years to the daily life of a man of faith who, unlike the serving men, did not have to ‘go over the top’ but who shared so many of the other daily experiences of the troops—the cold and the mud, the constant falling of shells and snipers’ bullets, the insidious gas attacks, the horror of mangled bodies and pitiless death. The chaplains knew the unspeakable cost of this trench warfare, as they buried the dead night after night and wrote to the bereaved families back home. For them the war was not about glory or honour, nor was it about fighting for country or the Empire. Not once did Chaplain Lundie mention these terms in either his diary or his letters. It was, as he said himself on his return to Brisbane, about fighting for ‘peace with righteousness’ (*Brisbane Courier*, 1916). The role of the chaplains was to serve as a link, along with the nurses, ‘between the orderly civilised world of picnics, country walks, clean sheets and spirituality and the irrational debilitating world of fear, suffering, death and destruction’ (Linder 2000, 140).

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