

Underground Traces of the Great War at Naours: Some Australian Soldiers and Their Stories

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The underground caves of Naours in 2014 (photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap¹)

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How it all started

During the winter of 2014, a team of archaeologists working beneath Naours came across the most important concentration of military signatures from the Great War to be exposed on the Western Front. The original aim of the mission was to bring to light material evidence that would make possible the precise chronology of the site. Very quickly, from the first digs, the researchers found several coins, pottery fragments and a number of musket balls that were undeniable proof of human presence in the caves at the beginning of the seventeenth century during the troubled period of the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). Searching on the walls of the underground passages for possible inscriptions from that period of occupation, the archaeologists found, in a number of the rooms, on the walls of the corridors and occasionally in the most unlikely recesses, regimental inscriptions written by soldiers of the First World War. Sometimes whole expanses of wall were covered with these inscriptions.

There is evidence of repeated visits from troops in the sector, notably during the dreadful months of the battle of the Somme from July to November 1916. An inventory of the signatures has led to the identification of almost 3,200 inscriptions from the Great War, with the final number likely to be higher, as some of the underground areas are not currently accessible. Apart from a few names left by the North African *zouaves* in 1914 and 1915, the majority is made up of inscriptions left by soldiers of British divisions. English, Scottish, Irish, Canadians, New Zealanders, South Africans, Indians and, in 1918, American airlifted troops of the 7th and 148th Air Squadrons are all there. The most common are the signatures of Australian soldiers, with more than 2,200 recorded. They are nearly all done in the same way. The soldiers smoothed out a small surface with the blade of a knife, then wrote with a pencil or, more rarely, blue ink their identifying information. Thus we find family name, initials of their first names, their combat unit, often their battalion number and the state where they were born. Sometimes the date of their visit to the underground tunnels is added.

There is a sense of urgency and brevity in the signatures. One assumes they were done in just a few minutes. Archival research has made it possible to retrieve more than a dozen extracts from personal diaries of the Australians. These texts prove that all the inscriptions were made

when the soldiers were on excursions or recreational outings. These occasions were organised by and for the soldiers who were stationed in the sector, just a few kilometres from the front lines, during periods of rest or convalescence. The discovery of the caves, which are the focus of this study, allows us to follow the historical thread of tourism to the site, first discovered by the village priest in 1887, who was intent on using archaeology to reveal the attractions of his local community. The history of these soldiers who came to Naours for a few hours of relaxation offers an unusual lens on the war. Behind these inscriptions there are men, their life stories and destinies, their families and descendants.

An historical overview of the site

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the rural population of Picardy lived in a state of almost permanent insecurity. This led to the development of these networks of underground tunnels large enough to ensure the safe storage of food and property and indeed, to a certain extent, of people. During this period the Somme was a very desirable region because of its abundance of cereal crops and because it was a frontier zone just a day's ride from Paris. The ravages of war and economic crises were particularly evident from 1635 when France entered into the Thirty Years' War. Friendly or enemy troops were stationed in the area and stocked up on the resources of the local peasants.

The underground refuges were thus a defensive response by the villagers to survive the pillaging, violence and plundering that they experienced. A number of texts bear witness. In September 1597 Jean Vaultier wrote:

... at that time the king's quarters were at Poix, a very miserable part of the country at times of war, where the cruel peasants took refuge underground, only to emerge suddenly, with less pity for a man than for a chicken, such that, if you were not more numerous than them, you were done for.²

The underground caves of the Somme can be distinguished from other man-made caves by their overall structure. All networks identified by the

² Frédéric Carette, 'Souterrains et Paysans : apparences et réalités d'un fait d'histoire sociale, en Artois, Picardie et Cambrésis (XVIème et XVIIème siècles) (PhD thesis, EHESS, Paris, 2003).

name ‘muches’ (local dialect for underground caves) were constructed on one or several levels and based on narrow galleries that were more or less rectilinear, along which were dug rectangular rooms (sometimes doubles). This system was always present in a more or less complex system of branches. The network at Naours is particular in that it is structured around an epicentre which resembles old quarries from which a dozen branches were dug, without any apparent order, to form more or less individualised clusters of spaces. In the Picardy dialect ‘se mucher’ means to hide, a ‘muche’ is thereby a place where you can hide but also where you can hide goods. There are still families in the canton with the name Muchenbled, the origin of which means ‘a place to hide the wheat’.

Archival records³ indicate that the entry to the underground caves was blocked in 1796 and then re-opened in 1818 for stone quarrying. In 1822, the site was shut after the death of a stonemason. Nonetheless, a homeless family took up residence in one of the rooms near the main entrance. In 1832, they were forced to leave by a collapse which closed off the entrance definitively. A few older residents of the village retained some recollection of the existence of the caves. One old man told the local priest Danicourt that he used to do errands into the caves to a place that was called the Salt Store, where smugglers kept supplies. On Sunday 4 December 1887, the priest Danicourt spoke from the pulpit, calling on the parishioners to find and open up the entry to the caves. A team of workers led by two stonemasons came together. With the help of the knowledge of older residents, after eleven days of digging and clearing of debris, they found and opened up the entry.

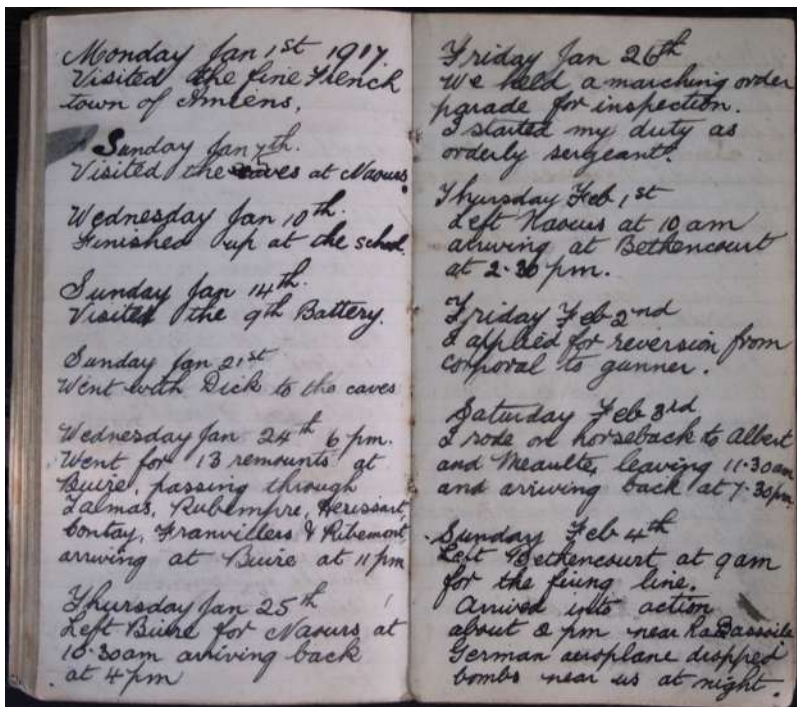
Strange visitors

The thousands of signatures, graffiti and inscriptions from the Great War, found on the walls of the underground passages of Naours, were done on the visits organised by and for the soldiers who were stationed in the sector. While no official archival record has been found which explains how the visits were organised, the personal diaries and letters of the soldiers describe the nature of these visits. These documents tell us that the soldiers came here to visit the site when they were billeted or were passing nearby the village of Naours.

³ Ernest Danicourt (Abbé), *Les souterrains-refuges de Naours ou Naours souterrain* (Amiens, 1906).

The words ‘visit’ or ‘visitor’ recur. English-speaking guides led these visits and transport shuttles seem to have been made available for the soldiers. The majority of the inscriptions are by Australians, which can be explained by the fact that many were stationed at Vignacourt, a small village situated just seven kilometres away. Vignacourt was an important rear base, notably a hospital and recuperation centre for wounded and convalescent soldiers, particularly Australians. The discovery of thousands of photographic plates in an old farm nearby was a primary source for Ross Coulthart’s *The Lost Diggers*, published in 2016.

One Australian soldier Leslie Escott wrote in his diary: ‘Sunday January 7, Visited the caves of Naours’. Just a couple of weeks later, on 24 January 1917, the Australian soldier Henry Stanley Davis noted in his diary: ‘Visited the souterrains (in French) of Naours’.



Extract from the diary of soldier Leslie Escott (private archive)

Other soldiers provide a few details of the historical context of the underground tunnels, which suggest that the guides who led these visits were aware to a certain extent of the history of the site. Thus Captain Patrick Ramkema, whose signature is on one of the underground passages, wrote in his diary on 14 July 1916: ‘Visited caves where refugees took shelter in time of revolution in the year 1451’.

Two young Australian soldiers, brothers Alexander and James Patterson, enlisted. Alec wrote to their mother on 23 July 1916 describing Naours: ‘There is an underground city here dug under a large hill. It is hundreds of years old & the people used to hide in it whenever France was invaded’. Lieutenant-Colonel Douglas Grey Marks writes in his diary for 23 and 24 July 1916: ‘Spent a very enjoyable afternoon with the “Doc” and the two school mistresses of Naours (. . .) Visited les Souterrains. These caves have [been] safe refuge during many wars.’

In his entry for July 1916, the Australian soldier W. J. Mundy referred to:

Naours noted for underground (. . .) A nice little river running through the outskirts of the town.(. . .) There is supposed to be an underground passage from there to Amiens 28 kilometres distant.(. . .) Underground caves at Naours. The entrance to them is on the North West side of the town. The Caves extend for about half a mile. There are about a dozen chambers, some race of people were [*sic*] supposed to live in them years ago. The walls are all worn very smooth to a height of about four feet.’

The Australian soldier William Fenwick Roscoe recorded what he believed was the date of the discovery of the caves: ‘April 10, At Flesselles, letter from Emma. Visit caves of Naours, a subterranean refuge discovered 1888⁴ underground village’.

Australian soldier Harry Stephen Blunt, recounted a great deal of information on the history of the site in his diary. For Friday 11 August 1916, he recorded:

Off 8am. Four of us went through Havernas to Flesselles to the canteen today. Lovely day. Hung on behind motor lorry up the steep hills. Well, we had a great time, bought up all sorts at canteen & rode out towards Naours; had tinned sausages, sauce, bread, tinned fruit for dinner under some trees.

⁴ The actual date of the discovery of the caves by Danicourt was 1887.

On again to Naours, a great spin down the hill. Here we cooled off & visited the Souterrains (caves). Entering the old wooden door with our guide it was terrifically cold. We walked for an hour & went through passages & rooms all dug out by people in the time of the Normans (850). These caves were made as hiding places for the people to take refuge in when attacked by brigands etc. The whole underground dugout is of a chalk stone with ridges or veins of flint running through it. They used to have their family's horses etc. all hidden in this place. An altar & communion place is also to be seen there. On the walls are hundreds of visitors' names, of course ours went on also. Amongst those I noticed was 'John Norton' of Sydney, the notorious paper proprietor. At the entrance, a large sandstone has the particulars etc showing dates & so on. The Mayeur De Naours 1220–1250, Louis XI 1475, Louis XII 1522, Ravages of the English 1575–1590, Henry IV at Doullens 1595–at Amiens 1597. I believe these places were burnt out & the bodies buried in these caves. The caves were closed & covered right over at entrance in 1825 & were not discovered until 1887 by a Mr Danicourt who tried to explore the position for years. Many shafts pierce through to the caves coming from underneath a windmill or house. These were used to trick the enemy.

Another Australian soldier, Adrien Henry Edmonds (whose name is amongst those in the underground passages), has a very enlightening account of his visit to the caves, as well as also mentioning John Norton and his niece. He wrote in his diary on 23 May 1916:

To 'les Souterrains' Naours. These historic excavations made about 850 years ago for protection of inhabitants during an invasion. The galleries are cut in the chalk. At intervals are dwelling rooms, stables and chapels. The deepest part of the 'Souterrains' is 100 feet below the surface. Chimneys have been cut in several places for ventilation and exit of smoke.

Used as refuge in all ages for outlaws, Huguenots, Royalists. This diagram has been inscribed in stone to show the plan of a chimney. The inscription states that the maisonette has been built over the opening to deceive the enemy.

In one of the large rooms is a monument commemorating the visit of the Archaeological Society from all parts of the world in 1897

Some Australian has scratched out the name of a professor and substituted his own. A mark of interest pointed out by the guide is the name of Johnny Norton scrawled in 1912 with his lady love Eva Pannet.

Finally, the evidence of the soldier Allan Alsop (who also inscribed his name on one of the underground walls) presents quite an interesting summary. In fact, his diary entry for 28 December 1916 mentions that they were to have visited the caves but there was no transport available. On 2 January, he is pleased that a group of ten were able to reach Naours. He too records the names of John Norton and Eva Pannett.

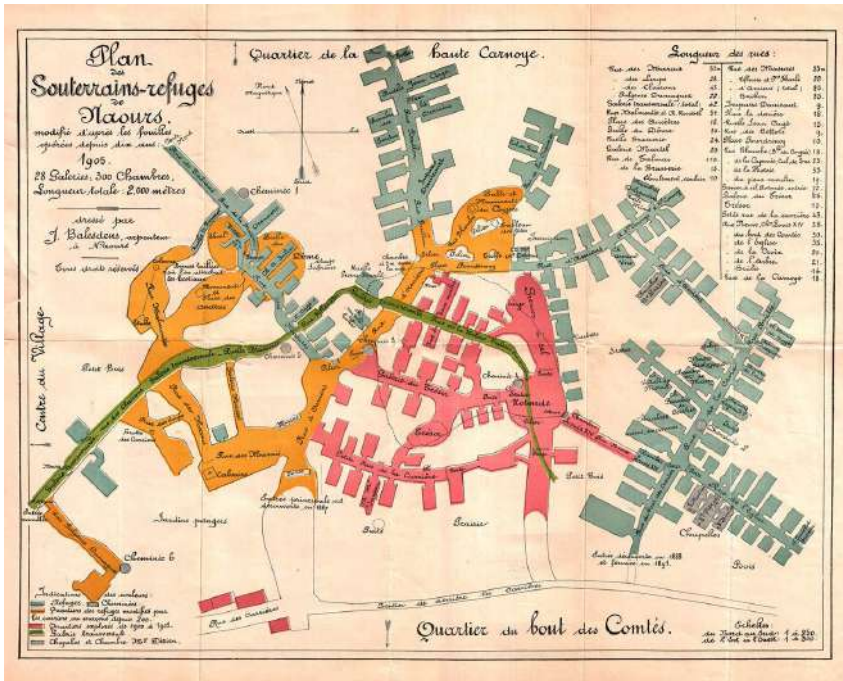
Thursday 28 December: Nothing to do. Were to have visited the caves but conveyance not available. . . .

2 January 1917: . . . In the afternoon a party of 10 of us went for a trip to the famous caves near Naours where the refugees used to hide in time of invasion. These caves contain about 300 rooms—one cave being ½ mile long. A whole division of troops with horses, artillery and all transport could be put into these caves. The names of John Norton & Eva Pannett are to be seen autographed on the stone erected just inside the entrance. Met with “Ginger” Smith from Mosman.

Memory in stone, memory underground

A large number of the inscriptions left by the Australians beneath Naours are like testaments, for many of these brave Australian soldiers were to die in the heavy clay fields of the Somme and the Pas-de-Calais. The desire to create a permanent record on stone of their presence and their existence is not a trivial act. When, with the point of a knife or a pencil, a person carves his name, his personal ID, his country, and sometimes his address, he is entrusting to the stone the responsibility of keeping his identity safe, but he is also asking that this be a visible and permanent record of his presence in the caves. When the soldiers emerged from the underground, they had left a part of themselves on the rock, a part which ultimately could never be taken by the pellets of the shrapnel shells. Wandering through the long underground galleries, you find yourself in an unknown and mysterious environment, dark and damp, silent and without echo. Here one no longer hears the fury of the battlefield. Here one whispers rather than shouts.

The underground inscriptions of Naours are an unusual primary source through which one can sense the influence of the group on the individual, through the imitation evident in their inscriptions and the loyalty expressed for their regiment and battalion. The inscriptions allow us to imagine the many backstories, individual and collective, alongside the personal and human dimension of these soldiers. Apart from their epigraphic interest, these archival remains have both historical and archaeological value.



Plan of the underground caves at the time of the Australian soldiers' visits
(Copyright Gilles Prilaux)

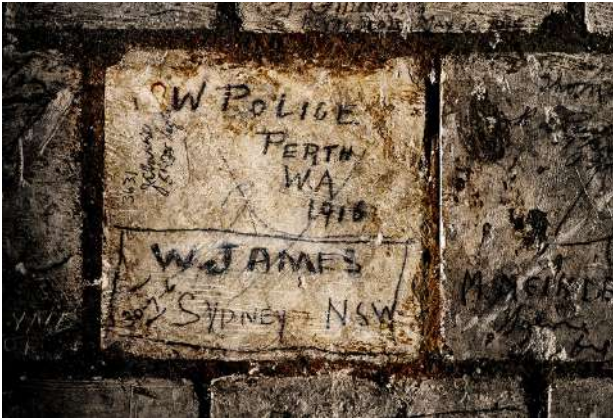
Portraits

Through my research, I have been able to identify with certainty nearly 500 Australian soldiers and to write their biographies. These biographies were sourced from the National Archives of Australia as well as from privately owned records, the latter allowing me to retrace the lives of these soldiers in greater detail. It is not possible to present my entire work in this article.

Nonetheless, I hope at some time in the near future, to be able to publish the full extent of this work in an Australian publication in order to return this part of its history to the nation which was the homeland of these young Diggers.

Following are brief portraits of some of the silent soldiers of Naours together with photographs of their inscriptions and of the soldiers themselves.

William POLICE no. 630



W. Police, Perth WA 1916 (Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap)



William Police

Constantin Polizo, who called himself William Police, was born on 1 July 1891 in Sandwell, South Australia. He was the eldest son of a Greek immigrant father, Treantafolas Polizo, from Skopoles Island. The Polizo family was one of the first families from Greece who emigrated to and settled in Australia. Upon enlistment, William joined the 16th Battalion. He fought in the Gallipoli campaign and was promoted to corporal in November 1915 and then to sergeant in March 1916. He disembarked in Marseilles on 9 June 1916. On 10 August 1916, whilst fighting at Wire Trench in Pozières, he was wounded in action suffering gunshot wounds to the leg and hand. On 11 April 1917, during the First Battle of Bullecourt, William was captured and taken prisoner by the Germans. During his capture he sustained a chest wound and was transferred to a German military hospital. He was then interned in a prisoner of war camp in Soltau. William returned to Australia on 16 June 1919.

Geoffrey Grant CARTER no. 2641



G. G. Carter Fremantle WA A-SOCUPI—KA (Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap) Geoffrey Carter

Geoffrey Grant Carter was born in Blackburn, England. He lived at 126 Queen Victoria Street, Fremantle, Western Australia. He was a draper and at the age of seventeen, he ran the Bullfinch branch of Carter & Co. He also had some success as director of the Geraldton branch. He enlisted on 17 June 1915, aged twenty-one, joining the 16th Battalion. Geoffrey served at Gallipoli for two months and was present during the evacuation, being one of the soldiers who remained until the very last day. He arrived in France on 12 June 1916 and was seriously wounded at the Battle of Pozières, receiving a gunshot wound to the spine causing complete paralysis. He was then transferred to the King George Hospital in London, in a serious condition. The doctors acknowledged the seriousness of his condition and Geoffrey was discharged to return to Australia on 16 October 1916. He died of his wounds on 29 March 1917.

Norman DOUGALL and Horace Frank Charles BAKER no. 2330

Norman Dougall was born in Melbourne on 1 January 1887. He enlisted on 14 January 1915 at the age of twenty-eight and joined the 11th Battalion. During the Gallipoli Campaign he was transferred to the 10th Battalion and commissioned and promoted to lieutenant in March 1917. Transferred to France, he was awarded the Military Cross for his actions near Louverval in April 1917. Lieutenant Dougall was killed in action on 6 May 1917 at the Second Battle of Bullecourt.

Charles Bean, the Official Australian War Historian, described the scene:

But shortly after the flamethrowers, the men of the 11th and 12th Battalion, shaken, regrouped.

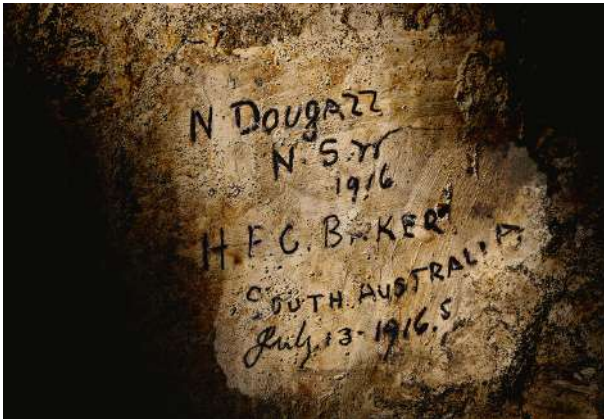
Captains Hallahan, Hemingway and Burgess of the 11th, and Lieutenant Lehman were wounded during the battle. Lieutenants Dougall and Wendt of the 10th and Lieutenant Daniel of the 11th were killed.

Norman is buried in Vaulx Australian Field Ambulance Cemetery (Pas De Calais 62).

Horace Frank Charles Baker was born in Glenelg, South Australia, on 17 March 1897. He lived in Glenelg, Holdfast Bay, and was a gardener. He enlisted on 22 March 1915 at the age of eighteen. He joined the 10th Battalion and participated in the Gallipoli Campaign. He disembarked at Marseilles in April 1916 and was promoted to lance-corporal in the same month. He was killed in action near Pozières on 22 August 1916 at the age of nineteen. He has no known grave.



Horace Frank Charles Baker



N. Dougall NSW 1916 H. F. C. Baker South Australia July 13 1916 (Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap)
Norman Dougall (above right)

Henry James BROWNE no. 576



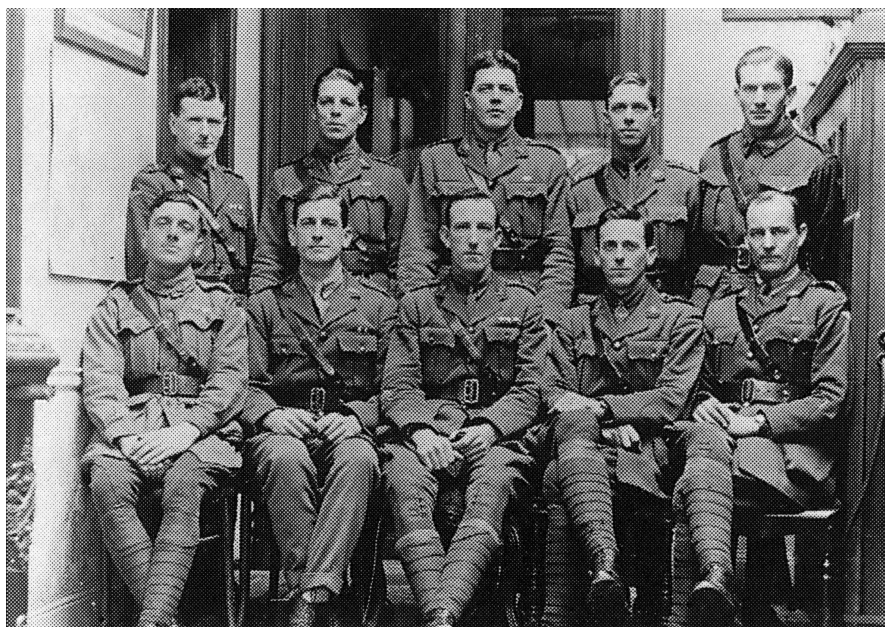
H. J. Browne (on right) during the battle of the Somme



Sig. H. J. Browne HQ 15th Battalion 4th Inf BDE AIF (Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap)

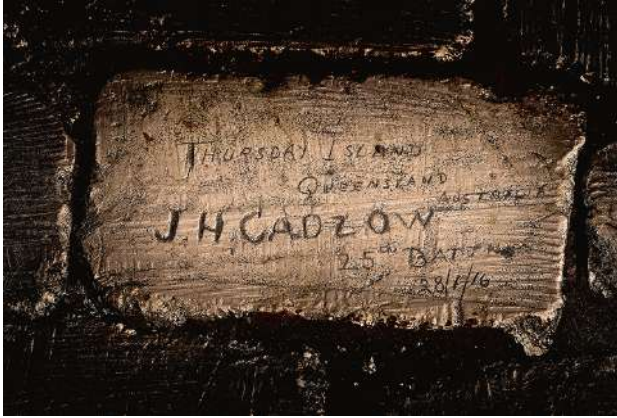
Henry James Browne, nicknamed 'Harry', was born in Red Hill, Brisbane, on 8 June 1891. He was a farm labourer and lived at Maryborough House, Turbot Street, Brisbane, Queensland. He enlisted on 18 September 1914, at the age of twenty-three. Harry joined the 15th Battalion in the 4th Brigade, which was commanded by Colonel John Monash and served at Gallipoli, and then on the Western Front as a signaller. He was awarded the Military Medal for his actions in restoring communications under fire, during operations north-west of Pozières. He was gassed in October 1917 and, as a result, was discharged on 10 October 1918.

James Hilton CADZOW no. 595



James Cadzow (seated, third from right) with Surviving Officers of the 25th Battalion

James Hilton Cadzow was single and lived on Thursday Island, Queensland where he worked as a miner. He enlisted in Enoggera, Queensland, on 15 March 1915 at the age of twenty-one. He was posted to the 25th Battalion in Queensland but was directed to a transport unit, due to a defective left eye. On 23 November 1918 he was promoted to lieutenant. He returned to Australia on 7 July 1919.



Thursday Island, Queensland, Australia J. H. Cadzow 25th Batt 28/1/16
(Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap)

Edward Percy CLOUT no. 3732



E. P. Clout 13Bn Balgownie (Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap)

Edward Percy Clout was born on 21 December 1893 in Camden, New South Wales. In December 1904 the Clout family left Camden for Balgownie. Edward Percy enlisted at the age of twenty-one on 16 August 1915 along with the entire Balgownie football team, which was quite common at the time. He arrived in Egypt in March 1916 and disembarked in Marseille in June 1916. A two-and-a half day train journey across France brought him to the front lines. In a letter dated 23 June, Edward wrote:

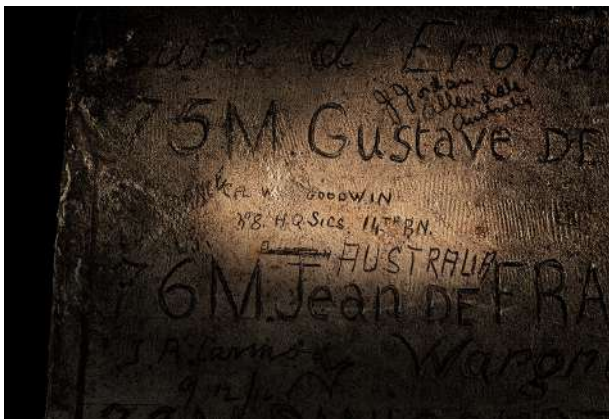
So we had a good view of the country. I think the south is the best choice.
We are now near the firing line. It's very pretty at night when you look at
flying shells in the stars.

He was killed in action north of Pozières on 11 August 1916 and is buried at
Courcelette British Cemetery (Somme 80).



Edward, centre back row (behind his mother)

William Wallis GOODWIN no. 8



Cpl W. W. Goodwin no. 8, HQ Sics 14th Bn (Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap) William Goodwin

William Wallis Goodwin lived at 41 Collins Place in Melbourne and was a steward. He enlisted on 1 October 1914, at the age of twenty-eight, and joined the 14th Battalion. For acts of courage and bravery he was recommended for the Military Medal on two occasions.

During the Battalion's tour of duty from 24th January 1917 to 9th February 1917, in the Gueudecourt Sector, this N.C.O. displayed great courage and devotion to duty. He was always at hand and with his assistants continually patrolled the telephone lines and kept up the telephone communications with the front line under most difficult circumstances. Many improvements were carried out to the Battalion's telephone system—a system of laddering was laid down which was a marked improvement on the previous system. This was carried out and supervised almost entirely by Corporal Goodwin, at great personal risk from the enemy's artillery and machine gun fire.

He was subsequently awarded the Military Medal for his actions at Pozières. William was killed in action on 29 March 1917, and is buried in Beugnâtre Communal Cemetery (Pas de Calais 62).

Frederick John JENKINS no. 375



F. J. Jenkins Bendigo (Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap)



F. J. Jenkins (left)

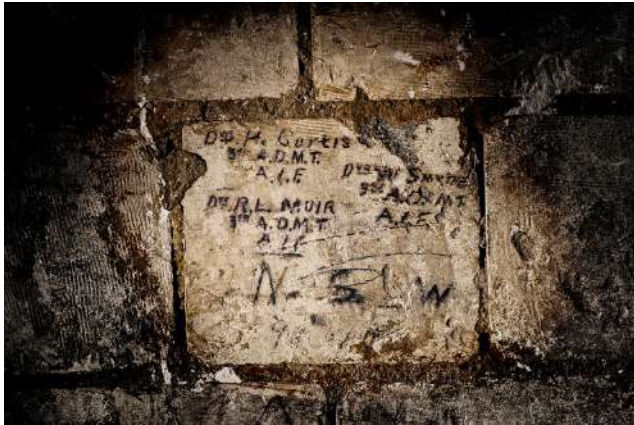
Frederick John Jenkins was born in June 1893 and lived in Kangaroo Flat, Bendigo, Victoria, where he worked as a schoolmaster. He enlisted on 23 July 1915, at the age of 22, and joined the 23rd Battalion. He was wounded in action on two occasions; on 28 July 1916 at Pozières and 23 April 1918

at Millencourt. He was promoted to lieutenant in November 1917 and received the Military Medal for his actions at Pozières. Jenkins was also awarded the Military Cross:

At the capture of Mont St Quentin on 1st September, 1918, he commanded a company in the first attack, and by his splendid leadership, courage, and initiative he was able to advance 600 yards in the face of a fierce machine-gun fire, capturing eighty prisoners and causing heavy enemy casualties. Later, he made a daring reconnaissance over very exposed ground, enabling the second attack to be launched at short notice. The success of the operation was mainly due to his magnificent example of devotion to duty.

He returned to Australia on 23 March 1919.

Robert Lewis MUIR no. 25677



Dvr R. L. Muir, 3rd ADMT AIF (Photograph: D. Bossut, Inrap)

Robert Lewis Muir lived in Fitzroy Terrace, Lagoon Street, Goulburn in New South Wales, and was a firefighter. He enlisted on 1 February 1916 at the age of twenty-two and served as a lorry driver with the 3rd and 5th Australian Motor Transport Companies. Robert returned to Australia in February 1919. Robert met his future wife in Pozières on the Somme. Her name was Jean Edwards and she came from a mining village in Wales. Robert and Jean were both affected by exposure to mustard gas, leaving them with lifelong after-effects as well as psychological fragility.



Driver R. L. Muir met his future wife Jean (seated) during the Battle of the Somme

Archéologie de Somme Patrimoine

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