

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN DIGGERS AND *POILUS*: FINDING THE HISTORY IN FAMILY HISTORY

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This article investigates the intersection between family history and its wider context. It aims to explore aspects of the interactions between French and Australian soldiers during the First World War. It also tells the story of my grandfather Joseph Georgelin, born in France, who moved to the Channel Islands, then to Australia, and then returned to France as a digger. Through the prism of family history research, I aim to explore how the story of one individual, my grandfather, is linked to the broader history of the war. Moreover, this exploration has led to the discovery of stories of great bravery, friendship and cooperation between the diggers and their French counterparts, the *poilus*, emblematic of the broader story of French-Australian relations during this period. This personal link to the history of the AIF in France led to a wider investigation of the Australians' experiences there and in particular the interactions between Australian and French soldiers in 1918. A continuing process, the attempt to discover details about the personal story has led to the discovery of the more public one. Ziino (2015, 126) has described this as the 'dialectical relationship between public and family stories of the war, as each continually constitutes the other.' I will outline the background to my family history research and the questions which this inspired. After giving some details and historical context of my grandfather's story, I will focus on the period of April to July 1918 and the stories of interactions between *poilus* and diggers at that time. Finally I will reflect on some further experiences of one 'Frenchman in the AIF'.

The family history context

In recent years, the approaching centenary of the First World War rekindled my long-held interest in family history and I found myself, along with thousands of other Australians, delving back into our personal and collective histories and investigating our links with this period which was so significant in Australian and world history. The project was also inspired by two other events: firstly inheriting a box of family archives from my mother; and secondly a family trip to France in 2010 which included retracing my



grandfather's steps on the Western Front. However, as I continued to delve into the story, more questions emerged. Unfortunately my grandfather left no diary, and as far as I can tell, no letters. So I began searching for missing pieces of the puzzle from other sources. Our precious family copy of *The History of the 14th Battalion* (Wanliss 1929), published in the decade after the war, was a good starting point.¹ The growing wealth of archival material being digitised and accessible on-line, both in Australia and France, provided further clues to the story.

The investigation thus led me to explore wider topics. My grandfather's army mate had reminisced about him to me when I was young. How his nickname was 'Froggy', how useful he was as an interpreter when they had time off in the French villages. Being his mate brought benefits when communicating with the locals! He also earned extra pay on the sea voyage home, after the war, as a French instructor in the shipboard education program. Starting with just the few known facts and anecdotes, I decided to investigate these elements of my grandfather's story.

Joseph's time on the Western Front coincided with a period when a significant amount of contact between the French and Australians was occurring. In early 1918, about 120,000 Australians were in France and Belgium (Burness 2008). Personal accounts describe the diggers' interactions with their French comrades as the Australians moved south to the Somme in the spring of 1918. How did his experience correspond with such accounts? As a French Australian, did 'having a foot in both camps', contribute to the relationships that developed between French and Australian soldiers? Was being a French speaker in the AIF a common or an unusual thing? I also wondered if the French Government knew where he was. Why didn't he join the French Army, and should he have done so? There was correspondence in his military records which shows that the French Consulate was trying to locate him after the war, but no indication as to why.

Another aspect of Joseph's story comes from his family's experiences. He had two cousins serving in the French army, Pierre and René Georgelin. Pierre was killed in action in 1915 but René survived and had a family. On my first trip to France I met René's widow, Caroline, and she told me Joseph and René had met while they were both serving on the Western Front. Joseph

¹ This unit diary, long out of print, has recently been digitised by the State Library of Victoria and is accessible online at <http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/128509>.



had told his cousin that Australia was a great place and he should consider migrating there. Years later, I read again the poignant and sobering message written on the back of René's photo 'My portrait on my return from hell, from the front if you prefer.'² The photo fascinated me, and I wondered where and how this meeting would have taken place, given the difficulties of communication and great movements of men to and from different areas. Was it planned or a chance meeting? How much opportunity was there for French and Australian soldiers to meet each other, and what would have been the nature of such encounters? This question led me to investigate the significant period in 1918 when French and Australian soldiers were in fact fighting alongside each other.

Some very good existing studies explore the interactions between the Aussies and the French civilians. In 2012, Ross Coulthart published *The Lost Diggers*, inspired by the discovery of a treasure trove of photographic plates in a farmhouse in Vignacourt.³ Gibson's *Behind the Front* (2014) examines the experiences of the British Army in France and Belgium and both positive and negative interactions with the local populations. Although written from the broader perspective of the British Army, it also includes some anecdotes which relate to the AIF's experiences, as well as those of the Canadians and New Zealanders.

Greenhalgh (2005) gives an extensive and informative account of the interactions on the government and command level and the evolution and development of the Franco-British Coalition. *Victory through Coalition* details the processes, politics and communications between the British and French leaders necessary for the successful functioning of this coalition. However, for the reasons outlined above it was the more personal interactions between the French and Australian soldiers which interested me, and I wanted to find out how this co-operation was experienced by the front-line Australian and French soldiers as they fought side-by-side. While researching I discovered various photos and documents dating from April, May and June 1918 which refer to the 'International Posts', zones of liaison between the French and Australian armies. I began investigating the records relating to both the French

² Mon portrait à mon retour de l'enfer, du front si tu aime [sic] mieux.

³ The photographs have been touring the country since 5th April 2014 in an exhibition sponsored by the Australian War Memorial. See <https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/remember-me/>.



and Australian units who were there. The comments and opinions expressed in French unit diaries and histories show that the French soldiers, by this time, were distinguishing *les Australiens* among the British and were particularly appreciative of their presence. Various Australian units were involved in this period of French-Australian co-operation, including my grandfather's unit, and their diaries include many comments about their French counterparts.

From France to Jersey to Australia

Joseph Georgelin was a native of Brittany. His family was from the small village of Ploeuc in the department of Côtes du Nord (now Côtes d'Armor) where his father was the miller. When he was young his family moved to Jersey in the Channel Islands. They were part of a large French population which settled there in the late nineteenth century. Economic migrants from Brittany and Normandy, escaping rural poverty in their own regions, they were drawn by the need for labour in Jersey's booming agricultural industries. By the early twentieth century, the French guest-workers had become a significant part of the island's economy and population. According to the 1901 census, the French made up at least 11% of the island's population, and a further 30% of Jersey's children had a French-born father (Ronayne 2014, 28). This growth in the French population was not without tension, as in 1900 there were anti-French riots in the town of St Helier, and in 1906 the Jersey government was prompted to commission a report, examining how to prevent the local population being swamped.

Joseph's ship left from Antwerp in December 1912. He arrived in Melbourne in February 1913, with 'just a shilling in his pocket' and quickly found work as a gardener at Billilla, a wealthy estate in Brighton. In some ways he was typical of many French migrants to Australia during this period. Analysis of migration and census records shows that most were unskilled or semi-skilled and were single young men. Roughly 48% of French nationals arriving between 1892 and 1914 belonged to the service, labourer or agricultural worker category (Stuer 1982, 155). Even though, according to Zeldin, 'unlike other European migrants, the French were not pushed to emigrate by poverty or unemployment' and were often professionals, he also describes typical French migrants as 'enterprising individuals, making their own choice' (1977, 90).



Stuer also concludes that French immigration was ‘mainly a movement of individuals unconnected with large settlement groups’, and the French ‘came to Australia “to do their own thing”, not to reproduce a French colony within a host society’ (1982, 145). Joseph’s profile corresponds neatly with Stuer’s comment.⁴ Joseph did retain his French and Jersey cultural identity throughout his life; however, he did not maintain links to the French community in Melbourne. In fact, his strongest sense of belonging to a community was shaped by his war experiences in the AIF and as with many returned soldiers, the battalion was his second family.

Joseph also had an unusual profile in that when he emigrated he was a French citizen, and came from a French community, but that community was based in the Channel Islands (a dependency of the British Crown which has its own unique cultural and linguistic traditions). In all decisions to migrate, there are push and pull factors. The question of what those factors were for Joseph remains to be answered. The French community in Jersey was well established and sizeable. Life there was relatively comfortable compared to the poverty of Brittany, but was difficult nonetheless. Also, as foreign-born residents, the French tenant farmers were not allowed to own land in Jersey. Economic factors may well have been part of the decision.

Another mysterious element of the story is a broken engagement: a young woman was left behind in Jersey, with a promise that he would send for her in due course. However, that woman, Clara, never made it to Australia and did not become my grandmother. Did he set off for Australia as a way out of the relationship? Or was it simply that war, history and distance intervened? Clara never married, and always remained close to the Georgelin family. So a romance, avoiding military service, economic reasons, and an adventurous spirit probably all combined in varying measures to inspire the decision.

Return to France

In 1916, just a few years after his arrival in Australia, Joseph enlisted in the AIF as an infantryman, in the 14th Battalion. When war was declared, the French population in Jersey had organised for mobilisation. Joseph’s younger brother

⁴ Stuer does acknowledge the various dynamic and important French community organisations which did exist in Australia at that time, such as the Alliance Française, the consulates, wool buyers, bankers and so on; but these were clearly not the working class French migrants like Joseph.

Jean joined his French unit. However, due to a knee injury during training, he did not serve at the front. Meanwhile, in Australia, Joseph Georgelin was probably faced with a dilemma. He had left Jersey without completing his military service and he would have been faced with harsh penalties if he returned. Initially at 5'4" Joseph would have been too short to join the AIF because of its height restrictions, but by 1916 these had been lowered. Certainly, encouragement to enlist was all around: *The Argus* of Saturday 26 August 1916 included appeals to both Australians and Frenchmen. 'Call for Men: Recruiting in Victoria' was printed alongside 'French For The Colours—All French citizens of Victoria born in Noumea [...] are requested to report immediately.' Enlistment in the AIF, which had been declining during the earlier months of 1916, peaked again during September to October.

The rise in volunteers at this time is attributed to the Australian government's 1916 Call to Arms appeal, as well as the anticipation of the first conscription referendum on 28 October 1916 (Beaumont 2013; Ziino 2010).

So, it was in the context of this spike that in October 1916 Joseph enlisted in the Australian Army, joining the infantry. According to his 1921 naturalisation papers, he spent three years in Brighton, but by the time he enlisted he was living and working at Moreland Park—the estate of the Dare family in what is now Coburg. The Dares' only son, Charles Dare, was an officer in the AIF and had commanded the 14th Battalion in Gallipoli and France before being invalided to desk duties



Joseph Georgelin (right) with his brothers (standing) and an unknown French soldier

in late 1916. So Joseph Georgelin enlisted in the 14th Battalion and, after initial training, sailed for Europe in December 1916. He arrived in England in February 1917 and spent the next few months training in Wiltshire.

He arrived at Le Havre in early June 1917. Returning as a soldier to Belgium and Northern France, he would have travelled through the same countryside where, just a few years before, he had boarded his ship to Australia. His service record shows that he was very similar to other Aussie soldiers in his relaxed view of regulations—during his first couple of weeks in France, he was fined a day's pay for being absent without leave from 8.30 pm until apprehended by the military police at 9.45. Having a bit too much fun in the estaminet and not wanting to return to camp was quite a common misdemeanour.

During the early part of 1917 the 14th Battalion had taken part in the disastrous battle of Bullecourt, where poor planning and leadership had resulted in appalling losses.⁵ Reinforcements, Joseph among them, were vital. Joseph took his place in D company, commanded by the famous, charismatic and decorated hero Captain Albert Jacka VC. The 14th played its part in many major battles during 1917–1918, among them Polygon Wood, Passchendaele, Hamel and Amiens.⁶ In October 1917 Joseph was wounded by a shell while in the front line near Passchendaele, but was well enough to rejoin his unit after three weeks of medical care. Space here does not permit a detailed presentation of his involvement, as I intend to examine the specific French-Australian connections of the 'International Post'.

Encounters between *Poilus* and Diggers, 1918: the 'International Post'

For a few months in 1918, the French and Australian armies co-operated and fought alongside each other. The Australians were stationed at the end of

⁵ Of the total number of officers killed in the 14th Battalion for the entire war, 25% were killed at Bullecourt (Wanliss 1929, p. 210). Official figures in February 1919 gave 14th Battalion deaths as 1049 for the whole war, 646 of them in France and Belgium. The Battalion's heaviest casualties in France were at Pozzières and Bullecourt. This does not include the ongoing toll of death and suffering which occurred after the war.

⁶ Wanliss 1929, Bean 1942, Carlyon 2006 and Beaumont 2013 provide good accounts of the battles.

the British section of the line, with the French army to their right. Existing histories provide us with details of the events and battles of this period, through individual experiences and official accounts. What has been less well documented is the liaison posts, referred to as ‘international posts’, which were established at the junction of the French and Australian armies. Several different units were involved on each side, as they took turns manning the front lines and taking rest behind the lines. Sometimes their experiences were dramatic and played a significant role in the outcomes of battles. The episode at Hangard Wood, described below, was one key example. At other times, during lulls in the fighting, diggers and *poilus* could interact and socialise in a somewhat more relaxed manner. The various diaries and journals of the units involved include comments and observations, mostly of a positive nature, which demonstrate the attitude of French and Australian soldiers towards each other. The language barrier was overcome both by official interpreters and bi-lingual soldiers on each side. The AIF included a wide range of French speakers, from many different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.⁷

In March 1918, the well-documented German spring offensive, Operation Michael, was launched. Australian troops stationed in Belgium were rushed south to help resist the German advance. Among these was Joseph Georgelin’s 14th Battalion. *The History of the 14th Battalion* describes the scene as Australians arrived at Bienvillers-aux-Bois, near Arras. En route they passed many fleeing French refugees. As they realised the Australians were ‘advancing rapidly to the rescue, they broke into loud cries: “Les Australiens! Vivent les Australiens! Vous les tiendrez !” (you will stop them)’ (Wanliss 1929, 266–267). The 14th Battalion took part in a successful counter attack at Hébuterne and held off the Germans during the following weeks. It would not arrive in the Villers-Bretonneux sector until later in April. Joseph’s participation in the international post did not begin until then. However, by early April, other Australian units were stationed at Hangard Wood near Villers-Bretonneux, alongside the French.

⁷ For information on French and Belgian born members of the AIF, sources include the ‘Mapping our Anzacs’ website, <http://discoveringanzacs.naa.gov.au/browse/places>, and De Pierre’s *Allies Forever / Alliés pour Toujours*.

Hangard Wood 9 April 1918: a call for help

The 19th and 20th Battalions from New South Wales and part of the 5th Brigade took part in fierce fighting along with British and French troops. On the extreme right of the British armies, the 20th Battalion was in liaison with the 165th French Infantry Regiment. On 9 April the French were holding the village of Hangard and, along with the Australians, had been subject to heavy bombardment. They feared further German attacks and sent a message to the 20th Battalion, asking for help.

I discovered in the archives of the Australian War Memorial a letter written by the commander of the French troops on the evening of 9 April 1918 and an accompanying document recounting the events of that night.⁸ The letter conveys the urgency and desperate nature of their call for help: ‘I implore you to lend us half a company, to help us to hold the village until the arrival of reinforcements [...] we are ordered to hold Hangard at all costs.’ Written in pencil, and hastily scrawled, the note was taken by ‘two French runners who were greatly distressed’ to the Australians on their immediate left. The message was read by Captain Morgan Jones, who ‘at once, took all the available men he had [...] No 7 Platoon, with Lewis guns, and set off, guided by the runners, to Hangard.’ Captain Morgan Jones and his men ‘remained with the French until daylight the following morning.’ The document continues: ‘the French Commander was especially thankful as his regiment had only come into this sector of the line the previous day and the *poilus* were naturally pleased at finding the Australians on their left.’

Captain Claude Morgan Jones was a journalist working for the *Sydney Evening News* when he enlisted in June 1915. A public school education in England had provided him with the ability to ‘speak and write French and have knowledge of German’ (NAA B2455). The 5th Brigade’s unit diary also gives a detailed chronology of the desperate events of that day and the importance of their continued liaison with the French (AWM4 23/5/34).

Bean also described the event: ‘small German parties penetrated the village and temporarily captured the cemetery east of it, but they were thrown out by a French counter-attack. Men of the 20th Battalion were greatly impressed with the spirit of the French infantry, who in the thick of

⁸ AWM / PR 90/091. To my knowledge, this note has not been referred to in published accounts of the battle.

the bombardment were continually jumping up to get a shot at the enemy' (1942, 514).

What of the French records? Sources now available online include the JMO—*Journal des Marches et Opérations*—and many unit histories. Both the JMO and the *Historique du 165^e régiment d'Infanterie* refer to help provided by a 'bataillon voisin anglais'. On this occasion the English speakers were regarded as generic 'Anglais' (*Historique du 165^e régiment* 1920, 12).

On 12 April, the battle for control of Hangard Wood continued, with Australians, British and French still sharing the front. Bean described the action of that day: 'The right flank post [...] was shared with the 165th French regiment of Infantry [...] Lieutenant Colyer, in charge of this post, maintained an intimate understanding of the French, whose officer he used to visit every morning. This morning, on his way back from that visit, Colyer was killed' (1942, 515). Reports of his death stated 'he was in the French lines at the time as an interpreter' (Red Cross report AWM 1DRL/0428). Lieutenant Colyer was a teacher who had completed an Arts degree at Sydney University, and had trained at the Signal School in Belgium in January 1918. One could assume that he had studied French at university, and perhaps even taught it in school. Having joined up as a private, his subsequent promotion through the ranks, training and appointment as interpreter show that he was a man of talent and intellect (NAA: B2455, COLYER H M).

Villers-Bretonneux

The loss and re-capture of Villers-Bretonneux on Anzac Day 1918 is a pivotal story of the Australians' experience on the Western Front. According to General Monash, it was after this that the demarcation line between the British and French Armies was reorganised, and fixed just south of Villers-Bretonneux. 'The new Fourth Army became the flank British Army in contact with the French. The Australian Corps became the south flank of that Army' (1920, 37). However Australian units had already been fighting alongside the French, as we have seen. Joseph's 14th Battalion reached Villers-Bretonneux on 28 April, taking its place to hold the line. The 14th Battalion chronicler Edgar Rule recorded: 'We came into contact with numbers of French soldiers, and a very fine lot they were' (1999, 115).

However, the feelings of mutual admiration were not always universal, nor without controversy. The 24 April 1918 report by liaison

officer Captain Renondeau expressed concern that feelings of resentment and suspicion towards the French on the part of the British High Command were trickling down to the ranks. This had resulted in ‘certain incidents’ to the point where, on 23 April at Vignacourt, the French and Australian troops had exchanged blows.⁹

Monument Wood 3 May 1918: ‘a joint attack’

After the loss and subsequent re-capture of Villers-Bretonneux on 24–25 April, the nearby areas of Hangard Wood and Monument Wood remained in German hands. The Australians were ordered to take Monument Wood and a joint attack was planned with the French on their right. The ‘magnificent French colonial division—the Moroccan’ (Bean 1942, 629) had arrived in the Villers-Bretonneux area on 26 April. The French units included the 8th Zouaves and the 3rd, 4th and 7th Tirailleurs.¹⁰ It seems initial impressions were not favourable as ‘the Australian guides allotted for leading up the 8th Zouaves were late, and although they afterwards met the column, the French commander reported that “they were of no help whatever, being completely ignorant as to the position of the elements to be relieved”’ (Bean 1942).

Over the next few days things improved as French, British and Australian commanders planned the next phase of the battle and soldiers took their positions. The 48th Battalion diary states that a liaison post was formed with the French to their right, and an officer sent to the French headquarters.

Bean describes the relations between the 48th Battalion and the nearby French: ‘The 48th remained quietly in Cachy Switch until the night of the operation. The hospitable French-Moroccans on its right flank kept inviting every Australian who came their way to share with them the bottles of wine of which they kept bringing sackfuls from Villers-Bretonneux’ (1942, 648). The 14th Battalion was also in the front line just to the north of the town and the *History* relates how in the evening the men would go into the

⁹ Service Historique de l’Armée de Terre, 17N/362. The resentment was attributed to Foch assuming supreme command of the Allies on the Western Front. For more on the context see Greenhalgh (2015, pp. 210–214).

¹⁰ Tirailleurs and Zouaves were troops of the French colonial army from North Africa. Zouaves were usually European, Tirailleurs units usually a mixture of French officers and native soldiers.

empty town, making the most of the comforts of civilisation which remained. Beds, bedding, food and even clothing were utilised to temporarily relieve the discomfort of sleeping in ‘verminous surroundings’ (Wanliss 1929, 278).

The history of the 3rd Tirailleurs describes their experience in the line with the Australians, taking their place beside them on 29 April. The Australians are described as ‘our valiant neighbours’ who had previously retaken the village of Villers-Bretonneux ‘during an audacious night attack’. Alongside the Australians, the 3rd Tirailleurs planned a joint attack on Monument Wood on 3 May 1918. During this battle, Charles Williams, a former French foreign legionnaire, was awarded the Croix de Guerre for courageously venturing out into no-man’s-land to bring in wounded under fire. Setting out in search of a wounded French officer, he cried ‘*Puisque c’est un officier français qui est tombé, c’est moi qui vais le rapporter* [sic].’¹¹ The 3rd Tirailleur’s history describes the good relations between their soldiers and the Australians:

Relationships marked by honesty, friendliness and good humour had been established between the Arabs and Kabyles of North Africa, and the soldiers from Queensland, Victoria, New South Wales and other parts of the Australian continent. There were joyous exchanges of cigarettes, tobacco, wine, jam and even the occasional pot of soup. During the lulls in the fighting, our native soldiers would get out their cards and our allies would join in and play. Words were rare, it is true, but gestures were enough to enable communication. And from this daily domestic business, under the shells, a real and genuine friendship was born. Australians and *tirailleurs*, placed on the ‘suture’ which joined the French and British armies.¹²

¹¹ As it is a French officer who has fallen, it’s I who will bring him in.

¹² Des relations pleines de franchise, de cordialité et de bonne humeur s’étaient établies dans les tranchées entre Arabes ou Kabyles de l’Afrique du Nord et les soldats de Queensland, de Victoria, de la Nouvelle-Galles du Sud ou autres lieux du continent australien. On échangeait joyeusement des cigarettes, du tabac, un peu de « pinard », des conserves, parfois même une gamelle de soupe. Aux heures d’accalmie, nos indigènes sortaient leurs cartes espagnoles, et nos alliés participaient à la partie. Les paroles étaient rares, il est vrai, mais on se comprenait par gestes, cela suffisait amplement. Et, de ce commerce aussi familial que journalier, sous les obus, naissait une réelle et sincère sympathie. Australiens et

On the night of May 13–14 the 14th Battalion, with D company on the right, found itself alongside French troops comprising the Colonial Moroccan Division, at Monument Wood near Villers-Bretonneux.

The entente cordiale was soon happily cemented. The ‘*Poste Internationale* [sic]’ established on the extreme left of the French, and the extreme right of the British Army, was jointly tenanted by a handful of French and 14th Battalion men. Several 14th men in this post enjoyed the unique experience of being the last man on the right flank of the British Army on the whole Western Front. The Zouaves liked our men... (Wanliss 1929, 280)

At this point, Joseph Georgelin’s D company made up the ‘handful of men enjoying this unique experience.’ It is fascinating to consider both the vast differences and the similarities between him and the Moroccan soldiers, and the inherent questions of identity. What did it mean to be French? A Breton, a member of the French community in Jersey, a member of the AIF on the one hand, French Colonial Troops on the other, part of the French army, francophone, yet many of them not born in France. It creates an interesting picture of the diversity of *la Francophonie*. A comparison of the two sets of colonial troops fighting side by side and the different political and social assumptions regarding their involvement would be interesting to explore further.

June 1918—Cordial relations and photo opportunities

In June, it was the turn of the 37th Battalion to share the front line alongside the French. The 37th Battalion was stationed along the Villers-Bretonneux–Amiens Road, holding a defensive line and preparing for a possible attack from the Germans. Plans were outlined for the counter-attack which would necessarily follow, detailing liaison with other units and methods of

tirailleurs placés à la « suture » des armées franco-britanniques.



communication required. At that time, an official war photographer captured the scene as the French and Australian lines connected.

June and July 1918—Monash on ‘Adjacent French Divisions’

On May 30 1918, General Monash was appointed commander of the unified Australian Corps. He writes that in the early part of June the Australians were ‘in immediate contact with General Toulorge’s 31st French Corps’ and that this ‘junction of the French and British Armies offered a tempting point of weakness’ to the Germans (Monash 1920, 42). The liaison and communication between the Australians and French continued to be crucial, as they remained prepared for any further attacks on Amiens.

During June and July, Monash realised that no further German offensives were likely and that the time was right for the allies to ‘seize the



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E02559

Australians of the 37th Battalion with French Colonial troops in the International Post before Monument Wood. AWM E02559



initiative' (1920, 69). After the success of the battle of Hamel on July 4, he began to plan the Amiens offensive. His feelings towards the French soldiers on his right, however, were not entirely positive. In spite of the scenes of hearty fraternisation and comradeship which had been features of the international posts, the differences of language and temperament between the two armies created 'a circumstance which troubled me sorely'. He explains that his hesitation about the French was due to 'an entirely different outlook and policy' (1920, 70–71).

July 1918—Official appreciation

After the victory at Hamel, Joseph Georgelin's 14th Battalion was present on 7 July when Clemenceau came to the Amiens area to thank the Australians for their victory and compliment them on their valour (Wanliss 1929, 310). Monash also talks of the widespread good will generated at the time. The French inhabitants of Amiens were 'highly elated at the victory' (1920, 63). The *fête nationale* was also approaching. On 14 July 1918 the *préfet* of the department of the Somme, Alfred Morain, presided over a 'humble but memorable repast' (64) in the deserted and devastated city, inviting about twenty representatives of the French and British armies, including Monash, as well as representatives of the city of Amiens.

The Australians took part in more of the fighting until November 1918, as the Germans were finally defeated. With the Allied victory now assured, the new challenge became the demobilisation and repatriation of the men. The creation of a new common purpose, a successful transition back to civilian life, was achieved through the AIF Education Service under the direction of General Monash.

Teaching French—The AIF Education Service

The AIF Education Service had been created in early 1918, inspired by the scheme already established by the Canadian Army. As the war drew to a close, it expanded and became a vital part of the demobilisation department. In preparation for civilian life, learning and teaching became a focus. It was a valuable element in the process of demobilisation for the thousands of Australians in France and Britain. The AIF Education Service provided a range of benefits to the soldiers, giving them a purpose, a useful way to



spend their time and the chance to learn new skills they could carry into civilian life. It also created possibilities to further strengthen ties with the local civilians, this time in the context of peace and reconstruction.

In early 1919, still in France, Joseph Georgelin was appointed to the AIF Education Service. After receiving some training, he was promoted to Temporary Corporal on 19 January and became a French instructor. He went on leave in early February, then spent March and April with the Education Service in France. The 14th Battalion records show that, during this period, the men were receiving French lessons while in France awaiting repatriation. The AIF counted many French speakers in its ranks, although they were a minority. The language skills of professionals, school-teachers, sons of the Australian French community, and immigrants from a variety of social backgrounds, could now be put to use in classrooms and on the troopships. Most returning troopships included French among the wide variety of classes taught on-board. The instructors were also a varied lot—one of them was a wool-buyer, another a butcher. A native command of the language seems to have been as relevant in choosing the instructors as any formal qualification.

Joseph returned to Australia on HMAT *Militiades*, leaving from Southampton on 30 April, and arriving in Australia on 19 June. On the return journey to Australia, he was one of three French instructors on his ship. Classes were taught three mornings per week, and the timetable and syllabus of classes is preserved in the Australian War Memorial's archives. As he was a gardener by profession and (to my knowledge) had no greater qualification for the job than being a native speaker, he must have found it helpful that textbooks were provided (from England) as well as instruction on which chapters to cover each session (AWM20 6444/1/2).

After the war—making a life in Australia

Even though Joseph had fought with the AIF, and had even voted in an election, in 1921 he was requested by the government to register as an alien. This probably prompted his decision to become a naturalised Australian citizen. His alien registration form is cancelled, with the word 'naturalised' written across it. He had clearly decided where his future lay. He was not political, but was patriotic. When World War II arrived, he enlisted again as a



member of the Reserve and was assigned to 'part-time duty'. On the enlistment papers, soldiers were asked to mention any special skills or abilities that they were able to contribute. He listed simply 'French'.

I have no evidence that the Australian army availed itself of his language skills during the Second World War, but being French could always be considered an asset. By 1951, Joseph was running a successful florist business and was a well-known local identity. A magazine article in *Woman's Day and Home*¹³ referred to him as 'Frenchman Joseph Georgelin' and one has the impression the epithet bestowed a certain positive image of style upon his business!

* * *

Researching family history is a winding path, with unexpected discoveries and trajectories that bring up new questions. I have followed the chronology of my grandfather's journey to Australia, the events, and what motivated him. But there is also a story of my own journey, starting with my affection for my gentle grandpa who taught me a few words of French when I was little. Later, when I was 18, I visited France with my parents. We went to the little village of Ploeuc and were thrilled to see the mill and cottage where Joseph was born. We walked through the cemetery and saw that Georgelin is a common name in that area. We met our French relatives and heard family history stories. A few years later I went back to Ploeuc and looked up the archives in the *mairie*. Bound copies were available going back to 1870. I asked the staff member where the earlier ones were. She led me to an ancient building next door, and up a winding staircase to a room in the tower. 'These are the older archives', she explained. The walls were full of shelves of yellowed dusty tomes, dating back to the 1600s. 'Here's the key: when you go out for lunch could you remember to lock the door?' And there I was, left alone with all that history. I loved it! Now the digital age has changed the nature of historical research, but my interest and passion in the subject continue to grow.

My grandfather's journey took him a long way from his roots in rural Brittany. Yet his life and values show that he continued the tradition of being close to the land, and growing things. I'm sure his profession helped him

¹³ *Woman's Day and Home* 19 Feb 1951 p. 11 (copy in possession of the author's family).

recover from the trauma of the war and establish a connection to his new country. I also think that his time in the AIF and the strong connections to his Aussie fellow soldiers would have strengthened his link to his new country and his identity as a French Australian.

Les Carlyon writes: 'One anecdote sometimes tells more about an event than boxes of official documents' (2006, 570). In examining the actions and feelings of the ordinary soldiers, it is interesting to ask to what extent they reflect official attitudes, and to what extent they help inform them. The goodwill and admiration expressed by the soldiers demonstrate the positive side of this evolving relationship, and there are many more examples to be found in diaries and personal accounts, and more stories to tell. The cementing of cordial relations at the most basic level is, I think, a fundamental part of the greater picture which is the huge landscape of French-Australian relations.

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