

# Diary double-up reveals new view of Digger's war

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A CHANCE discovery in an old East Brisbane house has restored a set of priceless heirlooms to their rightful owners and produced an 85-year-old mystery.

The mystery had its origins in 1915 when Digger Leslie Dunstan began a series of journals, written in tiny script, recounting his war experiences.

Over the years of his service he produced four of the journals, covering the years 1915 to 1918, all of which were handed down through his family after he died in 1952.

His grandson John Atherton, of Gympie, has always treasured the diaries, recognising them as holding a unique place in the histories of both his country and his family.

But what he didn't know was that there was another set of diaries his grandfather penned in France.

Those three diaries came to light when East Brisbane resident Shane Sakzewski found them in the bottom of a box of old books he had bought at a school fete years ago.

Knowing he had found something special, he contacted the Department of Veterans Affairs which had them transcribed — the tiny trench-inspired writing was barely legible after so many years.

Eventually, the department and Mr Sakzewski tracked down Mr Dunstan's descendants.

And then the family discovered their mystery.

Two of the newly found diaries were double-ups of the years 1917 and 1918, and they contained regular, emotive references to a woman called Bertha.

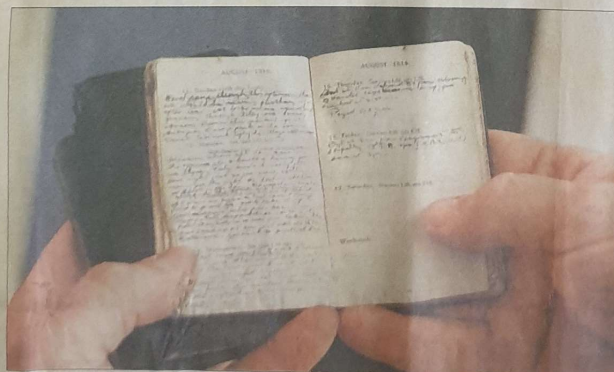
Mr Atherton said he was baffled and fascinated by the discovery.

"We have had four diaries covering 1915-1918 since my grandfather died in 1952," Mr Atherton said.

"The writing looks very similar. The army numbers, the names are all the same," Mr Atherton said of the new diaries.

As for Bertha: "My grandfather got married in 1921, but my grandmother's name was May," Mr Atherton said.

He said his grandfather was 19 years old when he enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces on April 24, 1915, the day before Australian and New Zealand forces landed at Gallipoli.



RIDDLE from the trenches... John Atherton and daughter Christine, 5, from Gympie, with one of the diaries of World War I Digger Les Dunstan, far left. The Department of Veterans Affairs had the diaries, left, transcribed, as the tiny trench-inspired writing was barely legible after so many years.

Pictures: Mark Cranitch