Private William Gepp Woolcock (MM)

April 30th, 1892 - March 30th, 1918

43rd Infantry Battalion - Australian Imperial Force

SN: 204



**2020 Premier's Anzac Spirit School Prize**

**Central Yorke School**

**Harrison Geater-Johnson**

***“...Your son was hit in the back. The enemy was shelling very heavily. I pulled your son in a gutter and dressed his wound …  Will's last words were, "Tell my comrades and my people I did my bit." Never were words more truly spoken.”***

John Medlin to Sarah Woolcock, in Longo (2018)

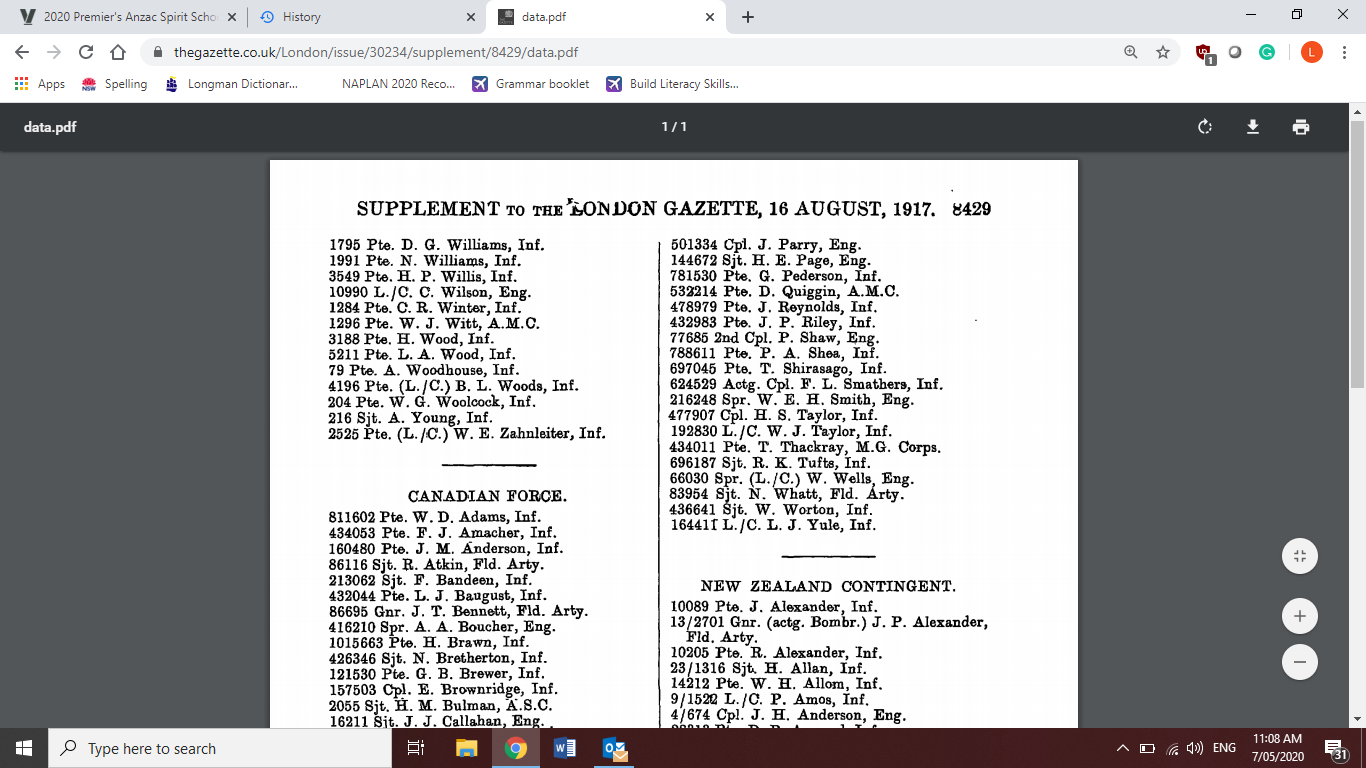
These were the last words of William Gepp Woolcock, spoken while succumbing to wounds received at the Somme in France. These words would provide little comfort to his family anxiously waiting on the home front for news and letters of his survival. Woolcock served as a stretcher-bearer and band member for the 43rd Battalion on the Western Front. Often when Australia commemorates World War I, the emphasis is placed on the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli and those who served in non-combatant roles. As a nation, we are transfixed by the birth of a fighting nation on the shores at Gallipoli and consequently, the heroics of the Western Front are often lost. Battles on the Western Front, specifically at Villers-Bretonneux, were where the war was won and Australian soldiers played a large part in winning the war in France and Belgium. This biography is an ode to Woolcock’s life and service for his country.

Woolcock was born on April 30th, 1892, in Adelaide to parents Sarah and Thomas Woolcock and was one of six children. In his early years, Woolcock lived with his parents at 739 Tin Street, Broken Hill and received his education at Broken Hill District School (Virtual War Memorial Australia, 2019). Upon leaving school he entered the local mining industry at North Mine Mill. William was renowned for his tireless work ethic and the physical exertion he gave to his job. He spent his spare time with his girlfriend, Ethel May, in Adelaide or at the shores of Wallaroo on the Yorke Peninsula. William and Ethel comforted each other and were planning to get married before the outbreak of World War I (R. Clark, personal communication, December 14, 2019).

Woolcock enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force at Kadina, Yorke Peninsula, on January 17th, 1916 at the age of 23 (National Archives of Australia, 2019). He was placed in the 43rd Infantry Battalion as a Private and would remain in this rank during his time at war. Woolcock received basic training in Morphettville with his “*small arms practice carried out in the sand hills behind the beaches at Brighton and Henley”* (Kearney & Cleary, 2018, p. 165). His battalion embarked the *HMAT A19 Afric* at Outer Harbour on June 9th, 1916 where he sailed for Southampton (National Archives of Australia, 2019). Woolcock trained in the facilities of the Lark Hill Camp, located on Salisbury Plain, where his battalion underwent further training (Kearney & Cleary, 2018). Woolcock spent his leisure in London sending letters and pictures to his beloved Ethel and close family members (R. Clark, personal communication, December 14, 2019). 

In November 1916, Woolcock was sent overseas to Marseilles, France, to serve on the Western Front. Woolcock’s discipline as a soldier was soon pulled into order as he was reprimanded twice in December by his Commanding Officer for failing to comply with good order and another for being drunk whilst on duty (National Archives of Australia, 2020). William was sentenced to fence posting for the next 60 days for the first offence, and spent 12 days awaiting trial for the second offence. He was proven guilty and had to face a total forfeiture of 72 days (National Archives of Australia, 2020).

When Woolcock returned to his battalion his duties involved a non-combatant role as a stretcher bearer. Additionally, he served within the 43rd Battalion Band where he played the trumpet. Bands were considered important and in 1916 each battalion or brigade was ordered to have their own. In the 9th Battalion, band members served dual roles as stretcher-bearers and it is likely the same applied to the 43rd Battalion. Bands were significant morale-boosters and entertained troops by playing hymns, playing songs at football matches and accompanying route marches (Cronk, 2017). Woolcock is pictured (back row, middle) with his fellow band mates in a post card he sent to his Auntie and Uncle (see above).

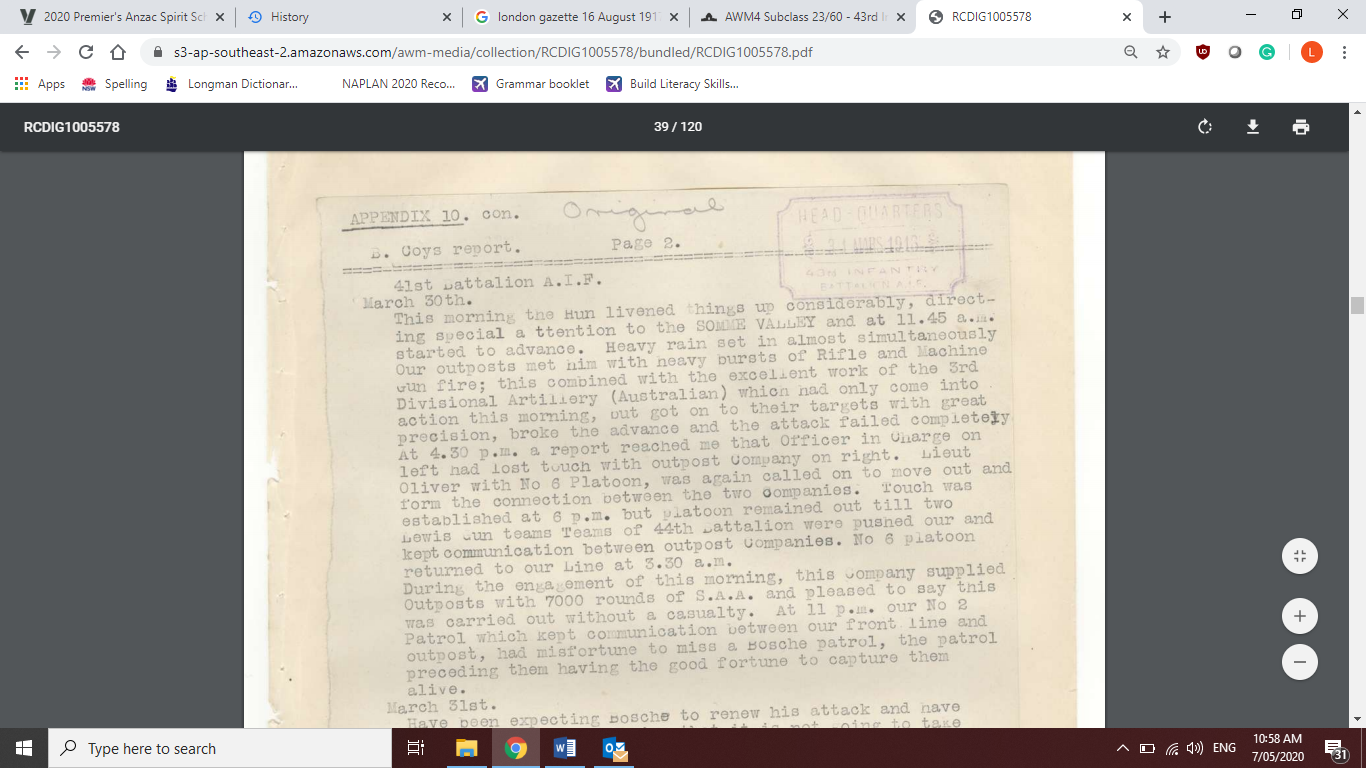
In June 1917, Woolcock served in Messines and Warneton in Belgium (Longo, 2018). It was during this time that Woolcock was awarded the Military Medal on July 3rd, 1917, though it is unknown what specific event earnt him this medal (National Archives of Australia, 2020; London Gazette, 1917).

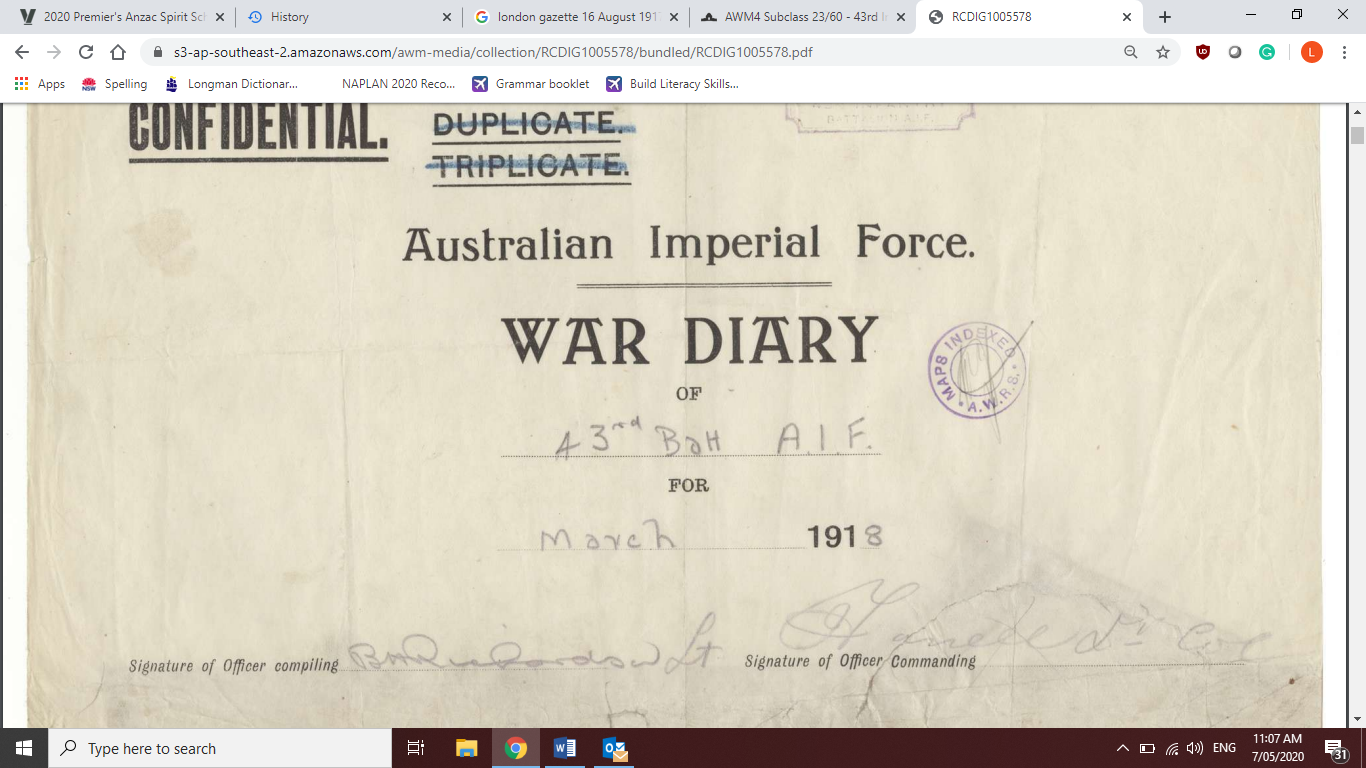
In October 1917, the Allies were optimistic that the war was drawing to a close, and the 43rd Battalion took part in the Third Battle of Ypres, involving action at Broodseinde and Peolcapelle (Australian War Memorial, 2020; Kearny & Cleary, 2018). Pronounced ‘Ieper’ by the Belgians, and also referred to as Passchendaele, Ypres symbolised sacrifice and the horrors of war (Australian War Memorial, 2018). It took stretcher-bearers four days to clear the field of wounded after the battle began, and it could take up to five hours to move the wounded to the nearest dressing station (New Zealand Government, 2020). During these battles, Woolcock waded through mud amidst shell fire and gas canisters to retrieve men who had laid in agony for days in the wintery conditions.

On the 29th of January 1918, Woolcock was sent back to England on leave, where he then spent his time in Scotland (R. Clark, personal communication, December 14th, 2019). The 43rd Battalion kept fit through playing football and Woolcock sent a picture of his Football Team to Ethel (see Appendix 1). During his time on leave, he spent his time sending letters to his beloved girlfriend Ethel (R. Clark, personal communication, December 14, 2019). In February, 1918, Woolcock re-joined the 43rd Infantry Battalion where he had to regain the trust from his Commanding Officer, however, this, unfortunately, would be a dreadful month for Woolcock, which would eventually lead to his fate.

One of many embroidered postcards William sent to Ethel “*with love*”. This was dated February 25th, 1918, and was possibly his last.

He had arrived at the infamous Somme Valley. On arrival, Woolcock and his battalion were responsible for patrolling the area and often courageously carried wounded soldiers from ‘no-man's land’ to safety. According to the Unit Diary, snow had fallen in early March making conditions for soldiers unpleasant (Australian Imperial Force, 1918). The Report by R.M.O for March 1918 noted that “*from the 26th to 31st March, the Battalion was in the line and for those 5 days all evacuations were due to battle casualties”* (Australian Imperial Force, 1918, p. 23). One of these evacuations would be for Woolcock himself.

The Official War Diary of the 43rd Battalion (see below) stated that on March 30th, 1918, “*the Hun livened things up considerably, directing special attention to the Somme Valley and at 11:45am started to advance”* (p. 39). The diary noted that there was heavy rain when fighting broke out, but the artillery “*got on to their targets with great precision, broke the advance and the attack failed considerably”* (Australian Imperial Force, 1918, p39).



Woolcock was stretchering a man to safety during this attack when he was fatally wounded by a shell blast. He was wounded twice in the abdomen and once in the back whilst carrying a wounded comrade out of no man’s land. He was in the vicinity of Sailly-le-Sec and died the following day. His comrade, John Medlin, was assisting him and wrote of the ordeal to his parents: *“The enemy was shelling very heavily. I pulled your son in a gutter and dressed his wound, and then carried him to a dressing station and got him away.”* (Medlin, 2018)

Photographs of William’s grave at Doullens Communal Cemetary were sent to his mother, Sarah. NOTE: It appears that he has two headstones: the image on the right shows the initial cross, potentially placed by his unit. The image on the left shows an additional cross possibly placed there by the War Graves Commission at the end of the war (D. Rafferty, personal communication, May 4th, 2020).

Despite reaching the 11th Field Ambulance within 15 minutes, William succumbed to his wounds at the No. 3 Canadian Stationary Hospital (National Archives of Australia, 2020). William was later buried at Doullens Communal Cemetery with 1360 other fallen comrades (Commonwealth War Graves Commission, 2020).

Woolcock’s 43rd Battalion would go on to play a large part in turning the war in the favour of the Allies. They halted the German Spring Offensive at Villers-Bretonneux in April 1918, and would continue to drive the Germans back to the Hindenburg Line by September 1918 (Australian War Memorial, 2020). This essentially sealed the fate of the Germans and led to the Armistice two months later.

After the death of William, William’s mother Sarah and Ethel would try their best to devote their lives to William. Sarah would devote many years of her life into recovering William’s belongings and documents from War. Sarah would consistently deliver letters, pleading to the Base Records Office to recover and forward the documents and belongings of William to her homestead in Broken Hill. When Ethel passed away in 1989, her Funeral Address noted the impact of war on her life:

*“The First World War erupted in 1914 and took the cream of the young men. The man that Aunty Ethel might have married was killed in that war and, like many another at that time, she cherished his memory and remained single for the rest of her life.”*

William Gepp Woolcock is commemorated on the Broken Hill War Memorial. (1529 words)

***“Stretcher-bearers faced an almost impossible task of carrying these men to regimental aid posts, dressing stations and sometimes the distant casualty clearing stations.”***

**New Zealand Government (2020)**

The soldiers who served Australia during World War I left Australia with the legacy of the Anzac Spirit, to which we embody as a nation to this day. Stretcher Bearers and members of military bands encompassed the virtues of mateship and perseverance as they served the needs of their comrades on a daily basis.

Whilst those on the front line engaged in combat, it was the stretcher-bearers who rescued badly wounded comrades – often those they knew – from no man’s land and took them to safety amidst gun fire and shelling. Woolcock would work in teams of four or eight to transport the wounded which would require teamwork and trust in your comrade. Enemy contact, including snipers, made the work of stretcher-bearers challenging and perilous. The terrain Woolcock had to endure made his task more difficult, and according to Kearney & Cleary (2017) “*hand carts and horse drawn carts were used when the terrain allowed, but rough or muddy ground meant all stretcher cases had to be carried”* (Kearney & Cleary, 2017, p. 282).

In the winter months stretcher-bearers worked through feet-sucking mud and shell-torn ground and navigating these obstacles was tiring and time-consuming. During the battles of Broodseinde and Poelcapelle, Woolcock worked in mud up to his knees (Australian War Memorial, 2020). The timeframe for those who required necessary critical treatment is known as the ‘golden hour’ and Woolcock and his team persevered to ensure the chance of survival for the wounded was optimal. In World War I, penicillin and anti-biotics were not yet invented, and I can imagine Woolcock and other stretcher-bearers tried to calm and reassure the wounded, even when they knew they wouldn’t make it. Any nurse, doctor or stretcher-bearer would have required perseverance and resilience throughout the war as the constant stream of war-torn bodies would be demoralising and traumatic to their mental health. Kearney and Cleary (2017) state that many were worthy of a Victoria Cross, however none were awarded during World War 1.

Stretcher-bearing teams embodied the spirit of mateship as they worked together to carry the wounded to life-saving medical aid. The close bond of mateship between Woolcock and Medlin, another stretcher-bearer, is outlined in Medlin’s letter to Sarah Woolcock, who wrote of Woolcock’s perseverance as a stretcher-bearer and concern for his wounded:

“*Wherever there was danger, wherever there were wounded, he was there, and his was the strong arm ready to proffer assistance. He was the strong, brave heart that stood all hardships. I truly say I lost a good cobber, and you can ask any of the battalions and they will tell you he was second to none on the battlefield, and among the wounded he was as tender as a woman.”*

(Longo, 2018, p. 248)

Military bands are often overlooked in our collective memory of war, however it was their role to cheer comrades up and build a sense of mateship and togetherness within their battalions. Bands were appreciated for their sense of humour and cheering their audiences up, especially when aboard long voyages (Cronk, 2017).

As our collective memory evolves, will we remember the sacrifice and contribution of stretcher-bearers and military bands, or continue to leave their story untold?

(534 words)

My name is Harrison Geater-Johnson and I live on a farm at Tippara, 15km north west of Maitland on the Yorke Peninsula. I have grown up in a family that actively contributes to our community, especially at the local football club – Central Yorke Cougars. Aside from playing in the Senior Colts team I also boundary umpire and run water for the senior teams. I enjoy playing cricket in the summer and have played for the Yorke Peninsula Association at the Country Cup. My grandparents taught me to play Lawn Bowls at a young age, and I am currently selected in the South Australian U18 Lawn Bowls squad. Additionally, I have been privileged to represent my school with pride at Knock Out Sports.

In Agriculture, I have the opportunity to learn in a hands-on environment and represent Central Yorke School at the Royal Adelaide Show with our school goats and alpacas. I am disappointed that due to the current climate we are unable to display our skills and hard work this year. I believe it is important for young people to learn and appreciate history so they can better understand how the world and society has developed over time. I have always enjoyed HASS, however learning about World War I has been particularly of interest, specifically discovering more on my family’s role in the Great War. During a school camp to Canberra, I had the opportunity to visit the Australian War Memorial and was in awe of the Roll of Honour, specifically the sheer number of names engraved on the plaques. This experience led me to learn more about the conditions soldiers and nurses endured and found the uniform, equipment and 3-D exhibits most interesting. At that time, I didn’t know William’s name would be on display, let alone that I had a family member who had served. Thanks to this experience we now have this insight. In the future, I plan to go on a pilgrimage to Doullens Communal Cemetary to visit William’s grave on behalf of my family.

During my research of William Gepp Woolcock I have grown close with my mother, Michelle, and Great-Grandmother Elizabeth ‘Betty’ Brooks. This task has given me the opportunity to contact my distant and close family members for sources of information. I have spent time with my mother locating and sorting out artefacts in my family’s possession and have indulged in the history of the booklets, postcards and images. Together we have scanned and archived sources form other family members so there is a digital record for the future. I have discovered additional information about William that I can ask my family to add to our Family book that could use some updating and maintenance. I was fortunate to interview and record conversations with my Great Grandma, Betty. This gave me a better understanding of our family’s history and how close William and Ethel were. A relative of mine, Rose Darling, who had heard about my research, sent my mother and I letters and records relating to William and other family members from the past. Without this inquiry task, our family would not have had the opportunity to share knowledge and converse about our family history and vital artefacts would be unknown of.

My research into William’s service has given me the realisation that stretcher-bearers are often overlooked. During Dawn Services and Remembrance Days we remember the people who have fought on the front line, however the experiences of non-combatant servicemen and women are in the background. In the future, I am going to make an effort to spread the word about stretcher-bearers and the impact they had in the Great War, so they can get the widespread recognition they deserve.

I will make sure Private William Gepp Woolcock of the 43rd Infantry Battalion will be remembered for his service.

Lest we Forget.



**Appendix 3:** Ethel (right) and her mother.

**Appendix 2:** A silk handkerchief sent to Ethel from William.

**Appendix 1:** The 43rd Battalion Football Team (c. January 1918)

This post card was sent to Ethel and read *“I am well and in the best of health and strength. This is our football team. You will see one in there that you know and I am in London too day [sic]. I am going back to Lark Hill Camp on Sunday Night and then I think we will leave for Scotland on Monday … Best of love too [sic] you and all from Will xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx.”* You can tell by the amount of ‘kisses’ at the end how much he loves and misses his beloved.

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