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Arthur's Letter

In 1916, after being wounded during the WW1 Battle of Fromelles, my paternal grandfather (Pop), Arthur George Snook, wrote a letter to his mother. For three generations, the letter and Arthur's military service were cloistered under a stoic family silence, while he carried the lonely burden of “a waring, boiling hell of shot and shell and mangled men” to his grave.

I have no memory of Pop, as he died in 1958 when I was three years old. I knew Pop had been a soldier in WW1, as Nana lived in a War Widow's Unit. As a child, I asked my mother, if Pop was an ANZAC then why don't we go to the ANZAC parade? I was hushed, then mum said quietly that Pop had refused to march on ANZAC Day and instead went to the pub. I grew up believing my Pop was a lazy drunk.

On ANZAC Day 2014, Ancestry invited the descendants of men and women who had served in war, to search the military records for free. Although hesitant, I typed in Arthur George Snook, and immediately I was viewing his Enlistment Form , Medical Assessment and four Medical Record Cards. The red stamps of Wounded in Action dominated the records. Wounded in Action – France – Gun Shot Wounds (GSWs), eye and leg 20/7/16, Wounded in Action, Gas 23/3/18, Wounded in Action, GSWs leg, buttock and hand 30/9/18. The blue stamps of Next of Kin Advised 5/8/16, 10/4/18 and 15/10/18. Promoted to Lance Corporal, 26/7/17 and Corporal 25/1/18. Next of Kin Advised Returning to Australia 31/1/19.

I was stunned by the reality of his service to King and Country. Arthur must have been fighting on the Frontline 1916 to 1918. As soon as he healed from the GSWs, he was back for more. Why had my family talked in hushed tones of WW1 for three generations and what happened to Pop, that ANZAC Day was a nightmare to endure?

My parent's early family photos were scanned before they died. Amid the small black and white images, I found my grandparent's wedding photo in 1919. Arthur wore his uniform to marry Ivy. Next were his military enlistment form followed by a photo of Arthur with six mates 32nd Battalion, Australian Imperial Force, 1916. The next image was unrecognisable until enlarged, when I could see "Dear Mother" and "22nd July 1916." Arthur's letter to his mother was 98 years old, written in cursive with ink. I enlarged the faded document, and then sat into the early hours, deciphering his words. Arthur wrote the letter while in the Northampton War Hospital, England, after being shot above his right eye and through the back of his right leg.

France
July 22nd 1916

Dear Mother,

I received your letter dated 30th May on the 18th July and I was glad to hear you are all well at home. Since your last letter I have had the bad luck to get wounded. I suppose by the time you receive this letter, you have received a telegram but you do not want to worry about me, as I will be back with the boys again shortly.

On the 18th we went into the frontline of the trenches, that is the firing line. When we got there we were told to be ready for a charge on the 19th. All day and night of the 18th and all day of the 19th there was a great bombardment by the artillery. A sight I will never forget. Shells of all descriptions, bursting all around us. Blown all the trenches to pieces.

At 3 O'Clock on the 19th we were told to get ready for the fun at six. At half past five, we were given a drink of rum and then fixed our bayonets, ready for 6pm. We marched to our post and then was given the order to mount the parapet (that's the top of the trench) and then

the final word, charge, which I will never forget.

Well mother, I only just got over when I got hit on the top of my right eye but that never stopped me. I got going again and I was nearly over to Fritz trenches when I got another smack in the back of my right leg and that was the end of me. I turned around to find cover and you ought to have seen the sight that met my eyes. Dead and wounded laying all around me. I crawled for about 20 yards to a shell hole and to my horror I found half a dozen of our boys there dead. I met Dave Lorre with a hole right through his shoulder and leg, but he will get over it alright. I layed in this hole for an hour and then crawled back to our own trenches. I was then taken to the hospital where I am now. I do not expect to be here long as I am not badly wounded.

Do not take any notice of what others might tell you about me as I consider this a mere trifle to what some of our boys got. I don't think there were two hundred left of our Battalion afterwards. It is a wonder to me that there is any man living to tell the tale after the shot and shell we had to go through.

I felt shock and deep sadness, not only for Arthur and all the soldiers, but for his mother, Elizabeth. She must have been so traumatised. Arthur's initial aim was to reassure her that he was OK, but the writing developed into a debriefing of unimaginable horror. At that time, I only knew the battle occurred in France and the date. Consequently I then read Peter Cochrane's *The Western Front 1916-1918*, where the Battle of Fromelles, on the 19th July 1916, is documented and remains Australia's worst military's disaster. Arthur and his mates, with raw courage and bayonets fixed, ran at dusk, across a level field of 400 yards with no cover while "the scything of German machine guns at 500 bullets per minute tore through each organised line". Wounded, Arthur crawled, ducking continuous machine gun fire, constant shelling and passing 5,533 Australian soldiers dead, dying or severely wounded.

I went back through Arthur's records again, trying to match Arthur's dates of Wounded in Action to other Battles. Arthur was a witness during a Military Court of Inquiry held in the Field, 1917, regarding this soldier in the 32nd Battalion, Godfrey Snook who was presumed Killed in Action. Same surname? Godfrey was aged 17 years and 6 months, when he followed his older cousin, Arthur into the Battle of Fromelles. Arthur and Godfrey grew up in Brompton, South Australia. Arthur had shared rum with Godfrey, then positioned him two rows behind him from the parapet. Arthur was quickly wounded. Godfrey ran into the battlefield with two mates, who witnessed that he was shot and killed. Godfrey's body has never been found.

Two years later, Charles Bean, war correspondent, wandered over the Fromelles battlefield. " We found the old No-Man's-Land simply full of our dead. The skulls and bones and pieces of uniforms everywhere". The mateship of the men who fought at Fromelles, is well known. "Don't Forget Me, Cobber" a cry from the bloody battlefield and a strong ANZAC tradition. Soldiers in the trenches risked their lives and continued rescuing their mates until the field went quiet. Godfrey's body was out there in the pulverised bloody mud, while Arthur had to continue fighting for two years and by fate alone, he survived.

Searching Godfrey's war record was soul destroying. His mother, Ann and father, William wrote many letters to the AIF Base and Red Cross, asking if any soldiers wounded with amnesia had been found in hospitals in England. Ann also requested Godfrey's personal possessions, but there were none. With no known grave or personal possessions, his parents had no closure. Arthur went AWOL from the hospital after GSWs to leg, buttock and hand in November 1918. The charges were dropped. Was he searching the hospitals for Godfrey before being invalided home?

The Australian Fromelles Association website has an article entitled "The Aftermath". In August 1916, 5,533 families opened the door to telegram boys across Australia delivering so many communications of terrible news and it is noticeable and recorded that most immediate families were so traumatised, that they never again spoke of the loved one. I believe when all hope was lost to find Godfrey, to support

Godfrey's parents, my family closed ranks and silence reigned for almost a century.

In 1919, Arthur returned to his home at Brompton, married Ivy and they had a daughter and three sons. My father was the second son, Thomas William. Arthur had been a 25 years old, brickmaker, tall, fit and strong when he enlisted. On his return home, he needed a walking stick, was partially deaf, had chronic lung damage and suffered constantly with myalgia in both legs. Arthur survived while so many friends and family died. Survivor guilt, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and depression were seen as personal weakness. The Military and the family turned a blind eye. Arthur's refusal to participate in ANZAC Day, is now understandable and I hope he found solace at the pub. A verse from T. Kook, 43rd Battalion wrote "So you're back again old chap I see, but you don't seem the same as you used to be".

On the 19th July, 2016, I attended the Centenary of the Battle of Fromelles, held at the Pheasant Wood Australian Military Cemetery, Northern France. I visited the VC Corner which is the memorial to 1,299 Australian soldiers who are still missing. I touched Godfrey Snook's name and tears fell. As the clock on the church steeple struck 6p.m., myself accompanied by a group of Aussie pilgrims stood where the trenches were exactly a hundred years ago. As heads bowed, I read Arthur's letter to his mother and his words echoed across the green, peaceful fields.

ANZAC Day is important to my family. My cousins, our children and our grandchildren are proud of our Pop, the ANZAC. Arthur's story belongs to our family and we are all stronger for knowing it.

RIP Pop