

Alfred Howlett Johnson

27th Battalion - Australian Imperial Force

June 20th 1894 - January 20th 1969

SN: 4457



2020 Premier's Anzac Spirit School Prize

Central Yorke School

Annabelle Smart

Many of the volunteers who enlisted for World War I were soldiers from the bush. Charles Bean (1944) noted that the country origins of soldiers 'where men have to live the lives of strong men' had shaped them into fine fighting men (Bean, 1944). In every rural town, the War Memorial is a notable place, proudly displaying the names of those local boys who had fallen in the line of duty. However, missing from memorials are the names of countless others who were wounded physically and spiritually. Alfred Howlett Johnson, and his seven brothers, was among the hundreds of country boys who flocked from the farming districts of the Yorke Peninsula to serve arm in arm during wartime. This is his story.

Alfred Howlett Johnson was a South Australian serviceperson who served on the Western Front during World War I. He was born to parents Eliza and Thomas on June 20th, 1894, in Kadina and was the second eldest of twelve siblings. Johnson was initially raised on a small farm near Tickera, SA, where his father managed the property. However, the family soon moved to the Medical Hall building in Kadina where they managed a combined butchery and sweet shop. Within their community, the 'Johnson Boys' were renowned



The Johnson Boys (l-r), back: Ray, Albert, Allan, Cliff;
front: Clive, Will and Alfred.
Alfred didn't like this picture as his brother Cliff was not wearing his service hat.

for their sense of humor and willingness to help others (Yorke Peninsula Country Times, 2005).

In his adult years, Johnson worked as a farm labourer and spent his spare time woodworking and rearing greyhounds. He was initially introduced to woodworking as a rehabilitation exercise for an existing injury and enjoyed collecting old woodworking tools. Johnson also had a keen interest in greyhound racing and owned, trained and raced his dogs (B. Johnson, personal communication, March 20, 2020).

Johnson enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in Adelaide on January 11th, 1916, aged 21 years. His brother William also enlisted with him and were both allocated to the 27th Battalion - 11th Reinforcements (National Archives of Australia, 2019). This was one of four South Australian battalions that fought in the Great War and the two men reinforced a battalion that had already seen combat at Gallipoli the previous year. Remarkably, of the nine sons in his family, eight served their country during World Wars I and II. Alfred and William would also be joined by Bert and all would serve on the Western Front in World War I (Alfred's brother Victor, who lost the fingers off his left hand in a butcher shop accident, was deemed medically unfit to enlist).

Johnson's Attestation Paper

Johnson embarked on the *HMAT Shropshire* on March 25th, 1916, in Adelaide destined for Alexandria, Egypt. He then departed Alexandria on the *H.T. Tunisian* for England where he arrived on June 29th, 1916. In October 1916, Johnson trained at the No.2 Command Depot at Weymouth and later transferred to Bovington Camp, Dorset, within the No. 3 Command Depot (National Archives of Australia, 2019).

It appears that Johnson was court martialed during his time in England for "being found beyond the limit [of the camp] ... without pass or written leave" and "being in possession of a document purporting to be genuine well knowing it was not genuine" (National Archives of Australia, 2019). On January 4th, 1917, he pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 42 days field punishment and lost sixty days pay.

Johnson's Statement of Service notes his misconduct.

In September 1917, Johnson proceeded overseas to France to the front line at Ypres, an area which had been heavily shelled and buildings within the towns were destroyed. According to the 27th Battalion Unit Diary, in early October he completed training in the Ypres area (Australian War Memorial, 2020). According to Kerney & Cleary, on October 9th the 27th Battalion was heavily involved in supporting the

area known as Anzac Ridge, located near Broodseinde, however the Allies were in a compromising position which proved fateful for some senior officials.

According to the Official War Diary, on October 24th, 1917, the battalion partook in a football match against the 28th Battalion, in which the 27th were victorious by 5 points (Australian War Memorial, 2020). According to Kearney & Cleary (2018), Australian Rules Football matches provided a distraction to soldiers, and there were great rivalries between battalions and states. Additionally, the 27th Battalion versed the 28th Battalion in a game of cricket.

Oct	23 rd	Training. 2 nd Lt. C. J. M. Carr to bombing School. Lieut M. J. De G. Sells, Lieut B. Hosking. Lieut R. H. Harris from Hospital.
Oct	24 th	Training. Half Holiday. Football Match 27 th Bn v 28 th Bn. 27 th Bn. Won by 5 points. Lieut Wiltshire from T.B. Lieut R. H. Horwood to English leave. Lieut W. S. Coombs from School.
Oct.	25 th	Training. Lieut W. S. Wiltshire and Lieut M. J. Sells proceeded to 2 nd Div. Rifle Camp. Lieut C. Houston proceeded to England. R.F.C. School. Lieut J. H. Lafforthorne present with M.C. medal.

An excerpt from the Official War Diary of the 27th Battalion, October 1917.

Two days later, the battalion began its journey back to the front line in Belgium, travelling in torrents of rain. It was noted in the Unit Diaries that here there were ‘many hostile planes, appearing to be directing ... artillery fire ... shelling by enemy all day. A little gas shells’ (Australian War Memorial, 2020, p. 2).

Despite the appalling conditions, the 27th Battalion progressed through a complex system of trenches, referred to as ‘the Maze’ near Flers. In November, they participated in an attempt to capture ‘the Maze’, however they were soon defeated by a German counter-attack. During this time soldiers succumbed to the winter conditions, developing cases of trench foot, trench fever and trench nephritis due to the muddy conditions. This was the harshest winter on the Somme in four decades, and General Joffre and Haig decided that any fighting should be postponed until Spring (Kearney & Cleary, 2018).

Johnson was Taken on Strength to the 9th Machine Gun Company on March 23rd, 1918. This company was serving on the front line near Villers-Bretonneux and received heavy enemy shelling (Australian Imperial Force, 2020). On April 9th, 1918, Alfred fell ill with influenza and was initially treated by the 56th Casualty Clearing Station for influenza and was then admitted to the 20th General Hospital in Camiers, France. His illness required further treatment and two days later he was transferred via the H. S Princess

to the Kitchener War Hospital and 1st Auxiliary Hospital in England (National Archives of Australia, 2020). Alfred would suffer several bouts of influenza throughout his time at war which would require hospitalisation.

In September 1918, Johnson was transferred to the 2nd Machine Gun Company, and Unit Diaries note of the destruction left by the German's retreat (Australian Imperial Force, 2020).

One month before the war would conclude, Johnson received a wound that would impact his physical health long after the war's end. On October 3rd, 1918, Johnson received a gunshot wound to his right leg and was initially treated by the 5th Field Ambulance before being transferred to the 11th Stationary Hospital in Rouen two days later (National Archives of Australia, 2019). He was further invalided to the Graylingwell War Hospital, England. It was here that Johnson watched the signing of the Armistice from the confines of a hospital bed in England.

Johnson returned to Australia from England due to this injury on December 9th, 1918. This wound gave Johnson a life-long limp (B. Johnson, personal communication, March 20th, 2020).

Alfred and his two brothers, William and Bert, returned safely to Australia at war's conclusion. Alfred Johnson returned to Australia in February 1919, and was welcomed home with a special service at the Tickera Church. The locals from Tickera and the surrounding districts celebrated and congratulated him on his safe return home from the battlefields of France. In the years after he met and married Jessie Ada Rebecca Anderson. In February 1922, he was allotted a farm under the Soldier Settlement Scheme at the '*Hundred of Finniss*' and relocated to Mannum with his newlywed wife to begin their family (State Records of South Australia, 2019). His love for animals ensued and he pursued an interest in raising poultry and devoted much time to his beloved greyhounds.



A post-war image of Alfred.

Like most servicemen, Johnson spoke little of their war experiences, but each of their families are aware of the contributions they made, the courage they showed and the suffering they endured as a result of war service. In 1923, Alfred and Jessie welcomed into their family a daughter, Grace Alice Johnson. This daughter left home at an early age never to return; it was only recently discovered in records of newspaper articles that she led a criminal life of assault and larceny and used several aliases as well (B. Johnson, personal communication, March 20th, 2020).

In 1937, the Johnsons lived in Booleroo Centre and Alfred worked in the PMG as a linesman, a trade that continued until 1946 when he retired due to ill health. In 1939, his first wife Jessie died, and Johnson relocated to the Eyre Peninsula to work at Tumby Bay and Cowell. It was here he met Winifred Jane Pinding and they married on December 19th, 1943. Alfred had three children with Winifred: Lorraine (Lori), Rosemary (Rosie), and William (Bill). Johnson's family suspect he had a love interest that he would visit during his R&R *"as he would have looks of long lost love in his eyes and mention "Cherie" at times ... he used this as a nickname for his eldest daughter"* (Johnson, 2020).

Alfred Howlett Johnson died at the age of 73 on the 20th January, 1969, and is buried in the Wallaroo Cemetery where he is reunited with his parents Eliza and Thomas.

(1523 words)

Courage and perseverance are quintessential qualities of all soldiers who served in World War I, especially Alfred. As one of three sons sent to war, it was Alfred's responsibility to keep himself safe for the wellbeing of his family on the home front in Australia.

When Johnson marched into Ypres in September 1917, he arrived at a scene of devastation and destruction. In July, the Germans began their third attack on Ypres and were using gas to push into the town. Johnson and his battalion demonstrated courage, sacrifice and doggedness when spearheading their defensive attacks at Menin Road, Polygon Wood and Broodseinde. He served in what was known as 'the horrors of the Western Front', and it is hardly surprising that he refused to discuss his experiences post war.

Johnson received heavy enemy shelling at the Battle of Villers-Bretonneux, a significant event which saw the Germans retreat from their furthest advance east. His role as a machine gunner was to kill, put quite simply. Johnson would cut down attacking waves of enemy troops, whilst also maintaining an overheating barrel, supplying a constant magazine stream and was the target of enemy fire. Described as the '*destroyer of human life*', those who operated machine guns would require courage and perseverance in the heat of battle, as well as to cope with the mental scenes that lingered long after battle (Australian Government Department of Veterans Affairs, 2020).

Johnson persevered despite several instances of influenza, a condition made worse by the cold, unhygienic conditions in the trenches. Despite his luck throughout the war, Johnson's fate had finally arrived when he was wounded by a shell blast.

Johnson lived to serve throughout the majority of the war, serving from 1916 to war's conclusion. His service would require courage and perseverance on a daily basis, particularly to maintain a level head amidst challenging situations.

Upon his return to Australia, Johnson was allocated a Soldier Settlement Block near Mannum. Whilst the plan to repatriate servicemen who had served overseas seems like a good idea, it is a little-known fact that this scheme failed after both World Wars. Alfred, who had been raised on a farm, had some knowledge of the agriculture industry, however he was not able to maintain his allotment. It is likely that earlier droughts and soil quality impacted the viability of his crops and was unable to survive off the income. The blocks that soldiers were allotted were often not viable enough to make a profit, and many walked off the land. I would imagine that Alfred, and thousands of others, would've demonstrated a tough perseverance while toiling and reaping their land in the desperate hope of making a profit to support their future.

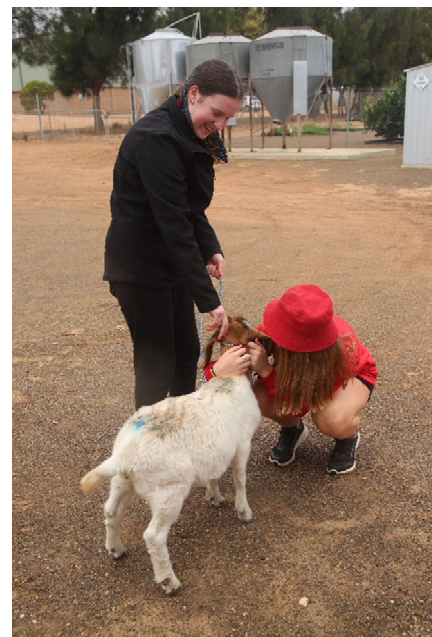
Johnson, like most servicepeople, did not speak of his wartime experiences to his family. I believe this is because of how traumatic it would be to relive these scenes, and the courage he would require in his post-war years to carry on with those bleak memories in the back of his mind.

My name is Annabelle Smart and I live in the rural town of Maitland, located on the Yorke Peninsula. I attend Central Yorke School and am currently studying Year 9. I enjoy the perks of a rural upbringing and the freedom I have in the country.

Throughout my schooling I have always been encouraged to try my best in different aspects of life. In Agriculture, I learn to handle goats and alpacas and would've had the opportunity to take them to the Royal Adelaide Show this year. Over the past three years I have been nominated as the Student Representative Council where I helped plan a Bushfire Recovery trip to Kangaroo Island to assist the local community. I enjoy this role as it has helped me grow into a more confident person and feel comfortable to express my ideas and opinions. I represent Central Yorke School at various netball, football, hockey, cricket and basketball Knock Out tournaments.

I have enjoyed learning about World War I, specifically the conditions soldiers endured on the front line. In History, I studied the Battle of Ypres to gain a deeper perspective of the context Alfred faced. I also find it interesting how the Industrial Revolution led to the production of resources and weaponry which were used in World War I. I visited Canberra during a school excursion and the highlight was visiting the Australian War Memorial. I particularly enjoyed the hangar exhibit of the old planes, and I recall my teacher telling me a story about the German pilot, The Red Baron. It is important for young people to know Australia's early history as it explains how and why we are the way we are today.

Whilst completing my research I worked closely with my grandmother, Rosemary, and my Great Uncle Bill Johnson. Rosemary and Bill are Alfred's children and I enjoyed learning more about my family history with them. Bill had a record of Alfred's artefacts and my mother and I were not aware this resource existed. Additionally, through working on his profile on the Virtual War Memorial I have been able to connect with a distant relative



in Adelaide who was also researching the Johnson Boys. My aim is to scan the artefacts and add it to his profile on the Virtual War Memorial.

Sport is a huge part of country life as it gels the community together. Having grown up with two older brothers, I have been involved with local basketball, netball, and hockey teams. I have competed and represented my club in hockey at many levels traveling to different regions to play for the Mid North Hockey Association. I am fortunate enough to play association basketball for the Yorkers Representative team. Outside of sport I am involved with the Fat Farmers group, a support network for men's health in rural areas which raises money a variety of men's health care charities.

I have been learning the Alto Saxophone for three years and played within the Yorke Peninsula School Concert Band. Our band regularly performs at community events including the ANZAC Dawn Service (see right) and Remembrance Day services. My family and I have attended the local ANZAC Dawn Service for as long as I can remember and I am proud to be part of a century-old tradition.



Thankyou for the opportunity to understand my family history better.

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Thank you to Bill Johnson and Rosemary Smart for sharing information and artefacts pertaining to Alfred and the Johnson boys' history.