

2012 Premiers Anzac Spirit School Prize

Eric Harding Chinner was born on 15th January 1894 in Peterborough, South Australia and died on 19th July 1916 aged 22 in Pheasant Wood, Fromelles, France. His father was Thomas Chinner; his mother was Sarah Thyer. They opened a drapery store in Peterborough and Thomas became Mayor in 1899-1900. Eric was second youngest of seven children and as a boy in Peterborough he was a member of the Boys Brigade and, later, was also a part of the local militia.

Intro?

As a young man, Eric was heavily involved in the young men's Baptist bible reading group which took place in Tennyson Hall, adjacent to the Baptist Church. He took his religion very seriously and would have been part of their young people's social gatherings, but not the local dances and balls, as these were not encouraged by the Baptist faith. When he was 15 to 16 years old he went to Prince Alfred College and because he had a good education it was easier for him to get a position at the bank as a bank clerk in Peterborough.

Eric was engaged to Gladys Dunn who worked at the Commonwealth bank of Broken Hill. Nobody knows how the two really met but there are some theories and one was that Eric was in Broken Hill for a business trip and that's how they could have met. He gave Gladys a gold locket with his initials engraved on the inside cover and a photo of him in uniform. The front of the



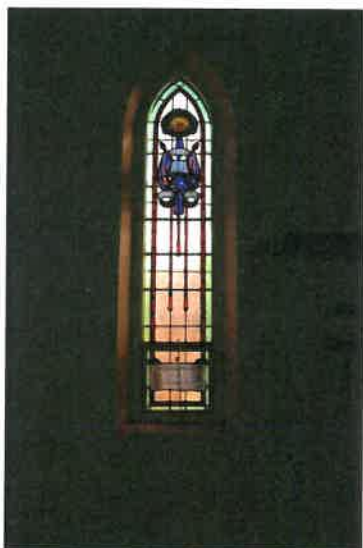
locket bore the emblem of Prince Alfred College.

Gladys treasured this memory of her relationship with Eric and never married.

When her family realized the connection with Eric Chinner, through the news reports about the graves at Pheasant Wood, they returned the locket to the family.



After the first World War the Baptist Church commemorated Eric with a stained glass window which was placed near the honor role which was also in the church



Eric enlisted in the army in 1915 in Adelaide when he was 21 years old and did most of his training in South Australia. He started off just like many other Australian service men and women but his involvement in the Boys Brigade and the local militia before-hand made it easier for him to climb up the ranks to the position of Lieutenant. Eric did some training at Duntroon, a large army training camp, in Australia and also did more training in Egypt.

Eric's regiment sailed to Egypt where there was a huge British, Australian and New Zealand camp based, because it was a good place to launch the troops from, to the Western Front.

Letters home from Eric spoke of their camp on the Suez Canal where they swam. They were at a camp called Tel-el Kebir in Egypt for about three weeks with approximately 70,000 soldiers and did more training before they went to war. In Egypt the Australians had lots of trouble with the British officers who said they were untidy and disrespectful. It is reported that these comments were often met with more Aussie casualness and disrespect.

Excerpts from the letters I was able to read from Eric to his family showed that he was keen to find out what was in store for them and in high hopes and good spirit, not sharing the down side of life in the army. He was very aware of his surroundings and described them in detail. The 32nd Regiment sailed from Alexandria to Marseille on the last sea leg of their journey to the Western Front on 22nd June 1916 with around 2,500 troops on board. They were very nervous and worried about the submarine activity during their trip.

When the ship landed the soldiers boarded a train for a 57 hour journey to the front line. Eric was particularly impressed with the scenery which he likened to the area around Mt Lofty. He also wrote about arriving to "the music of artillery and the light of star shells" and that he was hoping to soon be well into it. Once they reached the battle front Eric and his team repaired the trenches after the Germans had damaged them with bombs.

During his time at the front, Eric began training at grenade school and wrote home that he got an instructors certificate out of it. He also wrote that their Brigade Bombing Officer had been promoted to Divisional Bombing Officer and that it was quite possible for him to fill the

vacancy. The job that he was going to fill had a lot of responsibilities and there was plenty of work for him to do in that role.

Eric made note of it being hard to get to sleep the first few days of being there because of all the different noises that were unfamiliar to him. He later got used to the noises. Some other problems were the rats that were everywhere, but he soon got over them. Rain was a big problem and made everything muddy and slippery; it wrecked some of the trenches as well.

One letter from Eric spoke of his platoon moving into a billet in a large barn with Eric given the use of a room in the farmhouse. He spoke of the French being very good to them and that it lifted their spirits. While there they had a church parade in a 'lovely green paddock' and how, during the service a land mine exploded and another was exploded during the Communion. He said, "How wonderfully God illustrates all his lessons. It was a lovely service. The table comprised two chairs with a board on top. We all stood around our table in the open paddock".

Eric showed the spirit of Anzac from when he first started, he climbed the ranks and with each position having lots of responsibility resting on it. He cared for his men and this was noted in a letter to his family from one of their parents who said, *"I had not the pleasure of knowing your son personally, but he is my son's officer, and has had to censor all his letters to me. He has twice written such kindly and cheery notes to me concerning my boy's welfare, that although I have never seen him, I feel the greatest respect and admiration for him, and my heart is full of gratitude to him for his great kindness to my lad, and the interest he has taken in his work."* (Mrs Mary Korber) He was willing to take the responsibility and the work he had to put in. He took up more responsibilities when they got to the battle front because he did some more training to become a Bombing Officer.

The day that Eric died was when the Germans attacked the British and Anzacs in the night, and when Eric was throwing a hand grenade at the Germans he was shot. Eric dropped the hand grenade and jumped on top of it to protect his fellow soldiers from the blast. It would have been a quick and very painful way to have died. Eric was a brave and courageous young man, such a short life which ended only within less than one month of his time at the front.

Through Eric's letters I feel that he showed true ANZAC spirit in that he always put the best view of things in his letters home and he did act with courage and made a supreme sacrifice when he gave his life for his men. Patriotism was only one of the reasons men enlisted, pride and love of Australia was very strong as was the link to Great Britain. For some, the pay of the six shillings day meant that the Australian soldiers were the best paid in the world which was very good at the time of high unemployment.

I have read that on the 1st of July 1916 the Anzacs lost 5,533 men in one day and after five months of the Somme campaign the Australians had lost 23,000 men. During this battle our soldiers were exposed to poison chlorine gas and flamethrowers for the first time. The gas burnt their skin and tore the lining of their lungs as well as causing blindness.

Eric was found in a mass grave with many other British and Anzac soldiers who were buried by the Germans after the Battle of the Somme. Archeologists have used DNA from Eric's great nephews Andrew and John Guest so they could know who was who because the bodies were beyond recognizing. They have used the DNA of many other family members of dead soldiers to help them put names to bodies. This battle has been described as a bloody carnage and remembered as a sad loss of so many young lives, but the discovery of this mass grave has given many families a sense of peace.



Eric Harding Chinner 15 January 1885 – 19 July 1916

My primary source of information was Mrs. Irene Cummings of Peterborough who found the photos of Eric and other young Baptist men who fought in the First World War in the cellar of the Baptist Church in Peterborough. From her deep interest in this former member of her church, Mrs. Cummings has focused attention on Eric and has been a major source of information for his family. Mrs. Cummings lent me her Chinner family history book and her folders with newspaper cuttings and excerpts from books and gave me permission to use the photos I have included.

I also spoke with Mr. John Guest who is Eric's great nephew. He and his brother Andrew were used to verify Eric's remains through DNA.

I used the internet to give me up to date information on the finding of the mass grave at Pheasant Wood, Fromelles, France and the services which followed.

www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2008/06/16/2275978.htm

www.theflindersnews.com.au/news/local/news/general/.../1755992.aspx

www.aif.adfa.edu.au:8080/showPerson?pid=51901

www.awm.gov.au/research/people/roll_of_honour/person.asp?p

Other resources I used included:

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| Burgess, Sarah, 1995 | Charles Chinner & His Descendants in Australia, Chinner-Crabb-Chinner 1845-1995, Open Book Publishers, Adelaide SA 5000. |
| Hillman, Robert, 1948 | Binara Publishing Pty Ltd, Abbotsford, Victoria |
| Taylor, David, 1945 | Key Battles of World War I, Heinemann Library, Halley Court, Oxford X2 8EJ |