

Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize

By Madeleine Wells



In 1914, a war broke out binding nations together for a fight of a new kind. This was unlike any war in history and Australia was part of it. We took up loyalty to the Mother Country and marched towards World War I. Private George Wells from Quorn, South Australia, enlisted in the army on November 21st 1916; at 27 years of age and two years after the war had begun. Like other Australians, he showed great courage in simply enlisting. Upon enlistment in 1916, he would have



George Wells - Australian War Memorial Archives

known little of the consequences and hardships he would face in his service, but instead of staying safe he recognised his ANZAC spirit, was brave, and held his determination to fight for his country.

ANZAC spirit is what set our soldiers apart from other armies; it showed their will to give of themselves for their country and came from a combination of morals, qualities, and values. Each of the traits that the ANZACs showed in World War I helped them fight and stay together. One that is often shown in descriptions of the war is mateship, they treated each other like friends, rather than just another member of the AIF, this gave them a sense of family overseas and was one of the main reasons the army stayed determined throughout all the hardship. Their determination and endurance has been retold in many stories and anecdotes and is the reason many are amazed by what they did to this day; they didn't back down from a fight or say they couldn't, they battled through whatever was thrown at them and they did it with

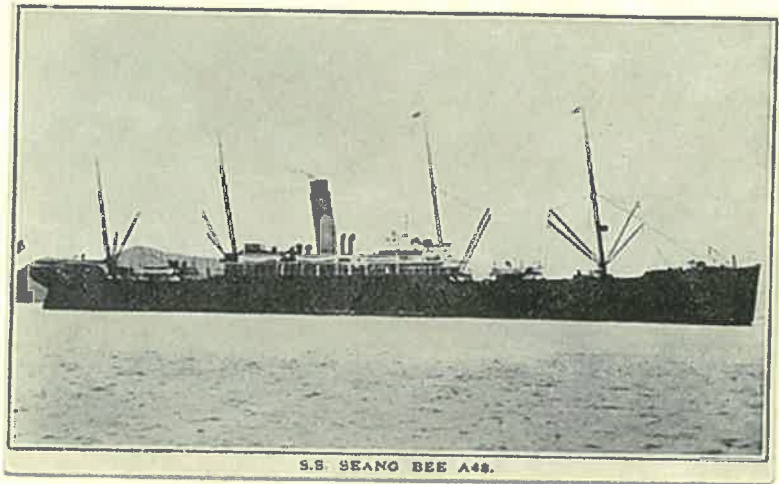
pride for their country. I admire George's courage and bravery in his willingness to enter his first battle at Passchendaele, knowing his life was endangered along with that of his new found army mates.

George's family originated from Quorn, a largely farming community, where he was the eldest son of thirteen siblings, ranging from births in 1888 to 1913. Due to this, like many young men in his era he was expected to contribute as the main income earner for the family once he was of age. He worked as a Fireman on Kangaroo Island and was a healthy and fit man and of adequate means to go to war. There would have also been pressure from the community to enlist for his country. His enrolment could be seen as somewhat late due to him being a young man with physical means to go to war. There are many theories to this; he might have stayed to continue his job as a

fireman, helping the community and providing for his family, or he only joined after the 48th Battalion was created, one of mainly South and Western Australian men.

The skills George would have gained from his occupation correspond with many that the ANZAC diggers have been described with; bravery is one of the most apparent. As a fireman he would have faced many situations where he'd have to risk his life for another, and this was a quality that was shown by many on the Western Front. He would have also shown great endurance and determination before departing in his occupation and having to provide for his large family; a responsibility that couldn't be ignored.

George Wells left Adelaide on the 10th February 1917 on the Seang Bee and upon leaving was appointed the position of Lance Corporal, and disembarked at Devonport on the 2nd May, being reverted to Private again the next day. A presumption for his



Seang Bee – Don't Forget the Diggers

<http://www.dontforgetthediggers.com.au/>

rather short-lived occupation in the position of Lance Corporal is that displayed the qualities of leadership and trust within the men travelling and was therefore given the duty, but when reaching their destination there were seen to be enough people in a role of leadership, hence the demotion.

George Wells was in the 48th Battalion and during his service was involved in one major battle with his infantry; the Battle of Passchendaele (or Third Battle of Ypres). It began as an offensive from the British side that aimed to move the Germans from the Passchendaele Ridge and back to the Belgian coastline and was under the command of British Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig. There were three Battles of Ypres, but the one he was in consisted of one day, the 12th October 1917, and has been described as 'vicious fighting in the most waterlogged of conditions' (Australian War Memorial). The men were put through horrific conditions with Major-General Monash of the 3rd Division writing to a higher authority;

*'It is bad to cultivate the habit of criticism of higher authority, and I do so with some hesitation... Our men are being put into the hottest fighting and are being sacrificed in harebrained ventures... and there is no one in the War Cabinet to lift a voice in protest.'*¹

This quote shows the cry for help from an official asking for someone to notice the difficulty the soldiers were having in Passchendaele; something that could only be described as slaughter. The battles of World War I has often been expressed as 20th Century weaponry with 17th Century tactics and Passchendaele is a perfect example of the minimal thinking that went into many of the plans. During the battle George Wells would have experienced some of the most horrific sights in his life, his mates lying cold in the mud and knowing his chances were slim. George Wells went missing in this fight and was one of the many fatalities that Australia suffered. It is difficult to be able to fully comprehend the terror that these men went through in this battle and most will never come close to viewing anything close to the sights they saw. The injuries they faced, physically and mentally, caused great suffering to Australia and we will never be able to repay them for their deeds. It makes

¹ Australia: An Illustrated History 2004

me proud to be part of a country that put their all into such a war as this and also truly grateful to have soldiers and nurses willing to put their lives on the line for others.

Soon after reporting George as missing and then as killed in action the army tried to communicate with the family. His father, being illiterate, had to travel into the nearest town, Quorn, and have a shopkeeper there translate the letter to him and write back on his behalf. This would have been a very difficult piece of information to hear at all, let alone not being able to understand it yourself.

George Wells' death was one of many in Passchendaele and sadly his exact whereabouts and how he died are unknown. The last time he was seen alive was only reported to the AIF in October 1921 in a letter from his father (see page attached), also named George Wells, stating; *...the only information I have is that a Private named Harold Cummins was wounded laying in a shell hole when my son came along badly wounded [on] the 12th October in a big battle in 1917... at Passchendaele.*

The only Harold Walter Cummins on the Australian War Memorial's records was not a Private, but a Field Company Engineer who was involved in the Battle of Passchendaele. He survived the battle and the war as an engineer, who were seen as vital to the war's operation.

After the battle was over, likely the next day, soldiers were sent to collect the belongings of the men that were killed so the items could be forwarded to their families and the bodies may be buried in a mass grave. On George Wells' person was a Bible, wallet, photos, badge, an elephant trinket and two Franc notes – both damaged. This shows true mateship from the soldiers in how they saw each other as friends and found each of the possessions important to mate's loved ones.

Although he was only at war for a little over five months, not very long compared to some; he deserves the same recognition as he fought for his country wholeheartedly. Every ANZAC soldier faced some of the most horrific sights they would ever see, and many didn't live to tell the tale. They left fiancés, wives, children, and parents to fight for the freedom that we and our allies have today, which is something that all Australians are grateful for and cannot be expressed through simple words of thanks.

Today, in Plympton RSL there is a photo of George Wells in his army uniform, the exact reason as to why it is there is unknown as he had no direct connection to Plympton or the RSL in general. Through further research it happened to be that two of his nieces inherited this photo and they gave it to the Plympton branch of the RSL during a visit there. With the photo are also his three medallions; a British War Medal, a Victory Metal and a Star.



George Wells - Australian War Memorial Archives

Through researching my great, great uncle I've come to understand the hardships of war and also the bravery and courage the ANZACs showed that is unlike any other army. I feel honoured to be part of a country that has such incredible soldiers, now and then, and also in being able to research one of Australia's fallen heroes.

MK

AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.

Base Records Office,

Melbourne, 15th August, 1921.

Mr. G. Wells,

QUO EN.

S A

Dear Sir,

I regret very much that, notwithstanding the efforts of our Graves Services Unit, we have so far been unable to obtain any trace of the last resting place of

your son the late No. 3465 Private

G. Wells, 48th Battalion,

and, so that no possible source of information shall be overlooked, I shall be much obliged if you will let me have on loan any letters or communications that contain any reference to the circumstances surrounding his death, particularly the exact locality at which it occurred, or where he was last seen alive. Of course any information you may have received as to his burial would be of the greatest assistance. The reason these steps are being taken is to identify, if at all possible, those bodies that are being recovered but which have nothing on them to definitely establish identification, and thus obviate the necessity of interring them in the new Military Cemeteries under the heading "An Unknown Australian Soldier."

Only those portions of any letters having a direct bearing or reference to the above need be forwarded. They will be carefully preserved and returned without delay.

If you have nothing that will help, would you kindly let us know, so that we can advise the overseas authorities.

Thanking you in anticipation,

Yours faithfully,

J. McLean

MAJOR,

Officer in Charge Base Records

C.10408.

J. McLean

To the Officer in Charge Base Records,
Victoria Barracks,
Melbourne.

(KINDLY SUBMIT YOUR REPLY HEREUNDER.)

(Date) 12 October

Sir I regret that I am unable to give you any information regarding my son where he was at the time when he was missing or killed the only information I have is that a Private named Harold Cummins was wounded on laying in a shell hole when my son came along badly wounded the 12th of October in a big battle in 1917. as near as I can say but am not shure at Passchendaele. If I get anymore information I will let you know.

Yours Faithfully

G. Wells

Willochra Post Office
South Australia

Extract for A.G.S. London
- Killed 12.10.17. -
Vicinity Passchendaele.
15/9/57
AH

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