

Tom Bell Wheeling

A tribute to my great grandfather

By Griffin Bell McLaughlin



Private Tom Bell Wheeling (Regimental No: 7132), October 1917.

My great grandfather, Tom Bell Wheeling, was born in Ipswich, Queensland, on the 17th of August 1888. Tom was the eldest of eight children, three boys and five girls, born to James and Mary Wheeling, who had emigrated from Glasgow, Scotland, aboard the *Cloncurry* in 1886.



The Wheeling boys, Tom (rear), John Walter (left front) and Jim, photographed by F.A. Whitehead, Ipswich.

Tom lived almost all his life in Ipswich. From the age of 15 he worked as a junior shop assistant at Cribb & Foote, a prominent Ipswich department store. Originally a drapery shop, the firm expanded to become one of the largest stores in Queensland. When war broke out in 1914, Tom was almost 26 years old and was working for the firm as a commercial traveller, travelling long distances by train to sell all manner of goods to squatters, farmers and business people across the State.

Tom was not amongst the first rush of young men to go off to war. Perhaps as the eldest in the family, and with a steady job, Tom felt some responsibility to stay and continue contributing to the family income. It was not until 6th October 1917, when he was 29 years old, that Tom enlisted. By that stage in the war many soldiers had been killed or wounded and the AIF was desperately in need of reinforcements. Debates about the need for conscription were in full swing and there would have been significant pressure on able-bodied men of Tom's age to enlist. Tom joined up on the same day as his youngest brother John Walter, known to his family as Walt or Wal, who was just 21. The brothers were close, and it is likely that Tom felt a duty to go with Walt to try to protect him at war.



WORLD WAR I
WAL & TOM WHEELING
9 AUSTR INF BN AIF

Both Tom and Walt were originally placed in the 21st reinforcement of the 26th Battalion but were later moved to the 9th Infantry Battalion, which consisted of men from Queensland and Tasmania. They embarked from Sydney on the *SS Ormonde* on March the 2nd 1918. They



journeyed to Suez in Egypt where they disembarked on the 4th of April and stayed for several weeks. During the journey at sea and in his time in Suez, Tom took photos which he sent home to his family and to Elsie, his sweetheart of several years. Tom's photos suggest that he is enjoying the experience of travel, documenting small moments: A photo of a grinning Sergeant, with Walt in the background looking out to sea, and another of camels on Anzac Day: "I had a race on one of those camels", Tom wrote.



Another photo shows a group of Armenian refugees who had just arrived in Suez: “This was a pitiful sight to see”, Tom wrote, “The poor women and children, and makes one realize the horrors of war”.



Leaving Egypt from Port Tewfick, Tom and Walt arrived in South Hampton on the 15th of May 1918. Through the summer the brothers trained with rifles at Candahar barracks in the English village of Tidworth. They also trained at other English camps such as Fovant and Sutton Veny.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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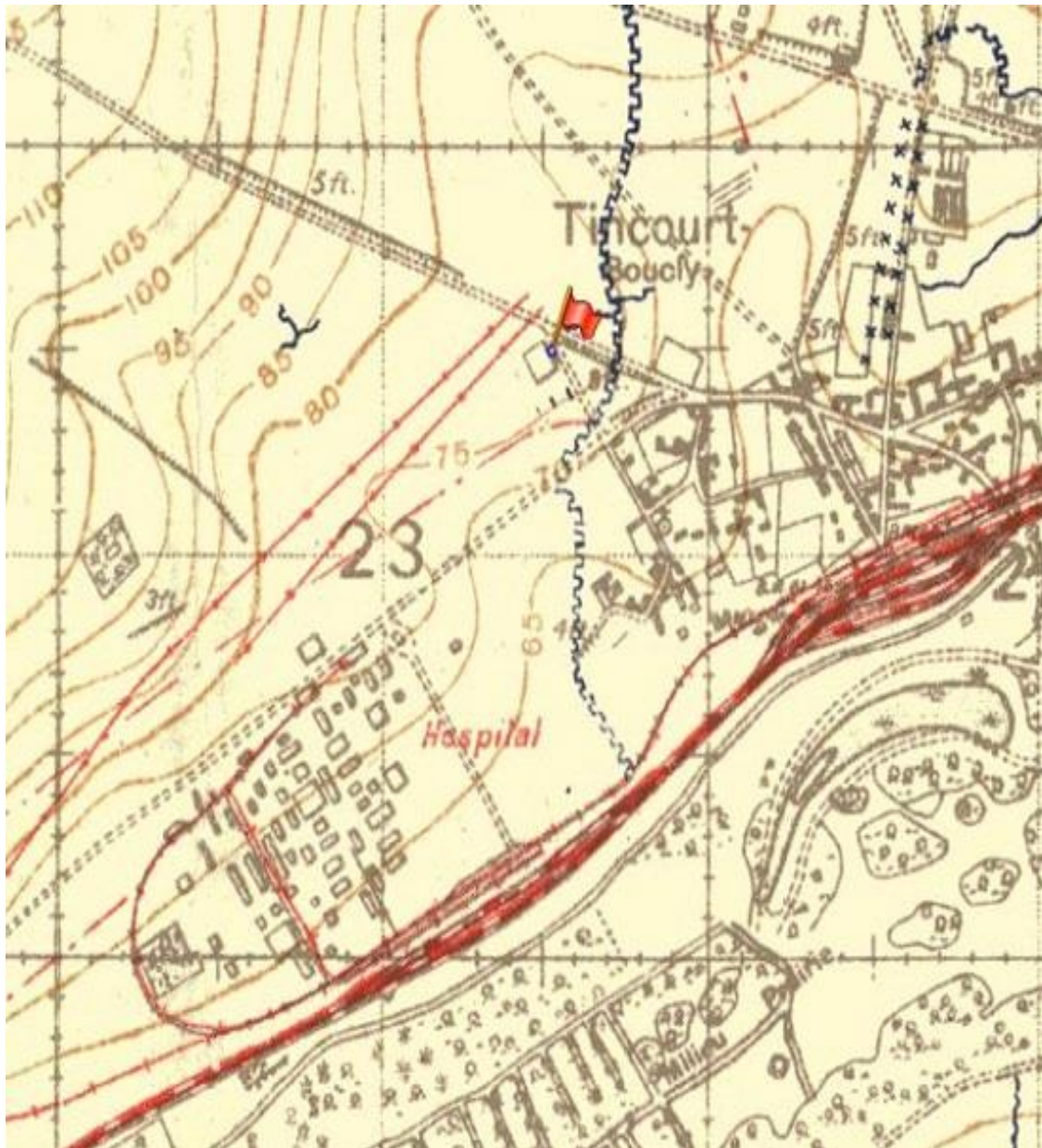
Australian soldiers in their room at Candahar Barracks.

In August 1918, the brothers left England for France to fight with the 9th battalion. At that time, World War I was reaching its climax, and Tom and Walt were part of reinforcements brought in during the final stages of the Hundred Days Offensive. On 18 September, the 9th battalion had fought in the Battle of Epehy, successfully breaching German defenses on the Hindenburg Line. Tom and Walt joined their unit just after this battle on the 20th of September and took up positions in trenches near Perrone under the command of Lieutenant E.H. Meyer.

However, Tom spent just two days on the frontline as he was wounded on the night of 21st September. As Tom later recounted in evidence presented to the Repatriation Commission: “A shell burst in the mouth of the dugout and buried the occupants including myself. I suffered from concussion, bleeding from the ears, nose and throat. The troops were wearing gas masks when we were dug out.” Walt was stationed a little further along the line and was not injured. When he inspected the dugout a short time later, he too was forced to put on his gas mask due to the presence of gas.

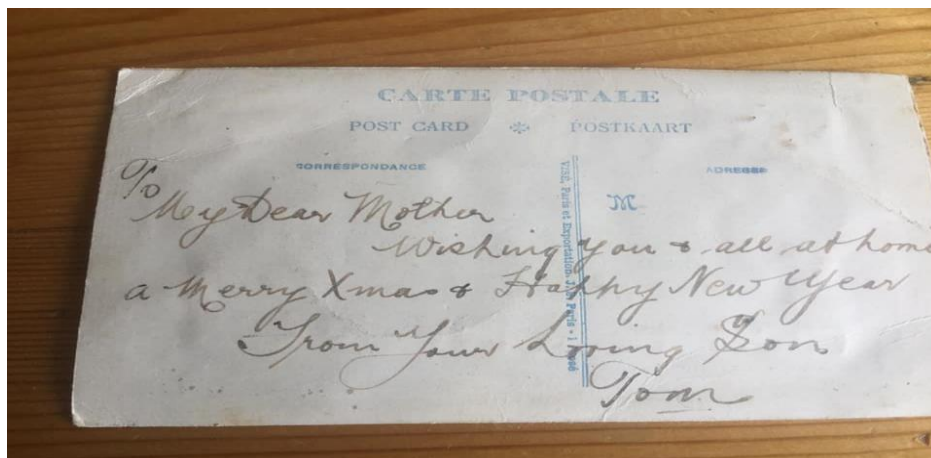
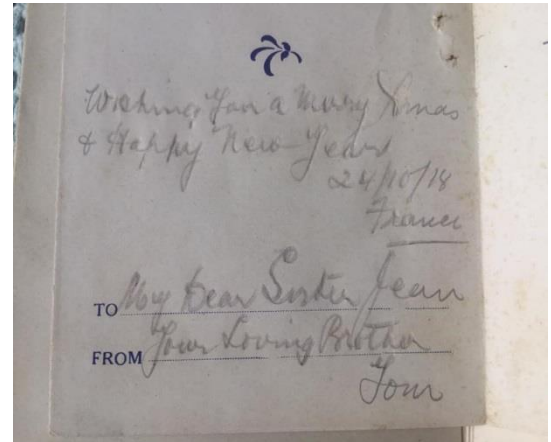
During this stage of the war both Allied and German forces made frequent use of mustard gas shells and so it is not surprising that Tom would have been exposed to mustard gas even in such a brief time on the frontline. However, in the years after the war Tom’s exposure to gas and the role it played in his declining health became a highly contentious issue with implications for the level of support he and his family were to receive from the government.

Following the shell blast, Tom was taken to the 53rd Casualty Clearing Station in Tincourt Boucly where, according to his service records, he was admitted with “shell concussion”.



Map showing location of 53rd Casualty Clearing Station at Tincourt Boucly, France, 1918.
Source: *Gazetteer of the Western Front: Tincourt – The Long, Long Trail*

He was then transferred to a major war hospital in the Allied port of Le Havre in Normandy where he spent several weeks. During his stay in hospital in France, Tom wrote to his family on beautifully embroidered silk postcards depicting pansies and violets, such as were often sent by soldiers on the Western Front to their loved ones at home.



On the 3rd of November Tom was taken to England, still suffering with shell concussion and loss of hearing. He would remain in England until the end of the war, never entering battle again. On the 10th of December 1918 Tom embarked for home on the *Somalia*. Tom remained in France until the end of the war and then served with the Pay Corps in London before returning home in September 1919.

Tom arrived back in Australia on the 19th of December 1918 and married Elsie Emma Stephens on the 14th of April 1919. He was medically discharged from the AIF on the 19th of April 1919. His Medical Report at the time of discharge states that he was expected to make a full recovery. However, this was not to be. Just as so many returned soldiers had found, the period after the war was difficult and painful for Tom. His health had been greatly damaged in his short time at war and he was unable to continue in his former job as a commercial traveller. Although his old firm had readily re-employed him on his return, Tom found that he no longer had the stamina to undertake long train journeys. In statements he later made to the Repatriation Commission, Tom described how one day, while travelling for work, he had suddenly blacked out: "I found the train travelling too severe. On one occasion I collapsed in the train and was unconscious for about one hour." After five months Tom resigned from the firm and took up work as a storekeeper in Ipswich.

In 1922 Tom went into business with his brother Jim, operating a general store at Five Ways in Ipswich. Tom's son, Lex, was born in 1920, followed by a daughter, Betty (my grandmother), in 1925. The family lived at Brisbane Road in East Ipswich. With a business, family and home established it would seem Tom had settled back into civilian life well.



Betty, Tom, Elsie and Lex (c. 1932)

However, during this period Tom continued to suffer from headaches, noises in the head and dizziness. He also began to experience greater fatigue and signs of chest trouble. By 1926, he was having difficulty breathing. In 1928, his doctor ordered him to have three months off work, after he suffered a nervous breakdown, with loss of weight, sleeplessness and further difficulties with his lungs.

At the time of his discharge from the AIF Tom had been granted a pension at 25% to take account of the hearing loss he suffered as result of the shell blast. In 1920, this was reduced to 20% to continue indefinitely. In 1929, on advice from his doctors, Tom applied to the Repatriation Commission for a re-assessment of his pension to take account of his lung condition. In his application, Tom states that his doctors have advised that he is suffering from pleurisy and pulmonary tuberculosis and that he must give up all work and move out West to a drier climate to help his lung health. He states that he has been trying to sell his business but, owing to the depression, had not been able to find a buyer.

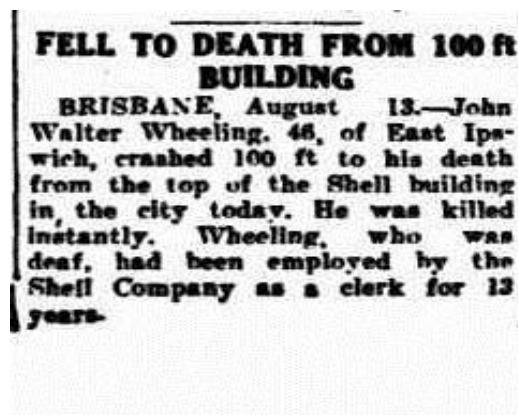
A senior medical officer at the Repatriation Commission assessed Tom's case and recommended that his application be rejected. He concluded that Tom's lung condition was not due to active service, despite evidence given by soldiers and officers who fought with Tom that gas was present when he was in battle. Among these was his former commanding officer, ex-Lieutenant E.H. Meyers who testified that "gas shells formed part of the general bombardment" from the enemy's artillery while Tom was on the line. Walt also testified that the company was

“undoubtedly in a gas area” and that he had “immediately detected gas” when he inspected the dugout where Tom had been shelled.

Tom appealed against the Repatriation Commission’s decision, but his appeal was rejected with gas debated and disputed as a factor in his ill health at every step of the way. The Repatriation Commission was under a large amount of pressure as many soldiers applied for welfare in the aftermath of the war. Despite being in desperate need, Tom’s request for assistance was denied, as was the case for so many other returned soldiers. Over the next few years Tom’s health continued to decline and he died on the 2nd of September 1935 at age 47. His death certificate gave the causes of death as 1) Pulmonary Tuberculosis, 2) Influenza and 3) Exhaustion.

In November 1935, Tom’s wife, Elsie, applied for a war widow’s pension to support herself and her two children, Betty and Lex, who were just 9 and 14 years old when their father died. In her application, Elsie gave further evidence of the long-standing nature of Tom’s ill health since his return from the war. Included with this evidence was a certificate from a Dr E.J. O’Keefe who argued that in addition to the damaging effects of gas, the injuries Tom sustained to his nasal cavity in the shell explosion would have left him vulnerable to contracting pulmonary tuberculosis. Dr O’Keefe concluded that: “All things considered, it follows that his illness was a direct result of his military service on behalf of his country”. However, this view was rejected by the authorities and Elsie’s application was denied by the Repatriation Commission and then by the Entitlement Appeals Tribunal. In the absence of support from the government, it fell to the local Legacy Club to provide for Tom’s family in the years following his death.

Walt had come through the war without physical injury, although his service records show that he was hospitalized with influenza in October 1918. He was lucky to survive this as many military personnel died as a result of the flu pandemic which took hold in the final months of the war. Back in Australia, Walt found employment as a clerk at the Shell Company in Brisbane. In 1930 he married Henrietta Frances Humphries. The couple lived in East Ipswich, not far from Tom and his family, and Walt travelled by train to work in Brisbane each day. Tragically, Walt died prematurely at age 46 when he fell from his office building on 13th August 1942.



Morning Bulletin (Rockhampton, Qld: 1878-1954), Friday 14 August 1942, p. 5.

At the time, my grandmother Betty years was 16 years old and was working as a secretary in Brisbane. She had travelled by train with Walt from Ipswich that morning as she did most days. Betty was devastated to hear what had happened to her uncle with whom she was very close. It is not clear if Walt took his own life or if his fall was an accident. However, my grandmother recalled that he was troubled by his wartime experiences and deeply sad in the years following Tom's death.

When my grandmother talked about Tom to my mum, she said he was a quiet and gentle presence in her life. She remembered him calmly sitting in his chair with a blanket tucked over him. But underneath that was a great amount of pain; his lungs were slowly breaking apart and he was partially deaf from a sudden burst of intense shell fire. I am amazed that Tom managed to remain quietly dignified through all the pain the war caused him. I am struck by the way Tom cared for others. He was always gentle and caring to his family and fought in WW1 alongside his brother, trying to keep him safe. Through his time travelling to the Western Front, I get the feeling that Tom was one to appreciate the small pleasures of life.

Tom's story has an impact on my life, as we share a middle name: "Bell". I am grateful to have learned about my great grandfather's story and to have had the opportunity to pay tribute to him close to where he was treated for his injuries at Tincourt Boucly on the Western Front. I hope to take the values he held: resilience, a gentle nature, and care for those around you. I hope I can emulate them for my family, friends, community and world.



Paying tribute to Private Tom Bell Wheeling at Tincourt New British Cemetery, 23 April 2019.

You Were There with Me

You were there with me by the creek
Catching tadpoles in the sun.

You were there with me the day we jumped the fence and ran
Out across the plains to where the mountains stood.

You were with me the day we stood in line,
“Good job mate”, they smiled at us, “You’ll be back a real man”.

You were there with me on that long but peaceful voyage,
Looking out towards the sea.

You were there with me riding camels around Giza,
The Sergeant grinning at our glee.

You were there with me at those camps in England’s summer,
Staying fit and healthy, aiming rifles carefully.

You were there with me fighting in September,
The world was loud, and gas was always coming.

One shell was all it took to take you from the fighting.
We journeyed back both wounded men.
The wind was cold and biting.

You were there with me after,
As we tried to float a corner store.

Your wounds too great,
Doctors claim too late to give you aid for surviving.

In 16 years’ your time is done.
You are not there with me.
Please keep watching over,
With gentle smiles,

Private Tom Bell Wheeling.

Griffin Bell McLaughlin, 2019.



My great grandfather, Tom Bell Wheeling.