

As I sit here, the sun warms my back, I listen to the melody of bird call and gentle rustle of leaves in the breeze. I try to imagine what it would have been like here for Uncle Col just three generations before.



My great, great uncle Albert Colin Morris was born in 1886 in Ballina, a beautiful coastal town in New South Wales. His parents and four older siblings immigrated to Australia from Wales 3 years earlier. Col's father William died in 1887 leaving wife Teresa a widow, alone to look after her eight children in a new country.

Albert spent four years studying at the University of Sydney where he was awarded a Bachelor of Engineering in 1909. He was part of the University Scouts, a sort of militia.

In 1913, Col's Engineering qualifications took him to Broken Hill to pursue his career in mining. Here he lived and worked, shortly earning himself a well-paid position as Chief Surveyor in the town's prosperous Zinc Corporation.

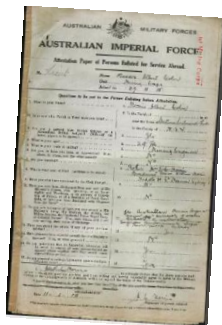
The gradually settling weight of the Great War had begun to show in the bustling mining town, as more young men left their jobs and families and set off to fight for England on the other side of the world.

From January 1915, Col became involved with the local 12th Field Company, Broken Hill, but he had not yet enlisted. The Field Company consisted of volunteer miners who participated in military drills and training.



Newspaper excerpt from Broken Hill's "The Barrier Miner"

Col officially enlisted in the Mining Corps on 21 October 1915. At 28 years old, his application named his mother as next of kin. A medical examination at the time recorded that he weighed as 8 stone and 12 pounds, and he was 5 feet 2 inches tall. Albert's application was accepted shortly after in November and he was sent to the Engineers Reinforcement Depot in Sydney for 9 weeks military training.

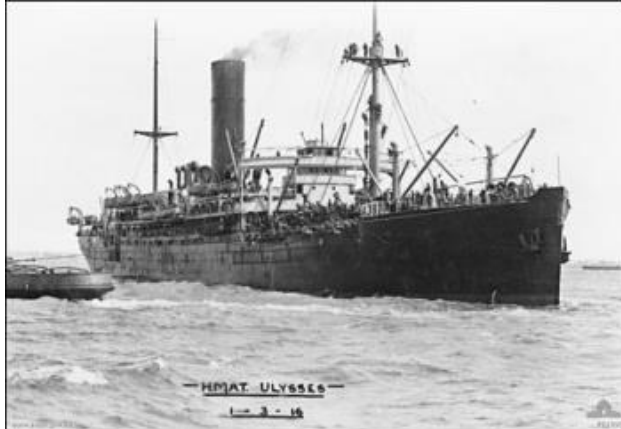


Col's enlistment documents

On 27 November 1915 Col was appointed 2nd Lieutenant in the Australian Imperial Force. The next three months were a whirl wind of promotional and recruitment parades about Sydney, as well as some additional training. These were intended to rally capable men who had not yet enlisted and gain support and donations from the public.

Col embarked from Sydney to the Western Front on 20 February 1916 aboard the *Ulysses*, along with about 1200 other miners and engineers. A great crowd gathered to farewell the departing soldiers as they paraded in uniform down the city domain. Families waved their beloved sons, husbands and brothers goodbye; many would not return.

Via Melbourne, Perth, Alexandria (Egypt) and Valetta (Malta) the troops arrived in Marseilles, France on 5 May. The journey was riddled with challenges; leaky hulls and engine problems earned the *Ulysses* her nickname of "Useless".



HMAT Ulysses

Only three weeks earlier, the arrival in port after an unpleasant time at sea had caused a party of about 120 miners to 'jump ship' and run *"like a lot of released school boys up the main street of Alexandria"* (Major T.W. Edgeworth David). The men were eventually rounded up (after a night spent in the local prison and a fairly displeased Major, I expect) and were returned to the ship. I don't know if Col was involved with this, he seemed a generally calm person from all accounts and at 29 he was older and wiser than perhaps most of the young adventurous men onboard. The excitement amongst the soldiers at arriving in a new country, Egypt, having never left Australia before must have been absolutely terrific.

On arriving in France, the Mining Corps was disbanded, and three Australian Tunnelling Companies were formed. Col was made Captain of the 3rd Australian Tunnelling Company and he was to remain leader of his company until Allied success and the end of the war.

Col's company relieved British tunnelling companies in April 1917 at Hill 70. Already extensive tunnelling systems had been set up and German encounters had reduced by the time the Australians arrived. Their main job here was to create trench dugouts that provided much needed shelter to the ground troops.

As opposed to the loud gunfire of the fighting above ground, the tunnels were eerily quiet. Ankle deep mud and water often lay along the floors of the underground paths and miners suffered infected feet from the moist environment. The men had to stay quiet, speaking only in hushed whispers to avoid enemy miners in nearby tunnels from hearing where they were. Miners often ran into enemy tunnels, they fought in hand to hand combat.



1st Australian Tunnelling Company, led by Captain Oliver Woodward. Showing the terrible tunnelling conditions.

The company was also heavily involved in road and bridge construction and the locating and clearing of enemy mines and booby traps. This continued for the company some months after the Armistice was signed.

On 28 September 1918, Major Alexander Sanderson from the 3rd Australian Tunnelling Company, recommended Albert for the Military Cross award: *“This officer has been employed on the Hill 70 front for over 2 years. He has commanded a section since 24.7.16. During the past 7 months his section has completed over two miles of Infantry Subway in very exposed positions on the Hill 70 front. The success of this work is largely due to the example of gallantry and devotion to duty always shewn by Capt. Morris.”*

It was well after the fighting had ceased that Col left France. In mid-1919, Col travelled to England and stayed with relatives in London where he met his wife, Muriel Alice Webb. They married in December 1919 and 6 months later embarked for the voyage to Australia, on board *Bahia Castillo*.



On returning to Australia, Col and Muriel moved to a rural cattle property near Pymble, New South Wales. Here he developed his love for work horses and the great, wide cattle grazing lands. After being underground so much in such horrendous conditions during the war, I can understand why the returned soldiers of tunnelling companies would choose to spend their time in the open air.

Together they had a daughter Muriel Catherine Morris and lived in Pymble until retirement when Col and his wife moved to Morpeth. Then when Muriel died in 1963, Col moved only 8 kilometres away to live his daughter and her family.

Albert Colin Morris died on 27 October 1973, aged 87 years. He was buried at Saint James Church, Morpeth, NSW.

The truth is, I will never be able to understand what Col experienced fighting in the war. I will never understand long sleepless nights, waking up in sweats, shaking from the memories of constant gun fire or the contrasting eerie silence of the mining tunnels.

It can be difficult to relate to an event that occurred over 100 years ago. However, while researching the stories of many men and their families I have learnt just how much the war still effects people today. A perfect example of this is ANZAC Day Dawn Service in Villers-Bretonneux. Thousands of people stood in the cold morning to pay their respects to the men who fought and died for their country.

By the time we got to Hill 70 on the Western Front, I still felt as though I had so much to learn about this person. How do you summarise a person's life and experiences at war in one small presentation? Standing there at Hill 70, where Col had been part of the great mass of fighting men in the war, brought me closer to not only his own story, but that of the thousands of the mining men in World War One. I began to realise the sheer impact of the war, and how so many people's stories were deeply intertwined to form the great tapestry of war.

As a young child, my grandmother Pam remembers playing in her Great Uncle Col's well-kept front garden as he watched her from the battered old weather-board veranda. Col never talked to his family about his time at war, my grandmother didn't know he served until well after he died.

Both my grandma and I share Col's love of horses. Col's grandson, Ross Clarke, remembers how his grandpa taught him how to carefully oil the saddles and bridles. Ross tells of a gentle man, a kind man, who loved his animals, working in the garden and going on trips.

I hope that by sharing Col's story his legacy will continue to inspire people like me to take an interest in their incredible stories and keep the memories alive.

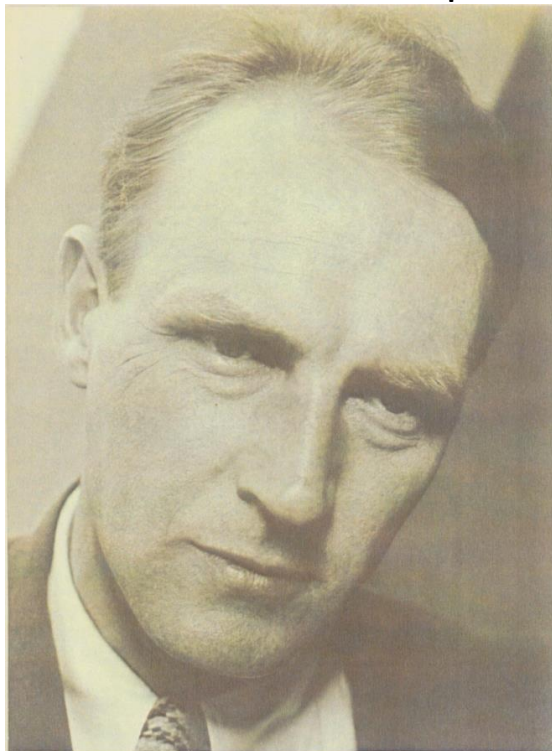
The rabbit holes...

When I was awarded the Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize (FMMP) I anticipated that I would learn a lot about the significant people and events of World War One and I have but I also learned that this is not what the prize is really about. And although the previous recipients attempted to tell me this, it's something I needed to experience before I understood that the FMMP is about making connections. It's about a deeper understanding of not the facts and figures but that this happened to real people just like me. The technology of the time has rendered them, old fashioned, blurry and so 'not like us' but actually they were unique individuals just like us swept up in events beyond their control. We must not glorify or celebrate these events but we must honour the memory of those real people, who through a twist of fate and timing were there.

This interconnectedness became so obvious when researching my soldiers, it is impossible to separate a story and look at it as an event not connected to anything else. The story may have the soldier at the centre but he has family and friends with their own stories, he has circumstance, luck, tragedy, all wound up together. As I followed the threads in my research one story led to another story which leads to another and all of a sudden I'm off down and 'unrelated rabbit hole' away from my soldier.

I went down many rabbit holes and made many connections in the course of my research. Here are two:

1. Ekkehard Beinssen and Captain Richardson



Ekke Beinssen

My great grandfather, Ekke Beinssen, was a second generation Australian of German descent. He was sent to Germany for education and was in Berlin at the outbreak of World War One.

He fought as a soldier in the Triple Alliance but remained connected to Australia and returned after the war.

Ekke was a great letter writer and diarist and these are still in my family. His letters give great insight into him as a person and also the thinking of the time.

1 August 1914 – 15 year old Ekke was in Berlin. He wrote to his sister...

“The people were in an awful excitement they were crying Hurrah! Singing ‘Die Wacht am Rhein’ and all sorts of patriotic songs, and giving toasts to our Emperor. Around the Schloss were thousands and thousands of people, all screaming and behaving themselves how I have already described it. Just as we passed the Kaiser the Kaiserin and the Kronprinz appeared at the window of the Schloss, at whom the people took off their hats and screamed hurrah! Til they were quite hoarse. Now and then a motor appear full of ‘Extra Blatter’ which a little boy throws out onto the street after which the people run like mad-I have never seen something so interesting and grand but also so terrible as this. Because just fancy the people who are screaming today will perhaps lie dead on the battlefield tomorrow.”



By October 1917 he was a battle weary soldier on the western front when he received a letter informing him of the death of his beloved grandmother. He wrote to his sister again...

"I would liked to run home and throw my arms around you and pour out my grief-stricken heart to you and tell you death is of no consequence, it's nothing, nothing at all. Anyone who saw death as I did is no longer afraid of it and must tell himself that it is better for the person concerned than life. For anyone who is still sensitive to the misery on a battlefield – and thank God I no longer am – must come to the conclusion that life is something bad and that death is a release from evil. Perhaps I am still too affected by my latest impressions, but everyone who has seen all that I have seen and experienced must come to this conclusion."

In the same letter he refers to his experience of volunteering to lead 8 men out into no mans land to retrieve the wounded...

"Now you have to imagine the battlefield; there is not a blade of grass to be found, not a tree that is more than a black stump, and one crater after the other full of water, full of mud, full of barbed wire. We eight men now walked along the frontline in the pitch black night, had to lie flat whenever a flare went up and arrived just as the alarm was sounded that the English were attacking. We were all without weapons, a distinctly uncomfortable feeling. On the way we were fired on by shells and just had to get ahead as quickly as possible and consequently fell from one pool of mud into the next...

To make matters worse, masses of dead lay around on the roads and in the craters so that we often stepped on one of them by mistake. Horse too lie around in great numbers. You can imagine that after that night I was dulled to the sad news about our darling grandmother. Really, it is impossible to imagine such a war, such shell-fire and such mud. But I am blunted to everything and am no longer in the slightest afraid of shells or other dangerous things."

The story of Ekke and Captain Richardson is well known among the members of my family. And yet no one really knows who he was. Ekke wrote of finding the body of an Australian Soldier...

"The Tommies had already advanced when they saw us coming in extended order so that the counter-attack was completely and totally successful. They suffered huge losses and we also took several prisoners. They were all Australians opposite us and I have letters belonging to a fallen Captain from Sydney - Mr G. W. Richardson. I may also get his photos, which somebody else has. A bit later they took off his boots. I must say, there was a lot of looting. A pilot who came down was undressed down to his shirt when he had hardly hit the ground. I think it is really disgusting and of course I didn't do it, though the enemy are also guilty. Perhaps I can write to the relatives of Mr Richardson after the war. I am sending you the letters."

It was common place for the ID tags to be taken from dead soldiers from both sides and handed to the red cross. The ID tags had already been removed but Ekke took letters from the dead man. Whether he was also searching him for valuables we'll never know but I do believe, being a man who valued letters so much himself, he had every intention of trying to return them. Unfortunately he never got the photos he mentioned.

After the war Ekke returned home to Australia but he never returned the letters. Maybe he didn't want to inflame the anti-German sentiment, maybe he wanted to put the entire experience behind him.

Ekke's son, my grandfather has done some research. Captain Richardson was a belt maker from Sydney before the war but there is very little information about family. We haven't found a photo yet. My grandfather and I are going to continue down this rabbit hole together.

It was incredible to be able to visit his name on the Menin Gate and leave a poppy and some leather belting to show he is remembered and honoured to this day.

2. Jack Cannon – Sapper 15th Field Company Engineers.



As part of the FMMP we are given the name of a soldier remembered at the Soldiers Walk Memorial to research. I was randomly given the name of Jack Cannon, remembered at tree 174.

In another example of how connected we are, I found out that Jack was the uncle of a friend of my grandparents. I got to meet the Cannon family and they shared with me the beautiful story of Jack Cannon, who went to war to protect his young brother, Jim. This is truly a reminder of how small a world we live in and how the impact of war touches all.

It is impossible to talk about only one man in this story, it is a story of brothers.

At 29 and half way through the war I don't think Jack (officially Joseph John) Cannon planned to join the insanity happening on the other side of the world.

However, his younger brother James Dominic Cannon, known as Jim, was evidently quite enthusiastic to be part of the cause. So much so that at age 17 he gave a false age to be allowed to sign up.

Jack Cannon signed up on the same day. He was a loyal family member with a sense of responsibility to keep a protective eye over his younger brother.



Jack Cannon, right, with his younger brother Jim.

After enlisting and a short time training in NSW, they travelled via Egypt and arrived in France July 1916. In December 1916 Jack and Jim were side by side in a trench in Belgium when Jack was shot in the head. He died the next day. In another twist of fate, the trench where Jack died was very near the site of the Battle of Waterloo. Which his grandfather survived almost exactly a hundred years before.

And imagine young Jim, now just 18, one second next to his brother, the next Jack was dead. Just like that. I can't even begin to imagine what this must feel like, *have* felt like. His big brother who had his back, his connection to home, to family, to peace was cruelly, *heartbreakingly* ripped away in a matter of seconds.

And of course, he wasn't the only one left alone. Families ripped apart, friends wiped out, this was the experience of war for so many.

After Jack's death, Jim reportedly had "several brushes with authority" including giving a false name and being absent without leave.

Perhaps this was Jim mourning for his brother, or maybe he now just had no-one to keep him in line. We'll never know this for sure. Jim was wounded in action in 1918 but returned safely home to Tasmania in 1919. He married and named his young son Joe, after the brother he lost in the war. Joe's story as a soldier in WW2 lead me down another fascinating rabbit hole, but that's a story for another day. Joe was a friend of my grandparents.

I have been absolutely amazed by the connections I have discovered while researching this man called Jack Cannon and I feel privileged to be part of honouring his sacrifice and keeping his story alive.

#6716 Sapper Joseph John (Jack) Cannon
15th Field Co, Australian Engineers

Died of wounds, 11th General Hospital on 12th December 1916



Age: 29
Bridge Builder

Roman Catholic
Lefroy

Buried in Etaples Military Cemetery, France.

Enlisted 7/1/1916, embarked 11/3/1916 with 4th Reinforcements. Son of Mrs Mary Cannon later of 'Aspinall's Corner', Hampden Rd, Battery Point & Charles Cannon (dec. miner). Brother of Hannah Maria (Mrs Dean), Bridget Elsie Victoria (Elsie), Julia Margaret, Francis Ellen (Neil), William Charles (Bill), Mary (Molly, Mrs Wilkinson) & James Dominic Gerard. James gave a false age & enlisted (# 6715). Jack enlisted to look after him. Born in Alberton, reared in Lefroy. Employed Public Works Dept. building bridges in Nth Tasmania, working at Victoria Valley near Waddamana at enlistment. Grandfather Joseph Cannon fought at Waterloo (1815), came to Tasmania as a soldier-settler, married at 60 & had 6 children. Jack received shrapnel wounds while sharing front-line dugout with James & died en route to England.

Tree #174

Original tree planted 3/8/1918

Plaque 11/11/2006

Jack Cannon is remembered at tree 174 on the Soldiers' Memorial Avenue and on the honour boards at the Hobart Town Hall