

# The WAGS 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion—Cheops Project (Part 1)

## From little things, big things grow...

By Julie Martin (Member: 5454)

### BACKGROUND

At some time, most Australians have seen the iconic photograph of the men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion AIF on the Cheops Pyramid in January 1915. Framed copies are sold in shops, at markets and on eBay and prints and digital images are available from state and national institutions. A unique and engaging image, it's instantly recognisable. There would be few however, who know the full story behind it and understand its strong connection to Western Australia.

When England declared war on Germany in August 1914, the then Australian Prime Minister Joseph Cook declared 'if the old country is at war, so are we!' Twenty thousand Australian volunteers were promised to help England in its struggle with Germany. One thousand and four hundred of Australia's volunteers were to come from Western Australia.

Towns and regions in Western Australia were given a quota; quotas that were quickly filled by eager, mostly young, recruits; 200 from the Goldfields, 30 from Northam, the same from Albany, 60 from Bunbury and so on. As the men arrived at Blackboy Hill army training camp in the foothills of the Darling Range (near Perth) they were drafted into battalions.

The 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, wholly West Australian in composition came into being on the 17<sup>th</sup> August 1914 and consisted of just over 1000 of the men who had downed axes, picks and pens to join up. For many it was the opportunity to earn a good wage; Australian soldiers were to be paid 6/- a day, whereas their British counterparts were to receive only 1/- per day.

The majority of the non-commissioned officers of the 11<sup>th</sup> were long-serving Citizens Forces soldiers or regular personnel. Some had previously fought in South Africa during the Boer War and others in the British Army. The new recruits however, were, for the most part, young mill workers, miners, farmers, clerks and labourers.

In late October, after months of discipline



*'Just as the men went down' – family members join recruits at Black Boy Hill, August 1914. Courtesy of the Inman Family, Perth WA.*

and drilling, the men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion finally entrained to Fremantle and boarded the troopships *Ascarnius* and *Medic* for an unknown destination. Originally, that destination was to be the United Kingdom where they were to complete their training; however, after stopovers in the Cocos Islands and Colombo, orders were changed due to concerns about overcrowding in the proposed training camps. At the start of December 1914, they arrived in Egypt.

When 1915 dawned, the men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion plus thousands of other Australians and men from England, New Zealand and elsewhere were camped in the shadow of the pyramids at the Mena Camp outside of Cairo. There, the battalion's eight companies were reorganised into the four that existed under the British Army establishment and further training was undertaken.

On Sunday, January 10, 1915, the officer in charge of C Company, Capt. Charles Barnes, recorded in his diary: 'After Church this morning, the whole Battalion was marched up to the Pyramid (Old Cheops) and we had a photo took or at least several of them.' The

'photo' mentioned by Capt. Barnes is the iconic Pyramid image, but his diary entry was not strictly accurate. Only 703 members of the battalion's full strength of approximately 1,022 were on the pyramid that day. The remaining 300, or so, were involved in other duties or training.

At the end of February, having grown tired of life in the desert, the men rejoiced when orders were received to strike camp. At the Egyptian port of Alexandria, the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion boarded transport ships which headed for Mudros Harbour on the Greek Island of Lemnos. After enduring a further seven weeks at Mudros, they learned that, as members of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade, they were to be part of the covering force for the landing at Gallipoli and therefore amongst the first to land on the peninsula.

**The story of that Gallipoli landing and its place in Australian history is well known.**

Sadly, it is also known that many of the men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion who appeared in the photograph, taken in January 1915, did not survive their time at Gallipoli. In the five days following that bloody

## Cheops Project (Cont.)

April day, the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion suffered 378 casualties; over one third of its strength. Charles Barnes was included in that number, he was killed at the Dardanelles on 28<sup>th</sup> April, 1915.

Almost 100 years later, most of the men in the photograph remain unidentified. Their names can be found on the battalion's nominal roll, but who are the 703 who posed on the pyramid that fine January day, and which face belongs to which man?

Thus the WAGS 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion-Cheops Project, to give names to as many men in the photograph as possible, was born.

### THE PROJECT

The seeds for this project were sown when WAGS vice-president Rob Atkins asked if the Society would like a good quality reproduction of the Cheops photograph. It had been given to Rob, and he thought it might be more appropriate displayed in the WAGS Library.

It was an image I'd seen many times during my working life and one which invariably



Chris Loudon holds an original 11th Battalion-Cheops print held by the State Library of WA. Photograph courtesy of Diane Davidson & West Australian Newspapers.

intrigues and fascinates. Although almost a century has elapsed since it was taken; it has a timeless quality. It portrays a large group of young West Australian men eager for a bit of adventure and keen to do their 'duty' for king and country. I imagine, as they jockeyed for positions on the stones of the Great Pyramid, each man in some way displayed elements of his personality and feelings about being so far from home, as

well as the prospect of imminent combat and possible death.

It was not difficult to accept the offer and two of our always generous members - Bev Russell and Bev Rowbottom - paid for the beautiful customised frame. The photograph is now in a prominent position in the WAGS Library at Bayswater, Western Australia. But the story, of course, doesn't

# WAGS HOUSE GROUPS

[All located in suburbs of Perth, Western Australia]

## ARMADALE DISTRICT

Meeting Date Monday evenings fortnightly  
Time: 7.30pm  
Organiser Robyn Hukin  
Venue 7 Jade St Armadale  
Telephone (08) 9497 7770  
Email armadale-districts@wags.org.au

## EASTERN HILLS

Meeting Date 3rd Thursday of the month  
Time: 7.30pm  
Co-Organisers Diana Boxall & Edwina Shooter  
Venue Mount Helena - please phone for details  
Telephone (08) 9573 1227 or (08) 9572 1286  
Email eastern-hills@wags.org.au

## KELMSCOTT

Meeting Date 1st Wednesday of the month  
Time: 9.30am  
Organiser Colleen Fancote  
Venue Kelmscott Library, Albany Hwy, Kelmscott  
Telephone (08) 9495 4963  
Email kelmscott-hg@wags.org.au

## NORTHERN SUBURBS

Meeting Date 3rd Monday of the month  
Time: 7.30pm  
Organiser Olive Sampson  
Venue Edgewater  
Telephone (08) 9405 3354  
Email northern-suburbs@wags.org.au

## SOUTH OF THE RIVER

1st mm 1st Wednesday of the month  
Time: 7.30pm  
Co-Organisers Barbara Regan & Louise Clarkson  
Venue 3 Bertola St, Willetton  
Telephone (08) 9332 1588  
Email south-of-the-river@wags.org.au  
Special Notes No meeting held in January

## WESTERN SUBURBS

Meeting Date 1st Tuesday of the month  
Time: 7.30pm  
Organiser Gillian Piper-Webb  
Venue Drabble House, Webster St Nedlands, behind Nedlands Library  
Telephone (08) 9204 3364 or 0429 088 182  
Email western-suburbs@wags.org.au

## Cheops Project (Cont.)

end there. Webmaster, Chris Loudon, also a fan of the photograph, having grown up with it etched in his memory, and thinking his grandfather was one of the soldiers pictured; asked if he could scan the photograph before it was framed.

What eventuated, as a result of his fertile mind, and computer capabilities, was a website containing the scanned image overlain by a grid with every man individually numbered. Their features could now be enlarged and their position, in the image, easily identified. The possibility of identifying the men in the photograph was now a distinct possibility.

The idea for this project was, however, not strictly new. Back in the 1990s, military historian, Allan Ellam, and his wife Raye, had also been attempting to name the men in this photograph. Over time, the Ellams



Random 'cropped faces' taken from Grid Row G of the image on the website.

### THE WEBSITE

The 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion website conceived and built by Chris Loudon can be viewed on the Internet at [www.11btt.n.wags.org.au]. Not only can the unedited image of the men on the pyramid be viewed and enlarged, the grid image showing the men and their allocated identifying numbers is also available.

In addition, it contains the nominal roll of the original 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion, making it easy to check whether a particular individual is likely to be in the image, and also has the capacity for the descendants of these men to pay tribute to their particular soldier



Identified - Pte Frederick Noel Arnot in Egypt, January 1915 taken from the Cheops photograph by Chris Loudon, webmaster.



Christmas Day, 1914. Mens Camp in Egypt. Courtesy of the Inman Family, Perth WA.

collected a vast array of photographs and documents and following Raye's death, in 2000, and not well himself; Allan deposited their collection with the Princess Royal Museum in Albany (WA). The curator there, David Theodore, generously provided WAGS with some of the information amassed by the Ellams. Sadly, Allan Ellam died, in February this year, just as this project commenced.

and tell their personal story. Additional information shows where these men were born, where they enlisted and the addresses of their next of kin. Chris Loudon has also painstakingly enlarged and cropped the faces of the 703 men, so they can be viewed separately from the photograph, row by row.

Telling the world about this project has



Frederick Noel Arnot marries, wearing his AIF dress uniform, in Perth 1952. Photograph courtesy of the Pearce family.



Father John Fahy c1954. Courtesy of Archdiocesan Roman Catholic Archives, Perth WA.



Identified – Father John Fahy in 1915, this photograph courtesy of Trose Newspapers Online.

been crucial, as there's no guarantee the families of these men still reside in Western Australia. We've been extremely fortunate to receive enthusiastic support and assistance from the media, especially West Australian Newspapers Ltd. In July of this year, a wrap-around of the photograph, as well as stories about some of the men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion were published in *The West Australian* newspaper, including details of the WAGS project and website. The newspaper continues its support by telling the stories of individual men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion on a weekly basis.

We've also had support from NewsCorp, the ABC, the UK Daily Mail Online, military historians, museums, libraries and enthusiastic supporters of the project, all keen to help with our quest. The frequent compliments and encouragement are also greatly appreciated. The publicity has resulted in an avalanche of emails, information, photographs and narratives and has enabled us, thus far, to identify (name) 208 men. Of these 101 are now verified and the remaining 107 are 'subject to verification', and we anticipate the majority of these will, most likely, be proven to be correct.

The homepage of the website has a link to the project's email address [fvigilans@wags.org.au](mailto:fvigilans@wags.org.au). We ask those with information about any of the men to contact us. If you have a possible identification and can provide copies of photographs, especially

those taken about the time of enlistment, we are eager to hear from you. Experienced researchers then assess the submission and make a judgement. On the website the ID numbers of unidentified men are shown in white, those under review in yellow and those positively identified in green. Men, in the photograph, who died while on active service wear a red poppy.

Putting names to the faces of the men is not without its challenges. Some families know exactly where their man is, having a copy of the photograph marked by the subject himself or having left details as to his position. For others, it's a matter of constantly scrutinising the faces and comparing them with submitted photographs. If families have not contacted us, a small team of Society members trawl



Identified – Pte David Simcock's tribute card 1915 – note the nick-name 'Pinktop'. Courtesy of the Ellum-Innes Collection.

the various repositories and newspaper archives in the hope that images of the men can be found. We have learned that friends, brothers and cousins or those in the same company, are often grouped together and because of this, specific areas of the photo are often a reasonable starting point to search for an individual. Chris Loudon, having scoured the photograph countless times, knows the men's faces well and can sometimes pick out a subject almost immediately a comparison image is provided.

There are however, times when we need to remind families of two crucial facts regarding the men in the Cheops photograph:

- Only members of the original 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion who left Australia in November, 1914, will be in the photograph. Later groups of reinforcements would not have been in Egypt by January 1915.
- Not all members of the original 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion were on the pyramid when the photograph was taken. About 300 men were otherwise engaged.

It's been a revelation to discover how many sons and daughters of these men are still alive, many now in their eighties



Mr David Simcock, a fruiterer in Perth, c1912. Courtesy of the Ellum-Innes Collection.

## Cheops Project (Cont.)



Identified - Cpl Alvared Roe Clifton in Egypt, January 1915, taken from the Cheops photograph, by Chris Leudon, webmaster.

and nineties but with clear and vivid memories of their fathers. Their stories are sometimes sad, always poignant and occasionally even humorous, but always, of course, very interesting.

Liz Tempest told us how her father lost one eye at Gallipoli and went through the remainder of his life with ahrapel in the other. She is the daughter of Cpl Alvared Roe Clifton, (Regimental No. 155), a descendant of the Clifton family, pioneers of Australind in WA's south west region. Amongst many of the interesting stories about her father, which will be published on the web site shortly, was that of her parent's meeting:

*'My mother, a nurse from England came out to Australia in 1923 with a group of work friends who thought it would be fun to do the two year trip for £10. They had to commit to staying the two years or if they wanted to return they would have to pay back the full fare. Unfortunately, all her friends decided to go on to Victoria and when Mum landed in Fremantle she was quite alone, knew no one and was dreadfully homesick. She was committed to work in a hospital of her choosing and chose a small hospital in Adelaide Terrace not far from Dad's family home and it so happened that he was having a very bad attack of eye problems so his doctor put him into hospital for treatment. His eye was totally bandaged and the English nurse took pity on him and having no home to go to, undertook to sit by his bed and read to him on her days off duty...and, as they say, the rest is history. He would say he fell in love with her voice and he*

*proposed to her before he had even seen her. He was 33 and she was 21. They married in 1924, had three sons and one daughter, the first son dying when two days old.'*

A favourite of mine in the photograph is ID No. 335. Lean, lanky, and displaying a cheeky grin, he stood out, leaning nonchalantly against a stone block by himself on the pyramid. I was delighted when he was identified as being Pte Frederick Noel Arnot, (Regimental No. 510A), from Coolgardie who returned to WA in 1918 after service at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. Fred married, almost a decade after his return from active service, but sadly his wife (and child) died soon after, in childbirth. Fred remained a widower until the age of 56, when he married widow Jess Pearce and was drawn into the circle of the loving Pearce family.

Quoting from his step son's recollections of Fred:

*'On arriving in Egypt he (Fred) had an Australian flag tattooed on his right arm. So proud of that flag, you would see him stroke it at times. As age wearied him, he would say, I loved this flag but it doesn't look so nice now. We agreed - muscle loss leaves lots of wrinkles and it had also faded. He was always interesting to have a chat with, but never of himself or war.'*

The stories, like the two above, previously known only to family members, give a wonderful dimension and uniqueness to the profile of each identified man. We've been touched by the generosity of families who have been willing to share their memories, documents and memorabilia. Contact has been initiated by relatives from Switzerland, Canada, New Zealand and every state of Australia. We've also talked to descendants in the Kimberley, the Pilbara, the Goldfields and the South West of Western Australia. We know that men on the pyramid belong to families which have had members of the Federal and State parliaments in their ranks; we know there were brothers, cousins and close friends pictured together in Egypt that day in 1915.

Two well known local identities are centrally positioned in the photograph; one at ground level with the other officers of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion is Father John Fahey DSO, who on his return from the Western Front was appointed founding president of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League, the forerunner to the present Returned & Services League

(RSL). At the end of his career he was the parish priest of Star of the Sea Church in Cottesloe (WA) and when he died in April 1959, over 2,000 mourners attended his funeral.

The other is situated uppermost on the pyramid and was the irrepressible Pte David Simcock (Regimental No. 951), a resident of Leederville and well known fruiterer in Perth. His burial in May 1915 at Baby 700 Cemetery on the Dardanelles would have had few attendees, although his passing was widely mourned in Perth by family and friends, and by fruit growers and others in the market industry as well as his numerous customers.

The Western Australian Genealogical Society Inc. (WAGS), and the Returned & Services League of Australia, WA Branch Inc. (RSL) is holding a Centenary Commemorative Service at:

### *The Flame of Remembrance*

**Perth War Memorial, Kings Park, Perth,  
Western Australia**

**10<sup>th</sup> January 2015**

**Commencing at 09:00am and finishing  
at approximately 10:30am.**

All descendants of members of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion and extended family members, and interested members of the public are invited to attend. The service is being held on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day on which 703 men of the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion were photographed on the Great Pyramid (Cheops) in Egypt. Those descendants who wish to attend the Commemorative Service are asked to complete the registration form on the WAGS website.

At the completion of the official ceremony, descendants will be able to lay wreaths and participate in a group photograph. Copies of this group photograph will be available in the weeks following the event. Photographs of the official event will also be available.

There are countless stories about the photograph; how it came to be taken, how copies made their way back to Western Australia, and myths surrounding the image and stories of the men themselves. These stories will be told in subsequent issues of the Western Ancestor and on the 11<sup>th</sup> Battalion-Cheops website as we continue to identify the brave West Australian men who were photographed in Egypt that tenth day of January, 1915. •