

Exploring the context of a 'ghost of a moment in time'

The WAGS 11th Battalion- Cheops project, Part 2

By Julie Martin (5454)

On the 10th January 1915, the shutter on a camera, strategically positioned to capture the assembled group of 703 men, opened. Light passed through the lens onto a prepared glass plate and the '*ghost of a moment in time*' was created. That 'ghost', the photograph of the 11th Battalion on the Cheops Pyramid Egypt has haunted thousands of people since it first made its appearance in 1915.

Aesthetically, the image is very pleasing and interesting. Most non-Australians would struggle to interpret it and understand its context; nevertheless, those huge blocks of sandstone, the informal arrangement of the men and their varied poses and attitudes, the clarity of their faces, the soft diffused light and tonal range, all have immense appeal.

For Australians, especially those with an understanding of its context, the image has both emotional significance as well as aesthetic appeal. For the families of the men captured by the camera, the emotional appeal is even more affecting.

For a number of reasons, the photograph is quite extraordinary and the more its context is understood, the more extraordinary it becomes.

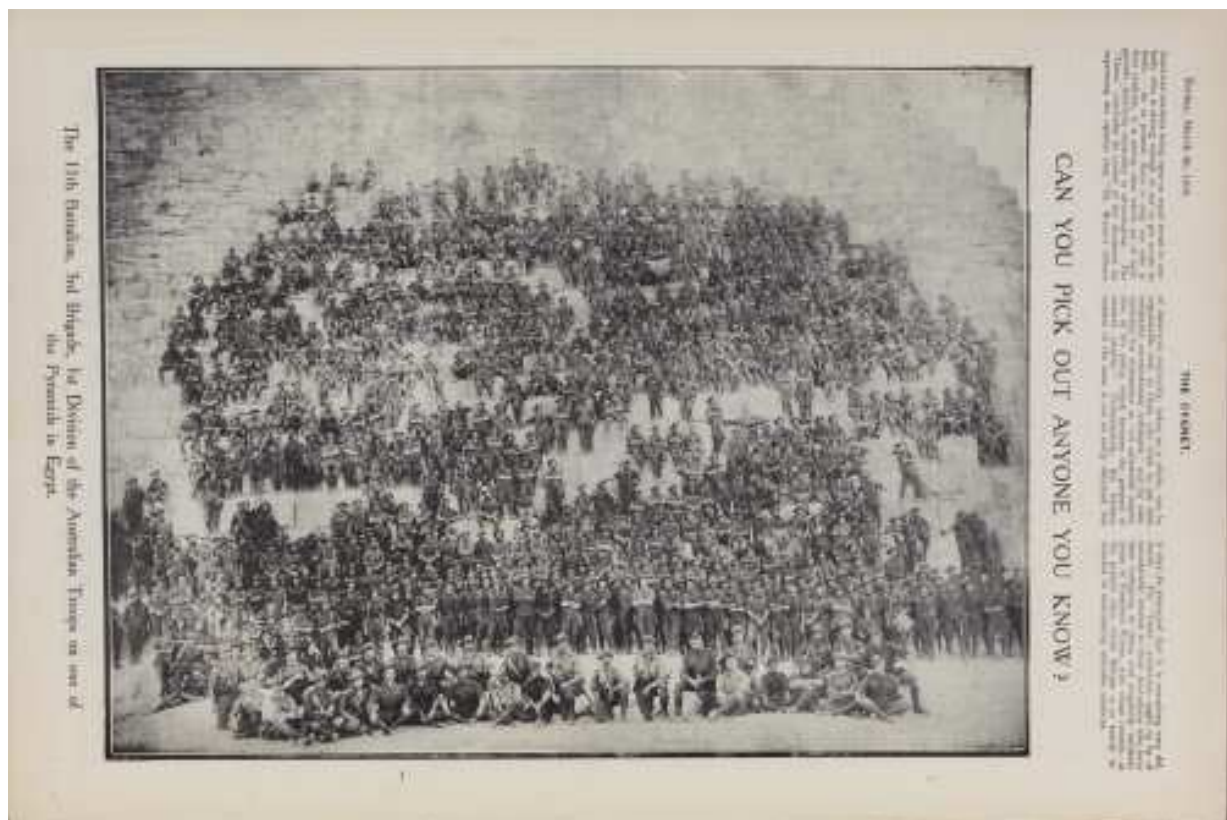
An idea and its execution

Every photograph produced has specific meanings and those meanings depend, not only on form and composition, but also on contexts in which the photograph was produced and in which it is viewed, as well as the background knowledge and information brought to the image.

We've all inherited photographs which mystify us; we don't recognise the people in the images or where or why they've congregated together. The context of these images and consequently their significance is lost.

Such is not the case with the photograph of the soldiers on the pyramid. The 703 men appearing in this photograph were a sizeable proportion of the 1022 members of the original Western Australian 11th Battalion and the identity of the group is not in question.

A mere ten weeks after it was taken, a copy of the photograph was published in a Western Australian magazine, *The Cygnet* in the issue of 26th March 1915, with the heading '***Can you pick out anyone you know?***' Already the quest to identify the men in the photograph had commenced!



There are also numerous references in the diaries and letters of the men of the 11th Battalion concerning the photograph and the date it was taken – Sunday 10th January 1915 - and this date precludes there being any of the 11th Battalion reinforcements in the photograph as the first of them did not arrive in Egypt until early February, 1915.

Captain Charles Barnes started a letter to his mother on Christmas Day, 1914 and continued to add to it until he signed off on Sunday 24th January, 1915. His entry for Sunday 10th January began with the following

'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. Will send one along if they are any good'ⁱⁱ

It would seem that many of the men wrote their letters on a Sunday and Corporal Tom Louch, Ser# 923 (later Lieutenant-Colonel) in a missive to his mother dated 10th January also told her about the events of that morning –

'11th Battalion photographed sitting on first pyramid. It turned out rather well to everyone's surprise'ⁱⁱⁱ

Pte George Medcalf (later Captain) Ser# 1048 in his thinly disguised memoir - ***The adventures of Sydney Blobbs in World War I*** wrote –

'On the following Sunday after Church parade, the 11th Battalion was marched to Cheops pyramid and the men instructed to scatter themselves out over its steps ready to be photographed. An excellent picture was the result, it being a unique method of keeping a copy of the original battalion'^{iv}

Captain Medcalf posted a copy of the photograph to his fiancée in Western Australia and for many years it hung in the Medcalf family home in Albany before being donated to the Battye Library^v

Edward John (Jack) Richards Ser# 826, the publisher of the *Northam Advertiser* and a member of the 11th battalion, wrote a series of articles about the AIF in Egypt with the by-line 'EJR', and these items appeared in the ***Northam Advertiser*** and were syndicated in other WA country newspapers. One such account, as published in the *Bunbury Herald*^{vi} stated

'this morning, after church service, the whole of the 11th battalion of Infantry were marched up to the Pyramid of Cheops and clustering over one corner of the pyramid, were photographed. Needless to say, the thousand odd men only covered a very small portion of one slope of the enormous pile. Doubtless a reproduction of this interesting and historic photo will shortly appear in the illustrated press of WA'^{vii}

The final sentence in this paragraph is a strong indicator that it was Jack Richards who sent the copy of the Cheops photograph back to Western Australia. It's reasonable to assume that he would only make such a statement if he had organised and facilitated the publication of the Cheops photo in *The Cygnet*.

Captain Walter Belford in ***Legs-eleven***, his history of the 11th Battalion, also mentions the photograph but does not include the exact date it was taken.

'During the sojourn of the 11th Battalion in Egypt an interesting photograph was taken of the whole unit, with all the officers and men grouped on the massive stones of the Great Pyramid of Cheops. Owing to the remarkable clarity of the desert atmosphere a very distinct picture was obtained, and most of the troops are easily recognisable'^{viii}

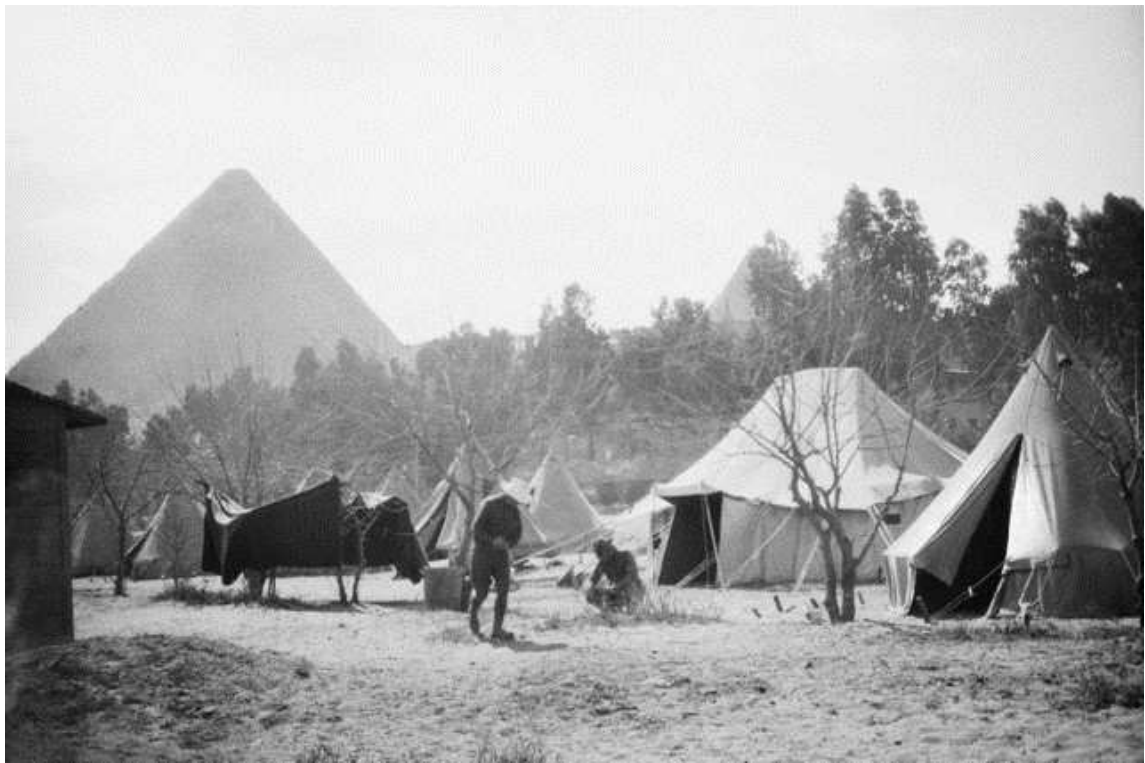
Interestingly, Barnes, Richards and Belford specifically use the phrase 'whole battalion' with Richards going further and specifying a *'thousand odd men'* yet the Cheops photograph only contains 703 men, about 2/3 of the entire battalion. With the exception of Louch, the others specify that the photo was taken on the Great Pyramid (Cheops).

Even in 2015, the logistics of producing a group photo of 703 people are daunting; one hundred years ago many would have thought it nigh impossible. Yet in 1915, such a feat was achieved.

Capt. Walter Belford sets the scene for the whereabouts of the battalion in December 1914

The 11th Battalion, along with its sister battalions of the 3rd Brigade, was now established at Mena under the shadow of the Great Pyramid. This pyramid, "Cheops" by name, was the largest of the many pyramids in Egypt. It was composed of massive stones, some of incredible size, and an active person could climb from stone to stone and thus reach the small flat top. Cheops was the dominating feature of the landscape, but there were also two other pyramids close by, of which not so much is known...

It was awe-inspiring for these young Australians to be awakened by the shrill notes of "Reveille" and to see towering above them those ancient monuments of a long gone powerful people, and to realise that the red sun had risen and illuminated these mighty edifices for so many thousand years.'^{ix}



What would be needed to photograph a large group of men whilst keeping each man equally in the eye of the lens?

An experienced photographer, a sophisticated camera and a vertical site, one which could be safely climbed and of such proportions that the subjects could arrange themselves on it with some stability - perhaps a hill, an amphitheatre, a stadium or maybe a pyramid?

As Belford tells us, the men of the 11th Battalion were living in the shadow of the last remaining wonder of the ancient world, The Great Pyramid of Giza. What an eminently suitable and extraordinary setting for a photo opportunity, especially for a battalion of young men, most of whom had seen little of the world.

As for photographers, diaries and letters written in early 1915 by men of the AIF contain many references to local photographers being present at the pyramids and the Sphinx and in the 'shops' which sprang up outside Mena Camp in the weeks following the arrival of the troops in December 1914.

The official war correspondent, Charles Bean in an article syndicated in many Australian newspapers in February 1915 expands

Besides those who have built shops in the camp, a certain number of natives have been allowed to build a number of shops in a small sandy valley between camp and the pyramids. Within a week there has sprouted up there a small village. It has a military street about 100 yards long with a crowded row of shops along each side. There are photographers, postcard sellers, barbers^x

Australian illustrated newspapers of the time contain many images of individual soldiers or groups with the backdrop of the pyramids or Sphinx and similar original photographs feature prominently in the collections of Australian institutions. Resident photographers and photographic opportunities were readily available to the 11th Battalion in Egypt in 1915.



Unearthing the inspiration behind the Cheops photograph and the organisers has proved to be the most difficult task.

In 2015, most photographic images are spontaneous. Practically all of us have the means to capture an image instantly on any one of the electronic devices we carry about with us. Not so in 1915. Photography was complex; few people owned or knew how to operate a camera and the capturing of an image was an organised and calculated action. There is no doubt that the Cheops photo was many days or weeks in the planning.

The only clue behind its organisation is given surprisingly by a member of the 10th Battalion, Ben Chadwick, Ser# 1097, an apprentice compositor from Renmark, South Australia who in a letter written on Boxing Day, 1914 remarked

*'The lads that came over on the **Ascanius** are trying to get their photos taken in a group and if they turn out alright I will forward one on to you so that you can get a block made and reprint it in the **Pioneer**^{xi}*

Chadwick would have been on the lookout for material to send back to his local newspaper, the *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* and it's clear that he was referring to the lads of the 11th Battalion, the only other group on the **Ascanius** apart from his own 10th Battalion. It's also clear from his comment that the idea of a group photo was mooted well before the 10th January 1915 and that it was the men rather than the officers who were behind its organisation. Nevertheless, consent and approval would have had to come from the Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel J Lyons Johnston who made mention of the Cheops photograph stating that it was to '*commemorate the campaign and be a souvenir of the war.*^{xii}

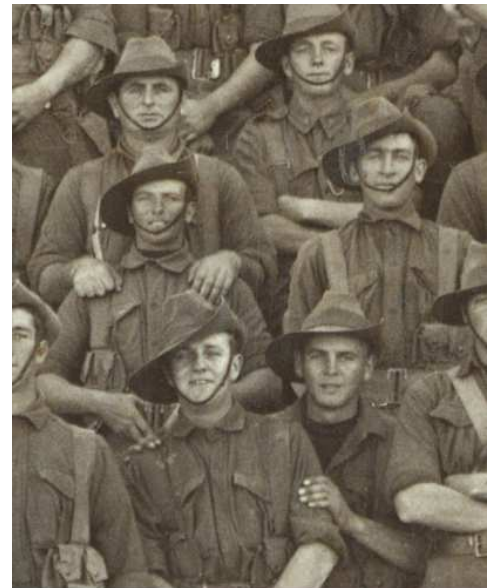
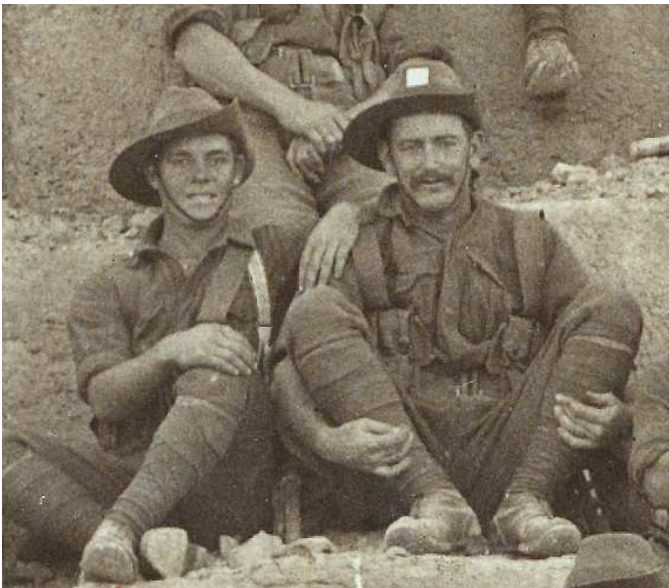
George Medcalf was the only other chronicler who stated a reason for having the photograph taken - '*a unique method of keeping a copy of the original battalion.*' However, Belford may have

sensed in the men, a foreboding of what lay ahead and the need to come back together as a Battalion following their separation during the long voyage from Australia to Egypt.

*From the time of embarkation at Fremantle on October 31, until the arrival at Alexandria, the 11th Battalion had been split up in the **Ascanius** and **Medic** and mixed with troops of other units. Under such circumstances any battalion loses its identity as a separate body of troops and becomes more a part of a ship's complement than a separate entity..... Previous to this again, it was merely a unit in training at Blackboy Hill, but now the 11th Battalion takes its place as a unit of the 3rd Brigade, and all its future history is bound up with that of this famous brigade.....^{xiii}*

If the opportunity and motivation for recording the battalion in this unique way were the reasons the photograph was taken, surely other battalions would follow suit? There are numerous group photographs of companies and platoons of individual AIF battalions in private and institutional collections; however none display more than two hundred men or have the appeal of the 11th Battalion image. None are composed as well as this image or have its clarity.

The two cropped images (below) from the Khufu (Cheops) photo illustrate this clarity.



Was the organisation of a photograph containing such a large group indicative of a unique and strong bond amongst the men who enlisted in Western Australia and trained at Blackboy Hill? Perhaps..... Was it simply the idea of a creative mind in the 11th Battalion? We can only speculate.

Whatever the motivation, it was for many of the men, the last in which they would appear. For others, it was a memento of what they thought would be a great adventure and what turned out to be a harrowing and life changing experience. Sadly, for some it was the last image of themselves as 'whole' men; for all, it signified the camaraderie, the reliance they had on one another and the bond which was to remain with them for the duration of their lives.

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Note: This article first published in **The Western Ancestor** April 2015

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- ⁱ The Cygnet. F 052A CYG. (SLWA) 1915, 26 March
- ⁱⁱ Photostat copies of letters from Charles Albert Barnes to his mother, 1914-1915. 1DRL/0091 (AWM)
- ⁱⁱⁱ Memoir. T S Louch. (Private Collection)
- ^{iv} The adventures of Sydney Blobbs in World War I. F G Medcalf. 5304A/2 (SLWA)
- ^v 4496B. (SLWA Pictorial Collection)
- ^{vi} Bunbury Herald. 1915, 16 February
- ^{vii} Legs-eleven: being the story of the 11th Battalion (A.I.F.) in the Great War of 1914-1918. Belford, Walter C
- ^{viii} Op. cit
- ^{ix} Op. cit
- ^x Kalgoorlie Miner 1915. 20 February
- ^{xi} *Murray Pioneer and Australian River Record* 1915 11 February
- ^{xii} Gallipoli: the Western Australian story. Wes Olson p21
- ^{xiii} Legs-eleven: being the story of the 11th Battalion (A.I.F.) in the Great War of 1914-1918. Belford, Walter C