

Memorial Box 1: Australia in the First World War

The Pockley family



Captain Brian Pockley, c. 1914

Twenty-four year old Brian Pockley was working as a medical practitioner at Sydney Hospital when war was declared in August 1914. Without hesitation, he volunteered for the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC) and shortly afterwards found himself en route to Papua New Guinea as part of the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) that had been raised just days after war was declared.

Britain and Germany both held territories in the south-west Pacific and even shared a border that divided Papua New Guinea into two separate colonies; one British and the other German. With warships from the German East Asiatic Cruiser

Squadron patrolling nearby, Australia found that the enemy was on its doorstep.

The AN&MEF was ordered to destroy Germany's wireless stations in the region. At dawn on 11 September, the 1,500-strong force approached New Britain and Brian went ashore with a party of naval reservists. But the German troops stationed on the island were prepared for the attack and a series of skirmishes along the Bitapaka Road ensued.

As they approached the first German position, Brian heard that Able Seaman William Williams had been shot in the stomach and immediately set out to find him. Brian quickly saw that Williams needed urgent medical attention, so he ordered Leading Stoker Kember to take him back. In the hope that the German troops would respect the symbol of the Red Cross and allow Williams to be carried to safety, Brian tied his Red Cross armband onto Kember's helmet.

Brian returned to the fighting without his Red Cross armband but was himself shot soon afterwards. Both wounded men died later that afternoon.

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Brian's younger brother, John, had been a farmer living with his wife, Nancy, in Yarran Springs when the First World War began. Although Nancy had recently given birth to a son, John enlisted for service just months after Brian was killed in action. Like his older brother, John served with the AAMC and initially worked on hospital transport ships before being sent to the Western Front.

As spring arrived in early 1918, Germany launched a huge offensive on the Somme. John was on the frontline near Villers-Bretonneux on 30 March when he was wounded by machine-gun fire.

Stretcher-bearers offered their assistance, but John told them to take another man he believed was suffering more than him. By the time they returned, John was dead.

John was buried nearby, but despite his family's desperate enquiries his grave could not be located after the Armistice. He is remembered on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial in France, along with nearly 11,000 other Australian soldiers who have no known grave.

Brian and John were among over 2,800 sets of two brothers who both lost their lives in the First World War. Their nephew, John Antill Pockley, served as an eye surgeon with the 2/9 Australian General Field Hospital in New Guinea during the Second World War.



2nd Lieutenant John Pockley, c. 1915

Activities for research and classroom discussion



The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) on their way to New Guinea, c. 1914

1. This was the first group of soldiers to depart from Australia. How do they appear in this photograph? How do you think they might have been feeling?
2. What expectations do you think they might have had?



Able Seaman William Williams, c. 1914

3. Able Seaman William Williams was the first Australian wounded in the First World War and he later died as a result of his injuries. William's death was reported in newspapers across Australia. How might this news have affected perceptions of war at home in Australia?

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H. Septimus Power, "Stretcher bearers", c. 1922, oil on canvas, 69 x 94 cm

4. H. Septimus Power travelled to France in 1917 as an official war artist, where he witnessed the actions of stretcher bearers firsthand. How have the stretcher bearers been depicted in his painting?
5. How has he emphasised the dangers associated with their role?



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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John's grave at Hangard Wood, c. 1918-1919

6. John's grave could not be located after the Armistice in spite of the assistance provided by the Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau of the Australian Red Cross. Investigate the role of this organisation. How did they provide assistance to families anxiously waiting to hear about the fate of their loved ones?

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