

## *Memorial Box 1: Australia in the First World War*

### *The Holden family*



*Albert Holden and son, Norman, c. 1918*

In 1898, Methodist chaplain, Albert Holden, and his wife, Martha, welcomed the arrival of their second son, Norman Gladstone. Having lost their first son at birth, it was a very special occasion for the Melbourne couple.

Two years later, Albert accompanied the Victorian Fourth Contingent to the Boer War. The South African conflict lasted for almost three years and almost 16 000 Australian troops were sent to assist the forces of the British Empire. As a chaplain, Albert provided the men of the Fourth Contingent with spiritual guidance and support.

Albert's skills and expertise were again called upon years later when the First World War erupted in Europe. In 1916, he was commissioned as chaplain-general of the Methodist denomination and in August he travelled to the front line to report on the state of the chaplaincy service.

Albert's son, Norman, who had not yet turned 18, accompanied him as his batman. Norman had been a student at Wesley College preparing to study medicine, but the opportunity to be in the thick of the action must have seemed like a grand adventure for a boy still too young to enlist. As a batman, Norman was required to care for his father's uniform and equipment, and convey his orders to other officers.

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Albert and Norman returned home in March 1917, but it wasn't long until they found themselves once again en route to Europe, only this time Norman was old enough to be assigned to a fighting unit. In March 1918 he farewelled his father and travelled to the Western Front as a gunner with the 11th Field Artillery Brigade.

By September allied forces were becoming increasingly desperate to break through the Germans' seemingly impenetrable Hindenburg Line. Late in that month, the allies launched an attack against the heavily defended St Quentin Canal.

Positioned near Ronssoy, the 11th Field Artillery Brigade was ordered to provide cover for advancing troops. But on the 29 September, the brigade found itself under heavy shell and machine-gun fire. Among the seven members of the brigade killed during this action was 20-year-old Norman Holden.

Devastated, Albert travelled to the cemetery in Roisel to stand by the side of his son's final resting place. Albert knew that he was not alone in his grief, so he wrote to some parents at home in Australia whose loved ones were buried beside Norman. Mrs Boulton, whose son, Stephen, died of wounds in October 1918, received this letter:

*It has been my privilege recently to visit the little cemetery at Roisel, where the mortal remains of your dear son have been laid to rest. I went to see the grave of my own boy and he lies with over twenty other lads side by side, and one of them is your boy. I thought you would like to have a line from somebody who had stood with bared head at the grave.*

*On the day that the Armistice was signed, whilst shouts of rejoicing could be heard in every direction, I stood alone with a lump in my throat, feeling in no mood to wave flags, though deeply grateful that hostilities had ceased and that no more precious human lives would have to be sacrificed.*

Albert eventually returned Australia to resume his chaplaincy duties. Until Albert died in 1935, scarcely a year went by that a memorial notice for his son did not appear in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Argus*, on the 29 September.

*In loving memory of our darling, Gunner Norman Holden ... killed in action, 29<sup>th</sup> September 1918. Until the day breaks and the shadows flee away.*

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*Activities for research and classroom discussion*



*A chaplain writing a field card for a wounded soldier in Salonika*

1. Chaplains have played an important role in all the wars in which Australia has been involved. How might they have helped troops far from home during the First World War?



*Artist unknown, "Quick! Give us a hand old sport", Queensland Recruiting Committee 1914-1918, chromolithograph on paper, 100 x 63 cm*

2. What is the purpose of this poster? Who is this poster designed for?
3. What kinds of techniques have been used to appeal to that audience?
4. Design your own poster. Who is your audience? What kinds of techniques would be most appropriate?

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2nd Aus. F. A. Bde.

6/10/1918.

Dear Mrs. Boulton:

It is with the very greatest regret that I write to inform you of the death of your son Lieut. S. F. Boulton of our 6th Bty. who was killed in action on the morning of the 3rd inst. during heavy enemy shelling of the Bty position.

We buried him, side by side with 3 other Officers of the Brigade who were killed the same morning, in the Military Section of the Civil Cemetery at Reisel (East of Peronne) and the Unit will erect substantial crosses over the graves.

I know how miserably inadequate all expressions of sympathy must seem to you at such a time, but I do want to assure you that we all feel very deeply for you in your sorrow.

Throughout the Brigade your son was highly respected and well liked and we who were privileged to be his comrades very deeply mourn his loss, and can imagine something of what his death must mean to his loved ones in far off Australia.

Please accept our deepest sympathy with you all

Yours faithfully,

(Sgd.) F. Theodor Webb.  
Chaplain,  
2nd. Aus. F.A. Bde.

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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*A letter from Albert to Mrs Boulton, c. 1918*

5. How do you think Mrs Boulton would feel reading this letter?
6. What do you think she would have written in her reply?

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART91794

*Bob Merchant, "60th anniversary of opening of the Australian War Memorial, Remembrance Day, 2001", c. 2002, oil on canvas, 150 x 250 cm*

7. Albert writes in his letter to Mrs Boulton that he felt "in no mood to wave flags" when the war finally ended on 11th November 1918. This day has since become an important anniversary for communities across Australia to remember those who were lost. How does your community commemorate Remembrance Day? Who do you remember on this day?

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