

# BEHIND THE LINES: OTHER STORIES OF THE GREAT WAR



## Queensland soldiers in Vignacourt and Naours

*Presented by*

*The Royal Historical Society of Queensland Commissariat Museum*

*and*

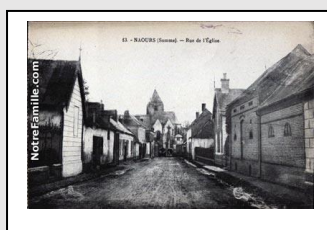
*Intercultural Consulting Group.*

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**RHSQ**

The Royal Historical Society of Queensland



During the Great War, the front could be compared to a huge machine which had to be ceaselessly fed, as much with men as with commodities (rations, water, fuel), as well as weapons and munitions from “***behind the lines.***”

From the first months of the war onwards, hundreds of thousands of Allied soldiers came from the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth but also from mainland France and its colonies to fight on the Western front between the Province of West Flanders and the Aisne in France. The areas behind the front served as giant hubs at the intersect of not only new recruits but also soldiers returning from the front for a rest while on leave, as well as injured soldiers evacuated from the hell of fighting. All the logistics necessary for supplies of men and weapons were in place in this pivotal geographical area, removed from enemy fire whilst at the same time close to the frontline.

The First World War is invariably characterised by the mindless slaughter of troops, the images of men running over the parapet, the mud, and the trench warfare. The major battles are celebrated and commemorated; places such as Fromelles, Pozières, Bullecourt and Passchendaele.

However, in the daily lives of the soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) these were the exception. More common was the drudgery of war. Soldiers were in the front line for only part of the war, while much time was spent behind the lines resting in French and Belgian villages, in billets, and on bivouac. There soldiers had the opportunity to have baths, repair equipment, write letters, get drunk and perhaps visit brothels.



Despite the connotations, it was not free leisure time but simply a respite from the trenches and the hazards of the front line. There was still much work to be done behind the lines; sometimes soldiers were busier behind the lines than they were in the trenches. Manual labour featured heavily, and so did tedious tasks such as drill, parades, and repetitive training.



While training and on rest, soldiers were often placed in billets; temporary lodgings provided to soldiers by the AIF when they were stationed behind the front lines. The troops were accommodated in a range of civilian buildings that had been acquired for military use. They were often placed in farmhouses, but the ranks also slept in barns, halls, or whatever accommodation was available.



*Photos courtesy of the Australian War Memorial collections.*

## The Towns and Villages “behind the lines”

In Northern France in Picardy, the villages and towns of **Vignacourt** and **Naours**, Flixecourt, Bertangles, Abbeville and Etaples and many other were always behind the front lines. For much of the First World War, they were staging points, resupply stations, casualty clearing stations and recreation area for troops of all nationalities moving up to and then back from the battlefields on the Somme.

Soldiers rotated into and out of the front lines to provide a break from the stress of combat. They spent four to six days in the front trenches before moving back and spending an equal number of days in the secondary and finally, the reserve trenches. This system of rotation, along with occasional leave to England, prevented many soldiers from breaking down.

There was more free time in the rear areas, even though soldiers were ordered to train and provide work parties for the front. When not engaged in these activities, soldiers could idle away hours in a YMCA hut for a local village, often the centre of a soldier's social life. These provided a quiet space in the daytime to catch up on reading and writing, and a gathering space for concerts or lectures in the evening.

Sports also relieved the stress of war and the monotony of soldiering. The army saw sports such as boxing and football as good for morale, fitness, and keeping soldiers out of trouble. The soldiers loved their games.

( selected texts courtesy *Life in the Rear- Jessica Bretherton AWM*)



Photo Naours 1916 courtesy AWM

## Vignacourt

Vignacourt was distant enough from the fighting to be beyond artillery range but close enough to be an important billeting place, rail centre, base, and training area for troops within what became the British sector of the front. Its importance would ebb and flow, depending on the closeness of the fighting. At various times it also held headquarters, a signals centre and hospitals, and for a while an airfield operated on its outskirts. For many troops Vignacourt was a refuge. Many remembered it as a place where they recovered from heavy battle and prepared for the next. During the war thousands were billeted in houses or slept in the local barns, stables and lofts. The surrounding fields were alive with training grounds and camps. Evenings were often free, with the chance for troops to visit the cafes and estaminets, which filled with rowdy banter and merry laughter over plates of eggs and chips and glasses of beer or wine.

For a couple of months in late 1916 and again in 1918, hundreds of Australians struggled down from the Somme winter trenches to Vignacourt. Here baths and laundries were set up and army stores issued fresh clothing. Most important of all, there were homes with women, children and even pets. It was a rare glimpse of the domestic life they had left behind. Young Frenchmen were noticeably few, as most were away serving in the army. Still there were always some around, mostly soldiers on leave visiting their families.

Vignacourt is the story of how one enterprising photographer took the opportunity of this passing traffic to establish a business taking portrait photographs.

Captured on glass, printed into postcards and posted home, the photographs made by the Thuillier family enabled Australian and other soldiers to maintain a fragile link with loved ones at home.

Courtesy Peter Burness AWM

## **Naours**

The underground portion of Naours began as a quarry in antiquity that was steadily enlarged over successive centuries. The empty subterranean chambers gave area residents a convenient place to store goods and take shelter from the elements, and to hide from raiders and roving armies looking for supplies. By the 17th century, thanks to the rampant destruction of the Thirty Years' War, the underground city had a large and fairly well-settled contingent of residents. Consisting of 300 rooms and 28 galleries, the Cité souterraine de Naours hosted roughly 3000 people at its height. Along with these human inhabitants, there were also spaces for keeping livestock, as well as three chapels, multiple town squares, and a bakery with working ovens. The chimneys from these ovens and from any other fires underground were carefully routed through the existing structures aboveground to hide the existence of the daily life taking place 22 meters (72 feet) below ground.

As Western Europe stabilized and hiding in caves for long periods of time became less necessary, the existence of this underground complex was forgotten until it was rediscovered in 1887. True to its past form, the hidden network of chambers was a popular sightseeing attraction among World War I soldiers on the Western front as well as a billeting village

located well behind the lines for soldiers from many lands. Today it boasts the highest concentration of graffiti from the Great War. It was also used as a headquarters by occupying Nazi forces in World War II. The Cité souterraine de Naours is today one of the largest tunnel networks in northern France.

### **Bertangles**

In 1918, the Chateau of Bertangles was the Australian Corps Headquarters. Manfred von Richtofen, otherwise known as **the Red Baron**, was shot down near Corbie and later buried with full military honours in the cemetery at Bertangles. He was later moved to the Fricourt German Military Cemetery before being repatriated to Germany in 1925. On the 12 August 1918, George V visited the chateau to give General Sir John Monash, the commander of the Australian Corps, his knighthood.

### **Abbeville**

No. 3 Australian General Hospital was based at Abbeville from June 1917 to April 1919. Abbeville was headquarters of the Commonwealth lines of communication and a number of hospitals were located here. Most wounded came in by train, some seriously wounded on barges. During the German offensive, 3AGH worked as a Casualty Clearing Station with some wounded arriving direct from the front on motor vehicles and other transport.

### **Étaples**

Étaples is a very old fishing town and port, which lies at the mouth of the River Canche in the region of Pas de Calais in Picardy. The Étaples Army Base Camp, the largest of its kind ever established overseas by the British, was built along the railway adjacent to the town. It was served by a network of railways, canals, and roads connecting the camp to the southern and eastern fields of battle in France and to ships carrying troops, supplies, guns, equipment, and thousands of men and women across the English Channel. It was a base for British, Canadian, Scottish and Australian forces.

The camp was a training base, a depot for supplies, a detention centre for prisoners and a centre for the treatment of the sick and wounded, with almost twenty general hospitals. At its peak, the camp housed over 100,000 people; altogether, its hospitals could treat 22,000 patients.

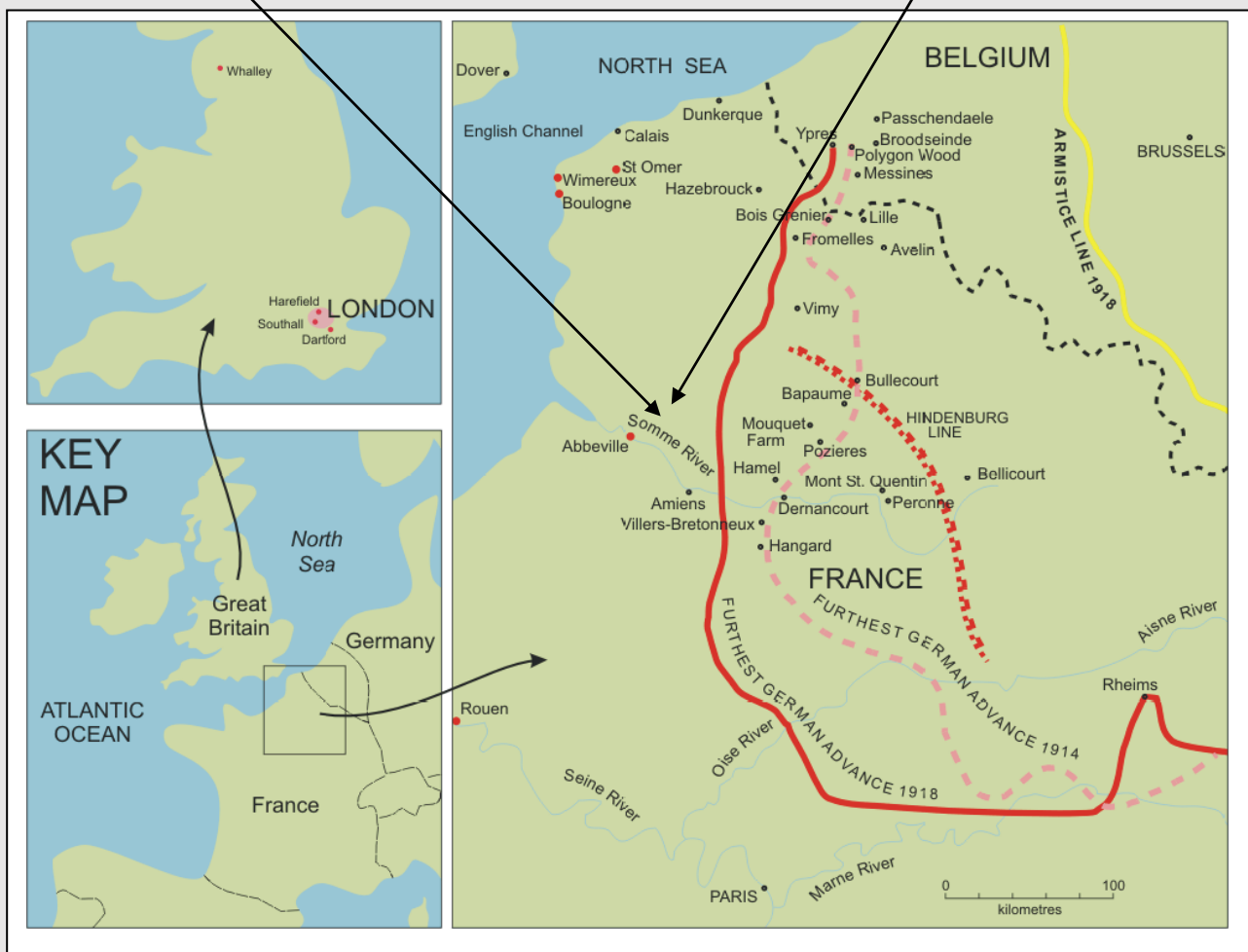
With its vast conglomeration of the wounded, of prisoners, of soldiers training for battle and of those simply waiting to return to the front, Étaples could appear a dark place.

## Flixecourt

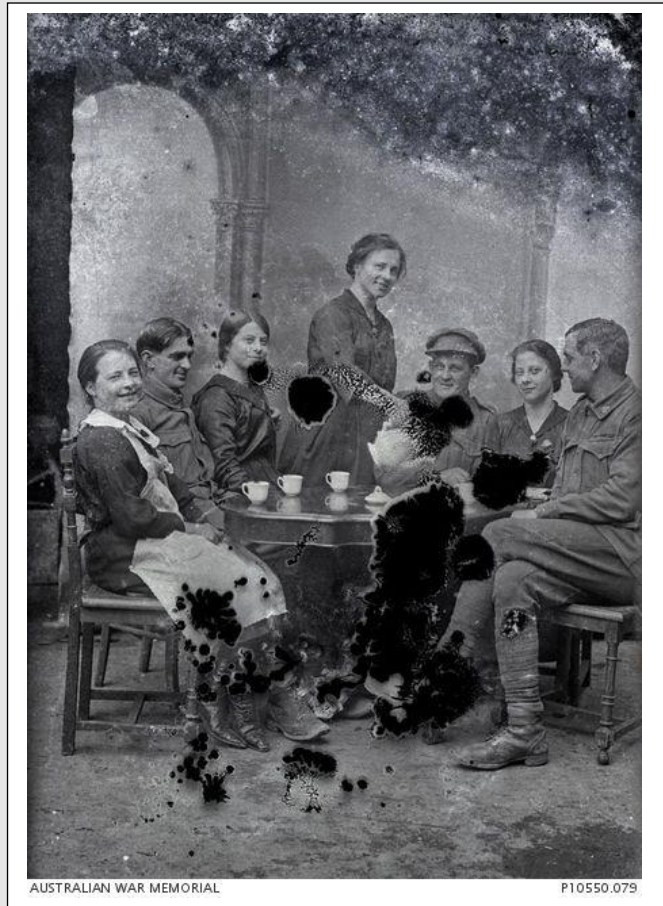
Flixecourt is about 25 km south of Abbeville. It was a major training centre for the British and many soldiers would be stationed there to undergo officer and other training. The discovery of a new natural fibre, jute changed the destiny of both the town and the region. Large weaving factories had been established there before the war and with the outbreak of war were given the task of producing all the camouflage netting for the great war. Locals and Scottish weavers were employed. The factory was electrified in 1907. Before the outbreak of World War I, 14,000 people were employed here. The town was the factory, and the factory was the town. The owners set in place all manner of improvements to the daily and social life of the workers. Piped water supplies and electricity to all homes, a school, a creche, a pharmacy, a maternity hospital and a co-operative. The huge chateau in the town became the Headquarters for many military commanders during the war.

## Vignacourt

## Naours

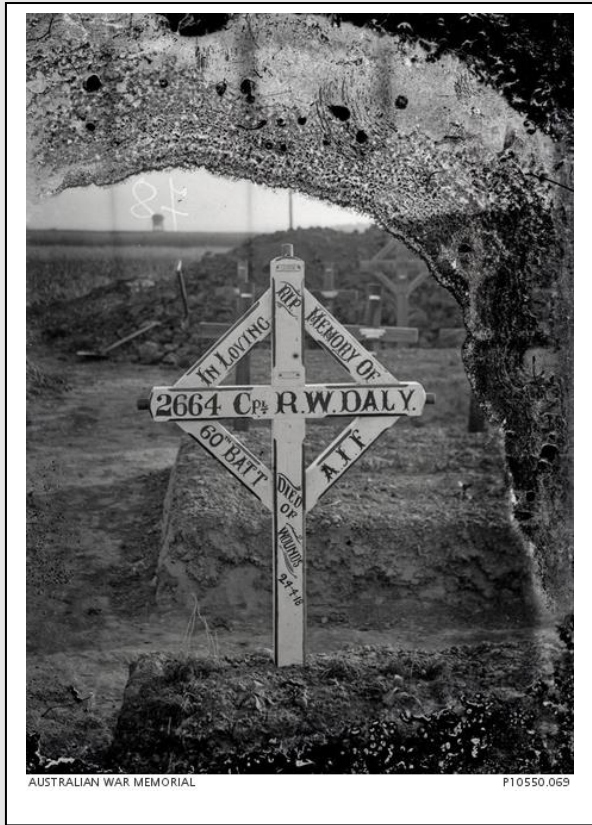






AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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## Vignacourt

Photos Courtesy of Kerry Stokes Collection, Louis and Antoinette Thuillier Collection

# The Photographers of Vignacourt

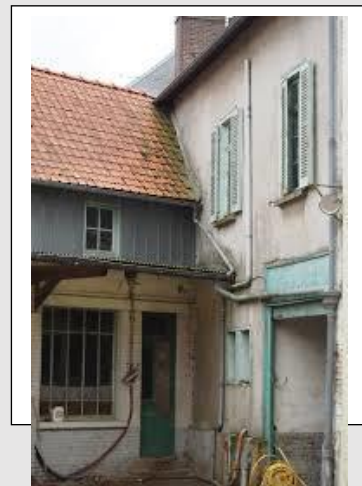
## Louis and Antoinette Thuillier



Who were the Thuilliers?

Louis ,a local farmer (returned from battle) and Antoinette Thuillier, his wife, set up a photographic studio in the small behind the lines town of Vignacourt, France. During the First World War, they took thousands of photographs of allied troops as they passed through the village on their way to and from the front line.

Nearly 100 years later, these photos were discovered, still sitting in the attic of the Thuillier's farmhouse. Enterprising locals, Louis and Antoinette, were interested in photography, They turned their home into an outdoor studio and advertised for soldiers to have their photographs taken. Thousands passed before their lens. Among them were many who would shortly die in battle. The recovery of the Thuilliers' glass plate negatives, still held in the attic of their house and containing images of hundreds of diggers, was widely reported in 2011.



## The Thuillier Collection Vignacourt

The Thuillier collection covers many of the significant aspects of Australian involvement on the Western Front, from military life to the friendships and bonds formed between the soldiers and civilians. This collection is perhaps one of the most important legacies of the Great War for Australians in particular because it offers an insight into the war as never seen before. It offers images of soldiers away from war but still showing the effects of war upon these men. You can identify the soldiers upon arrival in France not knowing what they were to experience and then the soldiers returning from the bloody carnage the expressions on their faces changed forever.

**The Lost Diggers of Vignacourt** collection rediscovered in a barn in Vignacourt in 2010 and brought to life through the generosity of Mr Kerry Stokes and the research of Laurent Mirouze, Peter Burness and Ross Coulthart tells a little known story of the life of soldiers far from home.

Of the 800 Australians portrayed in the collection only around 160 are identified. The remainder are poignant memories of events 100 years ago. This is an ongoing project today.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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### Armistice Day 1918

Courtesy of the Kerry Stokes Collection Louis and Antoinette Thuillier Collection

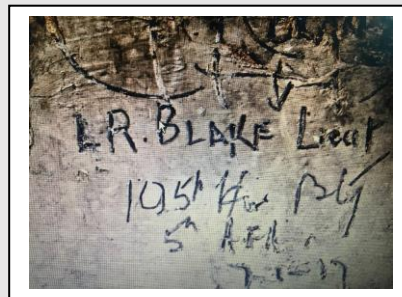
## The Medieval Caves of Naours

Just a few kilometres from Vignacourt is the village of Naours. It is here that soldiers also were rested but something else that is remarkable happened here. It is not a battlefield but a huge site of forgotten graffiti.



Photos Courtesy Gilles Prilaux and Dominique Bossut

While behind the lines, AIF soldiers and others visited this 20 kilometres cave network that lies beneath the village. Used in medieval times as a sanctuary it became during the Great War a place of respite. Here soldiers left over 2000 signatures on the cave walls. It is another forgotten story of life behind the lines. For some it was there last parting message to the world before they were killed on the surrounding battlefields. They came here, spent a time with mates, remembered and pondered on their lives and those left over 12000 km away in Australia. French Archaeologist **Gilles Prilaux** and his team rediscovered the graffiti at Naours recently and is now passionate about the stories behind the names on the walls of the caves and ensuring that the legacy lives on. The Silent Soldiers of Naours are now a living legacy to the events of 100 years ago.



Photos Courtesy Gilles Prilaux and Dominique Bossut

## **Our Queensland Soldiers “Behind the Lines”.**

**World War I** impacted on many aspects of everyday life in **Queensland**, Australia.

Over 58,000 Queenslanders fought in World War I and over 10,000 of them died.

The outbreak of war created a heightened sense of patriotism; the recruitment call for Queenslanders to volunteer for the Australian Imperial Force met its initial quota of 2500 enlisted men by September 1914.

As Australian soldiers marched off to World War I on a wave of patriotism, Queensland was in a state of political flux. With an increasingly active and unionised workforce, vocal and radical anti-war groups, and a change of government in 1915, the people of Queensland struggled to find a partisan approach towards the war.

Despite these issues, the Queensland Government had a duty to support the war effort, to keep social conflict to a minimum, to provide reasonable living and working conditions for its citizens, and to look to the welfare of returned soldiers and families of soldiers who died.

As the most visible public servants across the state, the Queensland Police were intimately involved in government actions throughout the war. Additional duties were thrust upon them, even as their numbers decreased due to police officers enlisting in the armed forces.

These duties included enforcing some of the provisions of the National Security Regulations, and the War Precautions (Alien Registrations) Regulations. Police were required to maintain the internal security of the state and to administer support to the war effort and to recruitment.

One of their earliest tasks was tracking members of the British reserve forces in Australia to notify them of their call-up on the outbreak of war. Foreign-born reservists of combatant counties were considered to be prisoners of war; some were interned while others were paroled to move freely within the community provided they regularly reported to police.

Anti-German sentiment led to a Cabinet direction in 1916 that persons of German or Austrian birth were not to be employed in the Queensland Public Service if there were British nationals available for the task. (At that time, those born or naturalised in Australia were British nationals as there was no separate status of Australian citizenship.) However, due to the shortage in personnel, the 65 German-born Queensland police

officers were not dismissed, though they were scrutinised by their senior officers.

Throughout the war Queensland police were required to maintain secret surveillance on members of the Turkish, Syrian, Bulgarian, Greek, and Italian communities across the state.

At the behest of the Queensland War Council, police also provided assessments of the moral character of soldiers' wives who were receiving assistance.

The Queensland War Council and subsequent Local War Council Committees were established in 1915 principally to help recruit and provide support for returned soldiers and for the families of those who were disabled or killed in war. The Queensland War Council Chairperson was the Premier of Queensland. The council was the primary force in the repatriation of Queensland soldiers until the Australian Government established a similar entity in early 1918. In the early part of the war the council supported the establishment of the Anzac cottages and the tuberculosis home schemes.

The Queensland Government's Discharged Soldiers Settlement Act 1917 provided land and financial assistance for which all returned servicemen could apply. Another measure to support returned servicemen was the preferential employment scheme adopted by the Queensland Public Service.

The Queensland Government did not require women to take employment in war industries as they had in Britain, and full-time employment for women did not significantly increase. Relatively small numbers of women were accepted as military nurses, and only after prolonged lobbying were the Voluntary Aid Detachments of the Australian Red Cross able to send units to overseas hospitals. It was in voluntary organisations that women made their direct and most significant contributions to the war effort. These organisations took on the responsibility of providing comforts for sick and wounded soldiers here and abroad, and providing frontline troops with morale-building gifts and articles of clothing.

The Red Cross Society began work almost immediately upon the declaration of war. From initial knitting circles, the scope of Red Cross support expanded rapidly to include teaching handcrafts to convalescent soldiers, mending hospital clothes and providing food and other necessary supplies to local and overseas military hospitals. So strong was the mobilisation of Red Cross "kitchen ladies" that in addition to

providing food for the Rosemount, Kangaroo Point and Lytton military hospitals, they were also able to supplement food to asylums, orphanages, and public hospitals. Other voluntary organisations - the National Council of Women (which was an amalgam of 41 other societies), the Queensland Soldiers' Comfort Fund, the Babies of the Allies Clothing Society, the Women's Mutual Service Club, the Soldier's Pastime Club, Sailor's and Soldiers Residential Club, and the Christmas Box Fund to name but a few - provided similar services. The social and economic value of such voluntary work was considerable.

Queensland women also exercised their right to vote during the war years. The Military Service Referendum Act 1916 and the War Precautions (Military Service Referendum) Regulations 1917 were contentious, the debate concerning conscription dividing Australian society on religious and political grounds.

Women rose to their feet to speak publicly in support or against the proposals. Both attempts to conscript men for military service were defeated. At the height of the second conscription referendum, the Queensland Government, which was the only state with an anti-conscription position, took the extraordinary step of stationing armed police on the Queensland Government Printing Office to prevent the Australian Government censoring anti-conscription material in the Raid on the Queensland Government Printing Office.

Queensland society changed considerably during the war years. The strains on the local economy prompted the government to embrace the acquisition of state-owned industries in an effort to keep living standards affordable. This social experiment also divided the population, and, as the war drew to a conclusion, the state was no less polarised by political ideology.

However, there was a shared empathy for the survivors of Queensland's 57,705 enlistees, for those who were killed, and for their families. This manifested itself in many ways but particularly in the erection of World War I memorials in many towns across the state and in the annual Anzac Day ceremonies.

Courtesy Wikipedia



Brisbane during the Great War. (Items held by John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland.)

# Queensland Soldiers Behind the Lines.

*Over 58 000 Queenslanders signed up for the great war.....*

*over 10 000 never returned.....*

Let's go "behind the lines" and meet some of these soldiers and learn about their lives.

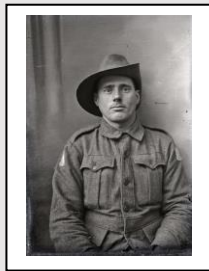
**Some Queensland Soldiers who spent time in Vignacourt and were photographed.**

**Roy Swan Purssey -Brisbane**

**Thomas See -Childers**

**William See- Childers**

**Thomas Beldon-Mackay**



(courtesy- Purssey Family, Kerry Stokes Collection Beldon family)

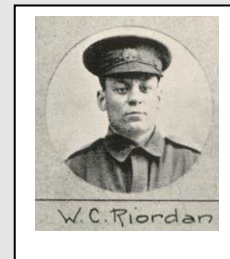
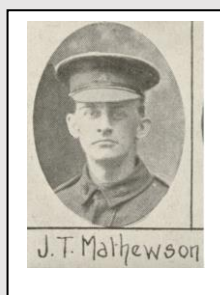
**Some Queensland Soldiers who spent time in Naours and left their names on the cave walls.**

**John Trevallon (Jack) Mathewson Toowoomba and Brisbane.**

**John Patrick Ramkema Townsville and Brisbane.**

**Alfred Clegg-Cairns.**

**William Riordan -Toowoomba.**



(Courtesy- State Library of Queensland -The Queenslander)



## Acknowledgements

# “Behind the Lines

## ..Other Stories of the Great War.”

**Queensland soldiers who visited Vignacourt and Naours.**

**Royal Historical Society of Qld Commissariat Store Museum**

**4<sup>th</sup> October 2018-September 2019**

*Exhibitions at the Commissariat Store Museum involve the hard work of many volunteers at the Royal Historical Society of Queensland. I would like to thank the individuals listed below for their specific efforts. In addition, I would like to thank Michael and Donna Fiechtner (from Intercultural Consulting Group) for their unstoppable enthusiasm and, who have provided the main ideas, content and material for this exhibition.*

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*Ilona Fekete      Manager, The Royal Historical Society of Queensland*

### Credits

- Exhibition design: Samantha Rowe
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- Publicity, website, social media: Ilona Fekete, Michael Fiechtner
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