

Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize 2017

# Private William George Copcutt MM

1890 – 1916



Emily next to Private W.G. Copcutt's name  
at the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial in April 2017.

By Emily Curak  
1-1-2017

William George Copcutt was born on 29 April 1890 in Hobart, Tasmania. To Pashur Copcutt and Mary Ann Copcutt (nee Jones) he was the second child of six. His siblings included Florence Lillian (born 1887), Frederick Henry (born 1892), Arthur Alfred (born 1896), Henry Allan (1898) and Phyllis Irene (born 1900). As a family, they resided at 8 Kelly Street in Battery Point, Tasmania.

The Copcutt family had an Indian heritage descending from William's father – Pashur's family. Pashur was born in Buckinghamshire, England in 1864, and William's mother, Mary Ann, was born a year later in Tyenna, Tasmania. The couple married in 1886 in Hobart, with their first child (Florence) being born the following year. Pashur passed away in 1906, however Mary Ann died in 1952, outliving three of six children.

Prior to joining the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion in September 1915, Private Copcutt was a Telephone Linesman in Tasmania. He was the son of Mrs. Copcutt of 36 Colville Street, Battery Point. His father, the late Captain Pashur Copcutt was well known in maritime trading in Hobart. – Extract from a Hobart newspaper



**Left:** Pte Henry Allan Copcutt

**Right:** William George Copcutt



William's brothers Arthur and Henry were also soldiers in the Great War. Arthur embarked on the HMAT Berrima A35, on 1 July 1916 – a year after William. Meanwhile, Henry embarked the HMAT Borda A30, on 17 July 1918, following the death of William. Both of William's brothers returned home to Tasmania, which should have been considered a blessing for their mother Mary Ann. However, her reaction was quite the opposite, as a sour demeanour descended upon her, once she realised that her eldest son was asleep under foreign skies.

William attended Albuera Street Primary School. Unfortunately, as with most day-to-day Tasmanians during those days, little else is known of people's childhoods. However, it is gathered that he was a cheeky soul, considering he placed a sheep's skull on a

telegram post on the Midlands Highway. The reasoning behind such a peculiar form of comedy is unknown, but it did serve its purpose of entertaining travellers. 'Spot the Skull' became a game for those travelling the Midland Highway (especially for children), until it was taken down in the 1950's.

William and Ruth May met in Hobart, and on 19 October 1910 they married in the Congregational Church. One year later, their eldest daughter Mavis Irene was born, and two years later, in 1913, Gladys Jean came along. William was only granted two more years with his family, until he decided to join the adventure that was World War I; in 1915.

On 28 July in Hobart, at the age of 25, William enlisted to join the First World War. Instantly accepted, and with a tick from the doctor, William became a soldier. His service number was 2472, and naturally, upon enlistment, his rank was as a private.

This is a handwritten attestation form for William George Copcutt. The form is titled 'AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE' and 'Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad'. It contains the following information:  
- Name: William George Copcutt  
- Unit: 26th Battalion  
- Enlisted on: 28/7/15  
- Age: 25 1/2  
- Height: 5 feet 3 3/4 inches  
- Weight: 128 lbs  
- Complexion: Olive  
- Eyes: Blue  
- Hair: Black  
- Education: Vocational  
- Medical Examination: Certificate of Medical Examination (see separate page)  
- Signature of Enlisting Medical Officer: J. H. Green  
- Signature of Commanding Officer: J. H. Green  
- Date: 28/7/15  
- Place: Hobart  
The form is filled out with blue ink and has a large '26976' written across it.

Private William George Copcutt's enlistment form and his description upon enlistment

This is a handwritten certificate of medical examination for William George Copcutt. The form is titled 'CERTIFICATE OF MEDICAL EXAMINATION' and contains the following information:  
- Name: W. G. Copcutt  
- Age: 25 years 3 months  
- Height: 5 feet 3 3/4 inches  
- Weight: 128 lbs  
- Chest Measurement: 31-32 inches  
- Complexion: Olive  
- Eyes: Blue  
- Hair: Black  
- Education: Vocational  
- Medical Examination: Certificate of Medical Examination  
- Signature of Enlisting Medical Officer: J. H. Green  
- Date: 28/7/15  
- Place: Hobart  
The form is filled out with blue ink and has a large '26976' written across it.

Mavis (William's eldest daughter) claims that one of her most vivid memories of her father was when at the age of four. She recalled travelling to the wharf with her mother and sister to complete a task she did not fully understand: wave goodbye to her father. As a child, her innocence and obliviousness to World War One, entitled Mavis to one, final and happy memory of her father.

Originally assigned to the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion, William trained at the Brighton Military Camp, prior to boarding a ship from Hobart to Brisbane. With adventure in his mind, on 5 October 1915 he embarked the HMAT Warilda A69, from Brisbane to Cairo, Egypt; where his long-awaited adventure officially begun. In Cairo, William underwent further

training and had time to compose himself before making his way to the battlefield. From Cairo, William sent: postcards and silk scarves to his wife and family back home in Hobart. Such gifts became a source of comfort as it assured them of his safety. He sent Mavis an Australian flag, that had her name hand sown into the top right-hand corner, and Gladys received a two-inch camel statue. On 1 March 1916, William was transferred to the 12<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and a mere 29 days later on 30 March, he decamped Alexandria, and set sail for Europe. Unfortunately, from a modern-day perspective, it is upsetting to find that William did not keep a journal nor diary detailing his experiences, so that a deeper understanding of the War might be uncovered. Towards the end of William's stay in Egypt, gifts to his family members became sparse, which only solidified their worries. Once William departed the Egyptian shores, his family understood that their nightmare had only just begun.



William proceeded to leave the safety of Egypt, in exchange for European soil. His ship landed on the western coastline of France, from where he continued his travels by train to Albert. Maintaining the same north-easterly direction, William and his battalion begun their trek on foot towards Pozières. William successfully made it to Pozières on 8 July 1916.

There were more than 23,000 casualties at Pozieres, it was considered one of Australia's costliest battles. This is where William fought his first and only battle. Australian soldiers were sent to Pozieres to capture key positions; unfortunately, this resulted in the deaths of many, as Charles Beans states, 'Pozieres 'is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth' and 'the cost in Australian lives had been enormous.'



An image of a road that leads to Pozieres. The smoke visible in the distance is the village of Contalmaison, which was under German shellfire.

Here, William put his telegraph linesman skills to the test through treacherous conditions. Trenches, mud and uneven terrain from the shells – this was the nightmare he had signed up for. William was a brave man throughout the War. He fought gallantly for Australia, laying his life down so that future generations can flourish and thrive. His acts of bravery led to becoming a recipient of the military medal. The following is the citation for William's medal:

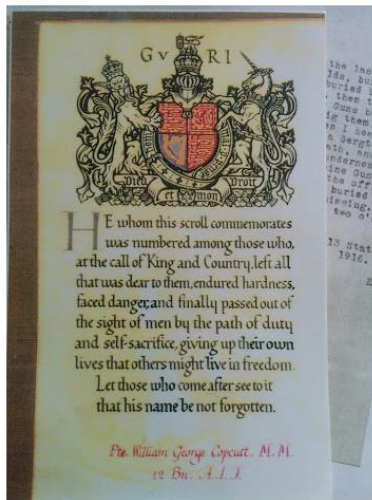


“On the morning of 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1916, during a counter attack, when his Lewis gun team leader had been killed, he took over the gun which was then under heavy machine gun, shell and bomb fire and continued to work it inflicting heavy losses on the enemy.”

Relief and a sense of pride is an understatement as to how a mother would feel upon receiving a letter explaining their son's fantastic efforts. The Copcutt family would have received the letter of his award with utmost joy. The medal was awarded to William for distinguished service on 19 August 1916. Unfortunately, William was in fact an ineligible recipient of the military medal, because he received it posthumously (after death). It is thought that a man with vast amounts of compassion covertly submitted William's application, in the hopes that his heroic deeds would not go unnoticed. It is not uncommon for such rules to be broken due to the significant influx of letters that were received by officers daily – there were few 'double checks' in those days.

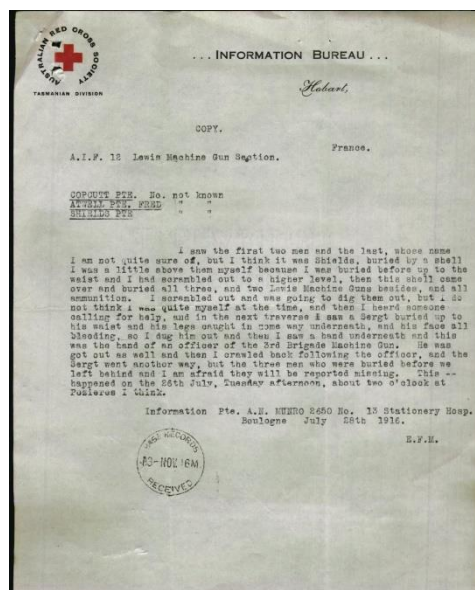
Mary Ann, was extremely concerned for her son, especially when she heard of news in the *London Gazette* on 21 September 1916 that her son had been awarded the Military Medal. 'I am naturally very anxious to learn of any particulars concerning him' she stated in a letter to Base Records Office in Melbourne. They replied expressing that they knew nothing more other than that he had been wounded and that 'should any further information come to hand, next-of-kin, shown as wife, will be promptly advised'.

Sadly, death became an inevitability during WWI, families were remarkably lucky to have husbands or sons return. Mary Ann would have been considered 'lucky' to have two of her sons return home, but William was not one of them.



The scroll of commemoration sent to the Copcutt family

Private A.N. Munro informed officials via letter about William on 28 July 1916. He was originally reported missing but after officials received the letter from Munro, it became evident that William was now deceased. William was pronounced wounded and missing on 26 July 1916 and in the following month, on 29 August his spouse, Ruth May, was



advised through a letter that he was dead. Buried by shrapnel after a shell exploded, three men escaped (including Munro, an officer and a sergeant). Unfortunately, William along with Fred Atwell and Private Shields were left behind on the field that Tuesday afternoon at around 2 o'clock.

William left Hobart in 1915 when Mavis was four years old, and Gladys was two. Mavis was blessed to have some happy memories of her father, which is an opportunity that Gladys was denied due to her young age. The only recollection that Gladys has of her father is when her mother was walking up the stairs of their house reading a telegram that she had received. The telegram said that her father was dead, Gladys had no happy memories of her father. William's mother was horrified at the news and in all her years, was never able to come to terms with it. What held her back from accepting his death was that her other two sons had returned – her two *younger* sons. Mary Ann not only told herself lies, but told William's children that he had never loved them and left them for a 'French Tart'.

William's possessions were never returned to his family. They remembered him in heartfelt newspaper citations and passed on his story for family generations. Helen Hartley, his great granddaughter, is the treasurer of the Soldier's Memorial Walk in Hobart. Helen vows to never leave a Tasmanian soldier forgotten nor have a lack of commemoration. Her will to recognise these brave men and women stems from the stories she heard about her grandfather Private William George Copcutt.



William's great granddaughter beside his plaque at the Soldiers Memorial Walk in Hobart.

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The Telegraph Linesman in the Fields

*By Emily Curak*

Out in the fields during 1916,  
In Pozieres, France is where we lay our scene.  
Standing on this same ground was a man from Hobart-town,  
Whose name was Copcutt, William George.  
Born on April 29 during 1890  
Copcutt attended Albuera St Primary  
To Pashur and Mary Ann he was their eldest boy  
A kind young boy, wild, spirited and free.

Married to Ruth May and residing at Battery Point,  
Together they raised Gladys and Mavis at this point.  
At 36 Colville St he lived and would touch base,  
And at age 25 he decided to join the race.

A race for power, a race of hate.  
A war so ugly he could not have anticipated his fate.  
Enlisting in 1915 on the 28<sup>th</sup> of July  
He joined the 26<sup>th</sup> Battalion, and boy did he try  
Shipped off to Brisbane embarking on October 5<sup>th</sup>  
On HMAT Warilda, he waved and boarded the ship.

From Hobart to Brisbane,  
Brisbane to Cairo, he trained there for many a-day  
From there he sent family postcards and Aussie flags, with names sown onto the top.  
No diary was kept nor a possession returned, once he departed the Egyptian shores.  
Off to Albert, next to Pozieres, from there he went barefoot,  
Walking up north with not a horse, but with men covered in soot.





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Upon arrival, a tragedy Copcutt did see,  
O surely, he wished he had stayed on the sea.  
Trenches and mud, with hills galore,  
This was the nightmare he had signed up for.

Young and unaware, children left behind,  
But there was no looking back now, for there was no returning of any kind.  
Deaths were seen, and running he did,  
As a telegraph linesman, he did all sorts of things.  
No postcards were sent from here,  
No word was heard from here.  
Until Copcutt won the military medal.

For conspicuous gallantry and devotion in the field,  
He fought bravely for all that his team needed to wield.  
Taking over a Lewis gun he inflicted heavy loss on the enemy  
All whilst the enemy fired right back tremendously.

A couple days later not a whisper was heard  
Our friend, dear old William had been hushed by the herd.  
Buried by a shell so deep into the ground,  
Not even the sun could reach his dying mound.  
On this day, July 26 1916,  
11 months and 2 days since his enlisting,  
At 2 pm he was gone,  
Never to be returned to the land in which he truly belonged.

A grieving mother left with one less son,  
A grieving wife left with no one to hug,



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A child so young, they only remember waving goodbye,  
Another left weeping, as she watches her mother cry.  
All these people left behind,  
All these people left to try,  
Try to continue with their lives,  
As if nothing had ever happened.

Mary Ann could not believe,  
The eldest son she had conceived,  
Was now left lying peacefully,  
In a strange place, unimaginably far.  
So, she lied to help herself,  
She said this to his children,  
She said, "He had never loved you",  
And he left you for a French tart".

I do not believe this,  
I do not see his leaving a cowardly act.  
Instead I see a man of great integrity,  
Who fought to ensure his children live safely.  
William George Copcutt, it has been a pleasure,  
To talk and to learn so much about you,  
To understand the life of a soldier,  
And to thank you for your life.

Thank you for your sacrifice,  
Thank you for your might,  
Although we're not related, I shan't forget your fight.  
Goodbye William, and good luck, for you will live on throughout my life.

**Lest We Forget**



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