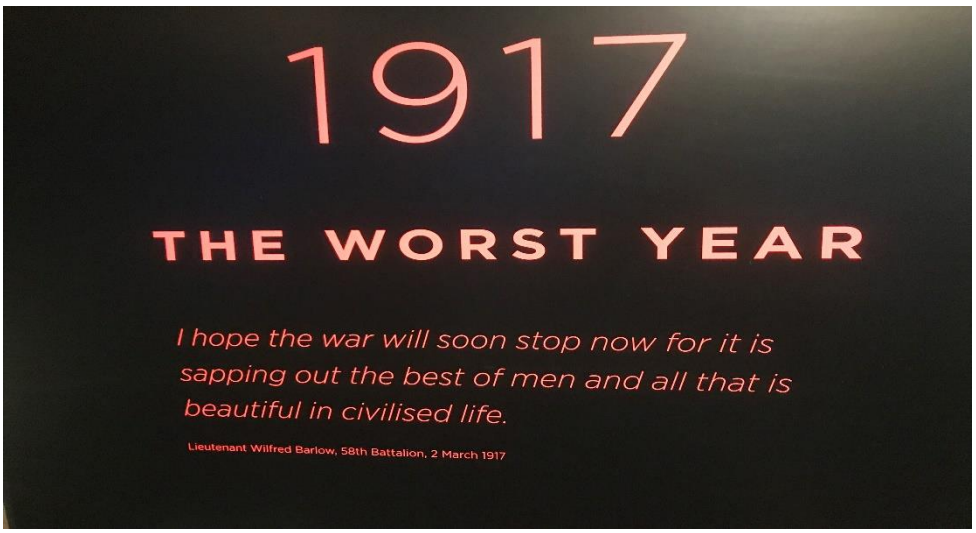
ALBERT CHARLES WOOLLEY

1917 was a significant year of World War One. After two years of fighting, the romance of war had long faded and there appeared no sight of it ending soon. Soldiers were becoming exhausted and disillusioned, yet they knew they had to fight on. The beginning of 1917 saw the war reach a dark stage as Germany resumed their U-boat attacks in the Atlantic which meant that military, civilian and supply ships could be targeted. This had been Germany's response to the British Naval Blockade which was stopping shipping supplies reaching Germany. In February 1917, a revolution occurred in Russia with the abdication of the monarchy. This came about because the army was ready to mutiny due the major military losses during the war. It was indeed the boost Germany needed and many of its forces were sent to reinforce the Western Front. France had struggled with a range of heavy losses during 1916 and now that Germany was ready to target the Western Front, France's morale had plummeted. There were examples of mutiny in their army as well and there was fear that the whole army was going to collapse. The British Empire had taken on the burden of trying to fight Germany on its own, however when the Americans declared war on Germany in April 1917 this was a major boost to the Allies situation. One of Britain's major plans for 1917 was in Belgium, but it also meant that it became one of the deadliest places of the war. The Third Battle of Ypres was one of the major battles of the war and left half a million troops dead. Because of this, 1917 became the deadliest year for Australia in the war. Australia suffered from nearly 22,000 deaths in this year alone compared to about 14,000 deaths in 1916 and 1918 and nearly 9,000 in 1915. One of these casualties was a Tasmanian soldier, Private Albert Charles Woolley who was killed in action near Ypres in Belgium on 8 October 1917.



Albert Charles Woolley was also better known as Scott to his family and friends. He is the great-grandfather of my wife and the great-great grandfather of my two daughters. I was fortunate enough to visit his grave at the Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium in 1999. Some of Scott's grandchildren are still alive, and along with his descendants, remember the ultimate sacrifice he made.

Scott was born at Hastings, Tasmania on 13 July 1884. He worked as a sawmiller in southern Tasmania and was also a keen sportsman. He was close to the Hay family. One of his best mates was Charles Hay (who also served in World War I and died as a pilot during training in Scotland in 1918) and he married Charles' sister Jennie in February 1906. The photos below show Scott and Charles working at Fortescue Bay. Another photo is taken of Scott on his wedding day. Over the next six years Jennie and Scott had four sons: Basil, Geoffrey, Raymond and Kenneth. As well as working and playing sport, Scott served in the militia for a number of years, learning to use rifles and completing other military drills.

Scott Woolley and Charles Hay at Fortescue Bay
date unknown

Wedding Day 21 February 1906, Port Esperance

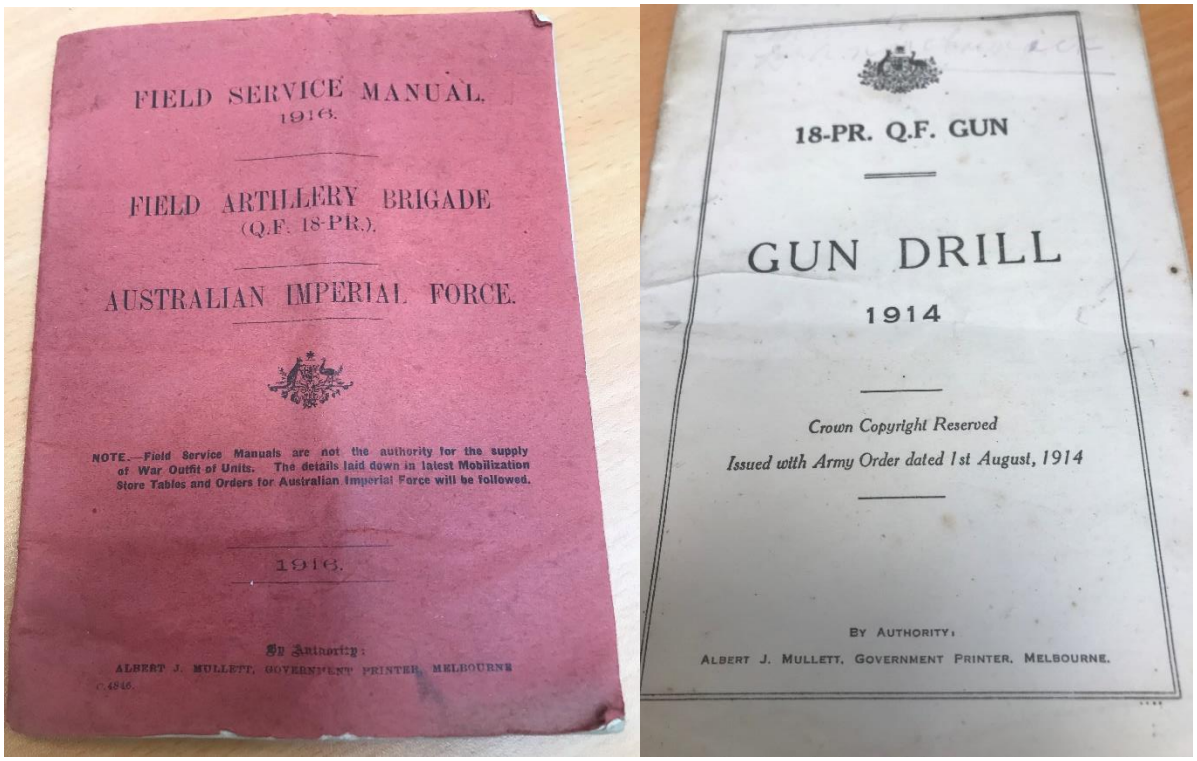
When war broke out in 1914 it seems that Scott was keen to join the army despite being 30 years old and having a young family. He was probably driven by the patriotic feeling of national duty as well as having mates who were keen for an overseas adventure. However, it appears he was declared medically unfit at the beginning of the war due to dental health. At this time there was a surplus of men who wanted to be recruited so this was a common reason for men to be rejected. Tragedy struck the young family in October 1914 when Scott and Jennie's four-year old son Raymond died from a snake bite and the next 12 months would have especially difficult as they mourned the loss of their son.

During 1915 and 1916 Scott would have read and heard of stories from Gallipoli and France, and probably knew of men who had been killed in action. By 1916 as the AIF were facing a shortage of men Scott enlisted in August 1916 with the 12th Battalion and began training at Claremont. Why did he decide to join now with stories of horror from the battlefields fresh on his mind and a family still dealing with personal tragedy? Perhaps Scott still felt a duty to serve his country, or perhaps there was pressure from the community that Scott was a fit man and that he should enlist and do his bit for the empire. It was also common for men to be sent white feathers in the mail as a symbol of cowardice if they had not enlisted.

In the background of this was the issue of conscription. The Australian Prime Minister Billy Hughes had come to the conclusion that conscription was needed to keep up the required number of men in the army. In October 1916, a referendum was held, and conscription was narrowly defeated. Tasmania was one of three states which voted in favour of conscription.

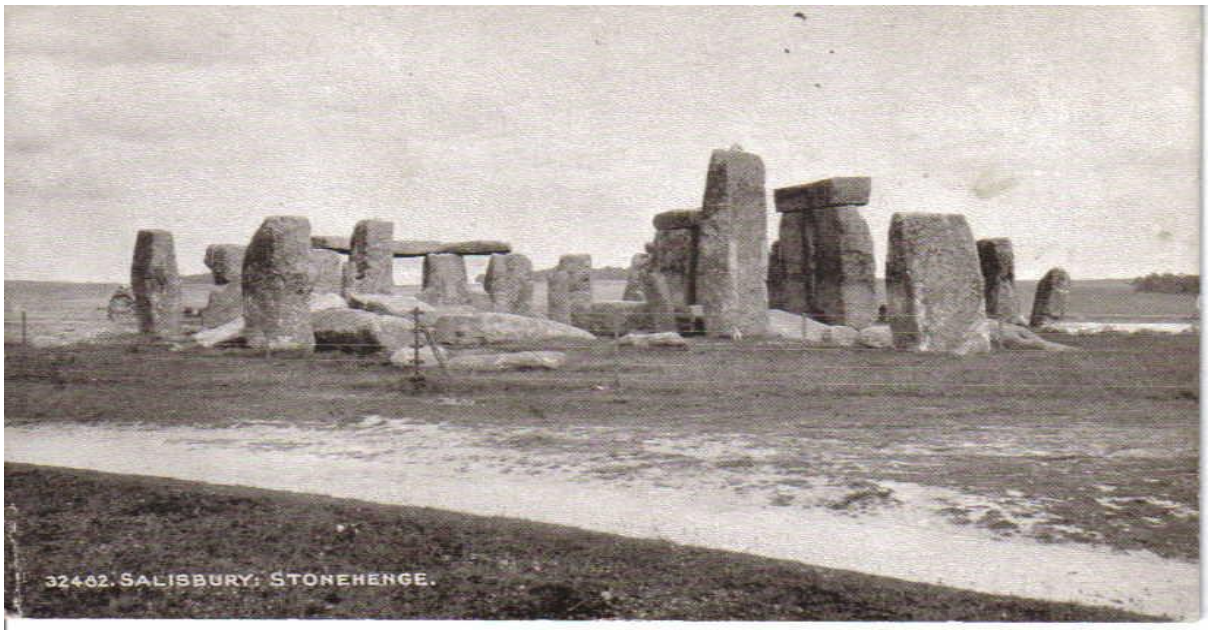
Scott and Jennie Woolley 1916

Scott set sail from Australia in October 1916 and headed towards England. The journey included a stopover in Sierra Leone. He finally arrived in Devonport, England on 28 December 1916 and over the next few months Scott would be involved in training most of the time as well as having a chance for some sightseeing. The images below show some of the types of booklets which would have been used in training. The soldiers combined practical training along with theory. Images in the following pages include a photo of Scott had taken with two other Tasmanian soldiers in Amesbury in England. There are three postcards which were sent to Jennie. Included is an image of a postcard of Stonehenge. On this postcard to his wife, Scott mentions having a look around Stonehenge, he also mentions that he wants a photo of the boys. He had not received any letters from home in over a month and thinks maybe the mailboats have been sunk. Another postcard to his wife is dated 10 February from the Lark Hill YMCA in Wiltshire. Scott mentions that he is healthy and that he has sent a gift of broaches for his wife to wear. The third postcard is of a Blacksmith in the Salisbury Plains and is dated March 1917. He writes to Jennie to say that he was leaving England at midnight and heading to France and that in eight hours he would be close to the firing line.



Soldiers would have used similar books to these for the theory part of their training. (Courtesy of Anglesea Barracks).

Private Woolley (left) with two Tasmanian soldiers in Amesbury, England 1917



Postcard of Stonehenge, send by Scott to Jennie, early 1917

Scott joined up with other members of the 12th Battalion as a reinforcement in May 1917. New reinforcement soldiers were often told about past stories of the Battalion, the Victoria Crosses gained and how it was an honour to be drafted into the 12th. Half of the 12th Battalion was made up of Tasmanians and about a quarter were from South Australia and another quarter were from Western Australia. The 12th Battalion was a part of the 1st Division and were now having an extended four-month break leading up to the Battle of Ypres.

Up until this point the 1st Division had been continuously on the front line for months and were feeling the strain. The troops were tired, and a rest was promised. During this time the men were sent to a quiet back-area of the old Somme battlefield, which was now silent and covered in weeds and poppies. In these times of rest and training the men begun to hear rumours of a large battle which lay ahead. The Battalion were often billeted during this time in small villages and had pleasant memories, sometimes the weather was quite pleasant and even better was when the locals did everything they could to make the soldiers stay more enjoyable. The soldiers were kept busy with their training. There were instructors for gunnery, bombing and bayonet fighting. Morning parades took place from 7am to 11am as the weather did get hot at times. Other training exercises included night exercises, trench drills and attack practice. The afternoons saw sports events such athletics and novelty events. If the soldiers were lucky there may have been a stream nearby for a dip, another time a barn was converted into a cinema. The good weather, decent food, pleasant surroundings, leave passes to local towns as well as the sporting activities helped the men keep fit and healthy and raised the morale. On 12 July, the men had been inspected by King George V. The men had been ordered to line up on the Albert-Amiens Road and to cheer when the King passed by in his car. After waiting some time, a car approached without any warning and zoomed passed quickly before anyone had noticed the King was in the car. An interesting note on the official military records of Albert Charles Woolley around this time is that he was charged for being absent from the parade from 8am to midday on 14 July and lost a week's worth of wage. Seeing as it was his birthday the day before, perhaps he had slept in after a night of celebration. During this time members of the 12th Battalion were able to catch up with members of another Tasmanian Battalion, the 40th. There were many men who now had a chance to mingle with relations and friends.

Despite it appearing safe away from the front line, the dangers of war were still there. Enemy aeroplanes regularly flew over dropping bombs, luckily the 12th was never in the firing line. However, anti-aircraft guns were ready for that occasion and soldiers were on duty to use them. One trick the Germans were involved in was to try and fool the French locals about the war by dropping newspapers into the countryside. These "French newspapers" had been created by the Germans and it was designed to trick French locals to not support the British.

The summer rest and prolonged period of training came to an end in mid-September 1917. Major-General Walker of the 1st Division said this: "after a long period of rest and training we are called upon to participate in an operation, the success of which will have the most important results for not only the British armies, but all the Allies. This was a battle planned by Commander Douglas Haig and the choice of this battle in Flanders was controversial at the time and still debated today. The British Prime Minister was not in favour of this plan and the head of the French Army was also against this attack. The grand strategic aims of this plan was to defeat the German stronghold around Ypres and then hopefully move north to capture the Belgian ports which were being held by the Germans as bases for their U-boats.

The major assault of Ypres had begun on 31 July by the British and French, and it soon became a battle of attrition as the weather and the land they were fighting on made life for the armies difficult to make any ground. A combination of heavy rains and millions of artillery shells raining onto this land of clay turned the place into a muddy abyss. It rained nearly every day of August and men were known to have drowned in the mud. The British racked up 60,000 casualties during August. Despite the heavy casualties and breakdown of morale, Haig insisted the attack had to go on. With so many being lost it was inevitable that Australian troops who were enjoying a long rest over the summer would be brought in. In the final weeks of September, the Australian Divisions were caught up in this slaughter and the 12th Battalion was in a great deal of action in the coming weeks. Some of the battles had familiar names: Menin Road, Polygon Wood, Broodseinde and Passchendaele. And Albert Charles Woolley was in the thick of it.

The Battle of Menin Road begun on 20 September at "zero hour" at 5.40am. Over five days artillery had bombarded the area with 1.5 million shells. In the

lead up to zero hour the 1st Division alongside British divisions had begun to advance across a 12 km front. The barrage also targeted the German pillboxes, and when the Australians reached them, it led to some brutal incidents. The emptied pillboxes were also sought after by the souvenir hunters. Charles Bean declared Menin Road a success but at the cost of 5,000 Australians who were killed or wounded.

An Australian dressing station on the Menin Road during the Third Battle of Ypres (Passchendaele), 20 September 1917.

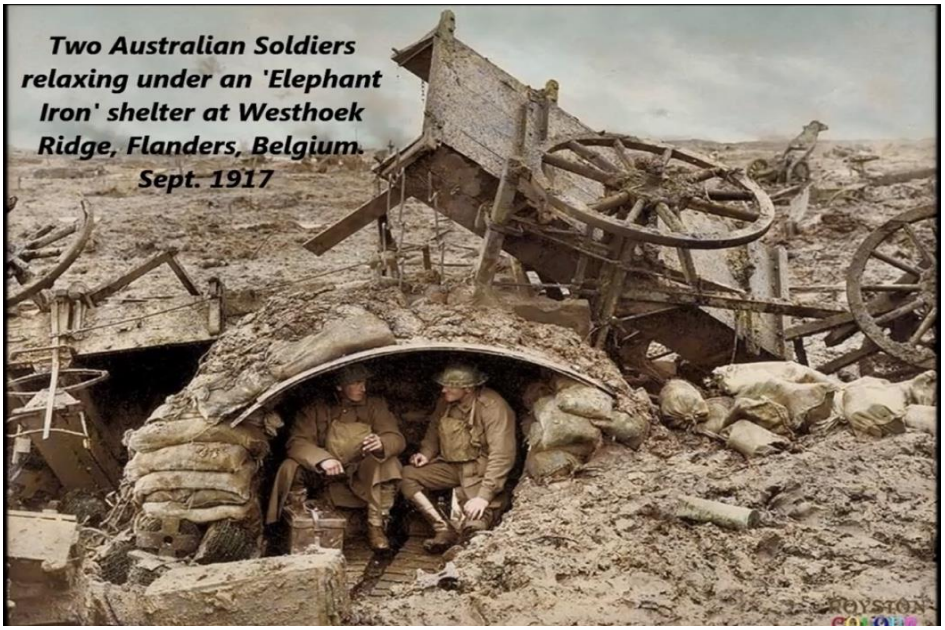
For the 12th Battalion the battle saw 16 men killed, another 16 missing and 138 wounded. In the lead up to zero hour the 12th had the objective to claim the "Blue Line" which was on the western edge of Polygon Wood. During the evening it had been raining heavily which made conditions slippery and muddy. Throughout the night the Battalion had continued to move into position with the Germans only 200 yards away. The Germans continued to fire short machine gun bursts as well as send off flares. Whilst waiting for the zero hour the 12th assembled around 4am in wet and open shell holes with no cover. For more than 50 per cent of the Battalion this would be their first experience of shell-fire. At 5.40am with dawn breaking and a thick morning mist, the men moved forward with their bayonets fixed and some with a cigarette in their mouths. A number

of pillboxes were rushed and taken over. This was often dangerous as machine-guns were set up inside and some Germans were ready to fight to the end. The men of the 12th had completed their objective in this battle and it is regarded as one of their finest moments.

The 12th was soon relieved of this post on the 23 September and they were given a chance to re-group and rest away from the front line trenches. The men had to sleep in open fields with waterproof shelters covering them. On one night German planes flew over at 8.30pm starting to drop bombs in the distance and the men knew they were in the direct firing line. Four bombs landed in their area, which killed three and injured eleven.

In the next few days the Battle of Polygon Wood became the second phase of the advance onto Passchendaele. Over six days from 26 September the soldiers from 4th and 5th Division worked through shellfire and mustard gas to build roads for artillery to move into position. Polygon Wood was another hammer blow to the Germans, although at a cost of 4000 Australians.

In the following week the Germans had tried to attack and counterattack at least 24 times. The German artillery was active in shelling its lost territory as well as firing gas shells into the area. On 1 October, the Battalion reached Westhoek Ridge an area which was described as being quite unhealthy as it was littered with broken wagons, discarded supplies and dead horses and mules. The men had to find shelter in whatever they could find. The image below gives an indication of what the men of the 12th had to experience.



The Battle of Broodseinde was the third phase in the Flanders Offensive on 4 October. This saw the joining of three Australian Divisions in an offensive of capturing the ridge. In the two days before the battle, heavy rain had nearly caused the attack to be called off. The attack was similar to Menin Road and Polygon Wood. There was a massive artillery bombardment at first and then the troops would move forward. The Australians were also heavily shelled by the Germans who were launching their own attack. This day was one of the deadliest days with the Australian divisions suffering 6,500 casualties. This battle saw nine Victoria Crosses being awarded including one to Tasmanian Lewis McGee of the 40th Battalion. The battle was another crushing blow to the Germans as they suffered more casualties from the Allied shelling. According to their official history, the Germans refer to this day as a "black day". With three lost battles in a short amount of time it was believed that the Germans were on the verge of defeat, and Haig insisted the need to fight on. However, the weather was going to have an impact and the rain turned the ground into a morass.

The role of the 12th during this battle was to support the front line by carrying ammunition on pack mules, it was a challenging situation with shells bursting around them. How dangerous it was can be explained where one shell on the morning of the 5th killed about 16 men. Conditions were so wet and muddy that the men who were carrying guns and supplies were often over their knees in mud and water. Their 48 hours of duty on the front line had resulted in an unbroken period of shelling.

On the night of 6 and 7 October a party of men from the 11th and 12th Battalions were instructed to carry out a raid at Celtic Wood. The 20-minute raid was successful as it led to bombing of a few dug-outs, the killing of a number of Germans, capturing a machine gun, taking 10 soldiers as prisoners and suffering no casualties. Two days later a similar raid took place at Celtic Wood by a party from the 10th. This action would become quite controversial where 71 soldiers would disappear without a trace. It has become one of the great mysteries of the AIF. The website *warhistoryonline.com* ranks it as one of the top 10 mysteries of World War I. The missing men never became prisoners, and no trace of their bodies were ever found. German military records make no mention of the attack. There is speculation that the men may have sunk in the mud and vanished or were they taken by German troops and massacred and then buried in an unknown mass grave. There have also been theories of a supernatural event and that it became a wartime equivalent of Picnic at Hanging Rock. At least six books and various websites have been written in an attempt to explain the mystery.

In the middle of this came the unfortunate death of Albert Charles Woolley on 8 October 1917. Various eye-witness accounts have him around this area on this day. Not all accounts are exactly the same. What is known is that Scott was in a support trench when he was killed by a shell along with about four or five others. All died instantly. One eye-witness was Lance Corporal Bradley who signed a document in February 1918 which said that Woolley was in his section and saw him “blown to pieces” by a shell at Celtic Wood and that there was no chance of a burial. Another account by Lance Corporal Hull in March 1918 mentions that he was killed with five other men in the support trenches at Zonnebeke at about 1am by one shell. This account says that the bodies were buried in the trench where they were hit. An account from Private Dickinson on 4 April 1918 says that he knew Woolley and that he was about 20 yards away when Scott was hit by a shell and blown to pieces. Dickinson mentions that it happened during daylight hours when other accounts say it occurred during the night. This account also says that Woolley was killed at Menin Road on October 10. A final eye-witness account by Private Fox from May 1918 says that he was told by another solider, who was now deceased, that Woolley was killed at Ypres on 10 October by a shell during an attack. Someone who buried Scott managed to gather his watch and bible which found its way back to his wife Jennie.

Here is a watch and bible retrieved from Woolley's body and returned to his family

Whilst there are some irregularities with the eye-witness accounts, we can only imagine how difficult it would have been to remember all of the incidents and the bloodshed that was happening around them during this period of time. According to the official military records, the death of A.C. Woolley occurred on October 8. There appears no official mention on his records of the actual place of death, however on the plaque on the Soldiers Walk on the Domain in Hobart, it does mention Polygon Wood as the place where he was killed.

In another tragic chapter of the family's history, Scott's nephew Horace Lockley of Bruny Island was killed in action in France only three days earlier.

Scott's death occurred on the eve on the First Battle of Passchendaele on 12 October and the campaign would continue for another month. It was the culminating point of the whole campaign since the beginning of August. The final month was considered worse than what the men had already faced. Haig had insisted that his army continue onto Passchendaele despite the exhaustion of the men and the quagmire they faced. He felt the Germans were about to collapse and his grand objective could be achieved. His decision to do this is still seen as controversial. Over the next month this battle was a bloody debacle. There were huge losses of men for small territorial gains. Finlayson argues that "the battle has become a metaphor for pointless sacrifice." Finally, in early November, the Canadians were the ones who were able to reach the final objective, the capture of Passchendaele. The Third battle of Ypres finished three

months after it started. The Allies had gained a few kilometres, but at a huge cost of lives. The losses were heavy: 250,000 British, including 12,000 Australians. There were more than 200,000 German casualties.

Military historians have not been kind to Haig's plan to take Passchendaele, as it was a disaster of epic proportions. It is arguably the most horrific battle of World War I. Some claim that what Haig ordered was a military crime. Winston Churchill claimed that Haig's real motive was to achieve victory before the Americans arrived so he could take glory of winning the war. One nickname given to him by his troops was "Butcher Haig". The campaign did not end up being the knockout blow the Allies had hoped for. Ten days later the Germans had counterattacked and regained the lost ground. Winter was approaching and the British had failed to drive the Germans out of Belgium. In November, the Russians had surrendered to the Germans and now the Germans could move troops from the Eastern Front to the Western Front, just in time before the Americans troops arrived to support the Allies. 1917 had ended in a stalemate.

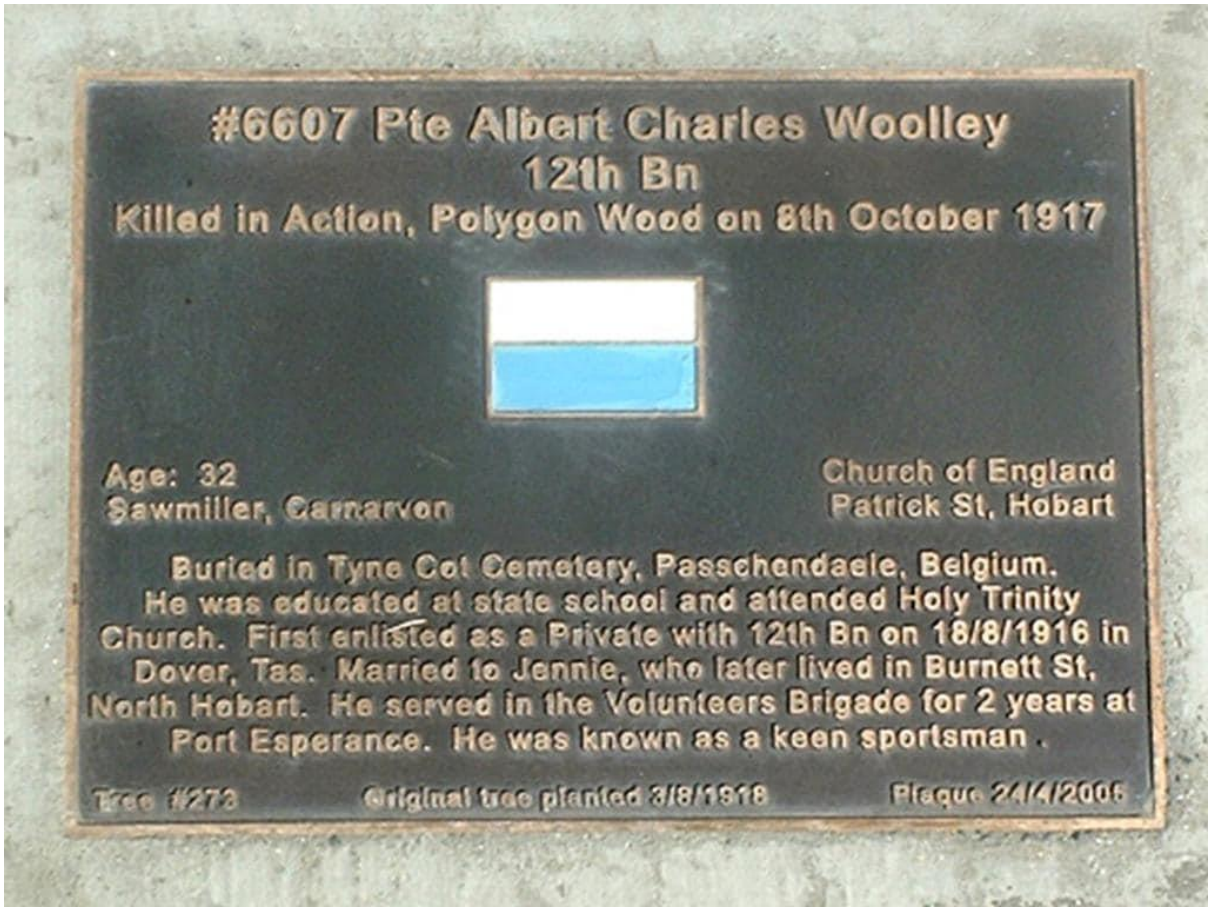
After the war Scott's remains were later exhumed and buried in the Tyne Cot Cemetery, about 9km from Ypres. It became the largest cemetery for Commonwealth soldiers. Remains of soldiers were brought in from small burial grounds of various battlefields around Passchendaele. There are now 11,953 Commonwealth servicemen buried or commemorated at Tyne Cot, including 1368 Australian graves. Another Tasmanian Lewis McGee, a recipient of a Victoria Cross in the Battle of Broodseinde, is buried in the cemetery. The image below and on the following page show the original wooden cross of Albert Woolley's grave and the current headstone.

Woolley’s grave at Tyne Cemetery (notice bill box in the background)

Woolley's grave as it is today at Tyne Cot Cemetery (bill box is still in the background)

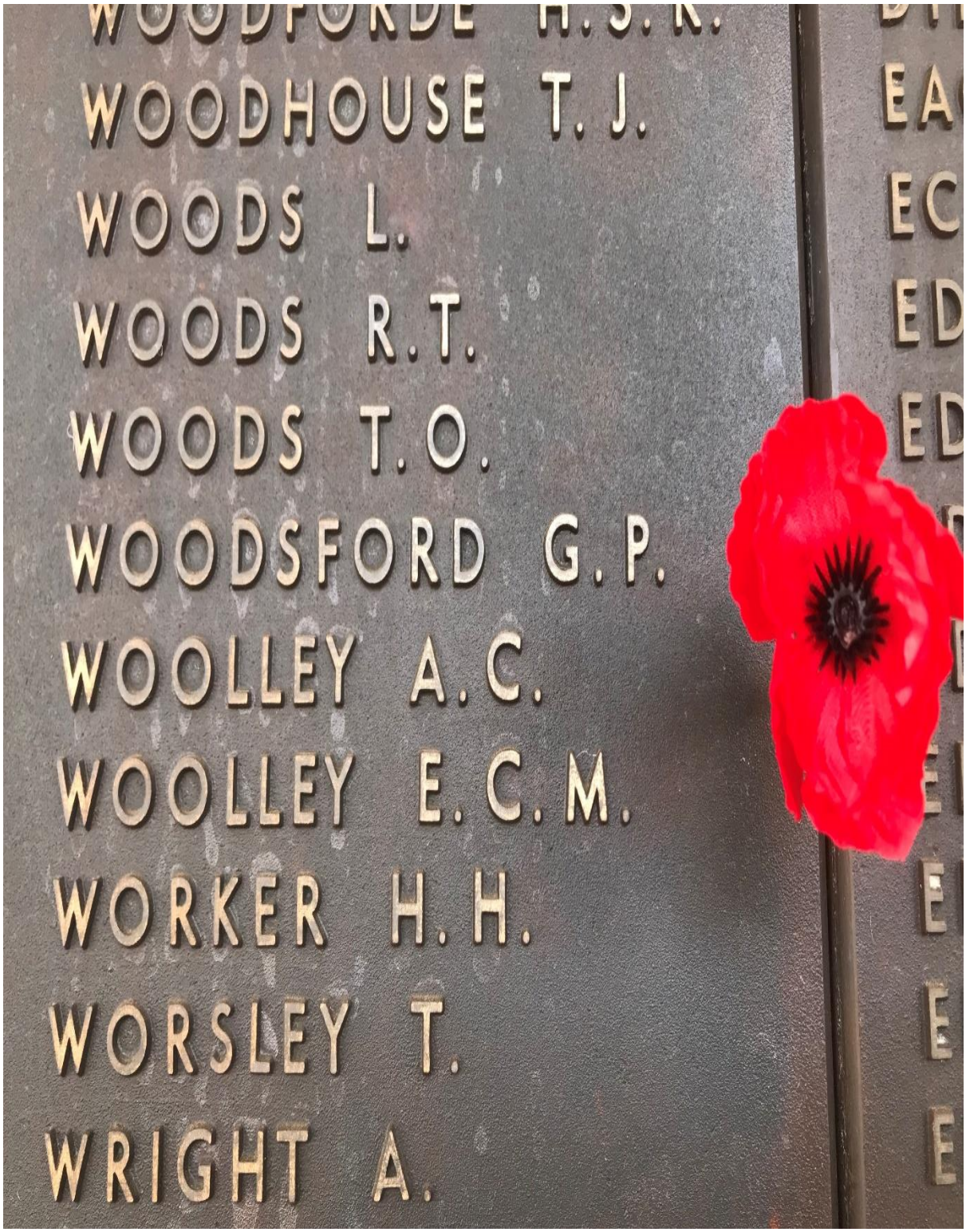
The sacrifice Scott Woolley made has not been forgotten. The Woolley family published multiple tributes in the *Mercury* at the time of his death and for several years after. A tree was planted in his honour along the Soldiers' Memorial Avenue in Hobart. He is remembered at tree 273. There is another tree in his honour at the Port Arthur Soldier Memorial. The honour board at the Hobart Town Hall includes his name with another 3,000 names and his name is etched in stone at the War Memorial at Dover. His name also sits along with 60,000 other Australians who died in World War I at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

Tree 273 Soldier's Memorial Walk


#6607 Pte Albert Charles Woolley
12th Bn
Killed in Action, Polygon Wood on 8th October 1917
Age: 32
Sawmiller, Carnarvon
Church of England
Patrick St, Hobart
Buried in Tyne Cot Cemetery, Passchendaele, Belgium.
He was educated at state school and attended Holy Trinity Church. First enlisted as a Private with 12th Bn on 18/8/1916 in Dover, Tas. Married to Jennie, who later lived in Burnett St, North Hobart. He served in the Volunteers Brigade for 2 years at Port Esperance. He was known as a keen sportsman .
Tree #273
Original tree planted 3/8/1918
Plaque 24/4/2006

Roll of Honour Hobart Town Hall

War War I Memorial Dover Tasmania



Roll of Honour, Australian War Memorial, Canberra

Map of Passchendaele, Belgium

Woolley Family Memorial

HE whom this scroll commemorates was numbered among those who, at the call of King and Country, left all that was dear to them, endured hardness, faced danger, and finally passed out of the sight of men by the path of duty and self-sacrifice, giving up their own lives that others might live in freedom.

Let those who come after see to it that his name be not forgotten.

Pte. Albert Charles Woolley
12 Bn. A.I.F.

Death Scroll

Iron Maiden - Passchendaele

In a foreign field he lay
Lonely soldier, unknown grave
On his dying words he prays
Tell the world of Passchendaele

Relive all that he's been through
Last communion of his soul
Rust your bullets with his tears
Let me tell you 'bout his years

Laying low in a blood filled trench
Kill time 'til my very own death
On my face I can feel the falling rain
Never see my friends again

In the smoke, in the mud and lead
Smell the fear and the feeling of dread
Soon be time to go over the wall
Rapid fire and end of us all

Whistles, shouts and more gun fire
Lifeless bodies hang on barbed wire
Battlefield nothing but a bloody tomb
Be reunited with my dead friends soon

Many soldiers eighteen years
Drown in mud, no more tears
Surely a war no-one can win
Killing time about to begin…