Private Harold Stephenson

The Lost Years of World War One

For this generation, names like 'The Somme', 'Fromelles' and 'Passchendaele' needed no further explanation.

Those who had fought and survived


The Canberra Times

ARMY CHIEFS PERISH IN CANBERRA AIR DISASTER

The settlement of Canberra in 1940 boasted little more than the Provisional Parliament House, several suburbs, a population of around 10,000, and a network of formal avenues and circles that sprawled across endless empty space. In the clear skies above this township on the morning of 13 August, almost a year into World War Two, a Hudson bomber aircraft lost control on descent, see-sawed out of control and nosedived into a nearby ridge.

Among the 10 souls who perished in the ensuing inferno were four of the nation's key war leaders: Geoffrey Street (Minister for the Army), James Fairbairn (Minister for Air), Henry Gullett (VP of the Executive Council) and Brudenell White (Chief of the General Staff). These men had been hand-picked by Robert Menzies as his most-trusted advisers and, on a personal level, the Prime Minister would mourn the loss of his friends for decades to come. Menzies' wartime government would also become a victim of this air disaster. It wasn't just the fact that the deaths triggered a hung parliament.

More importantly, these men were among the cream of Australia's World War 1 fighting generation and were thus crucial to Menzies' credibility. This was an era when men were defined by their service - those who had fought and survived, and those who had not fought at all, such as Menzies and his successor John Curtin. My great-grandfather Harold Stephenson, was among the members of the Canberra Fire Brigade and Ambulance Service who were called to attend this disaster. Inside the blazing wreckage they found bodies that were horribly charred.

They could only be identified by military insignias melted into the remains. The man who drove in the ambulance with Harold that day said he tripped over a smouldering log, only to later realise it was a human body. Many of those who witnessed this scene were tormented by nightmares for the rest of their lives. When the time came to place the bodies in the ambulances, Harold tried to shield some of the younger officers from the grisly task. One of them later asked him how it was he could cope with such a haunting sight.
"*I was on the Somme,*" Harold replied.

Above: Harold Stephenson - on the far right of the fire engine; 2nd right of the seated officers.

Queen Victoria Postcard

George Stephenson

Playing in the shadow of the Sphinx

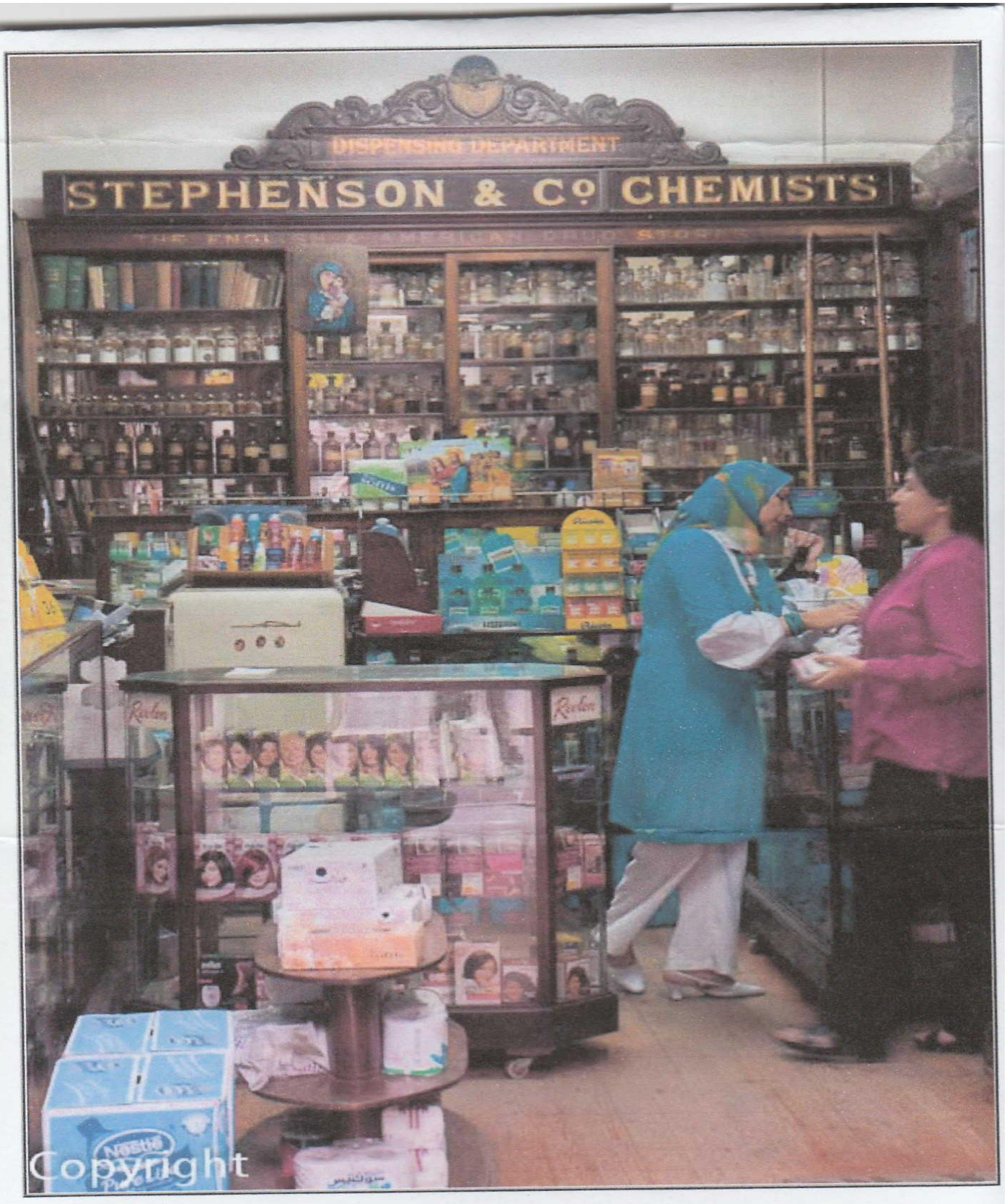
The Western Front, and even 1940s Canberra, must have seemed a long way from Harold's childhood in Cairo, Egypt. Harold was born on 6 May 1896 in Queens Park, London. He was the youngest of the five surviving children of George and Clara Stephenson, an adventurous Yorkshire couple who'd travelled the world. It's said that Clara was a talented pianist and horse rider; she was also heavily involved in the Mothers' Union. In 1889, after the family had returned to England from several years in Singapore, she helped raise money for a statue of Prince Albert and later received a hand-written 'thank you' from Queen Victoria.

Meanwhile Harold's father George was a chemist who, in 1899, opened a pharmacy in downtown Cairo. The business continues to operate under the Stephenson name even today (See photos right). The following year Clara sailed to British-occupied Egypt with the three youngest children: Claude, Lionel (Leo) and Harold. Many years later, Harold would share with his children his memories of playing on the Sphinx as a child.

Harold attended a German-speaking Lutheran school and was groomed to one-day take over the family business. So, at the age of 16, he returned to the United Kingdom to attend the then newly-founded Scarborough College, on the North Yorkshire Coast. He stayed there for three years before entering Cambridge University to study Pharmacy.

Then, on 4 August 1914, the world changed forever.....

Harold’s father’s (George Stephenson) Pharmacy in Cairo, Egypt



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Old-fashioned pharmacy

Within an inch of his life

Thirteen days after England officially declared war on Germany, Harold told the Fellow of his Cambridge College that he was ducking into town to do a few errands. Instead, he secretly enlisted in the British Army. Harold was one of half a million British men who 'flocked to the colours' in those first few weeks of war.

Harold spoke German and had attended a Lutheran school, so there's nothing to suggest he believed the rhetoric about 'a righteous war' or an 'evil enemy'. My guess is that he was seeking adventure, and his desire to join the Grenadier Guards supports this opinion.

As Australians, we don't know much about elite infantry regiments like the Grenadiers - except perhaps for their iconic uniform (they're the guards at Windsor Castle with the fluffy black hats, called bearskins). We can get a glimpse of their prestige by discovering it was the Grenadier Guards that the 20-year-old Prince of Wales chose to join in 1914 (he later became Edward VIII but abdicated to marry the American divorcee Wallis Simpson). Such was the appeal of the Grenadier Guards that a six-foot (183 cm) height minimum was introduced for recruits. Harold was an inch shorter than this towering restriction and was thus initially unable to join the Grenadiers.

This must have been a bitter blow for Harold but it's sobering to note that the 2nd Battalion of the Grenadier Guards, which he later joined, fought in France as early as August 1914. After the devastation of the First Battle of Ypres, only four officers and 140 men remained in the whole Battalion (roughly 1,000 men).

In reflection, Harold had likely come within an inch of his life - and so had all of us who are his descendants.

An army marches on its stomach

So on 17 August 1914, Harold Stephenson became Private S/2/9654 in Kitchener's Second New Army. Joining the Army Service Corps (ASC), Harold listed his date of birth as 1895, thus increasing his age by a year because soldiers needed to be 19 or older to fight. All three of Harold's brothers would also 'answer the call'.

While World War One is remembered as an industrial war, it still relied largely on horse power for the transportation of supplies, weapons and troops. The logistics of doing this were intimidating. In August 1914, for instance, the 120,000 British men on the Western Front consumed 1,600 tonnes of meat and 2,000 tonnes of bread each month; by 1918 the monthly consumption of the 3 million Allies on the Western Front totalled more than 31,000 tonnes of meat and 41,000 tonnes of bread. Meanwhile in battles such as the Somme, the British fired nearly 28 million shells.

It was the job of the ASC to maintain the vast army on many fronts, with most of the supplies originating in Britain. Extensive networks of sea, rail, road, horse and foot were able to move huge tonnages from British ports but the challenge became more deadly within 11-kilometres of the front - anywhere beyond this point was within range of artillery shelling. And the lines of supply were a favoured target for both sides.

The bulk of the ASC was organised into Companies but each Division of the British Army also commanded a specific Corps, known as the Divisional Train (comprising 26 Officers and 402 Other Ranks). These men carried stores and supplies for the Division, and provided the main supply line to the transport of its infantry and artillery. Harold was in the 141 and 138 Corps, which placed him under the direct command of the 15th (Scottish) Division.

Below: This photo was on the reverse side of a postcard sent by Harold, seated at the far end of the table, in 1914 to his cousin, Miss O.B. Barugh, of Linton, Cambridge. Harold asked her to drop him a line as he hadn't heard from family for more than a fortnight. He also wrote that they had been having an easy time but started 'issuing' the next day.

The irresistible glamour of the kilt

The Scots had not been troubled by conflict since Tudor times but the declaration of war against Germany prompted a rousing across the land. "Recruits came in so fast," said one officer from the 15th Division, "that it was impossible for us to process them". Another added that thousands flocked from far and wide because "the glamour of the kilt was irresistible". In fact the numbers were so high that in September 1914, when the 15th was paraded for the King, there weren't any uniforms for the soldiers to wear.
The following July, after 10 months of training, the 15th Division received its orders to mobilise. Harold was among the first to leave as part of battalion transport. The brigades that followed included battalions of Gordon Highlanders - and that's the uniform Harold is wearing in this photo. The official website of the Gordon Highlanders explains that regimental kilts were issued relatively late to many of the New Army battalions and that "while waiting to be kitted out, the soldiers would often have to borrow a kilt to have their obligatory photograph taken to send to their sweetheart or family."

Harold sent this photo to the thoroughly-modern Miss Muriel Richardson, a lady friend of his from Yorkshire (pictured in red). On the Gallipoli Peninsula in October 1915, the Anzacs were lashed by severe storms that would lead to talk of an evacuation. Meanwhile in France, the 15th Division - which had been blooded with several experiences of holding the line - was chosen as one of six Divisions involved in Britain's first genuinely large-scale offensive action. Referred to as 'The Big Push', it centred on a French town called Loos - which apparently, and aptly, is pronounced Loss.

It was the first time that many of the volunteers would see action; for many, it would also be the last. This battle was like so many in World War One: soldiers were ordered to advance across open fields in range of unrelenting machine guns. Any gains that were made were lost within days. The British casualties from the main attack at Loos were close to 50,000. One officer, who later visited the area on which the 15th had fought, described dead Highlanders in tartan lying so thick on the ground that "it was difficult to step between them."

The Battle of Loos is notable because it was the first time the British used gas - a weapon that the official history of the 15th Division defended as a "barbarous method of warfare that was inaugurated by the Germans at Ypres in 1915." The Division was given a total of 1,500 cylinders, each weighing 140 lbs (63.5 kilos), that were carried by foot to the front line and 'liberated' at dawn on the first day of the battle.

A 1915 British newspaper suggested that even in their use of poisonous gases, the Allies showed "the difference between the methods of neo-barbarism and those of the warlike forces of civilisation." While the enemy used the "deadliest poison that could be manufactured", argued the weekly paper, the Allied chemists provided their armies with "merely an intoxicating stupefying mixture of heavy gases" that produced little more than a "longer sleep, an orange-coloured face, and a little discomfort on awakening."

A more accurate description was given by Dr Arthur Hurst, from the Royal Army Medical Corps, who said a poisonous gas like chlorine put a man out of action when inhaled at a strength of only 1 in 10,000. On contact there was instant burning of the throat, eyes and skin, followed by frothing, spasms and weakness in the legs. Tightness in the throat caused suffocation and, if death hadn't already occurred, the victim would experience intense headaches, a jarring cough, vomiting and pneumonia (which drowns you from the inside). Those who survived would then endure weeks of vertigo and headaches, and a lifetime of unrepairable lungs.

Gassed (1919), John Singer Sargent.

Supply work as usual

The 15th Division spent the winter/spring of 1915-16 on a rotation of holding the line, reorganising units and burying the dead.
In terms of Harold's individual story, it's interesting that the official history of the 15th Division makes special mention of the Royal Army Service Corps' efforts during this time:
"The diaries of the RASC are one continuous story of laborious, unobtrusive, and well-carried-out work. The historian cannot make much out of a Diary in which the entry day after day reads 'Supply work as usual'. Under that dull and uninteresting heading lies a story of long journeys over vile roads in all kinds of weather, often under artillery and machine-gun fire, with stores, rations, and ammunition up to forward areas. Those four words occur day after day in the RASC diary. It is all that The Corps says of its work, but the men of the Division know how well they were served on every occasion."
It was also around this time that machine gun companies were introduced to every Brigade of the Army and, amid downfalls of snow and drowning rains, both sides made increasing use of grenades and trench-mortars. Bombing attacks were of nightly occurrence. "After twelve months in the vicinity of Loos and Bethune, all ranks were not sorry to leave the district," explains the official history of the 15th Division. "The numberless crosses in the front line and cemeteries behind it were proof of what it had cost the Fifteenth Division to take and hold the salient..."

Worse was to come - much worse.

Battle of Ypres 1917 -. A water cart stuck in the mud to the axle, one wheel and one horse having gone over the edge of the brushwood track at St. Eloi in France on the British Front during World War I on 11th August 1917

"I was on the Somme..."

The Battle of the Somme (1 July to 18 November 1916) is regarded as the most painful and infamous episode of World War One. Fought along a 50km strip of the Somme River, British casualties on the first day alone numbered more than 57,000 - of which 19,240 were killed. This day remains the bloodiest in British military history.
It was also during the Somme Offensive, specifically at the Battle of Fromelles, that Australia suffered the worst 24 hours in its entire history: 5,533 casualties in a single night. This catastrophic attack was described by Brigadier General 'Pompey' Elliott as a "tactical abortion".

Within days of the slaughter at Fromelles, the Anzacs lined up beside the soldiers of the 15th Scottish Division for an attack at Pozières. Described in official despatches as "The opening of the wearing-out Battle", Australian deaths over the following six weeks were comparable to the eight months at Gallipoli. Charles Bean, Australia's Official War Correspondent, observed that those French fields were "more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other spot on earth."

During the Somme Offensive, the 15th fought in the Battle of Pozières, as well as the Battles of Flers-Courcelette and Le Transloy. The Division's official history tells stories of courage that was often not matched by leadership - such as a battalion of Camerons trying to defend themselves with picks and shovels when their bombs ran out. On a landscape of mud and shell-holes, tanks were introduced for the first time. The 15th was promised four tanks, which were to offer both a "material and moral effect". On the day of battle, only two materialised and, as the official history editorialised:
"One machine, the 'female', broke down on its way to the position of assault; possibly its constitution was more highly strung than that of the 'male'. The 'male' tank did not cross the British front line until after the infantry had started, and even then it does not seem to have been much assistance... It then returned to its base to refill."

By the end of the four-month Somme offensive, 1.5 million Allied and German soldiers had become casualties. Allied Forces had managed to advance only 12 km (at most), at a loss of 200,000 French and 420,000 British and dominion soldiers - more than 51,000 casualties for every kilometre gained. Widows and grieving parents across the world began to speak of a "lost generation". The Australian War Memorial sums it up best when it states...

"To those who fought there, and for the present generation, the Somme was synonymous with slaughter."

It's poignant to reflect that Harold was wounded at some point while serving on the Western Front. His children remember a story in which he was stretchered to a First Aid post behind the lines. "*Thank goodness I'm out of that,*" was Harold's thought at the time. Two days later, he was sent back in.

For the rest of his life, Harold carried shrapnel under his skin. Sometimes he allowed his grandchildren to feel it. Was it from the same incident as above? Were these injuries suffered in 1916 on the Somme? None of us really know for sure.

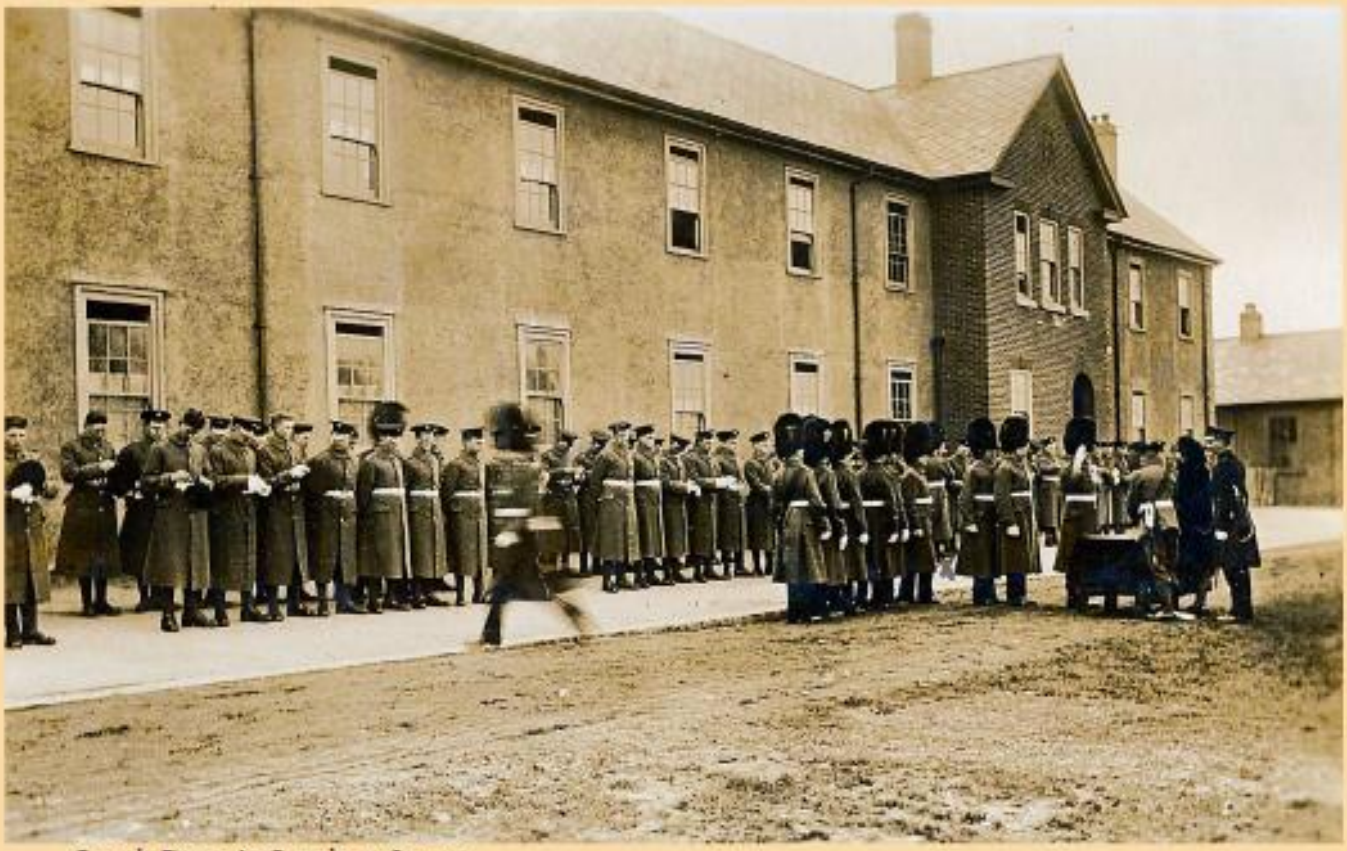
The truth is that Harold hardly spoke about the war to any of his children. These clouded years are like a faded, sepia photograph that hints of a grander story but blurs the telling details.

Once a Grenadier, always a Grenadier

By early 1917 the world had slaughtered so many of its young men that the Grenadier Guards relaxed its six-foot height requirement. Harold transferred into the 2nd Battalion (Bn) Grenadier Guards on 12 February and became Private 29887. On 15 April he returned to Britain for training - and judging by the adjacent photo was based, at least in part, at the Guards Depot in Caterham, Surrey.

As previously mentioned, the 2nd Bn Grenadier Guards were decimated in the early months of the war and, by the end of 1915, had suffered so many casualties that their ranks had turned over three times. In August of the same year the 13 Battalions of the Foot Guards were consolidated into a single Guards Division, with the 2nd Bn Grenadier Guards forming part of the 1st Guards Brigade. It would remain with this Brigade for the rest of the war.

Harold did not return to France until the following year, which meant he avoided the butchery of 1917. This year alone claimed the lives of 20,628 Diggers, which is more than one-fifth of Australian deaths from all wars. Amid mutinies in the French army, Biblical-type rains and questionable tactics, the Third Battle of Ypres (also called Passchendaele) was a monument to the heartbreaking futility of trench warfare.
The then British Prime Minister David Lloyd George described Passchendaele as one of "the greatest disasters of the war," and added that "no soldier of any intelligence now defends this senseless campaign."



Guards Depot in Caterham, Surrey

Sgt. L. B. ADAMS' Squad, Grenadier Guards, June, 1917.

W. T. COOK, CATERHAM.

Left: Harold in Sgt LB Adams' Squad, Grenadier Guards, June 1917.

Attack of the storm troopers

Harold returned to France, specifically the region around Arras, in January 1918. "The rumours at this time of a coming German offensive were daily increasing," states the War Diary of the 2nd Bn Grenadier Guards. The diary adds that there was: "great activity being displayed on all sides. Staff Officers could frequently be observed and new trenches in unexpected places sprang up almost every night." For the Grenadiers of the 2nd Battalion, the morning of 21 March broke to the sound of heavy gunfire and the shelling of Arras. Soon after the Battalion received orders to move at an instant's notice. Germany had added 500,000 troops from the Russian Front and unleashed a massive, final offensive to end the war. Spearheaded by fast-moving storm troopers, the attack was the biggest breakthrough in three years of trench warfare. The front advanced to within 120km of Paris, allowing the Germans to shell the French capital.The Allies were completely rattled, as reflected in the Grenadiers' diary entry for 23 March:

"*Many people seem to have taken temporary leave of their senses and not only have innumerable camps full of every kind of stores been incontinently abandoned but in this village alone a large Expeditionary Force Canteen has been set on fire...*"

Several days later the diarist added that:

"*...masses of troops are seen moving southwards across our front a mile away. These prove to be various units of 31st Division who have received orders to withdraw too late for them to do so under cover of dark... Most of them seemed vague as to their destination and purpose and none appeared to have any definite orders. Later in the day some of them reappeared from behind us having apparently been sent forward again. They did not seem to know what they were intended to do...*"

Ultimately the Germans were stopped by the speed of their own advance because their supply lines couldn't keep pace. They had made spectacular territorial gains but at the cost of 230,000 men in March and April alone. Germany simply didn't have enough teenagers to replenish their ranks. Meanwhile the United States had joined the war in support of the Allies.

The German Spring Offensive, March-july 1918 Battle of St. Quentin. Troops of the 2nd Battalion, Grenadier Guards moving up by motor lorries. Near Arras, 22 March 1918. 'Third system of defence' in front of Arras.

With the 1918 Spring Offensive eventually repulsed, the 2nd Bn Grenadier Guards engaged in a series of battles that formed the Allies' counter-attack. These included the Second Battles of the Somme (from 21 August), the Second Battle of Arras (26 August to 3 September), and the Battles of the Hindenburg Line (12 September to 12 October). The battalion's war diary over this period describes a routine of gassing, shelling, artillery, harassing fire and death.

Surprisingly the diary also records cricket matches with improvised ball and bats, regular education, an open-air theatre in a chateau, and a Divisional Horse Show. In fact the entry of 29 June details a bus trip to the 3rd Army Headquarters to provide a Guard of Honour for His Royal Highness the Colonel of the Regiment. The Grenadiers made such a remarkable impression that onlookers refused to believe they'd been in the trenches days earlier.

Events such as these are put into perspective in the introduction to the War Diary of the 2nd Battalion Grenadier Guards when it explains:

"Warfare was not continuous for the battalions as they were constantly rotated through the front line, the support and reserve lines and eventually billets for rest. Typically there were long periods out of the trenches interspersed with short periods of intense fighting. The battalion served for over 1,500 days in the Western Front and suffered fatalities on a quarter of these days. More telling is the concentration: 50% of their 1,424 fatalities occurred over just 22 separate dates - less than 2% of their time in France and Flanders."

One of those 'dates with death' was still to come.

Grenadier Guards consolidating the former German line prior to an attack near Moyenneville, south of Arras, 21 August 1918.

They could not see ahead

At 2am on 9 November the 2nd Bn Grenadier Guards left the ancient town of Bavay, near the Belgian border, using the road to Maubeuge as a front. By 5.30am they'd advanced across the high ground east of Maubeuge, marching until they reached the victory monument at the Mons Gate. The battalion's role, as explained in its war diary, was to support the 2nd Battalion Coldstream Guards:

"The rain stopped in the early morning but a heavy thick mist hung over the ground and when the Battalion advanced at 7:30 it was only possible to see about 200 yards ahead. After the leading Companies had moved forward about 800 yards they saw troops in front of them moving along behind our barrage. These they believed to be the 2nd Bn Coldstream Guards... It was not discovered till later that they were in reality the enemy retiring."

Despite the enemy's retreat, the 2nd Bn Grenadier Guards suffered 111 casualties that day alone; 11 killed, 91 wounded and nine missing.

The following day the Battalion's diary simply states that they reached Pont Allont, which is slightly north-east of Maubeuge. Then, at 7am on 11 November 1918, the battalion received a wire:

"Hostilities will cease at 11:00 hours today."

An Armistice had been signed in a railroad carriage at Compiègne, France. Victory had been achieved but not before more than 17 million people had died worldwide, including at least 7 million civilians.

In late December the battalion marched into Cologne, pausing when the Guards saw the Rhine for the first time. Harold would remain in Germany for a further month to work as an interpreter, eventually being discharged on 18 February 1919.

Harold's Military History Sheet states that he served a total of five years and 227 days. Across his discharge papers was written the word 'Exemplary'

Turning swords into ploughs

The end of the war marked a new global disaster as influenza swept the globe. The most devastating pandemic in world history, it killed up to 40 million people. One of the victims was Harold's father George, who still lived in Cairo with his wife Clara; another was a Queenslander named John Thomas Ensor, who had a daughter named Ethel. Remember that name!

Around this time, Harold sailed to Australia to join his brothers Claude and Leo at Beerburrum, the largest soldier settlement in Queensland. Harold's ship docked in Western Australia and he visited an uncle who loaned him £10 to help him travel across to Queensland. This uncle told him he did not have to send him back the money; instead, when Harold became established, he should pass the money on to another who might need it.

The three brothers decided they would clear their land and grow pineapples. At night, Harold slept in a big shed with a pet python nestled in the rafters to keep down the rat population. But the attempt to turn swords into ploughshares was a dismal failure across the board and within a year, the brothers decided that the recently-married Claude should stay on the property while the others left to look for work.

Harold had a good idea where he might find it...

Parliament House, Canberra (Old Parliament House)


CANBERRA
FIRE BRIGADE

Harold and Ethel Stephenson on holidays on South Coast NSW (About 1931)

Harold Stephenson - Manuka Fire Station) - This photo was taken on the day Harold retired in 1961

Painting the town red

The Government of the newly-federated Commonwealth of Australia was based in Melbourne until 1924, when the first meeting of the Federal Cabinet was held at Yarralumla Homestead (now the Governor-General's residence). The Yass-Canberra site of the capital had been chosen as early as 1908 but progress was slow because of The First World War and the Great Depression. It wasn't until 1927 that the Provisional Parliament House (now known as Old Parliament House) was officially opened. It was in these dawning days of the national capital that Harold Stephenson moved to Canberra. "*I'm painting the town red*," he wrote in a letter to his brother Leo, "*but not in the way you would do it.*" Harold had found a job with the Canberra Fire Brigade and part of his duties was to paint the local fire hydrants. Meanwhile a young nurse named Ethel Ensor moved to Canberra around 1927 and although we don't know the exact date that they met, Ethel and Harold were married on 29 December 1930. The first home of the newly-weds was a house near the Fire Station at Kingston, ACT. Their family would eventually grow to boast five children and their marriage spanned more than 50 years.

A gentle man who grew flowers

It's perhaps telling that out of everything Harold knew of the 'Great War', one of the few events he ever mentioned was the Christmas Truce of 1914. His eldest daughter Joan, my grandmother, remembers him speaking about the time that outbreaks of unofficial peace were reported along the Western Front: there were rumours of football games between the opposing soldiers, shared meals, Christmas trees in trenches, a sing-off of carols and the exchange of gifts in no-man's land. "Talk about peace and goodwill," one veteran later shared, "I never saw a friendlier sight. We tried to explain to each other that we bore no malice."

This story continues to resonate today because it is one of the few episodes in the whole four-year apocalypse that makes any sense. It speaks to the truth that whatever our differences, we are bound by what we have in common - namely, our basic humanity.

Harold passed away on 17 June 1981, aged 85. Today he is survived by his and Ethel's five children - Joan, Brian, Helen, Brenda and Harry - as well as their 15 grandchildren, numerous great-grandchildren and, to date, almost seven great-great grandchildren.

After serving in all bar 13 days of World War One, Harold dedicated the rest of his years to raising his family, putting out fires and filling his small patch of the world with blooms of prize-winning carnations.

By Josh Brennan

Left: Harold on his daughter's wedding day