

William Angus Wyllie

By Elijah Hughes, Kingston High School

Like many Australian children of the time, William Angus Wyllie, known as Angus (born 7 February 1885), was raised on a large family farm. A second-generation farming family of Scottish descent. Every spring/summer he and his younger brother, Robert Allan Wyllie, known as Allan, would help their father Robert Wyllie along with many farmhands to bring in the harvest. In the other months, the boys and their younger sister Jeanetta Evelyn Wyllie, known as Evelyn, would attend the local school in Boolite; they had annual picnics, flower days, games of cricket and Australian football which were big social events for both the students and parents. Throughout his childhood Angus and his family would attend the local Jeffcott Methodist Church with the rest of his community and grow his faith. This faith was one of his defining features which he carried with him throughout his life.



The town of Boolite was a small wheat-farming town near Warracknabeal, Victoria. It had a town hall which was used for concerts, dancing and fairs, the town also had a functional oval where cricket and Australian rules football were practised. Boolite had a strong background in cricket and were very good when they played. On the 1 November 1918 the Boolite schools annual flower day was held, this flower day while being held after Angus had enlisted would have been very similar to the one he had experienced. The children and several adults created and sold bouquets in the afternoon, with athletics in the morning. There were so many children that there were three or four heats for every single activity, with approximately eight children per heat. There were running races, hessian sack races, egg and spoon races and the most exciting race of them all: a rooster race. This was a race in which children would race after a live rooster, the winner being the person who caught it, and the prize: the rooster itself. While some children were undoubtedly wanting the rooster for the bragging rights, others wanted it for a tasty supper. After such lively activities the children would cool off underneath the nearby trees and take part in the school picnic. The food was contributed by the ladies who, according to the headmaster of the time, “left nothing unprovided”.

Later in that month on the 9 November the Boolite cricket club travelled to the town of Dunmunkle, to play ‘a friendly game of cricket’ The game was a bloodbath with the Dunmunkle cricket club

holding a final score of 17 runs. A certain O. Henke was particularly good as he got five wickets with six balls. A rematch was planned for the future, showing no hard feelings.

Angus undoubtedly enjoyed playing cricket and football, always willing to give something a go. Many children like Angus who lived in the surrounding areas, the parishes of Dunmunkle, Areegra and Carron flocked to their closest schools to do such activities, with their communities always willing to support the school.

After days of fun and games in November the children would return to school for another month and then have their long summer break, during which the children would assist their parents around the farm. This would mainly involve harvesting the vegetables and wheat, collecting eggs from their chickens and having a dip in the local dam if the weather got too hot. As the seasons changed and the children grew older Angus' character began to solidify.

During the summers, fires and dust storms would not be uncommon. If a pasture fire occurred the families around the land affected would use wet hessian sacks and rakes to control the fire, the wheat grown on the surrounding land was the livelihood of the family and was not allowed to burn. Droughts and dust storms frequented the land on which the Wyllies lived. (See below)



Droughts combined with dust storms were infamous. When a dust storm swept through the area dust got in every crack and crevice. The Wyllies wore cloths over their mouths when outside but often waited them out. When a drought had continued long enough the dust seemed to rain down upon the farm. Every time a dust storm occurred the topsoil, essential for farming, was blown away, making it very hard to grow a living out of the harsh land. Due to their reliance on rain or a well for water farming was an unreliable way to make a living, a reason for the Wyllies strong Methodist faith. They could not farm without water and had to rely on God to provide them with what they needed. Unlike today where farmers can purchase drinking water; the Wyllies relied on what they had and that was it. This circumstance caused the Wyllies to be very pragmatic and resourceful. The water they washed their clothes in went straight onto the vegetable patch, the cow and horse poo were used to fertilise the wheat and vegetables, nothing was wasted because it could not be wasted.

Due to the nature of farm work the Wyllie's 'finished' their education at around 15 years of age. At this age they knew how to read, write, and do basic math. This was all they needed for their work on the farm, a job with a lot of 'on-the-job training'. However, Angus continued to learn and was an avid reader, Angus loved to read and enjoyed a good book.

Surrounded by a resourceful and fair dinkum community Angus was influenced for the better. His circumstances did not allow for him to become selfish, picky or self-absorbed. He had no time for any of that. If he was selfish, he was severely reprimanded by his parents, if you were selfish, fellow farmers did not want to help you. If he was picky, he did not eat, the food provided was all he had. If he was self-absorbed, he had little chance of being someone's friend and making connections. These influences were the reason Angus grew into a selfless, hardworking, trustworthy man. As the Methodist faith was the backbone of the Wyllie household there was no alcohol in the house, no swearing and no gambling. From the outside Methodists were referred to as 'Goody-two-shoes', but this all went into the man Angus became. His faith prevented alcoholism, profanity and addiction, all of which are major issues today.



Angus continued working on the family farm for fourteen years before World War One (WWI) broke out on the 28 July 1914 with Angus enlisting on the 21 July 1915 at the age of 30.

When war was declared in Australia on the 4 August 1914, Angus was one of the few people enlisting in his district. With only five men enlisting, Angus had the community's expectations upon him to succeed. This required Angus to move away from his hometown and travel to the country town of Castlemaine, Victoria. This was where Angus and many other men his age gathered to become soldiers. Over the course of 6 weeks Angus and his cohort strengthened themselves both physically and discipline-wise. They lived in a close-knit camp and began the preparations for AIF basic training. Angus was then granted 6 weeks leave to bring in the harvest, something which would not happen nowadays due to strict regulations.

Angus then travelled to the training camp of Broadmeadows, Victoria to finish his basic training. Similar to Castlemaine, a general day would involve:

05:30: Wake up, the soldiers then would proceed to clean and tidy their quarters, get into uniform and shave.

06:30: The cadets would then parade for an hour to an hour and a half to improve physical fitness and discipline.

Between 08:00-12:00: The soldiers would have enjoyed a breakfast and then continued their drills.

Between 12:00-13:00: The soldiers would have then returned to the canteen for lunch.

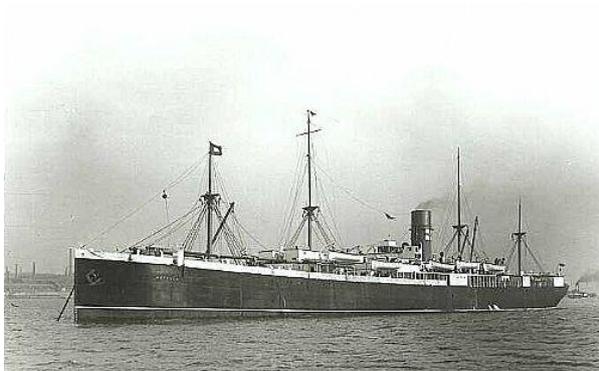
Aprox.13:00-18:00: Drills continued, some practise with weaponry

18:00-20:00: Evening activities such as billiards, snooker, reading and cards

Between 20:00-22:00: Lights out

Between 22:00-05:30: Sleep (usually). Soldiers could be subject to random night-time exercises.

This timetable would continue this way for three months and then they would have complete basic training. After completing his training at Castlemaine and finally Broadmeadows; Angus embarked upon the HMAT A23 "Suffolk" (Seen below) for Egypt as the 5th Battalion 16th Reinforcement (which became part of the 58th Battalion) from Melbourne.



In Egypt they trained in the shadow of the pyramids, in the desert. From Egypt they went to England for further training and then onto France. In France it was wet, muddy and cold. Angus often had to spend time in pillboxes and the conditions were horrendous. He had fellow soldiers with Trench foot and others with Shell shock. He was shelled and gassed numerous times but he was one of the lucky ones, he survived.

It was not too long into his time in France when Angus was shot. In the field near Flers Angus suffered a gun shot wound to the top of the shoulder. It left a large and gaping exit wound on the right side of his chest. He was immediately sent to a casualty clearing station, as it was unequipped

for such serious injuries and Angus was transferred to The Rouen Hospital on the 7 February 1917. He was later transferred back to England, to the Naunton Park Red Cross Hospital in Cheltenham. It was here that he sent many postcards back to his family at home as he recuperated, he also sent letters to his cousins on his mother's side, the Cooks.

After he was discharged from Naunton Park Angus stayed with the Cooks in Plumstead, Kent. He connected with them during his periods of leave and sent postcards to his mother throughout his time in Kent. While recuperating from the gun shot wound, on the 13 June (1917), Angus sent a letter to his brother Allan. The letter allowed Allan to spend Angus' wages to lease plots of land for farming. This land was leased in Angus' name while Allan managed the estate. As Allan had not enlisted for war he was running the family farm. On the 31 July 1917 Angus was on duty again in England. He began parading and marching again. During this time the Australian mail ships had been struck twice, once in mid-May and once in mid-June. Angus like many soldiers relied on the mail to give them insight of their family's life at home, it was a morale booster and whenever the 'Fritz' took out the mail-ships the soldiers were affected.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

E01311

Photo above: Members of D Company, 5th Australian Pioneer Battalion near Dranoutre, erecting sheds in Donegal Camp, to shelter horses during the winter; the huts in rear are those occupied by the men. Donegal Camp was situated on the right of the road leading from Lindenhoek through Dranoutre to Bailleul. The high ground seen in the top right is a slope leading up to Mont Kemmel. Photo taken 23 November 1917. Australian War Memorial E01311

On the 10 November 1917 Angus attempted to return to France onboard a small steamer: the "Prince George", however, due to engine troubles they did not arrive in France until the 14th. From France his battalion marched to a supply train which they boarded. Following a train journey across the French-Belgium border they marched to Kemmel and Lindenhoek Camp in Belgium. Angus stayed there for a couple months and then was moved between camps in France and Belgium.

Unfortunately, while Angus was in France for a second time he was wounded, a gunshot wound to the left knee on the 29 September 1918. This combined with several instances of shrapnel injuries Angus suffered removed him from the field for a long time. He spent this time with the Cooks in

their Bostell Wood Teagardens. He played billiards with Mr Cook and Mrs Scougall (the wife of a soldier and Mrs Cook's sister-in-law from Canada) and wrote letter back to Evelyn, Allan and Dorothy (Allan's wife).



After his second period of recuperation Angus returned to duty for approximately two-three months until he was discharged from the AIF on the 26 July 1919. He stayed abroad for a further few months as he completed a motor mechanics course and driving certificate. He completed these courses in 1919 on leave "with pay and subsistence" while prolonging his time abroad these courses allowed him to be one of the only qualified motor mechanics in his area when he returned to Australia.

Once he returned to Australia (RTA) on the 6 November 1919 Angus began managing the Wyllie family farm. He also began sending letters to a woman in the adjacent farm, Dorothy Ada Cosstick (Doll). Dorothy had been boarding at an adjacent farm and had undoubtedly gotten to know Angus after discharge. In 1921, on the 27 September, Angus and Dorothy were married, Dorothy had sewn her own wedding dress and embroidered her veil. Two years earlier, in 1919, Angus had asked Dorothy to pick out and send a ring to a girl in England for him, Dorothy later remarked to her daughter "the girl got the ring but she wasn't getting the guy".

This situation was often the case for many soldiers who returned to Australia and had sweethearts in England. Often the journey to Australia was too dangerous or Australia was seen as uncivilised in comparison to England. In this case Angus had already sent money to this woman in England, and after him sending the ring with no response forced him to reassess his situation.

Angus and Dorothy had four children. They lost a son to a miscarriage and a girl, Margaret, died aged 6 months old. However, they had two surviving children: Helen Wyllie and Joy Wyllie. These children helped around the farm and assisted their mother with gardening, milking the cows, churning butter

and sewing clothes. It was a harsh upbringing, but it created strong individuals, the children were pragmatic, practical and hardworking, much like their parents.



The Wyllie's code of resourcefulness and hard work was seen later in his life when Angus began using the first tractor drawn combine harvester in his district (c.1925). Angus sat on the sunshine harvester and drove the tractor via a long extension to the steering wheel (seen left). Angus was the first farmer in his district to switch from horse drawn to mechanical. Angus knew his way around mechanics due to the motor mechanic course he undertook after WWI in England (1919). This creation of a machine helped the Wyllies have a higher production of wheat and in turn a higher revenue.

Unfortunately, the next decade was not kind to the Wyllies, in 1923 Angus' mother passed away and his father passed away in 1927. The farm was then split three ways between the three children, a very unusual occurrence, especially Evelyn as a woman inheriting land. Angus began to lease land in the surrounding area of around 994 acres (402 hectares). During this time (1927-1931) Angus also served as a Warracknabeal shire councillor. However, when the Depression hit Australia due to a variety of factors, leasing too much land, bad luck (a flood happening on his land) and other factors Angus declared bankruptcy in 1931. As Angus was already on the land and no one could afford to purchase his land off the bank, the bank allowed Angus to stay on and work the land.

Angus and Dorothy did this until they moved to Queenscliff, Portsea and Bandiana for Angus' service in the Garrison reserve in World War Two (WW2). When war was declared on the radio, Joy (his daughter) said Angus went as white as a sheet, as if he had seen a ghost. The horrible circumstances of France and Belgium in the first world war would have flashed before his eyes. This insight into his memories was previously unseen as he was very closed off about the war. Angus never spoke about what happened in the war, if anything troubled him, he did not let on to family, the society of the time did not allow men to have problems after war. War was still romanticized until well after WWI and society did not manage to catch up, to provide support for veterans until after WW2.



On the 14 March 1941 Angus Wyllie enlisted for WW2 only 22 years after WWI. Angus was retrained at Ascot Vale in Victoria. He served a total of 784 days in the Garrison reserve. Angus was posted at the coastal towns of Queenscliff, Portsea and Bandiana. Angus was eventually discharged due to deafness and arthritis in both knees.

After his discharge the Wyllies moved to Dorothy's hometown of Maryborough and worked as a milkman while Dorothy nursed her father in his final days. He then took up a manager position at a cattle station in Connewirricoo, Victoria while his wife worked as the station cook. He decided to resign from the position due to the foul language the station hands used around his wife.

The Wyllies then moved to Heywood (Victoria) where Angus began as a dairy farmer with a small dairy farm. However, as his health continued to decline running a dairy farm was impossible. The Wyllies eventually sold the farm and bought a four-room timber cottage which they renovated as they could afford to. Angus would ride his bike over 6km to a nearby timber yard to buy what he needed, he would then walk home with the wood laid over the handlebars, resting on the seat. He would repeat this as many times as he required wood, it was quite an amazing feat as Angus did this at the age of 63 with arthritis in both knees.



While Angus renovated the cottage, Dorothy spent the majority of her time on the fledgling garden. She grew fruit trees, a large variety of flowers, had a large vegetable patch and kept Silky chickens. Doll would ride around the town with a basket of produce and sell it, this was the Wyllies sole source of income as Angus had refused a war pension saying he did not deserve it!

Angus and Dorothy eventually had a very nice two-bedroom cottage (seen right) with ample room for grandkids to stay in the holidays. One of the Wyllies granddaughters, Dorothy Hughes (nee Saul) has fond memories of picking blackberries and asparagus, collecting eggs from the chickens, reading classics from Angus' bookshelf and spending countless hours being taught how to play Chinese Checkers on the veranda. Angus was always happy and content around his grandchildren, never displaying the effect that two World Wars had on him.

William Angus Wyllie passed away in his home in Heywood on the 7 July 1965, aged 80 years. His wife Dorothy Wyllie passed away in 1981, aged 86.

Angus was known to be kind, patient, considerate and softly spoken. He never talked about his time in the trenches. Facing the horrors of war, losing two children and his farm during the depression Angus always had a way of being optimistic about his situation. He was a hardworking, 'fair dinkum bloke' and always came up smiling.

