BROKEN RIBBONS

The Diary and Letters of

Corporal William Alfred Spurling, No.4275

'C' Company, 50th Battalion
Australian Imperial Force
Enlisted 1915 - Died of Wounds 1917

Transcription and Editorial by Max Slee, Adelaide, 1999.

ABOUT THE DIARIST

William Alfred Spurling, known as 'Will', was born 27 February 1893 at Warracknabeal, Victoria, the eldest child of William Alfred Spurling (snr), known as 'Bill', and Charlotte Augusta Emma Spurling (nee Dohse), known as 'Lottie'. His parents, both South Australian born, had recently arrived in that town where his father had found work. The family lived in Warracknabeal for only a few years and then resettled at Redhill, near Port Wakefield, in South Australia, when Will was only two years of age. Shortly after that they moved to Beaufort, where both of Will's grandparents had farms.

Will's grandparents were early pioneers of South Australia, arriving there in the early 1850's. His maternal grandparents had migrated from Germany, while his paternal grandfather had migrated from England and paternal grandmother from Ireland.

Bill Spurling

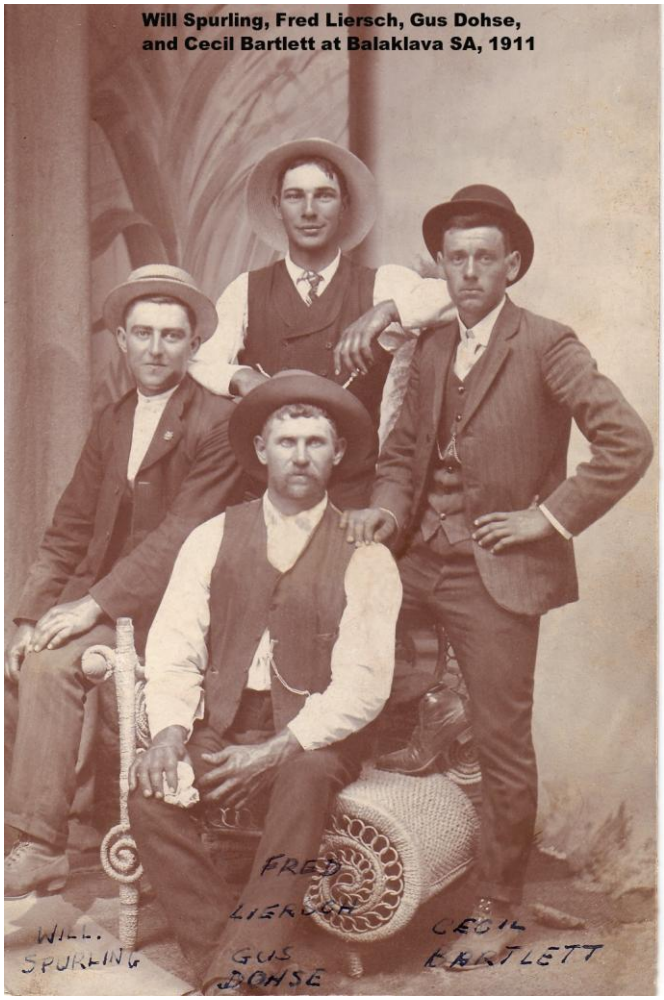
Lottie Spurling

Will spent most of his youth in the Beaufort and Port Wakefield districts, going to school and then working on the family farms. He had four sisters (Elsie, Irene, Amy, Ivy) and three brothers (Sid, Frank, and Gus).

Bill & Lottie Spurling & Family
L to R: Sidney, Elsie, William (father), Ivy, Will, Gus, Amy, Irene (Rene), Charlotte (mother), Frank.
Taken at the Balaklava Show, 1909

Scrupulous in his finances, he carefully saved his earnings. He bought a bicycle in Balaklava in 1907 and paid it off at One Pound per month. Fascinated with engineering, in January 1910, aged 17, he went to Adelaide and bought a secondhand 3.5 horsepower N.S.U. motor cycle for 50 Pounds. That same year he moved with his parent's family and the family of his uncle Gustav Dohse to take up virgin farming land in mallee scrub about 20km from the River Murray at Purnong. The Spurling and Dohse family farms were on adjoining land.

Because Will was the eldest of the children he became actively involved in assisting his father with the farming at an early age. Most of his spare time, when not cropping, was taken up in building their homestead and clearing their land of scrub and stumps so that ever larger crops could be sown. As well, he worked at times on neighbouring farms and during 1913 and 1914 did some farming on his own account.



L-R: Will Spurling, Fred Liersch (rear), Gus Dohse (front) and Cecil Bartlett, at Balaklava, SA, ca.1910.

However, Will's ambitions always went beyond farming and by 1915, aged 23, he was at a crossroad in his life. Earlier that year he went to Victoria for a few months. Then, in April 1915, he sought employment as a Provisional Teacher with the Education Department of South Australia. He sat the entrance examination for admission to the six months course of training on June 29th and was sorely disappointed when the following month when he was rejected.

Due to their ethnic origins, considerable sadness and anguish was experienced by the family when war was declared in 1914 between Britain and Germany, and Australia joined in among the British allies. This became more so when young Will declared his wish to volunteer and become one of the combatants. His first attempt, in June 1915, was thwarted when the army rejected him because of defective teeth. However, Australia was soon recruiting in earnest and such restrictions were altered. So, on 13th August 1915, at the age of 23, Will entered the Australian army at Adelaide as an infantryman.

Eight of his cousins were eventually to be on active service in France, namely, Gunner Roy Dohse, Private Fred Zerk, Private Bert Mason, Private Walter Butler, Lieutenant Leslie Butler DCM, Sergeant Joe Butler, Privates Jack and Ted Spurling,

all of whom, with the exception of the latter two, were grandsons of German-born Mr & Mrs Julius Heinrich Dohse, of Whitwarta.

Will Spurling, ca 1909, at Clare, SA

Like many soldiers, against orders Will kept a diary. This was made in small pocket notebooks using pale blue indelible pencil. The diary, along with other relics of his, has been handed down through his family as cherished heirlooms. In his own words, compiled from his diary, letters, and postcards, this is his story.....

ENLISTMENT AND DEPARTURE

This is a few notes on my life from the time I enlisted in the Army on the 13th August 1915. I went through the general preliminary of military training commencing at the Exhibition Camp, then Morphettville, and finally at Mitcham Camp. At Mitcham I was annexed to the unit of the 13th Reinforcements, 10th Battalion.

After five months of training life we left Australia by the transport ship *Borda* from the Outer Harbour on the morning of January 11th, 1916. The *Borda* is a nice clean ship of 11,000 tons and a speed of 17 knots. It was a pretty but sad sight to see when we began to move away from the wharf. Mothers, sisters, and sweethearts were saying perhaps their last farewell to the ones they love so well, and many sad faces were left behind after the hundreds of pretty streamers and ribbons had broken.

Will Spurling (right) at Morphettville training camp, SA, Oct 1915

My second day on water was far from pleasant, in fact we were all cussing 'Bill' (*Kaiser Wilhelm II, Ed.*) and after this all was well. That was the 12th, the same day that we lost sight of land, and then we saw nothing until the 16th when in the morning we arrived in Fremantle, Western Australia. They say we kept 40 miles out of the regular mail track to foil any spies there might be on the mail boats.

We anchored in Fremantle at breakfast time on Sunday morning, and here the vessel was coaling all day Sunday and Sunday night. Sixty of us were put on sentry duty on board all day Sunday, while the others had leave until 6pm in the evening. The next day, 17th January, we were granted leave from 7pm until 10.30pm. Four of us intimate friends went up to Perth, which is twelve miles and three quarters of an hour in the train.

We had a good look over the city and especially the River Swan. After buying a few luxuries for the trip we went back to the port and got there at twelve, despite being left behind. Then the fun began. We couldn't get through the guards and the boat was already moving. One chap dropped his parcel of biscuits and anchovy paste and forced the guards aside. After a little struggle the four of us got through just in time.

We were making to our quarters when a Sergeant told us to go to the Guard Room and get a rifle and bayonet. We were dumbfounded but had to obey. Thirty of us were armed and lowered to the water and pulled ashore. Curious, we didn't know what for, until we were in the port again and then it was made known to us.

Will Spurling (far left) with other recruits for 10th Battn reinforcements, at Mitcham Training Camp, SA, 1915

About thirty soldiers from the *Borda* were drunk and had run amok in Fremantle. Some had no intentions of coming with us and some were too drunk to know what they were doing. Well, to arrest these fellows and get them back to the boat was a very exciting piece of work. Rifle and bayonet were of no use. We had to put them down and get in with our fists. After handcuffing two or three, and knocking half a dozen over, we got the upper hand and the crowd by this time was enormous. When we had these fellows at our mercy we couldn't get them to move, so a Lieutenant stopped a horse and trolley and we loaded them up like hay and ordered the driver to go to the wharf. The *Borda* was then three miles out in the anchorage so they got a steam launch and we took them all out. Some of their uniforms were red with blood. They were all tried and got duties for the rest of the voyage.

AT SEA

We left the anchorage at 3 o'clock on the 17th and up until the 23rd the sea has been very quiet. On the 24th the sea was very rough and a lot of soldiers were repeating their experience of the 12th. Perhaps this was the reason for us seeing so many sharks this day, and there were thousands of flying fish also.

On the 26th January we were all paid with a One Pound note and I noticed all the gambling had started again. There were six crown and anchor schools going, and one two-up school, besides dozens of nap players. To see the boys you would never think they were going to war. It was very much a pleasure trip. And so it was - we had concerts and parties of all kinds, besides boxing and wrestling.

On the 28th January we had a picnic and general sports day. It was interesting. Up until dinnertime we had boxing, wrestling, tug-of-war, and numerous other items, our unit featuring well among the prize list.

At 2 o'clock that day we crossed the equator and it is a general thing for those who have not crossed The Line before to be dipped. This practice is carried out on all ships. They had a canvas dip which held about five hundred gallons and every man, with a uniform on or not, was dipped twice by special 'military police'. There was no getting out of it. You were arrested and put in and the boat was searched from stem to stern. It was all done in proper style. There was Father Neptune, his wife, and a judge and jury and, of course, a lot were tried and found guilty for different actions.

HMAT Borda, 11136 tons, 14 knots, P&O SN Co. London

After all this was over, and while we were at tea, the fire bell started ringing. This is practice for the troops in case of fire. We all fall out with life belts on and in dead silence. It's just the same with the alarm whistle and boat drill. Once we were called out in the night just to see how quick we could do it. We all had our parade decks and knew where to go. One afternoon we were feasting on canned fruit which we had bought when the bell started. Everything was left just as it was and when we were dismissed we returned and found someone had 'rescued' our fruit so we had to finish tea on rotten cheese

The food on the boat was anything but good. We have three parades a day, principally physical exercise, for three hours a day. Quite enough for the food and the hammocks we have to sleep in, too.

At sea somewhere? February 2nd 1916

My dear Mother,

Orders are given that if we have letters to post to put them in the Orderly Room by seven tonight and they will reach Australia a fortnight before those we post when we land, so I thought I would let you know how I am.

Well dear ones, I can't say much, only we had a splendid trip so far and the sea is like a billiard table today. God knows where we are - we don't - we have seen nothing but water for seventeen days, but we must be getting close to land somewhere, surely. We are all anxious to get off again.

I will send Elsie and Irene a note when I finish this. When you write, dear Mother, always tell me how many letters you have got from me, and I will know if any goes astray. I am anxious to get a letter from home. You don't know how I will appreciate a few lines from home. I will expect a letter about the first week in March, or before. I think I have told you before that you could use those envelopes I took home, but be sure to cross out the words not wanted. I suppose you got my two letters I sent from Perth. We had great excitement there. I will tell you later on.

We crossed the Equator on the 28th and had a sports day on board with great success, and it is customary for those that have not crossed the line before to be dipped and it was carried out in proper style. A lot were put in clothes and all. They had a canvas tank to hold about 500 gallons. Of course, we had Father Neptune, his wife, judge, jury and all. It caused great excitement all the afternoon. Then we have concerts, too, and get some good programs.

Well, Mother, I will write again as soon as we land, and promise you I will write every possible chance, however little it is. Always let Father read my letters, as I will address them all to you. You are sure to get them and send them to him, if he is not home. Tell me if you are getting my pay all right. If you like you can send the price of a dress to Elsie, for yourself, and she can get it, or anything you really want. I think I will conclude for the time, and hoping all is well and happy as I am.

I am, your affectionate Son and Brother, Will. XXXXXXXXX

Ps: Remember me to all, and give the little ones a kiss for me. I have written to no one but you yet. If anyone wants my address, give it to them. I am writing a diary, and find plenty to write. It will be interesting when I come home.

On the 2nd February we were surprised at waking up and seeing land on our port side. This was the first land we had seen since leaving Australia. After a lot of questions and surmising we were told it was the coast of Africa. It was very mountainous, with high rocks and very high cliffs. A lighthouse here caused great excitement. It was on an island all by itself. The island contained about half an acre of surface and went nearly perpendicular to the water. The lighthouse was perched on top at a tremendous height from the water.

While at breakfast we passed the troopship *Afric*, 12,000 tons, with troops from all states of Australia. All that day, off and on, we saw land. In the evening orders were that all portholes to be closed, no matches to be struck on the upper decks, and all naked lights had to be put out. This was while we were passing Aden in the Red Sea.

Up until the 5th February we saw steamers of all descriptions and, occasionally, land. We were paid again on this day and it took great effect on the gambling schools again. A few days before pay day you will hardly see any of it.

On the 6th our unit was detailed for guard and fatigue duties. The sergeant told two of the fatigues to go and shift some cheese out of the canteen. They asked him where they should put it and he thought they knew, so he said, "Oh, chuck it over", and so they innocently went and threw it overboard. Big 75lb cheeses, never been opened. After a while, the sergeant asked them where they had put it, and when they told him he nearly went mad. I don't know how he got on. The two chaps said it was nearly as much as they could lift and when it struck the water everyone on that side of the ship looked to see what it was. They thought it was a man.

EGYPT - CAIRO AND HELIOPOLIS

We reached Port Suez and anchored at the anchorage at seven o'clock on the morning of 7th February. This was the first time we had stopped since we left Fremantle and we had to stay on board until the 10th. This day we disembarked and left by train for Heliopolis, which is eighty miles distant. We got there in the early hours of the 11th February, one month to the day from when we left Adelaide.

Well, during this day we did nothing. In the evening we went up to Cairo, which is seven miles distant from the Aerodrome Camp where we were. The train and car does this in fifteen minutes and are entirely worked by natives. Cairo opened my eyes. I saw things here I would never have believed before. It is all natives - thousands of them. One wonders what they live on. They are very poorly clad - you can't tell the males from the females, and by what I have seen, I am not anxious to know the difference. However, there are some very fascinating French girls here and there are some natives dressed as well as any European.

We had to leave the city before 9 o'clock as no man in uniform is allowed out after ten. We returned to camp to our little 'mye-myes' (*or wurleys, Ed*) made out of bamboo, which, I suppose, is cheaper than canvas. There are hundreds of them, built by the natives. They are very cool during the summer months, but are very unpleasant when it is wet - and this is the wettest winter known in Egypt for fourteen years.

On Sunday 13th February we went for a tour under a French guide, which cost us 20 piastres (equal to 4/2 English money). We were taken through all the historic buildings of old and new Cairo, some as old as 2,400 years. We were taken and shown the mosque of Ibrahim Pasha, an enormous building where the Arabs used to pray. In this building were the two pillars they would kiss when felling ill, and they were supposed to get well again the next day. One could see where it was worn away with kissing. They are preserved now with a steel railing.

We also saw the two large pillars of marble, nine inches apart, that every Arab was forced through every year. If he failed to get through they said he was a bad man, and would imprison him. The marble here is as shiny as glass. I suppose thousands and thousands have passed through them.

There are hundreds of other mosques, of little or more importance, and the kings, or men, that built these places were all buried inside. The buildings were all done by slave labour. Then there is the old Citadel, a fort which was built to defend Cairo,

now Old Cairo, hundreds of years ago, with all its guns, of course now out of date. Half a dozen spots on the walls were called to our attention and it was explained that this was done by the Arab cannon balls in an attempted invasion of Egypt, two thousand years ago (?). It explained the difference between the 'Jack Johnson' shells we have today.

In one old church we were shown a solid block of gold, about nine inches square, which was built into the wall when gold was of little value, and is still preserved there. Yes, we all tried it but it was quite tight. In the same building were tombs of the great people of Egypt, with age clinging to them. One was of solid copper, valued at hundreds of thousands. Also here was a sacred carpet, and a kingdom would not buy it. We were made to remove our boots before entering. All these buildings are guarded by sentries and will be for years.

We can imagine the damage done in Belgium to these old places by the Huns. Enormous would be the loss of relics if that were to happen here. It is funny to see the Jews praying and repenting; they go through all sorts of antics. They come to their sacred God with a very sad face and go away smiling and look quite happy.

We were taken into the place where the Holy Family hid whilst fleeing from the Arabs in the invasion. It was a little underground cave under a church and their table and chairs are still there.

Then, on an island in the middle of the River Nile, we were shown the place where Moses was found, and the box he was in, and the old door he was taken through. We were disappointed we couldn't see the actual bull rushes - they were all dead. This is old Cairo, and every wall left standing has graves in them. There are thousands of natives living here; it's wonderful what they find to eat. Sugar cane is their principal diet.

While I am writing this, it is understood that there are four of us friends, very intimate, and we always knock about together. We went through camp together and we have been together ever since.

Cairo, Egypt. February 16th 1916

My dear Mother and all,

A few lines to let you know that I am well and happy and promise you are the same. Well, dear Mother, I suppose I ought to have written to you before but I have been too jolly busy. Well, I have had a splendid trip over and hope it will be as good going home. We arrived at Port Suez on the 8th and left there by train two days after and got to this camp at 2 o'clock on the morning of the 11th, a month to the day from when we left Adelaide.

This is a fine big camp and we live in huts made of bamboo, and it is very nice when it rains I can tell you, when you wake up in the morning and find you are lying in water. This is the wettest winter known in Egypt for fourteen years but I suppose we will soon have the summer here and then, they say, its awful - you can only go out in the night and mornings. As for the food, we get looked after

well, in fact better than we were at Mitcham. We get a change every other day and cocoa and biscuits when we get up in the morning. We have got to have it, as the training here is very strenuous, and all hours. You never know where you are going to be.

It would open your eyes to see this place Mother. You never see a white man (except those in khaki) and they are the dirtiest race of people existing. I have seen things here I could never tell you. It opened my eyes. Heliopolis, that's where we are, is only seven miles from Cairo and the train goes in in fifteen minutes. They are very fast and are worked entirely by the natives. One hardly feels safe riding behind them. Last Sunday about 150 of us went on a tour under a French guide through old Cairo and there are some wonderful sights to be seen here. The old historic buildings hundreds of years old, all have history clinging to them. Many of these things are mentioned in the Bible, things I have heard preached in S.A. I have seen in reality and perhaps will be the only one in our family who will ever see them. I could sit and write for hours on what I have seen here, but you will understand I can't explain in a letter. But, I am writing a diary and you will be able to read it when I come home.

Well, my dear ones, what do you think! You will be surprised to know I have met Bert Mason. He landed here two days after I did, and yesterday morning he came to my hut and enquired for me. I heard someone mention my name and he came up to me and said he was my cousin. I said no, not mine, he must be making a mistake. After a while he told me his name and I was dumbfounded. Fancy meeting over here. He didn't know I was here and I didn't know he was here. He thought by chance to make enquiries and I was the fourth man he spoke to in our reinforcements. Now we knock about together. I think he was glad to meet me, as he is very quiet. Bert is in the same Brigade as I am and only four chains from where I camp, so we are always together.

We are trying to get leave to go and see Leslie, and I will see Rolf too. It is impossible for me to tell you where they are. We are warned against this, so I won't take any risks, but its only two days from here. Of course, they are in the trenches - they themselves can't say where they are, you will understand. You will know more from the papers than I can tell you. We never know what is happening about the war as nothing is printed here or allowed in. You know more in Australia than we do. We hear there is conscription in England, but can't say if it is true. Let me know. The laws are very strict here Mother. Two English Tommies were shot here a few days ago for disobeying orders. What do you think of that! That will never be my fate.

Well, I am looking for a letter from you any day now. I have a letter from Adelaide tonight, so guess I won't have to wait long for yours. I will send you this letter. You can read it and see what I have left behind. I must be a funny kid because I never give anything like this a thought, poor girl. I wish I had not wasted her time. I don't know what to tell her. I think I will wait awhile now before I tell her. She's a pretty girl and very affectionate.

This is the first letter I have written since we landed and I suppose you are anxiously waiting for it. The one I wrote on water was a few days before we landed. They had to go in and be censored. I will post this in Heliopolis as I think it will be safer. I suppose you know our money here is different. It is very hard to get used to and very easy to get rid of. Well, Bert is here writing to Irene, and I am nearly cut out too. Let Father read this if you can. I will write again in a few weeks time so you can look for a letter pretty nearly every fortnight. Don't worry about me, dear Mother. We are a long way off Active Service yet, in a sense, so I will close with love to all at home.

I am, your affectionate Son and Brother,
Will Sp. XXXXX

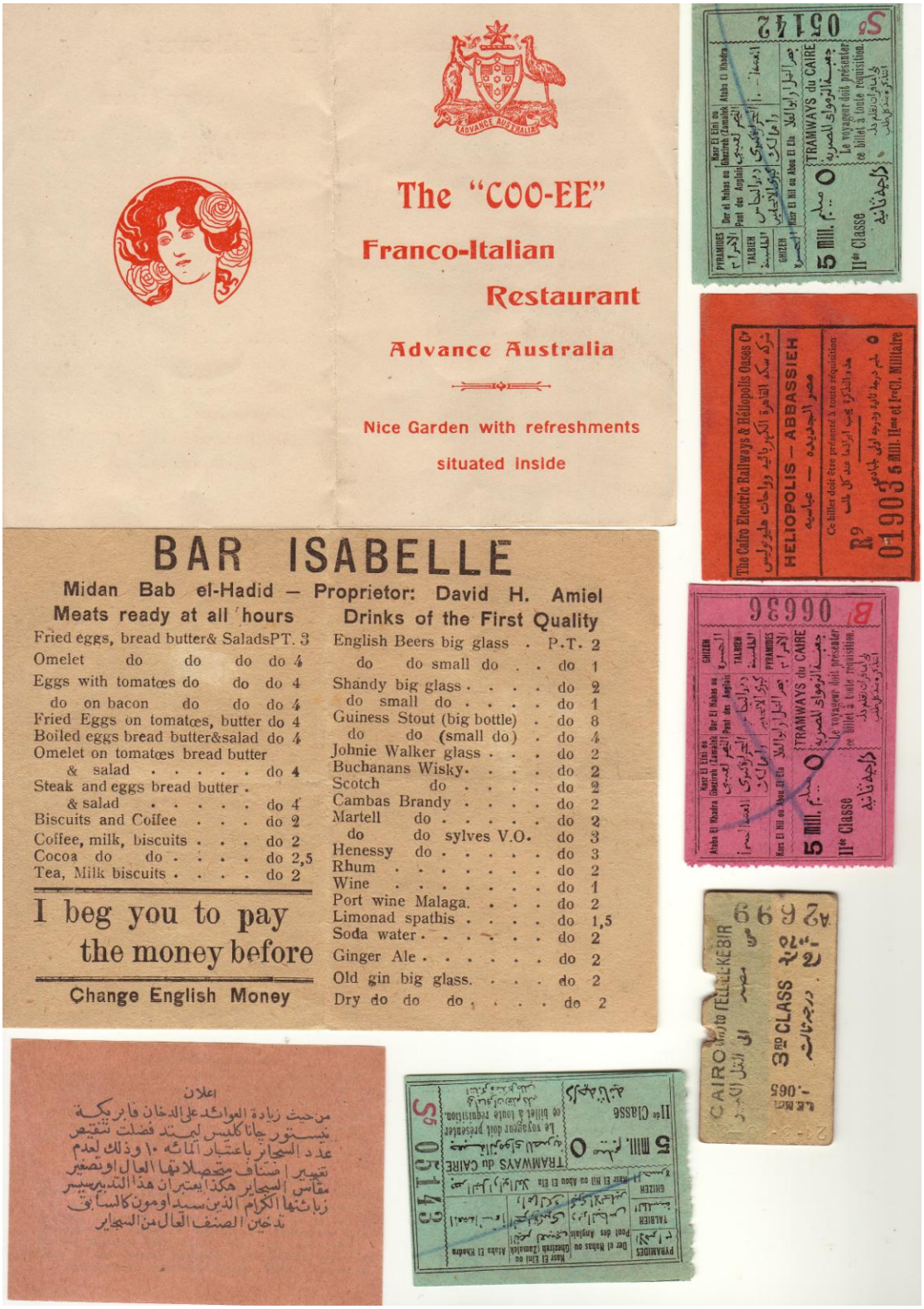
On Sunday 20th February we visited the zoo, which is the finest in the world. It's laid out fine with plenty of room and with a specimen of almost every living creature in the world. It would take four good days to go through this zoo.

I've seen the prettiest parks and paths here that I have ever seen. Getting about to these places is very awkward. You don't know the cars and then it's a hard thing to read them, and it's only about two in ten of the natives that you can make understand. I've been arguing with them for fifteen minutes, and then went away none the wiser, so you are in an awkward position if you happen to get lost here.

On the 27th February 1916, we went to the Cheops Pyramid, which is the largest pyramid in Egypt and is about seventeen miles from our camp. We get out there at a cost of threepence by car. It's a very interesting ride and we pass over the largest bridge on the Nile and this is a wonderful construction.

The first thing that meets your eye when getting out of the car are the donkeys and camels and their owners, waiting to take people to the pyramids. You can get a donkey all the afternoon for five piastres. Anyhow, we walked this afternoon; it was too far from payday. On getting to the pyramids you are pestered with guides, who we refused, and undertook it ourselves.

The largest pyramid covers a surface of eight chain square and runs to an enormous height. One little opening in this takes you to the interior, which is as dark as dungeon. Here we saw where a king and queen had been buried in a little room. The coffin of cement was still there. One is very glad to get out of there, as it is very stuffy.



Some of Will's Cairo souvenirs

Next we visited the Sphinx, which is wonderful, and close by is a large building that has been dug out and was supposed to have been buried for hundreds of years. In this were found some mummies and inside the boxes were found thousands of pounds worth of jewels. Even now they honour their dead by burying valuables with them. In one wall of this building there was a solid piece of granite measuring sixteen feet by four feet by four feet. Now, how did this get here, as there is no granite for miles. It's

the same with the pyramid; this is where the '?' comes in and no living man can answer.

On our way home from the pyramids we again visited the zoo and saw a few more things of note, including two pontoons that were captured from the Turks on 'The Canal' in 1901. We also saw a turtle with a circumference of seven feet and aged over two hundred years old.

TEL-EL-KABIR

On the 1st March 1916, we were roused out of bed at four o'clock in the morning, and were on the train ready for Tel-el-Kabir at 9 o'clock. We were all jammed in ordinary wagons but we had to make the best of it. After four hours ride we arrived at Tel-el-Kabir.

This is an enormous camp. There are forty miles of tents here and the camp is close to the Suez Canal. As soon as we got here we found things were more 'war like' and everything is far stricter than we were used to. Here we get a fair share of 'dog food'. The biscuits are as hard as iron and we get them in bagfuls. You could make a good tile floor out of them. We also got a taste of piggy - we call it Lance Corporal bacon' because there is only one stripe of lean on it.

The longest trains I have ever seen in my life I have seen since being in Egypt. They are a tremendous length. I have seen eighty vehicles and one engine. This is all level country here; otherwise they couldn't do it.

When we first arrived in Egypt we found the money very difficult, but after a while, when we are taken down a few times, we soon Jerry. There are eight different coins in the Egyptian money, from the quarter millieme to the twenty-piastre piece. Then starts the note money. They are similar to our Ten Shilling note. The money commonly used are the half, one, five, ten, and twenty piastre pieces. One piastre is about two and a half pence.

It's wonderful how one can beat the native down in prices. In one case I tried to buy a walking stick from one of them in the streets and he wanted a hundred piastres for it. I beat him down to six, and then I never bought it. One delights in arguing with them. There are hundreds of them in the streets selling oranges, peanuts, matches, and cigarettes. There are also hundreds of bootblacks and you can get a good shine for half a piastre.

The town of Heliopolis is built principally of bricks made of sand and there are some buildings here which are very fine. It's quite common for one building to have a hundred apartments and the finest building is the Palace Hotel, built by a syndicate of natives, and now called the Palace Hospital, because it is at present filled with wounded Australians. Heliopolis is a second Monte Carlo, built by a millionaire for the purpose of gambling, and by what I have seen, it was no failure. Thousands of Pounds change hands here every night.

On the 1st March 1916, we were reorganised, and helped to form a new battalion - the 50th Battalion. This seemed a long way from home after being used to the 10th Battalion.

March 2nd 1916

Dear Ivy

I have sent one of these postcards to Gussie and thought you would like one. Well, dear Sister, I can't tell you much, only I am well and having a real good time. I will have a lot to tell you when I come home again. We have been shifted about a lot since we have been in Egypt. It's all experience for us, I suppose. We are not far off the trenches now, and have been made into a new battalion. I will give you the address. I am waiting for a letter from dear Mother. I hope she is not worrying about me, as I am alright. I am not far from Rolf, but can't get to see him. I have written, but have no answer yet. Well, dear sister, I must conclude.

With best love from your affectionate Brother,

Will XXXXX

Ps: I have written this in a tent in the desert on a tin dish.

On Sunday 12th March, some of us went out into the desert and had a look at the trenches that were made thirty-two years ago by the Arabs in defence of their country from the British. I can remember the battle of Tel-el-Kabir from history lessons. There are miles and miles of trenches here, and one wonders how they have stood for so long.

Battles in those days were decided in a few hours. The British came across the desert by night and took the Arabs by surprise and that is how Egypt is now a British Protectorate. There must have been an awful slaughter here, for you can dig up skulls and skeletons by the hundreds of both sides and also old rifles and bullets and all sorts of war materials that have been drifted over by sand in the years gone by. The deserts of Egypt are not all sand, as one might think, but a mass of pretty little stones, and there is no sign of vegetation for miles, not even a bush.

On the 16th of March we were inoculated again and had to go through the agonies of that again. On the 19th of March we got our first big mail, and no-one but the boys know how we accept it. They nearly go mad when they get a letter from their dear ones at home. This is my first mail and I got eight letters. I couldn't sleep that night for joy. A lot of letters go astray, and one can't wonder why as they are unloaded like hay in bagfuls.

On March 22nd the Prince of Wales and General Birdwood paid a visit to our camp. This is the first time I have seen our future King and I was surprised to see such a boy. He was riding a splendid black horse and he had all his guards with him, as well as staff and two or three other big 'heads'. The Prince was carrying three 'stars' and as he rode along the lines we all 'hip-hoo-rayed' him. In the afternoon he ordered a half holiday for us. We were wishing he would come every day for the training we have here is very hard. I have worked hard but never before in my life have I felt so broken down. It was awful, and on such little food.

On the 23rd March we were all issued with helmets to protect the back of our necks, and also shorts, and once again we looked like little boys, or rather the bottom half of us did and the top half looked like an old Indian game hunter, so you can picture the sights we were. Nevertheless, we were glad to get them.

On the 24th we were inoculated again and went through the same agonies again. In a few days we are going to move, and today, the 27th March, they have got us out in the desert marching everywhere with a full pack, breaking us in (or, at least, down) for the journey. The sun and the heat are intense and almost unbearable and we are only allowed one bottle of water per day. Only the strongest of us can do this.

On the last day of March we left Tel-el-Kabir early in the morning and marched eighteen miles along a fresh water canal to a place called Mahsama, which is a railway siding, and we stopped there for the day at two o'clock. This was a terrible task and I shall never forget it. When on the march we always go for forty minutes and then have ten minutes spell. This is marching rules for the whole of the journey until the destination is reached.

On April Fools Day (1st April) we again left our camp at 3 o'clock in the morning and went on another twenty miles to a place called '…….....', well, I forget the name. (*Moascar, Ed*). Anyhow, this was another terrible day's march and on very little water. Water carts were following us but we only get enough to make us thirsty again. Natives were following us with oranges and they were a terrible price.

SERAPEUM, SUEZ CANAL

Following the withdrawal of the Anzac 1st and 2nd Divisions from Gallipoli in December 1914, these exhausted troops were transported back to Egypt. There they were rested and reinforced by fresh troops from Australia. All were regrouped into new battalions with the express purpose of blending experienced troops with fresh recruits. Over the next few months these new battalions were drilled into cohesive units in preparation for their transport to the Western Front in France. (Ed.)

On the 2nd April, after another heavy day's marching, we got to Serapeum. This is a camp in Asia Minor, just over the Suez Canal. The distance we have come in these three days was just on fifty miles and they were the hardest fifty I have ever done. A brigade that went over the same route about seven days prior to our trip lost three men from want of water, and one private shot an officer and then shot himself. Water is a hard thing to get in these places and some were paying five piastres to the natives for a bottle of dirty water. The next morning found a lot of us in the Suez Canal, which is only half a mile from the camp. A dip in the briny was all we could wish for and it was here that I learned to swim.

On the 11th April I weighed myself and was surprised when I turned the scales at 11 stone, 4 pound. We get a fair share of gift stuff in the sweets line from Australia, which is very acceptable, and a bigger share in dust storms and gnats, which are most unwelcomed. It's nothing to see a couple of chaps sitting down in the sun 'gnatting'

themselves. Every time I looked, and that was every day, I found about ten or fifteen of them on me on the average.

On the 16th April I was working all day and night digging out a train that was drifted over in a dust storm. Sixteen Turkish prisoners went through today that were captured in a little 'box-on' not far from here. This area is where the Turks made a raid on the Suez Canal a while ago, and we saw the grave of Major Von Hagen, a German who was leading the Turks. One of our boys dug him up and took his buttons and a few piastres from his body and he got three years for it.

On the 20th April we had a march past the Prince of Wales and General Murray, in review. The next day was Good Friday and it hurt us when we had to work all day.

On Easter Monday we were taken out into the desert, with very little water, and when we came back to camp we rushed the tanks. Officers and bayonets wouldn't have stopped us. The lousy devils, they have plenty of beer and refreshments and the poor

privates can't get even enough water, considering we have salt bacon for breakfast, or at least 'Lance Corporal bacon', as we call it.

On Anzac Day, 25th April, we had sports on the Canal, which were a great success. On the 8th May 1916 we left Serapeum for the railhead, a distance of five miles, and were very sorry when we had to leave the Canal behind as I often used to nick off down to the Canal and have a dip and I was never once caught by the red-caps. At the railhead we were issued with smoked glasses to protect our eyes. We made camp there and we used to parade there at four in the morning and rest during the day.

On the 18th May we left the railhead at three o'clock in the morning for the trenches, only four miles away, and on the 20th May slept in the trenches for the first time. These have been built to protect the Suez Canal from a threatened invasion by the Turks. There are eighty miles of trenches and they are guarded by very few men because more men could be got there from Egypt in a few hours. On the 20th we also got our first mail addressed to the 50th Battalion. On the 31st May we were relieved by some Hampshire men (*8th Hampshires, Ed*), and the next day we left the trenches at 2.30am and arrived at the railhead at 4.30am.

On the 2nd June we went to Serapeum to get our clothes disinfected and have a wash. It was the first chance to wash our faces for days as all we got in the trenches was water for drinking. The heat here is as high as 124 degrees and it took some water to cool that.

EMBARKATION FOR FRANCE AND THE WESTERN FRONT

On Sunday 4th June we again left at 8 o'clock at night for No.2 Siding, across the Canal, in an awful sandstorm. We arrived there and left by train at half past twelve in open trucks and got to Alexandria at nine the next morning, the 5th June. The morning dawned just in time to see the pretty country close to Alexandria. This is a large port, though I didn't see much of it.

We embarked here on the transport *Arcadian*, a ship of 14,000 tons with a speed of 24 knots. There were numerous other transports there also. Well, we were put on, and it was a put on, jammed in everywhere. There were 2,500 troops on board and room for only about 1,500. This was a very uncomfortable trip and only like soldiers did we grin and bear it. I was glad when the journey was done.

On the way we were never once sure where we were going, and only knew that we were in a 'dangerous zone' and had to be constantly on the watch for whatever might turn up and the whole of the way we had to wear our lifebelts. I don't know what good they would have been to us for we would never have got out of the ship in time unless you were up on deck, we were that jammed in. There are cruisers and battleships everywhere you look, and we travel at nights with all lights out and portholes closed.

On the following trip H.M.T. Arcadian was sunk in the Eastern Mediterranean by a German submarine with a loss of 19 officers, 214 other ranks, 10 naval ratings, 34 crew, and 2 civilians. (Ed.)

The transport Arcadian, which has been sunk.

Photographs of submarines have a special interest at the moment, when the problem they present is uppermost in the public mind. The Admiralty yesterday announced the loss of another transport, the Arcadian. It was sunk in the Eastern Mediterranean, and among the missing are nineteen officers, 214 other ranks, ten naval ratings, thirty-four crew and two civilians.—(Exclusive to *The Daily Mirror*.)

This is the transport I came from Egypt to France in, Lucky wasn't I.

Clipping Will sent home, endorsed by him, "This is the transport I came from Egypt to France in. Lucky, wasn't I."

FRANCE - THE WESTERN FRONT

Between March and June 1916, the three Anzac Divisions in Egypt were shipped to France, where they linked up with the Australian 3rd Division, which had up to that time been stationed in England. The Australian infantry groups were first sent to the Western Front at Armentieres in what was known as the nursery sector, where new or exhausted divisions were stationed to enjoy a relatively quiet time. (Ed.)

Well, after five days on the sea we finally reached the port of Marseilles, in France, on the night of 11th June 1916. The next morning we disembarked and camped in the port. In the afternoon we were given leave to have a look at the town and had to go through the same ordeal with the change of money and language. However, everything is much cheaper than in Egypt and you can get a decent feed here, even though it be 'frogs and snails'. My first meal in France cost me ten francs, about eight shillings and fourpence. There are seven coins in French money and one, a franc, is equal to ten pence in English value. Here we also get a lot of Belgian money. Marseilles is a very pretty place, densely wooded with very pretty trees.

On the 13th June we left Marseilles by train and travelled day and night for sixty hours, or two and a half days, from the south to the north of France, and I shall never forget the sights and pretty scenery that I saw on this journey. It was one long paradise of gardens, crops, and running streams of water, with ferns, fruit trees, and tall trees of all descriptions looking at their best. This is the best time of year to visit

this part of the world. One thing I have noticed here in France, and that is you never see an iron roof - every building is roofed with red tiles.

At the end of this pretty ride we passed Calais, stopped at 12 o'clock, got out of the train, and marched three miles to a village called Hazebrouck (near the Belgian border). Here we were billeted in houses and barns and it was nice to get a rest and lay down. We couldn't sleep in the train as it was too crowded. I forgot to mention that during the journey we passed through the suburbs of Paris.

The first thing we noticed when we got to Hazebrouck was the roar of artillery, which is only nine miles away. I will be able to speak more of this later on, no doubt. On the 17th June 1916 I had a look at a few of the villages, and although they are so close to the seat of war and thunder, everything looks so peaceful. The fields are green and look lovely and one can hardly credit this after seeing Egypt. I also forgot to mention that on the train journey we passed through some very long tunnels, one of which must have been a mile and a half in length.

On the 19th June, after several days, we left this billet and marched twelve miles to a village called Sailly. There were one hundred men fell out on this march. It was a forced march and the hard cobblestones were too much for the feet. When we reached our new billets there were not many in the Battalion that could have gone on much further and we were all glad when they stopped.

ARMENTIERES (First time into action)

After a week we left Sailly on the 26th June to go up as supports in the trenches. We left our billets at ten that night in groups of five, as it is too dangerous otherwise. For the four hours it took us it rained all the way and we arrived in the supports with everything wet through, except for our blanket, which was in our oil sheets. Otherwise, everything was wet through and soaking, packs and all. We settled down in the dark and had to sleep as we were and were not allowed to take any of our wet clothes off. We were too close to the firing line now to undress and any man caught with anything off was 'crimed'. Fancy sleeping like this in civilian life. Practically in water, you might say.

Well, around here one can see the devastation of war. Everyone you see is in uniform, houses are on the ground, churches are burned or destroyed, roads are rooted up with shells, telephone wires are cut, and the country is one mass of hidden trenches, barbed wire entanglements, ammunition depots, and dug-outs. Some of us are in dugouts and others are in old houses.

We are in the region of Armentieres and this country was once held by the Germans in the early part of the war. This is a pretty place too, and there are hundreds of fruit trees gone to the pack from want of care. It is two years now since the inhabitants have left.

This is where I got my christening under fire. Our batteries are hidden along here and the Huns are fishing for them. A big Johnson shell would go just over us and our boys

would sit up and say, "A little bit lower, Fritz" and "Another one, Fritz, another shell for .....!". I got another mail here, twelve letters, one from everyone back home.

On the 10th July 1916 we left the supports at Croix Blanck at one o'clock in the morning and marched as far as Estaires, reaching there at 8 o'clock the same morning. Here we camped in an old flour mill for the day. This is a fairly large town, with wonders of all sorts. A very old and large Catholic church here drew my attention and I was told that the Germans wanted 25,000 Pounds from the French to leave it alone and untouched. Whether they got it or not I can't say, but it was never touched.

The Germans held all this area in the early part of the war and this is easily depicted by the little wooden crosses, or crucifixes, in every field and all through this country. Some are in remembrance of unknown heroes and others have names on. These are British soldiers and I also had a look at the French cemetery here . They also have a plot of land set aside for Australian soldiers in this cemetery and there is quite a hundred heroes lying here, and in quite a short time, too. I also saw two of our boys buried here. They died that morning and I happened to be in the cemetery when they were being buried. There was no crowd, only the four bearers and the parson. The bodies were on a stretcher, wrapped in a Union Jack flag and sewn up in their own blankets, and they get a very decent burial. Then there is a little cross at the head of the grave with the rank, battalion, religion, age, and casualty (died of wounds or killed in action) on it. Very decent indeed. One can find their dead heroes easily, and photos can be procured of these graves.

On the 11th July 1916 we left Estaires and went back to Caestre, twelve miles hard march, and it was my luck to be billeted in a pigsty. Pigs were turned out to make room for twenty of us. This is a fact. I woke up in the night with something on my face, and found it was one of the pigs slobbering my face through a hole in the wall. She wanted to get in again, I suppose. I stuffed the wall with wet straw (some of my bed) but she would eat it as fast as I could stuff it in so I had to shift outside and I would have liked to have let her in on the others. After this we were crawling with lice and fleas again.

FIRST BATTLE OF THE SOMME

On 1 July 1916 the Allies began the first great battle of the Somme and the Anzac troops were sent in to form part of the huge Allied army concentrated there. All German reserves were sent to the area and the Allies responded by throwing in all the men they could muster. Three weeks after the Allied offensive had begun the new Anzac troops were sent straight into battle from the nursery sector, and moved in to take the village of Pozieres and beyond. In doing so they suffered perhaps the heaviest bombardment ever suffered by any troops in any war. (Ed)

At 5pm on the evening of 13th July 1916 we left Caestre again for 'somewhere', because we never know where we are going, and marched eight miles to a railway station called Bailleul. Here we entrained at 10pm and, jammed in, 40 men to each horse truck, we travelled all night and arrived at Candes at 4am the next morning. We left the train there and marched ten miles to a village called Pernois.

During the day there we had a tin of bully beef each and a few 'tiles' to eat. The day before we had only one meal, too. Oh, God, let me live to tell this, this was the worst village we have been in so far, for you can't buy very much in the line of eatables and for days we had no bread, and we did a lot of route marching here at the same time. We are 25 miles behind the firing line and we can hear the guns plainly.

Behind the lines, somewhere in France
July 21st 1916

My dear Father,
At last I have a line from you - two letters that you wrote way back in April. I have only just got them and I can quite see why you had not written before, as you didn't have my address. Anyway, by now you will all know my new address, as letters coming to the 13/10 now are likely to astray. In fact, I wouldn't expect to get them.

Well, I suppose you are home now and have the few letters I sent you. They were short, never the less the best I could do, and now we are warned against writing too much or the letters are destroyed. In this respect, discipline, and food, you are treated like dogs, and you can't open your mouth or you will be 'crimed'. They hardly give you a chance and now we are in action the crimes are anything from three to twelve months. We see plenty of courtmartials. One crime as is practised in the army and is next to shooting a man is called 'spread eagle'. Four pegs are driven into the ground and the defaulter is tied on his back with his legs and hands spread out, alongside of a gun. Understand, this is for a very serious crime and, as I said, is next to shooting.

Dear Dad, never connect me with crimes, as I want to leave this army with a clean discharge. I have a small one now which won't be mentioned on the discharge. I think I have told you that I missed a parade on the boat coming over, through seasickness, and was fined six shillings for not reporting. That means that I had to go six days without pay. I am, as you know, only getting a shilling a day, and 'that don't go far'.

You ask me to look after myself as far as the woman is concerned. Well, you have no need to worry in that respect, and I think you know that, or I rest assured you do. I have seen things here that would open your eyes if you had seen the same. You say Egypt is one of the lowest nations under the sun. Well, in this subject I don't agree with you, for nothing equals the French while I was in Marseilles. I've seen some of the prettiest women the world knows, and their city has a population of 100,000 and there are 40,000 common prostitutes. This seems incredible but it's a fact. And all diseases known to man exist here. But a man with any will can resist if he only thinks of the future and those he left behind. Well, dear Dad, I am telling you this and I hope you won't think I am going too far, for this exists, as I say, and it will give you an idea of what things are like.

This is a very exciting life, full of mishaps and wonders. How many times has my hair stood on end and thoughts fly home. Oh, it makes me laugh now I am away again, and the thoughts of the gas - its a perfect hell and on a large scale. One of Fritz's large shells is sufficient to flatten any house, and ours, I am told, are more deadly. Fritz is loosing heart now and I think the end is in view. Well, my dear Father, I think I will have to conclude for the time, and will write again later on, so hoping you are all well at home.

I am, your affectionate son and brother, Will. Sp. XXXXX

Ps I have just got a letter from Blanche Mason. I have not seen Rolf yet. He left here the morning we arrived. Hard luck, wasn't it. Jack Scott and McGuire, the engine driver and guard on the Waikerie line, are in this Battalion. You know Jack Scott - the chap that was going to get me cleaning his engine at Karoonda.

On the 29th July, after about a fortnight, we left Pernois and marched 12 miles to a village called Herissart and this was a terrible march. It was a very warm day and out of the brigade eight hundred men fell out, some with their legs and feet bleeding. They were still coming into the billets all the next day. We were then about nine miles behind the front line.

One thing about this part of France is that you can get fresh water anywhere at a depth of about ten feet, which is a godsend in one way, and difficult in another way for we can't get our trenches deep enough because of the soakage.

One can get plenty of liquor in France because every house has homemade beer and 'vin', as they call it, although it is very rotten stuff and very weak. One can drink three bottles and hardly feel the effect. There is no such thing as a general 'hotel' anywhere I have been yet, but instead there are cafes everywhere and they all have liquor, and they are making a fortune out of the Australians. Anyway, Herissart is a nice little village and one can buy a few loaves of bread and a bit of French cake. While here we did a few more route marches to keep us fit.

A few days later, on the 1st August, we left for a place named Vadencourt Wood, eight miles distant, a roasting hot day and the march took the stuffing out of us. This is a very large wood and the timber is straight and very high, and all around it is nothing but a mass of trenches and wire entanglements in case of invasion, but the Germans never reached as far as this. We were camped in huts here, four feet high and painted a colour that aeroplanes can't discern.

On the 5th August, after five days, we left this wood and went to within half a mile of Albert. We left our packs at Vadencourt Wood and just took a blanket, ground sheet, razor and towel with us. We reached Albert at 1 o'clock in the morning of the 6th and we camped in the open. We are now six miles from the lines as our boys have pushed the Huns back a few miles, and one more time we have the sound of the guns roaring in our ears.

The Somme region has been very busy since the beginning of the war. Here you see not one but hundreds of aircraft manoeuvring all day long. We also saw a couple of duels fought in the air and there are dozens of observation balloons up a good height. Albert is, more or less, a heap of ruins. It is a railway town and the first train to run for more than two years was run on the 5th of August. This shows the great advance we are making.

A very large church here is a mass of ruins. I have been right through it and I have some stone I took off the broken altar. This is the finest church I have ever seen and I should say it would have cost about 100,000 Pounds to build and not too many years ago, either. The steeple is 90 feet high and on top there is a statue of the Virgin Mary with a child in her hand. This piece of metal work, which would stand another 20 feet high, is now lying in a vertical position overhanging the street, and they say that when this piece falls the war is going to finish. There must be tons of metal in it and I can imagine it coming down. In the church there is padded furniture, organs, pictures, and fine pieces of sculpture and solid blocks of marble lying and torn everywhere. This can never be repaired again. There was, I am told, two thousand high explosive shells put into this church.

There is a salvage party working in this town now, and they have plenty of work, for everything was left by the fleeing inhabitants two years ago. The Germans never entered Albert but it was in their view and we can see from here the Germans first line before they were pushed back. I saw all this on the 7th. Today is the 8th and I saw W. Manow this morning and C. Underwood from Mannum, near home. This is more encouraging as they told me good news from the Front.

POZIERES (Second time into action)

After advancing through Pozieres, on 7 August the Australians turned back a heavy German counter-attack and then began an advance on Mouquet Farm, about a mile away, in an effort to get behind the German strongpoint of Thiepval. All through August and into September the battle raged and the Farm was won and lost and won and lost again. In all, nineteen night attacks of the utmost ferocity, on narrow fronts, were fought in that sector. In those battles, the Australian divisions lost some 23,000 men. Total Allied losses in the First Battle of the Somme were over 600,000. (Ed.)

The 9th August was a wet day and we all got wet through and with no change of clothes to put on we had to grin and bear it. On the 10th August General Cox gave us an address and wished us good luck in battle.

On the morning of the 11th we left Albert at 5am for the supports. (*The support trenches at Wire Trench, Ed*). We got there, had dinner, and then an order came down to move off to the Front in five minutes and we were told that we had to be ready to hop the parapets at half past ten that night. This was a great surprise that had been sprung on us as the Battalion that were to do it couldn't get in in time. Well, we all knew it had to be done, so the sooner the better, and get it finished, as we were getting shelled where we were anyway.

(The following appears on the last page of the diary, Ed.)

If I should fall, would finder please forward this note to:
Mrs. W Spurling
C/- Purnong Post Office
River Murray, S.A.

My dear parents, and all at home. If I fall in this battle, I will die with the thoughts of home in my mind. A hero's death is the sweetest of all. I am fighting for you and for God's sake don't worry about me.
Your darling Son and Brother
Will Spurling

Written on a 'Somme' battlefield this 12th day of August 1916.
Private W.A. Spurling No.4275, 'C' Company, 50th Battalion.
'Second Occasion'

Well, the five minutes passed and we were moving down along the communications trench into the front line. All the way we were heavily shelled but we got in with only a few casualties and no one killed. We had to move in groups of five with fifty yards interval. Several times we were halted and the smell of the dead was terrible. We got into the front line trench, or what was left of it, and had to huddle up anywhere and wait for the time to attack to come, which was another two and a half hours.

This two and a half hours was a terrible time for we were being shelled all the while with high explosives and had a lot of casualties. Here we were, crouched between the

dead and dying - I shall never forget it. We remained there like that until 10 o'clock and then we were given an ammo issue.

At twenty five past ten we crawled out of the trench with fixed bayonets and rifles loaded and advanced fifty yards. Here we laid low and waited for the artillery. Exactly at half past ten every gun was speaking and raining shell after shell into the German lines. With this we up and advanced to within fifty yards of the German trenches and then waited for the artillery barrage to cease, which was to stop at ten to eleven.

As soon as they stopped their barrage onto the German supports we sprang to our feet with one mighty yell and ran and jumped into the German trench and got to work with bayonets and bombs (hand grenades). I won't explain this. The next thing was to dig in and we lost no time in doing this. It was life or death because we were in there no more than half an hour when the German artillery found out and turned their big guns on us.

This was the last I knew until I found myself back at the dressing station. I was buried twice and the Medical Officer gave me a pass to get away, and I can assure you that it didn't take me long. I had had enough of it. I got into an ambulance and was taken to a D.R.S. twelve miles away, arriving there on the morning of 13th august.

A battlefield is a horrible spectacle, with the mighty craters and ground torn up, big 750lb duds lying around, dead and dying men, and the awful smell. The noise of bombs, ammunition, and equipment and the mighty roar of the guns all add to make it worse. Villages and woods were no more to be seen. I shall never forget the smell of burnt cordite.

After several days, on the 18th, I left the D.R.S. and on the 20th I joined up with the Battalion again. It was then that I learnt fully the casualty list. The Battalion came out of it only six hundred strong and had four hundred casualties. Some came out without rifle and others without equipment. I lost everything I had, including all the presents I got when going away in South Australia.

Postcard, France
21 August 1916

My dear brother Sid,
A line now I have the time again, and you will see that I am quite well and happy. Since I wrote you last I have been in the trenches and am out again and, my word, I am sure I am not too anxious to go back again as it was a perfect Hell on Earth. I have seen more dead men in half an hour there than I have ever seen before. In fact, you were walking and crawling over them. Oh, my God it was awful, and I was in two bayonet charges and came through without a scratch, but had to be taken away in the ambulance with 'shell shock'. Am quite well again now, I am pleased to say. I have written to all again, and hope this will find you in the best of health. More next time.

Your affectionate brother, Will

On the 21st we marched to and billeted in a village called La Vicogne. Here we stayed until the 25th August. On that day we marched to another billet towards the firing line again. This place was called Rubempre and we stayed there for a day. On the 27th we went to Vadencourt Wood, the place we were in before, previous to going to the firing line. This is where I was put in the Company Machine Guns after having passed three weeks training. On the 29th we left here and went to Albert again and this time we were billeted in the town itself.

MOUQUET FARM (Third time into action)

On the 2nd September 1916 'C' Company's machine guns and a party of bombers moved up to the firing line to assist the 51st Battalion in the stunt they were going to make this night for Mouquet Farm. The rest of the 50th Battalion were in reserves. We got to the line at 10 o'clock that night and took up a position in an isolated spot after having got in under heavy shellfire without a casualty.

At half past five next morning the artillery barrage started and it was a pretty sight. In the darkness behind us there was one long continuous line of light and fire from the many, many guns, and on our right, about three hundred yards in front of us, there was a mountain of smoke and earth rising skywards. This barrage lasted about forty minutes.

Then the infantry charged. We machine gunners stayed behind to repulse any counter attack and keep up a flanking fire. The infantry took the farm at the point of the bayonet, but after being in possession of it for three hours, they were driven out of it again. There was no counter attack but Fritz's artillery was too strong for them to hold it so they had to retire back to our own lines.

There were hundreds of Germans at this farm and our boys took over a hundred prisoners. The country here is all mined. The Germans have underground communication trenches here and large, deep dugouts which are fitted out with electric light, papered walls, and all conveniences one could think of.

That day, the 3rd September 1916, was a very eventful day for us twelve machine gunners. We were only fifty yards away in one place and they were all around us on three sides. One had to be constantly observing, for the snipers were giving us blazes and we didn't give them their own way, either. We could see them in their trenches when the star shells were fired and we put a few magazines in there.

Victor Bampton, our corporal, and two of us, were ordered to move our Lewis gun to another position and we had to do this in broad daylight over no-mans-land. Anyhow, we undertook it and got there alright and we were just putting the gun in position when a large shell struck the parapet and out of the four of us standing there it got two. A marvellous escape.

At 4am in the morning of the 4th September, we got word to get ready to get out of it as the Canadians were coming up to relieve us and it didn't take us long. This was good news for we were only in thirtysix hours but we had a terrible experience. The trench was muddy and it was trying to rain. The whole time we were lying low in the

wet, cold, muddy trenches and they were too narrow to turn in. When we got away from the front only half of us came out - the others were all casualties. We walked back to Albert and were damned pleased to be able to lay down and have forty winks.

YPRES

From Albert we marched to Autiele, a railway village, which took us two days of marching. We entrained there and after a six hour ride we arrived at Candas again, in the Ypres region, on the 8th September. On the 9th September we were billeted in a village called Steenvoorde, a fine large place. The whole 13th Brigade were around here.

On the 16th September, after about a week there, the 50th Battalion were moved by motor transport to a town called Tatinghem, a distance of about 20 miles, for the purpose of new officers to try their hands on us.

There was a fine large town close by called St. Omer and we had a real good time here. We were the first Australians that have been in this area and we found the people very good indeed. There are some very pretty woods and fields here. Hops, mangles, and beans are cultivated here to a large extent and these are just about what they live on. Also, blackberries grow here anywhere, mostly wild, and many a good feed I had on them. While we were at St. Omer, young Roberts died.

We were here till the 8th October, when, after several weeks we entrained and after a four hour ride arrived in a place called Dickebusch, in Belgium, on the Ypres Salient. Here we were doing fatigues building trenches and all sorts of work. This is a real home after the Somme. We were here until the 23rd of October, and on the last day here we were shelled very heavily and had to go back to our billets early. We had very few casualties.

On the 24th October we marched to Relinghelst and stayed a day and while we were here we handed in our steel helmets and gas respirators so the big query was, "Where are we going?". "Are we finished with war and going for a holiday?" All sorts of rumours were current, some mentioning Ireland, England, Salonika, and Egypt. Nobody knows but we are all surmising. Some say we will be on the Somme again before long, but God, how can we live there? With winter coming on it's almost too cold to live in good trenches - what must the open fields be like? Anyhow, the 25th October found us billeted in a little village five miles further on.

I am expecting to get word to go to the Royal Flying Corps any day, for I have volunteered and been accepted about six weeks ago, and I am anxious to go. I have been Number One on the Lewis machine gun since the last stunt. Our gun, 'C' Company's No.2 Lewis Gun, is Serial No.5524, and I am the corporal in charge. The chaps in my crew are Private P.L. Wethers, S/N 4907, Pvt G.D. Butler, S/N 1650, Pvt F.W. Collington, S/N 1763, Pvt J.N. Coad, S/N 1656, and Pvt W.J.F. Arthur, S/N 1526. We are all very close friends.

Lewis Gun Crew

France 28th October 1916

My Darling Sister Amy,
Another few lines in answer to your letter dated 5/9/16, which I got a few days ago. I was glad to hear all was well, as I am at the time of writing this. I wish you could see me sitting here writing this. I am in a very quiet little billet writing on my knee by the light of a candle, and my feet are like ice. It is very cold here and there is water everywhere. I would not care to live in France. Australia will do me, if ever I have the luck to get back. I have just had a long spell, and it was sorely needed. I was just about done in, and was nearly dead with a cold.

Well, Amy I am glad you like city life, and hope you had your photo taken at those frolics you were talking about, and if you have I would like you to send me one, just to see what you looked like. I suppose Mum is pleased to hear you are getting on well, and are you still learning your music? Don't let that go back, you won't have a chance when you get older, so learn what you can now.

Yes, Amy, I suppose there are a lot of soldiers leaving Australia every week, but there is not enough to reinforce all the battalions that we have. That is why they want conscription, and I suppose today was very busy in Adelaide. I hope they don't get conscription. I don't think the soldier's vote will get it. I would like to see the results. I suppose we will know in a few days. If we all came over here what would Australia be like when we come home again. We must have something to look to when we do go back.

Well, sister, this is all for this time. and if I don't write again before Christmas, I wish you and all a merry Xmas and a happy New Year, so ta-ta from

Your Affectionate Brother, Will Sp. XXXXX
Am writing to Elsie tomorrow.

On the 29th October we left Relinghelst and marched to Boerhip. We stayed there for one day and then went to Poperinge. Here we entrained for St.Riquier, heading toward the Somme again. This was a ride of about 70 miles and in dirty old horse trucks all night. We stayed at St.Riquier for about three hours and then marched on to Bussus, where we stayed until the 2nd November, 1916.

On that day we went to Brucamps, stayed there for a night, and then went to Vignacourt, a fairly large place. It was while I was at Bussus that I officially got made Lance Corporal and got my stripe. On the 7th November we left Vignacourt in French motor busses and after travelling for eight hours arrived at a place called Buire. This is about fifteen miles from the firing line and there are three big hospitals here, and mud - I never saw anything like it before. Now we are sure we are on the Somme again and we are getting all sorts of rumours about the front. It was here that there was an air raid on the hospitals and Fritz managed to kill three sergeants and wound a lot of others. I happened to see the raid and the guns firing up at them.

On the 13th November we handed in our packs and blankets and marched to Fricourt, and here the roar of the artillery is getting greater. While I was at Buire, Victor Weate got a letter from London asking him for assistance in finding me, as I am posted as 'missing' since the last time in on the Somme. I don't know yet if the news has gone home and I am anxious to know. This will show how easy mistakes can be made. I immediately notified the authorities in London and asked them to cable home.

France 10/11/16

My darling Mother,
Another line or two. I think I have all reasons to write again, although I have just written to you, and am wondering what you are thinking, for a letter has just arrived to one of my comrades, Victor Weate, you have heard me talking of him. Well, he has just got a letter from the Missing and Wounded Bureau asking him to make enquiries concerning me as I am reported missing. They ask him to give a personal description of me so they could satisfy my parents that no error has been made.

Now, I am just wondering what you are thinking, and if you have really got a cable to that effect. Now I am sending to London to have it rectified and I don't think I can let you know quicker. How this mistake was made I can't understand. Only, as I have told you before, I was taken away from the line the first time I was in action in the ambulance and I think that is where the mistake has originated. Now, I can see you, when you get word to say that I am alright. I suppose you will have heard by the 20/11/16 so this letter will be out of date. This will show you how mistakes can be made. I was never so surprised before as when I was handed the letter.

I had a big mail yesterday, 12 letters, and a terrible long one from Elsie. I was well pleased. Well, as I have just written you a letter I will cut this short and for God's sake, Mother, don't worry about this. I only wish I could explain the matter personally. Now I will conclude for this time, so hoping you are as well and happy as I am. Your affectionate Son and Brother,

Will Sp. XXXXXXXX

FLERS - BACK TO THE SOMME (Fourth time into action)

In late 1916 the Allied attack bogged down and the winter of 1916 in the mud and cold of the Somme was the bitterest winter of the war. The trenches and miles of shell torn fields disappeared into muddy bogs that drowned both man and beast, or exhausted them, or brought on trench feet or a dozen other serious complaints.

The strategy was not to attack the enemy but merely to keep them under strain, and the troops were somewhat relieved when frost and snow in early January 1917 entirely changed the conditions on the battlefield. The ground was now icy dry and trench walls, frozen hard, ceased to fall in. The morale of the troops improved along with the provision of duckboards, hot meals in the trenches, and huts in the rear for those in rest. (Ed.)

After the five-mile march to Fricourt we stayed there for one day and then marched on to the front lines (*near Bernafay Wood, Flers. Ed*.). This was a distance of about eight miles and we were all dead tired when we got there. We had a terrible lot of mud to travel through, up to our knees in places, and were all carrying a big load. Considering it was dark, we were travelling through shell holes, and we were being shelled going in, it was very unpleasant travelling.

Anyhow, we took over and relieved the 9th Battalion. This was an isolated position and during the twentyfour hours we were here we never had an enemy shell in the trench, but on the morning of 14th November someone put up the SOS signal and our own artillery began to sweep no-mans-land in front of us. This is their duty in a counter attack, but a lot were bursting over our heads and several of our chaps were hit, but not serious.

There must have been some big battles fought here for there were dead men lying about in hundreds. One Australian Major I saw was evidently bogged down and sniped, for he was up to his knees in mud and standing partially up and I could still discern the crown on his shoulder.

On the night of 14 November we were relieved by another company of the 50th Battalion and we came back into the supports. There we were doing fatigue work to the front line trenches until 17th November. Then we went into the firing line again, a position more to the left of the last one. Here we stayed until the 19th November, a total of 48 hours, and this was a cow of a place. Fritz knew we were there and was continuously shelling our position. We had twenty casualties out of fifty men in fourtyeight hours. That will give you a good idea of the position. It was very uncomfortable as the trenches were all full of mud and water and to make things

worse we had three inches of snow on the morning of 18th November and this continued until that night. Cold! Oh, God, it was cold, and mud, I never did see anything like it before. I shall never forget this position. This is my third time 'in' on the Somme.

On the night of 19th November the 49th Battalion relieved us and I couldn't get out quick enough. We all came back to Delville Wood and were put in dugouts on an old trench. We were doing fatigue work here for the brigade for a little over a week until on the 30th November we moved back into huts at Fricourt.

Postcard, France, 4/12/16

My Darling Mother,
Only a line, and you will see that I am well and happy. I laugh at the great mistake the military have made concerning me - let you know all later on. Have just got a letter from you with Wellington's photo. Will write a long letter when I get out of this. 'Nuff sed'. Happy Xmas to all from your son and brother.

Lance/Cpl W.A. Spurling

We remained there until the 6th December, 1916 and then entrained for Buire, arriving there on the same day. Here we were put into billets again and this was a little more comfortable for we soon dug up a fire bucket and bought some coal from the engine drivers. We put in a fairly good time here. After a few weeks we left by train for Vignacourt, arriving there at ten in the night. We then marched another five miles to St.Vaast, arriving there at 1am. It was at St.Vaast that we spent our Christmas and while here it snowed, which made it very cold. We spent Christmas as well as could be expected and had vegetables and pudding for dinner.

France December 20th 1916

My Darling Mother,
A big attempt to write you another few lines. I have four of your letters in my pocket now that I have not answered, and the reason

you will guess, without me telling you. I have had a long spin in the line this time, and one can't write there. In fact, I can hardly write now. The cold is that severe I can hardly hold the pencil. There is no end of snow and we hardly ever see the sun, let alone a fire. You would never credit it, it is far more than I can explain. You could go for miles and miles here and you would never find a green leaf - they all fell off a month ago. There is nothing but just the trees and limbs left and this is twenty miles behind the firing line. In the vicinity of the lines there is nothing left at all!

While I am writing this the roofs are all white. You have seen the old fashioned Christmas cards, looking down a crooked street in a village and everything white. Well, that's what this looks like now. I often think of the coming from Egypt, a place as hot as '....' and landing amongst all the snow and mud in the far north of France. The contrast is almost too great to mention, and I am nearly full up with this. I know well I won't be able to stand it much longer, but I have something in view that will take me away from this for the rest of the war, and I will benefit considerably in future life.

You are anxious to know what this is. I have been talking about it before, so I will tell you. About two months ago they called for volunteers for the Royal Flying Corps - men with engineering skill, must have at least six years education, certain height, weight, and also physically fit. I am waiting now to be called away any day and go through the examination. If I succeed it will mean twelve months in England and, of course, I wouldn't like that for a long time! I heard the adjutant say that I had a splendid chance. I hope they shake it up now, as I am very anxious. There is a great demand for engineers, and I would be in my joy to be in the air and have command of a machine. I hope to soon be able to tell you more about it.

In a previous letter I asked you to send me a bottle of eucalyptus. In case you never got the letter I will mention it again. I very often get a cold and I swear by eucalyptus. You never can tell what a cold might lead to, and I want none of their fancy complaints. I hear there is a big parcel mail in - we might get it tonight - and I will tell you if I get the parcel Elsie is sending. She has sent me two or three but I have only received one, and that is very small. The best one I never got.

Just fancy, next Monday is Christmas Day, the first Christmas Day I have ever been away from home. I can just picture you all, but, nevertheless, I hope to have the next one home. God knows when we are going to stop slaying one another. Sometimes the end looks close, and then it vanishes again. Oh, my darling Mother, I can just picture you all when you got those cables. I saw my name in the papers as 'missing' first, then 'wounded', and you must have heard about it long before I did. I will send you the letter they sent Victor Weate. As soon as I got the letter I cabled to London and I

suppose they notified you. It was a big mistake and, now I know all is well, I just can't help laughing.

I was talking to Bert Groth the other day. He has just joined the 50th. He has seen nothing yet. I pity these reinforcements, but I suppose I was the same. I have seen action, or at least 'hell', three times now, on the biggest and bloodiest battlefield in France. If you follow the papers you will know where this is.

In your letter of the 3/10/16 Mother, you say you had collected about 25 Pounds. Well, if this war goes on for another two years I will have a nice little cheque, won't I. Of course, I will get married then and go the '.....'. I can see myself married, too, can't you? Anyhow, I wonder if I will beat Elsie. I think we will both die as we are. I will have to keep my eye on 'Blonko' Sid or I suppose he will beat me. He is going pretty strong by the news I hear, Tell him for mine to get married and 'damn the war'. They can have all my money if they let me see home again, what do you think?

Rene has told me she is engaged to Mick. She said that no doubt I wouldn't like it, but as soon as she saw anything better it would be 'tiddly-hi'. I wonder will she. Oh, I would love to sit at the fire and tell you all I have seen and been through. I could make you laugh and cry for nights. I often picture this. Just give me a 'croaker' and a packet of cigarettes and you wouldn't be able to talk for hours.

Thanks for the pretty card, and also the view of Purnong. You say the crops are looking lovely. Well, I hope you have a good return. Now, I think I have told you all the news for this time, and by what I hear I can write pretty regular now till the end of January. 'Nuff sed', and I will close now, with all good wishes and Love for the coming year, I am your affectionate Son and Brother, Will Sp.
By the way, through sheer luck I met Bert Mason again and was talking to him for two hours, the first time since we left Egypt four months ago. Funny how we ever met, ain't it? Tell Amy I got the two parcels she sent me, and I will write to Father and Sid as soon as I can.

Ta-ta, with Love, XXXXXXXXX

Mail finished - no parcels.

We left St.Vaast in the new year, on the 4th January 1917, and then marched to Buire, arriving there on the 6th January. We stayed there two days and then went into close supports at Flers, and then on the 12th January we went into the front line again for two days, and from there we went to Switch Trench, about two miles from the front line.

We were engaged there on fatigue duties for nine days and it was incredibly cold. And snow - didn't it snow! It was nine inches thick and was the first snow fall I have seen of any importance. This settled all the mud but, my God, it was cold.

Will, on last leave home, at Sunnyside Farm, Copeville, SA 1915

We left Switch Trench on the 28th January 1917 and went further back from the lines to Burnafay Wood, into huts called 'Perth Camp'. Here we got all our Christmas boxes and gifts from Australia. I also got a big parcel from home and one from Queensland, so I had all I could desire. It was either feast or famine. While at Perth Camp we were doing fatigues to the front line and the near vicinity and most of it was night work.

We left Perth Camp on the 17th February, after several weeks, and went back into the firing line again. We were relieved again on the 19th February, after two days, and came back into the supports again until the 21st February. Then we went back into the firing line again until the 23rd February. Then on that day we left the line and marched to a place called Becourt, a distance of about eight miles, and we then stayed there overnight. The next day we went on to Buire, arriving there on the 25th February. This is the 5th time I have been in the front line on this front and I am full up with it.

PURSUIT TO THE HINDENBURG LINE - NOREUIL (Fifth time into action)

Allied planners spent the winter in forming up new attacks for the coming thaw. However in late February they discovered that in great secrecy the Germans had

staged a strategic withdrawal from their 107-mile long great salient between Arras and the Aisne. This withdrawal, up to thirty miles in places, had been cleverly planned and was to well prepared positions upon a heavily fortified new front that they called the Siegfried Line, known to the Allies as the Hindenburg Line.

The excitement among Allied troops was intense as they prepared to pursue the enemy out of the muddy trenches and through the many outpost villages in semi-open warfare. However, this was a staged withdrawal by the Germans and as the Allies advanced on the Hindenburg Line over the next three weeks they met with heavy resistance. The plan adopted by the Allies was usually that of moving past each village and encircling as well as attacking it. In the Anzac sector, after the capture of Lagnicourt, the task of taking the next main objective, the village of Noreuil, just a mile or so before Bullecourt, fell to the Australian 50th and 51st Battalions. (Ed.)

On the 22nd March 1917 we left Buire and after a three day march found ourselves in the firing line again. It was while at Buire that I got my second stripe (Corporal). In going up we marched over a lot of country that the Germans had just evacuated, including Bapaume, and a lot of other villages. We went into what was then our front line for three days. It was practically only outposts and new sort of fighting for us.

Well, we came out, had two days rest, and on the morning of 2nd April 1917 went back up to the line again fully equipped. At 5.15am that morning we charged the German lines through the village of Noreuil for a depth of a mile, in the face of dozens of machine guns and heavy rifle fire.

Australian artillery firing into the Noreuil valley on 2 April 1917

I had charge of thirtyeight Lewis gunners on starting the attack and when we reached our objective there were only seven men left, but we still had all four guns. I was only in the German trench about an hour and during that time I was trying to drive off a counter attack with a machine gun. I could see the Germans within forty yards of the

trench we were holding and they were shoulder to shoulder as they advanced with bayonets shining and they were big men, too. They dropped like hay before a binder from the fire from my gun. I claim it was my gun that broke the attack.

It was like that for about an hour, when suddenly I found myself in the bottom of the trench with a bullet through the top of my head and another in the right shoulder. That finished me. I had to get away as soon as possible and the best way I could. The trench was by then nearly full with dead and dying men. After walking three miles I found a dressing station and here I got assistance.

I went through several dressing stations before I found myself in the 13th General Hospital at Boulogne. It was there that on the 5th April I was put under the X-rays and the next day had an operation and had the bullet removed from my shoulder.

ENGLAND

I left Boulogne at half past five in the evening and boarded the hospital boat called the 'St.Dennis' bound for Dover, England. It took us two hours to cross the English Channel and I was then put in a hospital train bound for London. After four hours ride I arrived there and found myself in the 1st London General Hospital.

Postcard that Will sent home of 1st London General Hospital

All the way over from France the people were very good and could never do enough for one.

Telegram, 28 April 1917
Victoria Barracks, Melbourne

Mrs C. Spurling
Post Office, Glencope,
Tailem Bend SA

corporal william spurling admitted hospital twelfth april gunshot wound neck and scalp

Base Records

I was at that hospital for three days and while there I was put under the X-rays again and they discovered that there was another bullet still in my back very close to my lungs, but they would not operate. In this hospital we had a real good time, but there were some very bad cases there. The visitors were very good, fetching flowers and whatever one asked for. Our Australian Red Cross were giving us the needy things required.

I left this hospital on May 17th and went to a convalescent home at Bloomsbury. This is a fine large place and holds about eighty soldiers. We get plenty of outings here. The very first day they took us to the theatre and everything was free for us. The next day we went to the pictures and then on a motor ride to the London Zoo, and then tea to follow. I noticed nothing of importance here except that Australia was well represented in birds, especially parrots, and I think that they were nearly all from South Australia. I passed that remark at the time.

London
April 22nd 1917

My dear Father,
I suppose you know by now that I have been wounded, but I am getting along splendid now, although I can't sit up in bed yet, but hope to in a day or two.

I suppose you wonder at me not cabling a word home, but it was a week before I knew what I was doing, and then I was moved from one hospital to the other and could think of nothing else but my pain. I fancy someone in Boulogne Hospital, France, wrote Mother a few lines, but I don't know who he was. By what I have heard since, they had poor hopes of me being sane again as the bullet went right through my head. Now, today, it is just about healed up. The doctor told me to tell you, when I could write, that I had nine lives and that they couldn't kill me.

I seen the '.....' that fired at me, he was only about thirty yards away, but one man was nothing, and there was a counter attack coming. I could see their bayonets moving in a trench about fifty yards in front of us, so I waited about a minute. Out they hopped and came at us, shoulder to shoulder. At the same instant I lifted my Lewis Gun to the parapet and pulled the trigger. I stopped about two hundred men, and talk about a heap of corpses, it was an awful sight. What I didn't get, fled, and then they were shot down by rifle fire.

There were thousands of Germans here. If they had came at us again they might have got us out, as our Battalion by now was no more than half strength. The trench was full of dead and dying. I had just finished my bloody task and was just pulling the gun down

again off the parapet when I got this one in the head. He was too quick for me.

After that I know nothing, but while I was lying in the trench, bleeding to death as I thought, one of our own high explosive shells lobbed and exploded right alongside of me and drove two of its deadly pellets into my back, which stopped close to my lungs. The first operation in France they took one out, and the second time they took the rest out, as they thought. But I have been under the X-rays in England and there is still one in there. I thought I would have to have it taken out, but I think they are leaving it there if it doesn't trouble me.

Well, Dad, I have had a rough time in France and am now enjoying a well earned rest, and in a couple of months will be as well and fit as ever I was. It's nice to be lying here and know you are earning ten shillings a day. I was lucky getting my second promotion before this happened, wasn't I? Now I think I have given you all the particulars of how I was knocked, and hope you won't think too much of it.

I hope to be out of bed in a week or two. This is the first letter I have written to anyone except Mother. What will Elsie and Rene think? I asked Mother to let them know as I am not supposed to write at all. I have to plead to do this. As soon as I can sit up I will make the old pencil talk. I have not had a letter from home for a long time now, but I have got them stopped here and they will be brought in as soon as any comes.

I hope your harvest turned out alright this year. Mother was saying it was looking alright. There is a terrible shortage of bread here and they are coming at all sorts of games. Whatever price you have to pay for food in Australia, Dad, be thankful you can buy it, for you can't here. Well, this is all for this time, so I will close and hoping you are all well and happy, and I assure you I am getting on splendid. With fondest love to all,

I am, affectionately, your son and brother,
Will Sp. (excuse writing)

AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE

Base Records Office, Victoria Barracks
Melbourne 24th April 1917

Mrs C.A.E. Spurling
Dear Madam,

I now beg to advise you that No.4275 Corporal W.A. Spurling, 50th (late 10th) Battn, has been reported wounded, second occasion, the nature of which and the name of the hospital to which he has been admitted are not at present known here, but on receipt of further information you will be promptly notified.

It is not stated as being serious and in the absence of further reports, it is to be assumed that all wounded are progressing satisfactorily.

.....

It is now June 1st and still we continue to have good times here. I have seen very little of London yet but hope to later on. I have been X-rayed here again, and still the piece is in my back. I don't know why they don't come and take it out. On the 12th June we had an all day trip on the Thames River and enjoyed it very much.

Will's girlfriend in England, Daisy, standing with rifle. She called him 'Spud', and lived at 5 Beamish Rd, Lwr Edmonton, N9.

On the 13th June 1917 I left Bloomsbury for a Medical Board examination and found myself back in the 1st London General Hospital again. It was terrible, coming back to hospital again after being in such a lovely place as Bloomsbury. The first thing after arrival here I was X-rayed again and still the doctors shook their heads. Imagine me, with my thoughts of going home.

London
25th July 1917

My darling Mother,
I don't know why I have not had a letter from you lately - something must be wrong. The last one I had from you was dated April 18th and as I was 'hit' on the 2nd April you didn't appear to know anything about it then and I am anxiously awaiting a line to see how you took it. I guess it was a shock when you got my first letter, but that is all over now, and I have been telling you so much about me getting a 'Board' and I have been detained here in hospital.

Well, I am 'marked out' for Harefield and that is the Australian Base. I have special recommendation for a 'Board'. I am going out of here about Friday and will probably have my board in a fortnight's time and will know then what they are going to do with me. I am anxiously waiting, but I suppose I ought not to as it is sure to be my luck to be posted back. I try to keep myself from thinking of it but it's a hard thing to do.

If I can possibly manage it I will cable if I am coming, as I told you in a previous letter. I have been X-rayed sixteen times and have twentyone plates. That ought to be good enough evidence. I have been out of bed about a week now and am feeling rather too good. I won't say anything about coming home, Mother, as you might be disappointed.

You must have got a lot of mail from me lately as I write about twice a week, but I see a lot of mail boats have been sunk, so there is bound to be gaps. Well, Mum, this is all for this time, so I will close hoping you are well and happy, with heaps of love and kisses. I am, your affectionate son and brother, Will Sp. XXXXXXX

Ps Address to Battalion, as usual, and give my love to all. I will write again as soon as I get to Harefield.

After nearly six weeks in that hospital, on the 26th July, I was transferred to Harefield for another Medical Board exam. I didn't get my 'board' here as expected but was marked 'B.I.B.' and transferred to Weymouth, another Australian depot. This meant a hundred and fifty mile trip in the train. I had a lovely ride in the train and got a good view of the country of southern England. While in London I saw two of the biggest air raids the Germans have ever tried on London. On one occasion Fritz came over with forty flying machines and did a lot of damage besides killing a lot of people.

Weymouth is a pretty place and is situated on the coast and we can see miles out to sea here."

The diary ended here (Ed.)

Australian Imperial Force
No 2 Command Depot
Monte Video, Weymouth, England
August 12 1917

My darling Mother,
I have not written to you for a long time now, so will endeavour to scribble a few lines. I have not had a letter from you since I have been 'hit' (to say I was wounded). I told you before I had a letter from you dated April 28th and you had known nothing about it then and I was rather pleased, as you would be nearer getting my letter.

Well, Mum, I have had three Medical Boards since being here and they can't do anything for me, so I suppose they will decide to send me home soon. You will know by cable before you get this if I am coming home. I have not given up hope yet of getting home for Christmas. I am sure I will never go back to France again. Weymouth is on the South Coast of England and not a bad little place either, although we can hear the guns across the Channel and I don't envy the poor boys that are under it. It would be funny if I did have to go back, wouldn't it.

Oh, for a glimpse of all the dear faces I left behind, I can't realise seeing them again. What a picture when we all meet again. It will be worse than when I came away. I am a lucky fellow getting off as easy as I did. I often think of it. My first thought when I was hit was of home. I could see you all and then I thought of how I enlisted. Funny, this all comes back to one when he is in pain.

I have not had a letter from either Elsie or Rene for months now, and don't know what has happened to them. Well, Mum, I have told you all I know for this time and will write again in a few days. So, hoping you are all well and happy, I am, your affectionate son and brother,
Will.

Corporal William Alfred Spurling, No.4275, C Company, 50th Battalion, 13th Brigade, 4th Australian Infantry, died of septicaemia from wounds at the Weymouth Camp Hospital on the 16th August, 1917 at the age of 24 years, 6 months. He was buried on the 20th August 1917 in Melcombe Regis Cemetery, Weymouth, Dorset, grave No.3143, plot C. (Ed)

P.M.G. Telegram
Adelaide Railway. Urgent. 6.30pm 21 Aug 17

Mr C. Payne, Postmaster, Purnong Landing
Officially reported 4275 Corporal W.A. Spurling Fiftieth late Tenth Battalion died from septicaemia secondary to scratch on face at Camp Hospital Weymouth on 16th August. Would you kindly arrange to inform Mrs C. Spurling Purnong Post Office and notify this office when done. Reply Paid

Major Pendlebury

Will Spurling's grave at Weymouth, Dorset, England
(The army posted this photo to his mother)

No.2 Command Depot
Weymouth, Sept 10, 1917

To Mrs C.E. Spurling,
Dear Madam,
Just a few lines in hope I comfort you in your sad bereavement: Your son No 4275 Cpl Spurling 50th Bat A.I.F. was admitted to the Camp Hospital 12 August 1917 and his death took place at 5am 16th August. When admitted he complained of sore throat and was treated for same. Later the glands of the neck became infected. His death was a shock to us all as he died very suddenly in the early morning. It may ease you to know that all was done for him that could be and a Sister was with him till the end. He was a fine soldier and a good patient. He was buried in a little cemetery here in Weymouth where all our Australian lads are buried who die here. It is a pretty, peaceful little spot and the graves are all cared for. I ask you to accept the deep sympathy of the Nursing Staff in your sad loss. Hoping these few lines will be a comfort to you,

Believe me, yours faithfully,
B.M. Williams
Sister, A.A.N.S.

Premier's Office

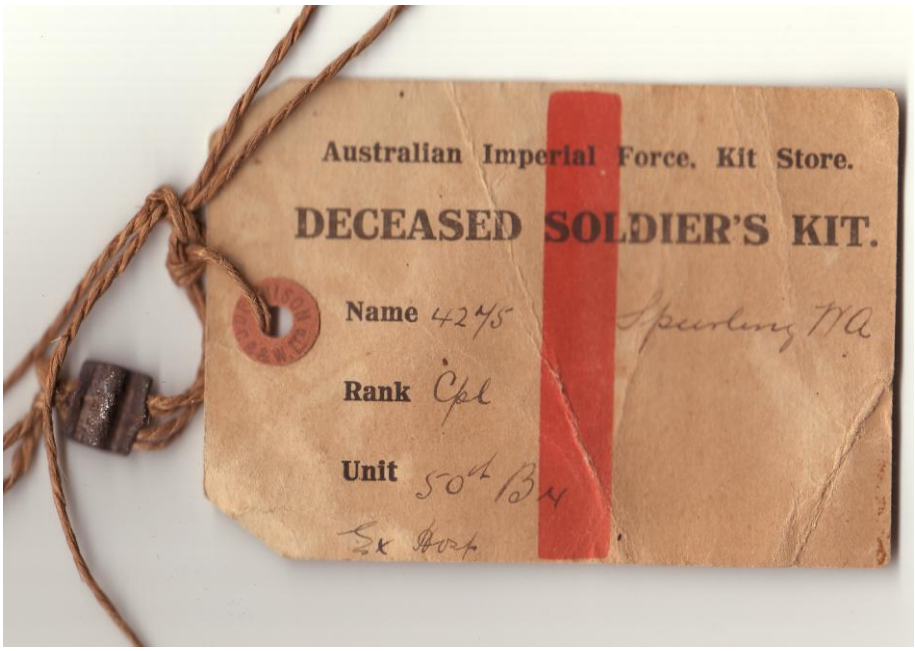
Adelaide South Australia
September 10, 1917

Mrs C. Spurling
Purnong P.O.
River Murray

Dear Madam,
It is reported to me that your son, Corporal W.A. Spurling, died of septicaemia whilst serving with the Australian Imperial Forces, and I desire, on behalf of the Government, to convey to you an expression of sympathy on your bereavement.

A man can render no greater service to his country than to give his life for it and the heroic deeds of those who have fallen in the cause of liberty, justice and civilisation will be ever remembered.

Yours sincerely,
A.H. Peake
Premier



Will's personal kit, which included his razors, strop, letters, as well as his diary, were sent home to his mother with this label attached.

Whitwarta PO via Port Wakefield
Sept 14 1917

My dear Parents, Brothers, & Sisters,
I received Amy's letter and upon a few lines yesterday in reply also received the cheque safely and thanks, Dad, for sending it. It came in handy as Ivy must have a pair of shoes and I didn't have enough left. Grandma gave her a white dress and I made it for her birthday.

I also received your letter from town, Mother, and was very sorry you couldn't have come up for a few weeks. I know you don't feel

like going out Mother but you could not have made me more miserable than I am. Everything seems so dull and lifeless now but, dear ones, we must do our best to bear our great loss altho sometimes it is almost too hard. But, now the parting has come, we must look forward to a happy reunion in Heaven. Our darling boy has only to wait for us and when we meet there is no cruel war to part the loved ones again.

How nice it is to know our dear Will rests in a land of peace and not on the battlefield. It was a cruel disappointment to us all as we had looked forward so to his homecoming, but our meeting will only be postponed until God wishes to call us to join our loved one gone before. I had hoped there may be some mistake and that it was not true, but today's paper proves it all too true. I understand it was the result of wounds but the paper says 'illness'. Do you know what it was?

Howard sailed last Friday from Melbourne. I really can't write much and I know you will excuse it, as I feel dreadfully miserable. Oh, how I should love to be with you Mother. I feel that I could keep up for your sake. It is a pity Amy has to leave you Mother, you should have someone home. I will come home after the harvest for six weeks. I will have five cows in soon so it would have been too much for Amy.

I will say goodbye for the time and try and cheer up as much as possible. We know he is past all pain and suffering now and he has done his duty and gave all he could. In time to come the wounded hearts will heal and all the tears will be wiped from your eyes. Once more I will say goodbye, with fond love to all, and I hope you are all well as it leaves all here as far as health is concerned.

I remain your
loving daughter and sister,
Rene (Irene)

Bandon, July 30th 1921

Mr and Mrs Spurling
Dear Sir and Madam
At a meeting of the Trustees of the new hall it was decided by a unanimous vote to call the hall after your beloved son William who made the supreme sacrifice for King and Country. We hope this will meet with your approval.
The vote was taken Monday July 25th 1921 that we name the hall the Spurling Memorial Hall, Bandon.

I am, dear friends
Yours Faithfully
Geo G White
Hon Secretary
Hall Trustees

Spurling Memorial Hall, Copeville (Hd of Bandon), SA, 2002

Only a few years after the war, Will's parents moved from the farm to reside in Murray Bridge township. His father died there in 1945 and mother in 1967. Will had seven brothers and sisters, all of whom married and had children except Sid, who died as a young man in 1925.

Though Will's mother lived to the grand age of 95 she never overcame her grief from the loss of her eldest child in the war and she lovingly preserved all his letters, diaries, and other memorabilia as treasured keepsakes.

She also never accepted that Will had 'Died of Disease' as was officially recorded by the army. Both she and the family remained extremely bitter about this classification as they were convinced he should have been classed as 'Died of Wounds'. Though the outcome would not have been any different, the whole family regarded the 'Died of Disease' classification as an insult to the bravery and sacrifice of their son and brother.

In the heat of battle Will had received multiple gunshot and shrapnel wounds to the scalp, right side of neck and shoulder, and back. One bullet, next to the lungs, was never removed. The neck and shoulder wounds were described by doctors as being "severe". His death from "Septicaemia, secondary to scratch on face" four months after battle was undoubtedly the direct or indirect result of these wounds, yet, even upon Will's death, the army could not be gracious enough to concede that fact, which made the family's torment and loss even greater.

….oooooOOOOoooo….

Postscript:

Will was the only soldier enlisted from Bandon, now better known as Copeville, who did not return alive to Australia. As was common for very small country towns, no local war memorial was erected in Copeville. Instead, a district memorial was erected in Mannum and unveiled in 1924. Listed on the Mannum War Memorial under "GREAT WAR" "OUR GLORIOUS DEAD" are the names of 37 young men, including "W.A. SPURLING".

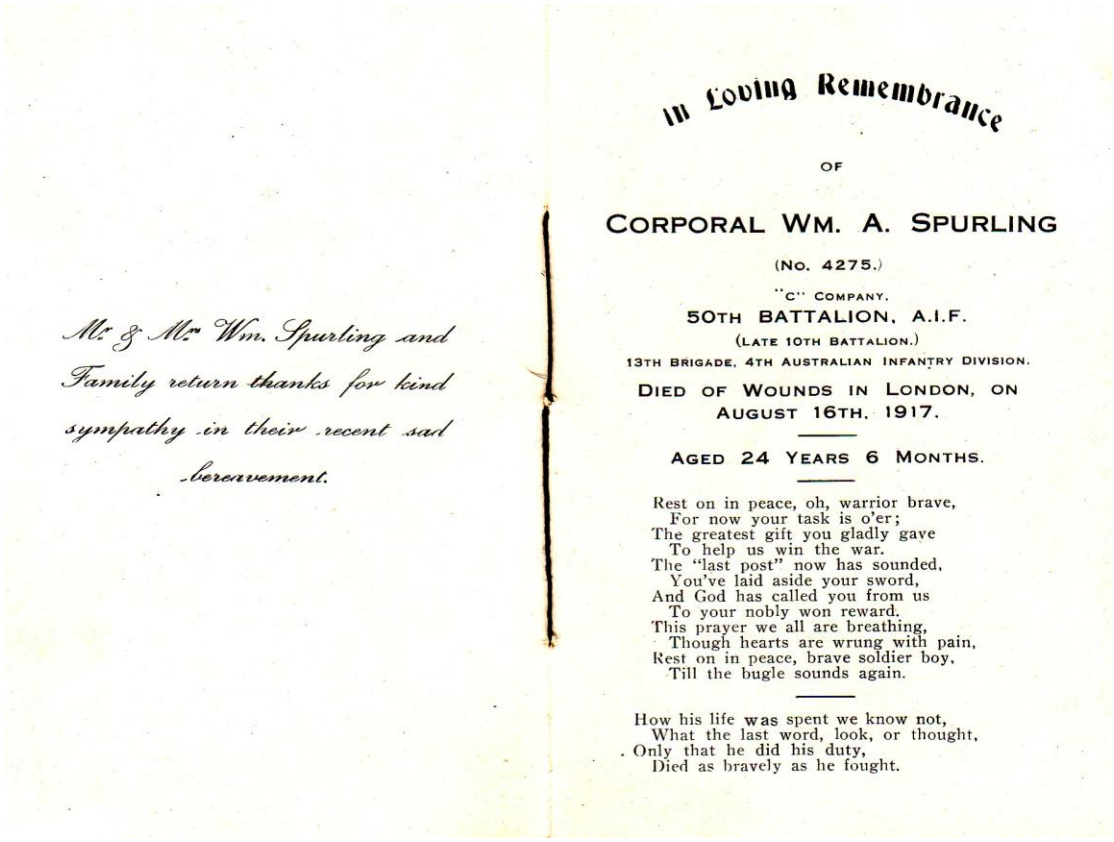
On Sunday 3rd March 2002 'Back to Copeville' celebrations were held and over 130 past and present Copeville residents met at noon for a reunion luncheon in the present Copeville Hall that was built in the 1960's. The reunion committee had decided that an appropriate project for the event would be to re-dedicate the old community hall.

At 2pm the whole party travelled in a dusty convoy of around 30 cars to the nearby former hall. Now derelict, the small stone hall stands about 2km from Copeville in a patch of mallee scrub beside the Copeville-Claypans road. Though its four large windows are now blocked with sheets of corrugated iron, its lean-to rooms at the rear are gone, and its iron roof is rusting away, the hall brought back many fond memories for older folk present who, over some 45 years, used it as their schoolhouse, dance hall, and community centre.

After hearing several speeches which recounted the history of the hall, the crowd of over 100 watched and applauded as a nephew of Will Spurling, Mr Glen Spurling of Edithburgh, unveiled a monument. The monument, a large single boulder of local white limestone set on a concrete plinth, bears a plaque that reads,

"The Spurling Memorial Hall
was erected in 1920 in memory of
Corporal William Alfred Spurling of Copeville.
Killed in action, 1917."

Though he was not officially 'K.I.A.', Will's mother would have appreciated the sentiment.



Mr & Mrs Wm. Spurling and Family return thanks for kind sympathy in their recent sad bereavement.

In Loving Remembrance

OF

CORPORAL WM. A. SPURLING

(No. 4275.)

"C" COMPANY.

50TH BATTALION, A.I.F.

(LATE 10TH BATTALION.)

13TH BRIGADE, 4TH AUSTRALIAN INFANTRY DIVISION.

DIED OF WOUNDS IN LONDON, ON AUGUST 16TH, 1917.

AGED 24 YEARS 6 MONTHS.

Rest on in peace, oh, warrior brave,
For now your task is o'er;
The greatest gift you gladly gave
To help us win the war.
The "last post" now has sounded,
You've laid aside your sword,
And God has called you from us
To your nobly won reward.
This prayer we all are breathing,
Though hearts are wrung with pain,
Rest on in peace, brave soldier boy,
Till the bugle sounds again.

How his life was spent we know not,
What the last word, look, or thought,
Only that he did his duty,
Died as bravely as he fought.

Will Spurling's Memorial Card

Will Spurling's Grave (centre foreground – white stone) at Melcombe Regis Cemetery, Weymouth, Dorset, England

The Advertiser, 2 April 1927, page 25

NORIEUL - What Happened to the Right Flank. By TWO EYE-WITNESSES.

Exactly 10 years ago today, on April 2, 1917, the 13th Australian Brigade fought a memorable battle in front of the famous Hindenburg line to capture position advantageous for a jumping-off place for a later attack on the Hindenburg line itself. To the 50th South Australian Battalion, which went to form the brigade, together with the 40th, 51st, and 52nd, was allotted the honor of capturing Norieul, a pretty little village that was known to be strongly held. Much has been said and written as to how the attack nearly failed owing to the disappearance of the right flank, and nothing has even been written to show why the right flank ("A" Company of the 50th) disappeared, and how they fared, and this account proposes to show just what happened. It is felt that this is due to the memory of the many gallant men that gave their lives that day, and particularly to those of "A" Company. Also, perhaps, to the few survivors. It has been stated by some that the company went too far to the right, and again by others that they were too far to the left. This is, no doubt, due to the fact that only the few surviving members of one platoon of "A" Company (the extreme right platoon) were present to see actually what did occur, and they were taken prisoners. It must be borne in mind that this account is given by members of one platoon, and must therefore, of necessity, confine itself practically to the doings of that one platoon. The general plan of attack was:—The 50th Battalion was to advance a distance of 1,000 yards, capture Norieul, then pivoting on their right, make a complete right wheel, advance a further 1,000 yards to a sunken road at a right-angle to their original line of advance, the left flank linking up with an English division in the manoeuvre, the right flank remaining open until the objective was reached, when the 52nd Battalion was to link up with them, and thus close the gap. A flank in the air is usually a dangerous thing, and it proved so this morning, for it cost the battalion many lives, and was nearly the cause of a decisive defeat. The dispositions were—"A" - Company (Captain Todd) was the right and pivoting company; "D" Company (Captain Churchill Smith) on the left; and "C" Com pany (Captain Armitage) in the centre, with "B" Company (Captain Seager) in support. The two left platoons of "C" Company and the two right platoons of "D" Company were to pass through the village, and the battalion bombers, under Lieutenant Bidstrup, reinforced with a platoon from "B" Company, were to mop up the village immediately after the line had passed through. Noriel was in a gully, and out of the town a sunken road ran along the gully right up to the objective ; but 3oo yards before it reached the objective it forked to the left towards Bullecourt, and joined it higher up, thus forming a right-angled triangle. "A" Company's right flank had to pivot 50 yards on the attacking side of this sunken road, and eventually rest on the objective 50 yards to the right of the right-angle of the triangle. The attack was launched at frosty dawn (5 o'clock), and the whole manoeuvre was to be completed by 6 o'clock, and promptly at zero hour the line swept to the attack, down, down the hill at a steady walk, each man keeping in touch with his immediate neighbor on the right, according to instructions. "A" Company were first in touch with the enemy, as expected, settling accounts with a couple of machine-gun crews who had beeu particularly vicious in the old front line. Then on they went, when unexpectedly a solid line of untouched barb wire entanglements loomed up out of the dark, and simultaneously a terrific crossfire of machine-guns, and for a moment the

line wavered, but an officer, gathering up a handful of men, clambered through the wire, shouting, "Come on, you fellows, what's wrong?" and the whole line was through. The pivoting point was soon reached, and although there was steady machine-gun fire from the front and right they kept their distance and none of the enemy was sighted. It was here while waiting the stipulated twenty minutes to enable the village party to overcome the garrison that one of "A" Company's three officers, Lieutenant Gore, was wounded in the leg. (It transpired afterwards that Lieutenant Auld was put out of action almost immediately the attack commenced, which left only Captain Todd unscathed with "'A" Company), Just as it was getting light the pivoting movement began, and "A" Company watched the troops gradually swing round out of the village on the opposite slope, a never-to-be-forgotten and wonderful sight in that grey dawn, with Captain Armitage plainly to be seen directing his men. The line gradually swung with the precision of the parade ground until the complete change of direction had been made, and Captain Todd gave the signal to continue the advance. But to our consternation "C" Company kept bearing about quarter left until the line had an open centre as well as an open flank. Todd sent one runner, two runners, but still the breach widened, until "C" Company disappeared over the shoulder of the hill, and all the time "A" Company were advancing under an ever-increasing machine-gun fire from the right front. A good many of them no doubt could see even then, 800 yards distant, the hell they were advancing into, for unless the 52nd Battalion advanced on time and covered the flank, apparently nothing could prevent them from being annihilated, and they were completely isolated, for they were out of touch with "C" Company, which for some mysterious reason was paying more attention to the left than the right. By this time the sunken road had become a high bank on the left side, with the result that the rest of "A" Company were out of sight, and the strength in sight had dwindled to a single platoon under Gore, who had kept up with the attack. There was no sign as yet of the 52nd Battalion, and the machine-gun fire had become deadly, but they kept steadily on, now in short rushes. The casualties were growing, and at 400 yards distance the enemy's aim had become too accurate, owing to the improving light, to advance further in the open. Here was a position that called for a quick decision. The rest of the battalion, including the remainder of "A" company, were out of sight ; were they advancing, or were they held up as this platoon was? If the whole line was held up then their duty was plain, they would remain where they were, and either dig in or line the sunken road and protect the flank. But, on the other hand, if the rest of the line were advancing and reached the objective, the protection they would be relying on from the flank would be missing. As there were no means of getting into touch, it was decided to take it that the line was still advancing, and we, for our part, would stick to the time-table. We were helped to this decision by the knowledge that the 52nd Battalion would be over the hill in a minute or so, and they in turn would be relying on us to be there. We couldn't advance across the open, so were swung into the sunken road, and found that whereas the far bank was 18 feet to 20 feet high, the one between us and the machine guns was only two feet high. We crept along it, however, with a terrific machine gun fire sweeping an inch or so above our heads all the time, and the bank becoming lower and lower until at length we had to crawl, and the crack of bullets was like 1,000 deal fires in one's ears. At 6 o'clock precisely, however, our leading men reached the junction of the roads—the objective! ! ! We then turned and lined the bank. The battalion flank was protected. Heads could not be raised, however, for the machine gun fire was incessant, and its accuracy uncanny. There was a redoubt of four guns, as far as we could make out about 300

yards distant to the flank, and on the objective itself, imme- diately below the crest of the hill, from where we had started. Imagine four machine guns trained on a platoon of men (or what was left of them), and the bitterest pill of all, the position of these guns was reported by a patrol from "A" company two nights previously! But where were the 52nd Battalion, they should have silenced those guns ere this, for it was after 6 o'clock. We expected them at every moment to sweep over the hill, for the redoubt was 250 yards inside the ground they were to take. If they would only come the position would be secure, and we would then be free to find the rest of the battalion, and incidentally roll up the enemy's flank. About this time a very brave act was performed by Sergeant James, who had done sterling work at Mouquet Farm. He took his Lewis gun and engaged the enemy guns from behind a bush in the open and knocked one crew out before he himself was killed. Certain death, and he knew it. Another man, Private Sam Searing, knowing the whole of that deadly fire would be concentrated on him, climbed the high bank at the rear to try and locate the rest of the battalion. It wasn't his fault that he didn't succeed. They were nowhere in sight. Through the ground being drilled by bullets from under his feet, he fell, back into the road, but was unhurt. What had happened to the 52nd Battalion? We hung on and hung on till a cry suddenly rang out, "Germans in our rear." It was only too true. They were coming up the road, in which we were lying in hundreds, driving 50 or 60 of our men in front of them. We hurriedly rushed round the corner and took up a position on the objective, and brought rifle fire to bear upon them, and paid the penalty. We were directly enfiladed by the machine guns, and when they swung off on the fork, previously mentioned, which made the triangle, we occupied our pre- vious position, with eleven men only. We were in a hopeless plight now, Germans all round us, the rest of the battalion evidently held up, and the 52nd Battalion nowhere. What was the next move? The Germans could attack us at any time they wished, either by converging upon us from the other two sides of the triangle or over the dead ground inside the triangle, and prevent any move on our part by their machine guns. The 52nd Battalion was only a forlorn hope in our minds now. It was then that a move was made, which the precarious position necessitated, but proved the end of the fight as far as this platoon was concerned. Immediately to our front, about 150 yards distant, towards the machine guns, was a line of trenches at right angles to the objective. If we could only get in these we would be protected from the machine guns by the slope of the hill and be able to bring rifle fire to bear upon the enemy, who were now in our rear. The order was therefore given to run the gauntlet, from shell hole to shell hole, and occupy the trenches. All that was left of the platoon, six ran, and not one will ever forget the way the bullets whistled and kicked up the earth round them. But they reached the trenches all right. They were dummies, merely mounds of earth 6 in. high! Two of the men were quickly hit, and one of the wounded men waved his arm in token of surrender, and the Germans came out and picked them up at ten past 8 in the morning. That's what happened to the right flank at Norieul. They were the only portion of the line to reach their objective on time, and were, we think, the only men to reach the objective that day. It was learned afterwards that "C" Company were held up about 600 yards from the objective, as were the rest of "A" Company, and it was apparently portion of "A" that we saw being driven in front of the enemy when they came out of Norieul in our rear. They were evidently forced off the high ground back into the sunken road by the same devastating fire that No. 1 platoon had experienced. No wonder therefore that the gallant Armitage could see no sign of "A" Company

when he went to look for them. They were 600 yards in front, or what was left of them, with only one chance of relief, which never came.