

CORRESPONDENCE TO THE SCHOOL DURING THE BOER WAR & WWI

The ANZAC Memorial Service in the School gives those attending the opportunity to reflect, not only on those who served and paid the ultimate sacrifice, but also allows one to realise what a rich and interesting history the School has. This particular *From the Archives* will focus on some of the correspondence written during the Boer War [1899-1902] and World War I [1914-1918]. The School Archives is indeed fortunate to have a record of some of the letters written by past students to their former Headmasters.

J.D. HENRY [1896] served in both the above conflicts. On the 31st of July 1900 he wrote from Pretoria, the Transvaal, to **Mr HODGES**, then Headmaster, stating: *"I was out all night about a week ago. It was raining and bitterly cold. Eighteen men and two officers died from exposure as did over five hundred head of mules, horses and oxen. My water bottle was frozen and I had no hat and no great coat, only a biscuit tin strapped over my head."* In some respects the biscuit tin may have been the one factor that kept Henry alive. Within weeks of the above event he was a victim of enteric fever and was sent back to Queensland. Henry was to return to South Africa in 1901 for a second tour and on a happier note relates an amusing story about himself and **ERIC KENNEY [1896]**. He writes: *"I was wandering around one night looking for a fellow to give me a match as I was just dying for a lucifer. At length I found a mate also wanting a smoke: he was at the time mooning round to find a spot where he could safely light up without the wind blowing it out. At length we found a spot, put our heads together and struck the match. To my surprise the mate was Kenny from my schooldays. The match went out without lighting a cigarette but we didn't mind. We had a real good yarn about the School and the boys and the times we had there together."*

No Grammar lives were lost during the Boer War but Eric Kenney was fortunate on one occasion. He ran into a group of about twenty Boer commandoes who shot his horse from underneath him. The Boers then took all his clothes and left him in the outback with only a pair of tattered trousers to wear. Kenney found a native hut to spend the night in and the next day found his way back to his base camp.

Unfortunately, twenty-two past students were killed in World War I. The then Headmaster, **P.F. ROWLAND**, encouraged his former students to stay in contact with the School, so we are fortunate to have a selection of letters describing conditions in Turkey, France and Egypt at that time.

Four members of the Foot family enlisted, two of them being killed at Gallipoli. In his last letter home **ALEXANDER FOOT [1906]** writes to his mother the day before he was killed. In the letter he says: *"I had some excitement yesterday when five bullets just missed me. Turks tried to snipe men getting salt water on the beach. Later in the day I was shovelling when a seventy-five burst right through the sand-bag parapet beside me. It was a marvellous fluke I was not hit, but the concussion knocked me down and deafened one ear."* At the end of the letter he asks his mother to pass on the letter to Mr Rowland but to please correct the errors in the letter first. Such was the influence that "Boss" Rowland had on his students. It is interesting to note that Alexander Foot willed the School £20 to help develop a new tennis court.

GUY SCHACHT [1908] left Grammar at the end of 1908 to return to England to complete his secondary education there. He was still in England when hostilities broke out in 1914 and he enlisted in the British Army. Schacht had always got on well with P.F. Rowland and was a good correspondent. In a letter dated 'Somewhere in France, July 2nd, 1915' he writes to Rowland about his experiences there. In some respects it was similar to that written by Alexander Foot. He writes: *"This night was awful. We took the trenches all right [but at what a cost], but a small hill on our right was in their hands. Their snipers were enfilading us, and their artillery blowing us to pieces, and on each flank we were being bombed. In the end only a sergeant and five men were left. Relief arrived and they held the trench for four days in spite of being shelled all day by J.J.'s coal boxes, pip-squeaks, zip-bangs and every explosive the Hun has. Talk about nerve racking."* Schacht finishes this particular letter by writing: *"My word, the good old Australians are doing finely. Everybody this side is awfully proud of them, and so they ought to be. I am sorry in a way I couldn't have joined them."*

One of the many Grammar war heroes was **R.L. HENDERSON [1894]**. A doctor by profession he enlisted at the age of thirty-seven. He was wounded several times and died of his wounds in a British Hospital on 31 July, 1917. He was awarded a Military Cross for his bravery displayed in battle. A prolific writer of letters he wrote regularly to the School often praising the Australians on the front and in one letter echoes the words of Schacht. He writes: *"My experience is that after a few months service he is a steady decent chap. He is not a plaster saint by any means, but when on duty is steady, quiet and reliable, and a dashed good sport. I have the most intense admiration for him."*

The limit of space has restricted this article to a few examples but it is also worth mentioning **C.M. JOHNSON [1908]** and **R.E. ALSTON [1906]**. The Archives has in its possession a resume of Johnson's military career in which he indicates how keen he was to reach the Somme. He reached the Somme on 5 November, 1917 but had the misfortune to be killed ten days later. ALSTON, a boarder from England, enlisted in England in December 1915 and in his last letter home in August 1916 he writes: *"I have had five and half weeks in what was regarded as the heaviest fighting known, and you will see that I have been very lucky, being one of the five original officers of the battery and wasn't wounded. I was in command of the battery at the finish."* He was killed a few weeks later.

These letters are a few examples of the amazing spirit, stoicism and bravery displayed by the Grammarians who enlisted in the various conflicts. Their efforts are, perhaps, best exemplified in a poem written by **C.W. BINGHAM [1916]** while he was still a student at the School. Bingham went on to be a war correspondent in World War II and Editor of the Sydney Morning Herald in the 1960s.

Their names are writ in gold, and for all time
Will serve to gild the annals of the School;
Sons worthy of their own dear Northern clime,
Strong each and all with courage firm and cool.

The words "Play up, play up, and play the game,"
Were taught and heeded in this very room;
Those words set all their patriot hearts aflame,
When war upon the world had cast its gloom.

They played the game, and we were proud of it,
And when soft Peace shall hold once more its sway,
We'll lift our hats to those people who "did their bits",
And gave their lives in lands so far away.

MR BILL MULLER
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