

Realising Distant Loss: Grief and Bereavement in the Red Cross Wounded and Missing Files

This essay examines the means by which the men of the 3rd Australian Field Ambulance conceptualised death and loss in the Great War. Beginning with a discussion of the language of bereavement and war, this paper tracks the relationships that developed between those at the Front and those at home. Servicemen felt an obligation to assist the distant bereaved to realise their loss, and in this, a sense of collective bereavement can be identified. Of course, the impediment to Australian families comprehending their loss was physical distance. As many New Zealand memorials remind, soldiers came 'From the uttermost ends of the earth'. Wartime bereaved attempted to narrow this distance by 'affirm[ing] private memories of the dead, and ... draw[ing] comfort from familiar places: services, funerals, photographs, relics and graves'.¹ This paper argues that servicemen and families attached great importance to ritual, burial and graves in an effort to console a distant and aching loss.

On 19 August 1916, Private Alan Fuller of the 3rd Australian Field Ambulance ('A.F.A') was working in an Aid Post at Pozieres when 'another stretcher bearer was wanted'. Pte Fuller 'volunteered for the more dangerous work' and while carrying wounded behind friendly lines was struck by shell and killed instantaneously.² Fuller was buried at a sunken area just outside of town known as the 'Chalk Pit'. 'There was no real cemetery there', writes Private Lisson who served on Fuller's stretcher team, 'but there were others buried near'.³ Fuller was not afforded a cemetery but, as elsewhere in France, there were no shortage of dead at his graveside.

As the account of Fuller's death so tragically reveals, death was the constant of battle and the moderator of familial grief. Thus, this paper describes how the men of the 3rd A.F.A. described the deaths of their mates, and how the families of the dead reacted to the loss. Taking as a starting point the language used by servicemen to explain death, this essay looks at how this language betrays relationship between those soldiers left alive and the families of the dead. Within this relationship exists a discourse of collective grief and shared loss, identified through the importance attached by the living to the ritual of burial and graves. When approaching these concepts historians have tended to collectivise private grief, an approach which recent scholarship has found problematic. Bruce Scates' has pointed out that historians 'have failed to historicise grief at the individual level';⁴ while Damousi has cautioned that exploring private grief through collective histories is awkward.⁵ That being said, this paper attempts to highlight a thematic but inconstant pattern of grief within what Jalland has called 'mass bereavement'⁶ in order to position individual grief within the larger context of a nation of mourning, and in doing so, explore in so far as is valid the common threads of loss.

As a preliminary issue, it is worth noting that the Red Cross Files are not a consistent or verified source. The chaos of war is reflected in contradictory and scattered accounts. One witness recalls that Pte William Hillcoat, who was killed in Belgium, was a Presbyterian minister,⁷ another remembers him as a Methodist minister,⁸ while other witnesses including his brother-in-law confirm that he was, in actual fact, a Congregationalist.⁹ His brother-in-law wrote to the Red Cross that Hillcoat's congregation was in Waverly, while witnesses remembered Hillcoat as being from Chatswood,¹⁰ or indeed, from Victoria.¹¹ Where Hillcoat was buried is unclear, some accounts record a burial at the C.C.S. cemetery,¹² others at the Wippenhook cemetery,¹³ and a Canadian officer remembers a service at Lijssenthoek with a Presbyterian Chaplain.¹⁴ That these accounts are inconsistent is salient not only to historians. For the families of men such as Pte Hillcoat, such contradictions and uncertainty left room for denial and fruitless hope. As will be discussed later in the paper, this was especially true when the contradictions in the Red Cross accounts left open the possibility that a serviceman might have survived the war.

The relationships of bereavement the men of the 3rd Ambulance sought were conditioned by battle in which death was a constant and unceasing presence. 'In France, no man [was] safe', writes Denis Winter, 'death could hit men in the same way in the relative safety of the reserve line'.¹⁵ The Ambulance was tragically familiar with death, and its omnipresence; these men were no strangers to loss. Arthur Birch, a driver for the 3rd A.F.A, came from Port Adelaide and was of 'medium build, very dark and hairy, and with a falsetto voice'.¹⁶ While bivouacked at Amiens, Birch 'went for a stroll' and was killed by an aeroplane dropped bomb.¹⁷ Capt Robert Young was establishing an aid post at Jeancourt, in apparent safety, when the dugout was hit by shell and Young 'practically blown to pieces'.¹⁸ Death was not restricted to combat losses - Pte Percy Fennell fell overboard on a transport just outside Alexandria, according to some accounts while sleepwalking, and was drowned.¹⁹ Death was frequent and probable and the reactions of servicemen to death were conditioned by its immediacy and its frequency. In a handwritten letter from Lt Col Davies of the 2nd Canadian C.C.S., a Red Cross Officer has underlined the name of the deceased and written next to it 'D of wds'.²⁰ One cannot help but be humbled by the sheer number of men who must have died of wounds for the phrase to be reduced to acronym.

Any discussion of grief therefore must be contextualised within an environment defined by loss. However, it would not be accurate to simplistically conclude that the frequency of death dampened its immediacy or emotional resonance with the men. Winter, amongst many others, has pointed out the complexity of wartime bereavement amongst serving personnel.²¹ As will be shown later in the paper, amidst a host of different emotions and attitudes, and in contrast to a supposition of desensitisation, funerals and ritual were extremely important to the men of the 3rd A.F.A.²²

What though do the Red Cross files reveal of the servicemen's attitude to death? Witnesses to casualties from the 3rd A.F.A. are quick to point out that death was mercifully quick but are very reticent when it comes to the suffering of the wounded. Where it is true, the brevity of death is continually emphasised. Deaths are often described as 'instantaneous'²³, men are 'killed instantly'²⁴ or 'killed outright'.²⁵ In some instances, brutal statements are used to underscore the rapidity of death; several men described 'heads blown off'.²⁶ When Alfred Eccles was killed during the landing at Gallipoli, his next of kin was informed that he had been 'shot through the heart'.²⁷ Harry Stephens describes the death of Pte Clifford Hall in the following terms: 'A big shell got him just outside our Dressing Station ... Poor Cliff did not live a second'.²⁸ When men are wounded, and do not die immediately, more closeted language is used. Often men are 'badly knocked about' by shell, an expression baldly euphemistic of terrible wounds.²⁹ Men dying from wounds are 'too ill' to speak.³⁰ Usually the expression 'died from wounds' or a similar phrase that reveals little of the horrible suffering these men must have endured is used to describe death.³¹ One account of the death of Pte Hillcoat recalls that Hillcoat was 'wounded in the head [and] part of it blown away'.³² While such horrific injury and description suggests a rapid death, another statement reveals that Hillcoat in fact lived some 48 hours before succumbing to his wounds.³³

The unwillingness of the Ambulance to discuss suffering is in contrast to the brutal discourses of death which Winter and other diarist scholars have identified in men's personal correspondence.³⁴ However, what might be seen as an apparent contradiction is in fact nothing of the kind. On one level, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that men did not want the ordeal and agony of their mates passed on to families and loved ones. Torment before death was not, in the minds of these men, fit for public view. Rhetoric of gallant sacrifice - a rhetoric many families accepted³⁵ - is not reconcilable with young men dying in physical pain.³⁶ This undercurrent of self-censorship runs through the Files, affirming the internalisation of grief that would prove so problematic to returned servicemen.³⁷ Moreover, these men felt duty bound to their mates, and more importantly to their mates' families. An association developed between men at the front and families at home. This relationship was one contextualised and stimulated by physical distance and the inability of home-front bereavement to realise distant loss. Joy Damousi notes that 'in the interaction between home front and battlefield ... loss, absence and displacement were defined by physical distance'.³⁸

The physical distance between the dead and their families fostered mutually supportive relationships, based entirely on bereavement, between those at the Front and those at home. Servicemen felt 'personal obligations to the fallen', to see that families were given what news was available.³⁹ 'Several of the lads, including myself, have written to his wife,' writes Pte Rogers on the death of Pte Hillcoat, 'as we know the Military

details which she would get would be very brief'.⁴⁰ Included with Pte Rogers' letter was a photo of the deceased, which the Red Cross returned 'know[ing] you must value it as a memento of your friend'.⁴¹ The exertions of Pte Rogers are not unusual; many servicemen did all they could to assist the bereaved. When Pte Fuller was killed stretcher bearing, Pte Cumberland 'wrote out to A. Fuller's people, telling them all he could'.⁴² Pte Richard Sharp was also killed while manning a stretcher; his unit arranged to have his particulars returned to Tasmania.⁴³ Even in those accounts which do not mention 'the people' of the killed, the strong element of self-censorship - and indeed the fact that these men replied to the Red Cross at all - strongly indicates that the men of the 3rd A.F.A took their duties to the bereaved to heart. Indeed, material of this sort has enabled Damousi to identify servicemen assuming 'nurturing roles' and permitting grieving families to visualise their loss.⁴⁴

This unusual meeting of grief and obligation was not confined to servicemen and the bereaved. Families at home would employ agents, such as the Red Cross, to investigate the loss of their loved ones. Winter has tellingly termed relationships of this sort as those of 'adoptive kinship'.⁴⁵ Within the context of these relationships, loss was common ground. In a letter from the Red Cross to a witness, dated 18 December 1917, the correspondent heartbreakingly longs for better times:

With all good wishes for a cheery a time as possible under the circumstances at Christmas and hopes for a happier year in 1918, including a return to Australia for all of us.⁴⁶

The Red Cross assumes the role of 'kin' in that it attempts to offer comfort to the bereaved. Tangentially related to this is a sense of collective pride. 'We feel sure you would like to have [this report] as it shows how much [Pte Hillcoat] was beloved by his comrades', writes the Red Cross to one family, 'it will be a great comfort to his wife and friends to know all these details and they should feel very proud of his memory'.⁴⁷

These relationships of common loss were however, anchored and defined by the importance afforded to burial and grave. Recent scholarship, such as the doctorate research of Bartolo Ziino, has argued that graves played a distinct and intractable role in private grief. As discussed above, the 'distance was the inescapable condition and conditioner of that grief'.⁴⁸ For those that lost a son, the physical whereabouts of the grave and the care accorded to remains was paramount. Many scholars have point out the overwhelming desire of the bereaved to see that 'bodies in distant lands were being cared for in memory'.⁴⁹ After the war, Bean recognised that many Australian families felt themselves in a 'netherworld', with their loved ones lost in a primordial and faceless mass of grief.⁵⁰ It was the physical presence of a grave that consoled families; the knowledge that their 'boys' rested within a defined space, with the respect and peace they deserved. 'The actual side of burial abroad', writes Moriarty, 'even if it could not be visited, was of great interest to the bereaved'.⁵¹

In this vein, the Red Cross files always detail the ritual surrounding the burial of the dead. In this vein, C.C. Rogers describes the funeral of Pte William Hillcoat in the following terms:

He is buried in the C.C.S cemetery at that hospital ... We managed to have a wreath sent up to his grave, and we made a very nice cross. He was almost worshipped by the boys, every one was sorry to hear of his death.⁵²

Pte Hillcoat's comrades arranging a cross and wreath is not unusual; many files record that crosses were erected, wreaths sent to graves or that the service was formal and 'military' in character. When Sgt Charles Derbyshire was killed by shell, witness McLeod recounted how he was buried with 'military honours in a soldier's ceremony'.⁵³ Pte John Cook died while trying to keep the 9th R.A.P clear by shell and buried near an old German Casualty Clearing station - even those that did not know him attended the funeral:

He had a military funeral - a Padre held service - a wreath placed on grave. Did not know him very well.⁵⁴

When Pte "Bluey" Ransley was killed carrying a stretcher, heavy fire prevented the retrieval of his body. 'It is my deepest regret', writes a comrade, 'that we were unable to procure his body and bury it in some recognised cemetery according to our custom'.⁵⁵ Many of Bluey's mates are mutely antagonistic to a Canadian work unit which eventually buried their comrade without their approval.⁵⁶ Other files stress that a

religious ceremony took place. When Pte Fuller was buried in the Chalk Pit, a chaplain was present.⁵⁷ Pte Hillcoat had a Presbyterian Chaplain hold service at his funeral, a comforting thought despite the fact that Hillcoat was himself a Congregationalist minister.⁵⁸

The death of Pte Roy Levy as told by David Hersche is in many respects illustrative of the themes discussed above. Hersche was a Jewish Chaplain attached to the No.13 C.C.S British Expeditionary Force, and stationed at the No.2 Casualty Clearing Station at Outersteene. Pte Levy was 'a pleasant sort of chap, always good humoured with a kind word and greeting for everyone'.⁵⁹ Being an Australian he was, of course, 'a good cricketer'.⁶⁰ On 7 March 1917, he 'received practically the whole of a shell'.⁶¹ In line with the general reticence towards wounds discussed earlier in the essay, two men present at the time he was wounded write that the injuries did not seem to be serious.⁶² He was transferred to the No.2 C.C.S, where Hersch 'stayed with him for some time, although he was *too ill* to talk much'.⁶³

He died shortly after 3.a.m. on the 8-3-18. I had visited him on the previous afternoon and was told the case was quite hopeless. Everything possible, of course, was done for his care and comfort.⁶⁴

Hersch buried Levy that day with those present at the burial, recognising the importance of religion in the ceremony, stressing in their accounts that a Jewish Rabbi buried him. A week after the death of Levy, Hersch 'set up a Jewish Memorial – Magen Dorid⁶⁵ – and read a prayer over his grave', later writing twice to Levy's mother Eva who lived in Paddington, Sydney.⁶⁶

What is evident from all the accounts discussed above, viewed firmly within the context of distance, is that the ritual of burial was 'critical to those *unable* to carry it out themselves'.⁶⁷ Families, unable to bury their sons, were left to bridge the distance in whatever means were available. In 1920, Nellie King of Melbourne wrote to General Birdwood asking that if Lady Birdwood were to visit her sons grave, could she 'place a kiss on my darling's headstone for me, his broken hearted lonely mother?'⁶⁸ Many of the families of the 3rd A.F.A. requested photographs of gravestones, a poor but comforting substitute to the long and expensive trip to France. The Imperial War Graves Commission sent official photographs of graves to the next-of-kin, often in response to anguished requests. When Pte Clifford Hall was killed by shell, his father was sent a sketch of his grave commissioned by his comrades.⁶⁹

The families of the men discussed above learnt of their lost sons and husbands but others waited years or never found out anything at all. Luckins has pointed out that is it was not uncommon for families to be advised incorrectly as to their sons' fates.⁷⁰ In May 1917, the family of Pte Reginald Sanderson, 3rd A.F.A, were advised that their son had been wounded and taken as a Prisoner of War. In actuality, Pte Sanderson survived the war but died in 1919 of pneumonia in Southampton.⁷¹ Other families would never know what had happened to their sons; indeed, some 20,000 men remain 'missing' to this day.⁷² After the war as some men were exhumed and buried in carefully planned cemeteries, Bean recognised how this would heighten grief for those without bodies to bury:

[it makes] more poignant the bitterness of those who had friends who were missing. They would say to themselves - "It is very well for those who know where their boys are buried but we have no word of ours".⁷³

Often this grief coexisted with denial. An internal RSL letter, written in 1920, expresses concern about mothers, classified as war widows, who refuse to claim a pension as 'they have been convinced that their sons would very shortly be reported as prisoners of war. It has, in many cases, taken twelve months and upwards before these mothers could be induced to face the fact that their sons were indeed lost'.⁷⁴ In this vein, the grave of Pte W.N. Holland reads:

We cannot say
We will not say
That he is dead
He is just away.⁷⁵

Those without bodies to bury were often never able to resolve their grief with their pain and doubt hovering around their lives. What information could be gleaned from unofficial reports was often inconsistent and left

room for fruitless hope. Alexander McKernan was an ambulance driver in the 3rd A.F.A. On 31 October 1917, during the Third Battle of Ypres he was sent up the line at Passchendaele with a despatch. He never returned. Wiggins recalls that 'his horse was found dead, and only McKernan's pay book could be found ... the body was blown to pieces'.⁷⁶ In the evidence of L/Corporal Graves and Pte Fornarich neither the McKernan's nor the horse's remains were ever found.⁷⁷ W. Mouney 'was told' that McKernan 'was mounted at the time and the shell, it was said, buried both him and his horse'.⁷⁸ Only Pte McPherson recalls a body being found, writing that the Canadians found and buried the body some four days after McKernan had disappeared.⁷⁹ The grief, doubt and tragic hope that these contradictory and uncertain accounts fostered in McKernan's family are revealed in a handwritten letter from his sister, dated February 1919, to the Prisoner of War Committee:

I also got a letter from his mate and he said he had been sent with a message up the line on horse ... and they found his horse killed and his pay book was lying beside the horse but no sign of him could they find & he said that searched the fields thoroughly. He said that he had gone too far or lost his way so we are thinking perhaps he may be a prisoner of war & we would be thankful if you would make enquiries for us ...⁸⁰

McKernan was not a prisoner of war, nor was he wandering lost in the fields of Belgium. In 1920, some sixteen thousand Australians like McKernan were unaccounted for, lost in a war where 'shells simply obliterated bodies'.⁸¹ War of this kind obligated families and servicemen to 'confront some level of the new and terrible reality of wartime death'.⁸² In practice, and as discussed in this paper, this obligated families to 'develop effective secular and heterodox responses to mass bereavement when conventional faith and ritual were shaken'.⁸³ The aspect of this highlighted in this paper was the role of the grave and of burial in providing the 'the vanishing points for the projected grief of hundreds of thousands of individual mourners'.⁸⁴ Witnessed in the files of the Red Cross is desperation to see a far-flung grave, attend a service or indeed a yearning in the bereaved to realise distant loss.

Bibliography

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The Red Cross Wounded and Missing Files for the following men were directly consulted during the writing of this essay. Considerably more Files were consulted than the list below.

- 1100 Private Stephen Sheaf
- 11860 Private John Pearson
- 136 Driver Alexander McKernan
- 13761 Private John Cook
- 15 Sergeant Charles Derbyshire
- 15535 Private Roy Levy
- 16410 Private William Hillcoat
- 16416 Private Francis Ransley
- 1672 Private Alan Fuller
- 2252 Private Percy Fennell
- 321 Private Alfred Eccles
- 5369 Private Reginald Sanderson
- 5390 Private Richard Sharp
- 6491 Driver Arthur Birch
- 6514 Private Clifford Hall
- 9 Sergeant William Gunn
- Captain Robert Young

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- 11 Ziino, B. *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War*, PhD Thesis, (University of Melbourne, 2003), p.4.
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- 3 RCF, Pte Fuller, evidence of Pte John Lisson.
- 4 Scates, B. 'In Gallipoli's Shadow: Pilgrimage, Memory, Mourning and the Great War', in *Australian Historical Studies*, No. 119, April 2002, p.20.
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- 6 Jalland, P. *Australian Ways of Death: A Social and Cultural History 1840-1918*. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.314.
- 7 RCF, 16410 Pte William Hillcoat, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of Lieut. Col. Davey (30 October 1917).
- 8 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of C.W. Thatcher (3 January 1918).
- 9 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of C.C. Rogers (7 December 1917); letter from Pte Vardill to Miss Deakin (RCF) (22 January 1918).
- 10 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of C.F. Wiggins (8 December 1917).
- 11 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of C.W. Thatcher (3 January 1918).
- 12 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of C.C. Rogers (7 December 1917).
- 13 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of C.F. Wiggins (8 December 1917).
- 14 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of Lieut. Col. Davey (30 October 1917). This is where the War Graves Commission has listed Hillcoat's grave.
- 15 Winter, D. *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War*, (London: Penguin, 1979), p.131.
- 16 RCF, 6491 Driver Arthur Birch, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of Pte W.L. Patison (5 July 1918).
- 17 RCF, Driver Birch, evidence of Pte S.B. Wheat (14 August 1918).
- 18 RCF, Capt Robert Young, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of Cpl Horigan (11 February 1919).
- 19 RCF, 2252 Pte Percy Fennel, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of Pte S.H. Martin (3 August 1916).
- 20 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, marked on the evidence of Lieut. Col. Davey; also observed in RCF, 5490 Pte Richard Sharp, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of Pte L Fontenoy (1 September 1917).
- 21 Winter, *Death's Men*, above n 15, p.207-8.
- 22 Winter, *Death's Men*, above n 15, p.208 where Winter discusses how funerals were 'reverently attended'.
- 23 For example see: RCF, Pte Fuller, evidence of Pte John Lisson; RCF, 16416 Pte Francis Ransley, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of Pte H. Bertram (22 June 1918).
- 24 For example see: RCF, 15 Sgt Charles Derbyshire, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of Pte H. Skeels (13 March 1918) and evidence of Pte W.G. Watson (18 December 1917); RCF, 13761 Pte John Cook, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of V. Morse (21 November 1918).
- 25 For example see: RCF, Sgt Derbyshire, evidence of Pte H.G. Hallifax (10 December 1917).
- 26 For example see: RCF, Pte Fuller, evidence of W. Hakey (13 January 1917); RCF, Sgt Derbyshire, evidence of C.F. Wiggins (8 December 1917).
- 27 RCF, 321 Pte Alfred Eccles, 3rd A.F.A., evidence of Pte A. Clark (25 May 1916).
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35 For a discussion of this see: Luckins, T. *The Gates of Memory*, (Fremantle: Curtin University Books, 2004), ch.1.

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51 Moriarty, C. 'Narrative and Absent Body: Mechanisms of Meaning in First World War Memorials, PhD Thesis, Sussex University, p.57 cited in Ziino, *A Distant Grief*, above n 1, p.22.

52 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of C.C. Rogers (7 December 1917).

53 RCF, Sgt Derbyshire, evidence of H. McLeod (28 February 1918).

54 RCF, Pte Cook, evidence of Pte J. Waddell (24 October 1918).

55 RCF, Pte Ransley, letter from G. Rees. (25 March 1918).

56 RCF, Pte Ransley, letter from G. Rees. (25 March 1918).

57 RCF, Pte Fuller, evidence of Pte John Lisson.

58 RCF, Pte Hillcoat, evidence of Lieut. Col. Davey (30 October 1917); verified by Hillcoat's brother-in-law, Pte Vardill.

59 RCF, Pte Levy, evidence of Pte S.B. Wheat (14 August 1918).

60 RCF, Pte Levy, evidence of Sgt O.P. Kenny (24 December 1918).

61 RCF, Pte Levy, evidence of Pte S.B. Wheat (14 August 1918).

62 RCF, Pte Levy, evidence of Pte S.B. Wheat (14 August 1918) and evidence of Sgt O.P. Kenny (24 December 1918).

63 RCF, Pte Levy, evidence of David Hersch (6 August 1918) (my emphasis).

64 RCF, Pte Levy, evidence of Pte S.B. Wheat (14 August 1918).

65 Believe this to be an alternative spelling of 'Star of David'.

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67 Luckins, *Gates of Memory*, above n 35, p.151 (my emphasis).

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71 RCF, 5369 Pte Reginald Sanderson, 3rd A.F.A.

72 Ziino, *A Distant Grief*, above n 1, p.3.

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- ⁷³ Luckins, *Gates of Memory*, above n 35, p.153.
- ⁷⁴ Luckins, *Gates of Memory*, above n 35, p.151.
- ⁷⁵ Laffin, J. *We Will Remember Them: Australian Epitaphs of WWI* (Kenthurst: Kangaroo Press, 1995), p.74. Many Australian epitaphs have similar inscriptions. For example, the grave of Pte G.B.E. Hunt, 17th Battalion, reads "We think of him / still as the same / he is not dead / he is just away".
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- ⁷⁸ RCF, Driver McKernan, evidence of W. Mourney (27 March 1918).
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