

## Andrews -Goodbye Uncle Bob .1485 words

Those names etched into the Gunning War Memorial, who were they? What do they symbolize?

One of those Gunning men honoured there was a young man who met the call from The King and from Mother England to defend her and the British Empire's Glory in the Great War. That brave young man was Gunner Robert Joseph Newman, my Grandfather Arthur's brother.

My "Uncle Bob. "

Uncle Bob was a courageous survivor who returned after the Great War and lived at Caxton House with my Grandfather's family.

One more of the large Newman family for my Grandmother to care for. Family looked after family in those days.

Uncle Bob never married, he had nowhere else to go when he came home from that war, a lonely extremely ill shell of a man.

As a young man in the pre-war years, he played football for Gunning, was an accomplished foot runner and athlete often mentioned in the Goulburn Evening Post.

Every night and for most of the day Uncle Bob spent his long hours confined to his bed. His bedroom adjoined the room occupied by my Mother, my Brother and me. We lived in Caxton House then as my Dad was away at the War. I was 5 years old.

Day and night, Uncle Bob coughed and wheezed continuously, at times almost choking as he gasped for breath. It was a terrible frightening sound. My being a small child I could not understand it. I was scared.

Some nights as he gasped for breath, we would hear him calling out loudly and painfully, as he surely relived those times on the battlefields and the terror that flashed back tormenting his mind. Mum explained to us that Uncle Bob had bad dreams and that we must pray for him every night.

Barry and I were never allowed to make any noise likely to upset Uncle Bob. We had to be very quiet. A most difficult task for two young boys.

Sometimes Grandma let us go into Uncle Bob's room, then he spoke little, certainly saying nothing about the war or his suffering, he just liked to hold our hands, the kids he would never have.

Uncle Bob's room had a heavy nauseating smell, a feeling of sickness about it, although Grandma kept his room scrupulously clean. She was forever up and down the stairs waiting on him, washing and bathing him and providing for his needs, however that smell always lingered, an odor of imminent death.

Gunner Robert Joseph Newman No. 11112, a born and bred Gunning lad, joined the army at the outset of the 1914/1918 Great War as a Private of A Company the 18th Battalion Infantry. He transferred to the 3rd Field Artillery Brigade in France.

Uncle Bob was a front-line soldier who witnessed the worst of it, The Somme, Passchendaele, Villiers Bretonneux and Frommel as his artillery unit moved from battle to battle.

In the early battles he suffered gunshot wounds to his leg and his hip and was repatriated to England.

After convalescence for three months, he was returned to his unit on the frontline of the battlefields of France. Once again, he sustained further gunshot wounds. For the second time he was repatriated to England for medical attention returning after only a short period to the frozen battlefields in France and Belgium. Soldiers were desperately in demand.

On his return to the frontline, he suffered further wounding and burns to the face and his hands as well as being severely gassed with mustard gas on two separate occasions. How did this brave young man from Gunning survive this torture?

On this last occasion his wounds were so bad that on the 20th of September 1918, just two months before the armistice, he was again taken from the battlefields and repatriated to England in a most serious condition. After months of hospitalisation, he was invalided back to Australia.

The horrible and unbelievable conditions that were endured by the soldiers who fought in the mud, blood and slime of the battlefields of Europe in the First World War can hardly be imagined.

Tens of thousands of young Australians did not survive. There was no trace found of hundreds of thousands of soldiers who were literally evaporated or blasted to pieces with the remnants of their bodies and body parts decomposing in the quagmires that were the battlefields of Europe between 1914 and 1918. Their final whereabouts are known only to God.

I wished that Uncle Bob would stop coughing and calling out at night so that we could get some sleep.

I had no comprehension of what he had endured, how could anyone, let alone a small boy.

In time I guess we got used to it. We had to.

After many bedridden years, the accumulated effects of gunshot and shrapnel wounds, burns and the pain of mustard gassings finally took their toll. Uncle Bob passed away at Caxton House Gunning on 22 nd September 1943.

Few came to see him after the war, except for his family.

An incredibly sad and lonely man who every day relived in his mind each moment of the horror of that war unable to escape it as he lay there in his room day after day. Fortunately, his brother Arthur and sister-in-law did all that they could making him as comfortable as possible and allowing him to die peacefully surrounded by the love of close family when that time finally came, and he was at rest.

Gunner Robert Newman was a brave man who never recovered from the hell and torment that he had gone through during the more than three years when he fought in those decimated, muddy and blood-soaked battlefields of Europe. His seeing mates fall beside him and not knowing when the next fatal shell or bullet would have his name on it.

In the hell and heat of battle I wonder if he may have wished that this would happen.

My lasting memory of Uncle Bob was after his passing when he was laid in a plain wooden coffin in the parlor of Caxton house.

There were few people there, few flowers had been sent, because apart from family, Dr Barbour and the Minister, although Bob was born and bred in Gunning, few really knew him then.

The casket was bare except for his battered khaki slouch hat and his medals and dog tags marking the place of repose of a soldier who had given it all and was finally resting.

In later years, the Parlor always reminded me of death and suffering, although in good times it had been a place of happiness and merriment as the musical Newman family and their families before them entertained family and friends there.

Uncle Bob was the first of many deceased relatives who I saw in their coffins in the parlor of Caxton House.

As a family rite his coffin rested near the piano, that symbol of happier times, propped between the padded seats of two inward facing dining room chairs.

Uncle Bob, after all that he had endured, the privations and tortures.

of those deathly battle fields, seeing his mates blown to pieces with their bodies, unrecognizable, grotesquely scatted and decaying in the muddy quagmires and trenches and the mental and physical pain that he had suffered from his many wounds and gassings. He finally looked peaceful. I had never seen him this way before, no wheezing, painful gasping for breath or nightmares.

Uncle Bob a young man who had in his brief, but tormented life soaked up centuries of misery and pain that we would never be able to understand or contemplate.

In respect and love for Uncle Bob my brother and I approached his coffin as Grandma lifted the of lace covering his face. We kissed him on the forehead with tears in our eyes, I was trying to grasp it all sadly saying to Grandma, " Goodbye Uncle Bob."

"Grandma, it looks like Uncle Bob has gone to sleep."

With tears falling down her cheeks she replied,

"Yes Brian, Uncle Bob is now sleeping with God in Heaven. "

To this day I treasure Uncle Bob's prized possessions. His Medals and Bakelite "dog tags ". From the day he joined up those tags were around his neck witnessing every horrific moment that he had endured in his sad wartime experience. The tags gave little testimony to his sacrifices, recording only his name, service number and religion.

What stories those tags could tell of the pain, sadness and carnage that Uncle Bob witnessed under the most horrendous conditions. Like him a whole generation of our young men were obliterated or scarred for life.

When you pass the Memorial in Gunning, ponder a thought for those brave and dedicated sons of the village who gave all. Their names, like Uncle Bob's, all have stories to tell and deserve our honour and respect.