



2nd Corporal J. Elliott, 1 Tunnelling Coy. A.I.F

The story behind a recovered British War Medal

My name is Christine Barrett and I am a volunteer family history researcher with Maitland and Beyond Family History Inc.

In October 2022 I received a phone call from John Gillam, local historian asking if I would like to research and try to find the families of some servicemen who served in WWI. Ten medals had been handed to the President of Tilligerry RSL Sports Club by police from their stolen goods store. One of those medals was a British War Medal awarded to Joseph Elliott who had enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in 1916. Joseph was also entitled to the Victory Medal, but this was not recovered.

I discovered, through research, that the ten medals had been awarded to one British airman, one Scottish and three British servicemen all of whom I was able to identify from the details imprinted on the medals.

I have written *Perseverance Prevails – The Search for Descendants of Stolen WWI Medals* to document their stories and the research process undertaken to uncover their military history and search for descendants. I have included a description of the medals awarded, an overview of the squadron/company/division in which the serviceman served and an explanation of the various online resources used, providing a URL. and a link to the website.

Every medal tells a story and I feel very strongly that medals awarded to those who fought and died and those who fought and survived are tangible reminders of their courage and sacrifice. They are not simply items to be bought, sold or collected, they are to be cherished and respected.

I sincerely hope that you find Joseph's story inspirational and encourage you to peruse the stories of the other four servicemen to uncover how they served their country in the Great War and how their medals found their way home to family.

Christine Barrett

Who was, 2 Corporal J. Elliott, 1 Tunnel Company, A.I.F.

The medal for J. Elliott was a solitary British War medal with the details on the rim being service number, rank, surname and initial, company and the initials A.I.F. The fact that Joseph enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (A.I.F.) would make searching easier because Australian WWI service records have been digitised and are available on the *National Archives of Australia* (NAA) website. The attestation page is the first page of a service record and provides details of enlistment and personal information. It showed that J. Elliott was Joseph, born at Berwick-on-Tweed, Northumberland, England, a miner by trade and married. Joseph had enlisted in the 4th Australian Tunnelling Company on 9th April 1916 at the age of 26 years and five months. The Victory medal would have also been awarded.



British War Medal

I had a broad idea of the role of a Tunnelling Company in WWI, but research provided me with information that highlighted the incredible work performed and the many dangers these men faced. (A précis of the role of the Tunnelling Companies in WWI can be found in the Appendix attached to *Perseverance Prevails*). Following Joseph's enlistment in the A.I.F., he embarked from Australia on 22nd May 1916 on board the *Warilda*. He was promoted to 2nd Corporal before arriving in France on 30th August. The 4th Australian Tunnelling Company was absorbed into the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company on 30th September 1916.

An area known as the Messines Ridge along the northern French/Belgium border had been captured by the Germans in 1914 and, despite efforts by the British in 1915, it remained in German hands, giving the enemy a tactical advantage because of the excellent views across British lines to Ypres. The British objective was to capture the German defences on the Ridge and destroy this tactical advantage so they could advance to Passchendaele Ridge and then capture the Belgian coast up to the Dutch frontier.



Map showing position of Hill 60 and Caterpillar on either side of the railway line.

Hill 60, on the Ridge, had been formed when the railway from Ypres to Comines was built in the 1850's. Earth excavated had been dumped on either side of the railway line to form small hillocks; two on the western side called the Caterpillar and the Dump and the one on the eastern side was Hill 60. It was so called because the contoured height of the ground was marked on British maps as being 60 meters above sea-level.

Following on from the unsuccessful attempt by the British in 1915 to secure Hill 60, tunnelling companies of the Royal Engineers took up mining operations under the hill and neighbouring ground. The British underground works consisted of an access gallery (Berlin Tunnel) leading to two mine chambers, Hill 60 A (beneath Hill 60) and Hill 60 B (beneath the Caterpillar). The tunnel galleries were between 122 and 658 metres long and 17-42 metres below ground. The 3rd Canadian Tunnelling Company took over from the British in April 1916 and completed the galleries; the Hill 60 mine being charged with 53,500 lbs (24,300 kgs) of explosives in July 1916 and the branch gallery under The Caterpillar 70,000 lbs (32,000 kg) in October. A further 19 mines were dug across the Messines Ridge and similarly packed with explosives.

The 1st Australian Tunnelling Company took over Hill 60 and the Caterpillar from the Canadians on 7th November 1916 and was tasked with ensuring that the tunnels and explosives beneath Hill 60 and the Caterpillar remained intact and undiscovered by the Germans over the next seven months. Drainage and ventilation shafts had to be dug in the unfamiliar blue clay, and there was a constant danger of collapse, particularly in the part of the gallery leading to the Caterpillar, which passed under the railway line. At the same time, listening posts had to be maintained to detect enemy action. These posts were only a few metres underground and therefore susceptible to collapse during bombardments. Diversionary tunnels were dug closer to the surface so that the deeper tunnels would go undetected. The German mining units were constantly trying to find British tunnels and numerous counter tunnels had to be dug towards the German excavations so that they could be mined with small charges and destroyed. The Official Australian History states that at Hill 60, *underground warfare reached a tension which was not surpassed anywhere else on the British front.*

British, Australian, Canadian and New Zealand troops were under the command of General Herbert Plumer who made the decision that the 21 mines that had been placed along the Ridge would be discharged on 7th June 1917. It was reputed that on the evening of June 6th General Charles Harington, General Plumer's Chief of Staff, said "*Gentlemen, we may not write history tomorrow, but we are certainly going to change the geography.*" When the mines were detonated at 3:10 a.m. 990,000 pounds (450,000 kg) of explosives went off under the German positions, demolishing a large part of Hill 60 and killing about 10,000 German soldiers between Ypres and Ploegsteert. Two mines did not explode, but the 19 that did created craters across the Ridge. The Hill 60/Caterpillar mine created a crater estimated to be 60 feet (18m) deep and 260 feet (79m) wide and newspaper reports claimed that the noise from the explosions and ensuing barrage could be heard in London. The Battle of Messines which lasted until 14th June 1917, had begun.

According to the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company War Diary, accessed from the *Australian War Memorial* website, from 7th-12th June, the men were working to carry out small repairs to dugouts around the Hill 60 crater and the construction of a new trench through the lip of the crater. This was carried out under heavy shelling by the Germans. On 13th June, a notation in the diary, put the men at Street 28, Dranoutre engaged in *Road repairing in forward areas – one man wounded, 3 men killed, one man missing.* Joseph was among those killed. Information gathered from *Tunnellers Research* website provides details as to what happened that day.

In a statement given on 22nd October 1917, Sapper Archibald McDonald stated that:

"He (Goodson) was one of a party of 5 unloading a lorry when a shell burst among them killing the lot. I saw it happen at Ypres, at a place we called Lillegate."

Sapper James McLean stated on 19th November 1917 that:

"While we were working at Hill 60 our cooks were stationed near Lille Gate and were a sort of half-way house for us when we went out to rest. They remained on a few days after we had moved and it was then that a shell came over knocking out two or three of them and killing Goodson outright."

Chaplain G.M. Ambrose stated on 8th September 1917 that:

"Spr. Mutch: I wrote a letter for him on the 14th to his sister Phyllis J. Mutch of Marrickville, Sydney, NSW. At that time, he was very hopeful of recovery, but he died at 10.05 p.m. on that day (14th). He left no message except sending his love to his sister."

According to service records from the NAA, those killed in action that day (13th June 1917) were 2nd Corporal Joseph Elliott, Sapper James Park, and Sapper George Goodson. Sapper Alfred Jarman died of severe wounds later that day and Sapper William Mutch died of wounds on 15th. All are buried in the Railway Dugouts Burial Ground, Transport Farm, Zillebeke, 1 mile SSE of Ypres.

Joseph's headstone was found on the *War Graves Photographic Project* website with a notation stating:



*3289 2nd Corporal Joseph ELLIOTT
26-year-old, married
Miner of Kurri Kurri*

Photo of headstone from the War
Graves Photographic Project

www.twgpp.org

Joseph Elliott was the fourth child of Thomas Elliott and Mary Jane (nee Roughead). He had eight siblings, six surviving when he died in 1917. According to *FreeBMD*, Joseph was born in the 4th quarter 1890 in Berwick-on-Tweed, Northumberland. The England Census was accessed from *Ancestry@* and Joseph was found on the 1891 Census as being four months old, born in Spittal, Northumberland; on the 1901 Census as an 11-year-old and on the 1911 Census Joseph is a coal miner, aged 22, married with wife Jane W. and daughter Sarah J. aged one year. They were living with Jane's parents, Henry and Sarah MacDonald in Ashlington, Northumberland. I then found a marriage for Joseph Elliott and Jane Wilhelmina MacDonald on *FreeBMD*, having taken place in the first quarter of 1909 at Berwick-on-Tweed, Northumberland. My search for further children born to Joseph and Jane in England did not yield any results, nor did a search for any children that may have been born in Australia.

Joseph's service record, accessed from the *National Archives of Australia*, had been altered to reflect that his wife Jane remarried. A search of *NSW Government's Family History Search* online showed Jane's marriage to Arthur R. Stansbury in 1919 in Sydney and a son Alfred L. born in 1920 at Kurri Kurri. A letter written on 16th March 1921 by Jane to the Officer in Charge, Base Records was also found in Joseph's service record. In the letter, Jane expressed her thanks for the photographs of Joseph's grave and provided a date on which she would leave for England along with a forwarding address. She also enquired as to any war medals to which Joseph would have been entitled, especially the British War Medal.

Immigration and Travel passenger lists accessed from *Ancestry@* show Arthur Stansbury, Jane, Sarah Jane and Alfred Leonard leaving Australia on board the *Omar* and arriving in London 25th May 1921. They returned to Australia on board the *Ormuz*, arriving in Sydney 26th December 1921. The family remained in Australia.

Joseph's daughter, Sarah Jane married John Edward Wrightson on 23rd March 1939 in Sydney. Australian Electoral rolls from *Ancestry@* show Sarah Jane lived for some time at Weston and Sydney following her marriage before settling in Belmont, NSW in the 1950's. Sarah's marriage in 1939 meant that I could not search online for possible children because of the privacy restriction limiting birth information to only being available prior to 100 years from the present. The next option was to look at death or funeral notices. I accessed the *Ryerson Index* and found that Sarah Jane, also known as Sadie, had died in 1997 and that the *Newcastle Herald* of 5th February 1997 had published a death notice. I was able to find this at Newcastle Regional Library. The notice mentioned Nancy, Jos, Sonia and Emma. Unfortunately, this information did not get me any closer to finding Sarah's family.

The search continued, finding a death notice for Alfred Leonard Stansbury, Sarah Jane's half-brother. The notice mentioned two daughters, Narelle and Leanne. I again turned to *Facebook*. I found Leanne Stansbury on *Facebook* and sent her a message. Leanne responded confirming she was Alfred Stansbury's daughter and Sarah Jane was her aunt Sadie. I explained what I had learnt so far and Leanne said that Sadie did not have any children, but did sponsor Nancy who was from Hong Kong. Leanne said that she would get in touch with her sister Narelle who would be able to put me in touch with Nancy. Narelle contacted me and provided Nancy's surname and phone number.

I rang and spoke with Nancy who said that Sarah was like a mother to her. She also said that Sarah had been given her father's war medals by her mother. I asked Nancy if she knew what had happened to the medals and she said that sometime in the 1980's Sarah decided to hand them to Newcastle RSL. Nancy accompanied her and Sarah had to sign papers when the RSL took possession of them.

Newcastle RSL was damaged in the earthquake in 1989 and relocated to Scott Street, Newcastle. The RSL has since relocated again to Mayfield and when I contacted them, they had no knowledge of medals or documents relating to Joseph Elliott. It is a mystery as to how this medal ended up where it did.

This headstone for the Elliott family is in a cemetery in Tweedmouth, Northumberland. Joseph is memorialised on this headstone.
Cpl. Joseph Elliott, F¹ Australians who was killed in action 13th June 1917, aged 27 years.

I have spoken to Nancy a number of times and she initially said that Joseph's British War Medal should go to a member of the Elliott family in Northumberland. She said that she keeps in touch with Thomas Elliott and she would write to him. I asked her to please include my name and email.

The next time I contacted Nancy she said that she had heard from Thomas Elliott and he thought that as Joseph had enlisted in the Australian army, the medal should stay in Australia. Nancy did provide me with an address for Thomas Elliott in Tweedmouth and I wrote to him, but have not had a reply at the time of writing this narrative. As Sarah had no direct descendants, the conundrum was where should this lone reminder of Joseph's courage and sacrifice find a home. It would appear that the decision would be mine and not one to be taken lightly.

When Joseph enlisted in 1916, he gave his address as Alexander Street, Kurri Kurri. Joseph's wife Jane and his daughter remained in Kurri Kurri until 1921. I was keen to find a photo of Joseph and finally, after a search of almost 12 months, was successful.

After numerous attempts to contact descendants of Joseph's siblings on various social media platforms to no avail, I researched his wife's family tree. Ellen, Jane's sister, married and had a son Joseph who then had a daughter Caroline. Joseph Elliott's wife Jane would be Caroline's great aunt. I contacted Caroline via an Ancestry® family tree and she searched her photo albums and found this photo, which she very kindly forwarded.



Caroline said that Joseph's name lives on through her son whose Christian names are Marc Joseph Elliott.

I believe that Joseph's British War Medal should find a home in Kurri Kurri. His name is on the Kurri Kurri War Memorial and it was where he chose to live and work when he came to Australia. I spoke to Yvonne Fletcher who was instrumental in creating and developing the National Schools' Program *Find Them, Remember Them – Creating Citizen Historians*, to garner her thoughts. Yvonne suggested Kurri Kurri High School as a possible custodian for Joseph's medal.

Year 9 students study WWI as part of their history curriculum, and researching Joseph Elliott would have significance for them. It is also interesting to note that Kurri Kurri High School was built on land known in Kurri Kurri as Hill 60. There is a Hill 60 Memorial in Rotary Park at Kurri Kurri, but it does not have Joseph's name on it. I contacted and met with Mr Eric Keegan, President of Kurri Kurri RSL sub-branch and showed him the British War Medal to confirm for him that Joseph was indeed a member of the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company. Eric said that he will ensure that Joseph's name will be added to the Hill 60 Memorial.

I contacted Kurri Kurri High School and, with the assistance of Meryl Swanson's Office (Federal Member for Paterson), received the news that the Principal, Mr Alan Hope, would consider it an honour to have Joseph's British War Medal kept at the school.

I received an email from Mrs Heather Sutherland, Kurri Kurri High School's Community Liaison Officer. I met with Heather and, together with her enthusiastic support, we have been able to design a display that includes an abridged story, a photo of Joseph, a photo of his headstone in Belgium, his British War Medal and a number of relevant items to be framed and hung in the foyer of the school. This memorial for Joseph Elliott was presented to the staff and students of Kurri Kurri High School at their ANZAC Day service in 2024.

Due to the generosity of spirit of the Principal of Kurri Kurri High School, Joseph will remain a loved and remembered member of the Kurri Kurri community now and well into the future, as pupils in the coming years learn of his life and the sacrifice he made for his adopted country.



Hill 60 today preserved in its war state – shells craters.