

Bridgetown Historical Society

Cemetery Walk April 23 2022

This is the story of 2 brothers, Lawrence and Augustus Farmer. They were born in Katanning and were living and working in Bridgetown when they enlisted in the Australian Imperial Forces for WW1. Augustus was employed as a timber worker and Lawrence a labourer.

Lawrence was 20 when he enlisted in Bridgetown on 10 March 1915. He was assigned to the 28th Battalion, 7th Brigade and his Service No. is 621. He saw action at Gallipoli and in January 1916 joined the BEF in Marseilles on 16 March 1916. He was killed in action at Pozieres on the Somme River 4-6 August 1916.

Augustus was 27 when he enlisted on 9 December 1915 and assigned to the 16th Infantry Battalion and his Service No. is 4808. He served with the 16th Battalion in France and in May 1918 he was awarded the Military Medal for "conspicuous bravery under fire". He was the first Aboriginal soldier to be receive this award. On 8 August 1918 he was killed in action at Mericourt on the Somme River during what was known as the Battle of Amiens.

Their names are inscribed on the Honour Roll in the gatehouse of the Bridgetown Memorial Park and the Somme Creek Memorial here in Bridgetown and of course on the Villers Bretonneux War Graves Memorial.

There is, however, more to this story of the Farmers and their connection with Bridgetown.

In 2008, a local Bridgetown girl was selected to go to France with the Premier's ANZAC Student Tour. The grade 6 and 7 classes of Bridgetown Primary School wrote letters to the families of local men who had been killed in action in France and a select few were chosen to be taken with the tour participant and left at the Villers Bretonneux Memorial. Sinead Jameson wrote to the family of Lawrence Farmer and she placed her letter in the Memorial.

In 2015 ECU mounted an exhibition using the stories of 13 Aboriginal soldiers who fought at Gallipoli and the Western Front. The exhibition featured a painting commissioned by Noongar artist Peter Farmer whose great-grandfather Kenneth Farmer and brother of Lawrence and Augustus also fought on the Western Front. There were 4 brothers from the Farmer family in Katanning who went to war. Only 2 returned.

In 2016 Lawrence and Augustus and 21 other young men from Bridgetown were remembered in the unveiling of the Somme Creek Memorial. The Memorial, on the corner of Barlee and Steere Streets near our Somme Creek consists of 2 freestanding granite blocks. One plaque lists the names of the men killed and the other provides an overview of the history of the Battle of the Somme.

The memorial was unveiled on July 23 2016 exactly 100 years after the Battle of the Somme. Among those present were four members of the Hayward family who were there to honour their 2 great-uncles, Lawrence and Augustus.

The 2 brothers that returned to Australia, Kenneth and Lewis encountered the problems that many Indigenous service men faced, that of gaining access to the local RSL club.