

## Book Review

***Rallying The Troops: a World War I Commemoration, by Ku-ring-gai Historical Society, Volume IV (Were YOU there then?), Sydney, 2018. ISBN: 978-0-9598673-6-7***

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**Publishers:** Ku-ring-gai Historical Society ([www.khs.org.au](http://www.khs.org.au))

*Were YOU there then?* is the fourth and final volume in an exhaustive research project which addresses service personnel and other citizens' experiences from the municipality of Ku-ring-gai, Sydney, during World War I. Its format and design mirror the first three volumes with chapters covering the Australian involvement in the 1918 battles on the Western Front and the Middle East and the ensuing 'peace' followed by biographical details of the men and women who enlisted from Ku-ring-gai. In physical design and logical presentation this four-volume series is a remarkable high-quality addition to the literature on World War I, both from a military history perspective but perhaps even more so, a sociological one.

Part of an ambitious design to cover an entire community's experience in a war that took over four years to be concluded, this book takes us much further than just the fighting. It also investigates what happened during the long transition to peace, the eventual return of the troops and the impact on the home front for both them and those back in Australia. It is indeed a poignant story. The warfighting section comprises a series of chapters grouped under the headings:

1. The final battles.
2. The Armistice.
3. A soldier's life.
4. Left behind.
5. The home front.
6. They're home.

The spring 1918 German offensives, known as Michael and George, came dangerously close to wresting control from the allies of the strategic hubs of Amiens and Hazebrouck in France. At the start, the Australians were not in the area but were moved rapidly into the battles where they were instrumental in the successful defence before the allied counter-offensives which continued unabated until the end of the war.

Following the heaviest casualties of the war in 1917 (Volume 3) the Australians were still in the Messines sector of Belgium, numbers severely depleted through high casualty rates and insufficient reinforcements. Back in France, all five divisions were used from March 1918 on, initially piecemeal, to block the Germans and then to attack. From 31 May, the Australian Corps came under the command of Lieutenant General Monash, with four of the five divisions operating together before being joined on 8 August by the 1<sup>st</sup> Division. During April-June, the Corps' divisions played a major role in the defence of Amiens, Hazebrouck

and Villers-Bretonneux. From July, the offensive included fighting advances to attack on a series of objectives that are now the stuff of legend including Hamel, Mont St Quentin, Péronne, St Quentin Canal, the Hindenburg Line and Montbrechain. The Corps fought almost continually from March to October when, depleted and exhausted, it went into reserve following the breach of the Hindenburg Line and mercifully remained so until the Armistice. This section presents a complex series of battles and many major achievements in a simple and easily-understandable way, something not easy to do. Like the rest of *Rallying The Troops*, the story is interwoven with reference to the Ku-ring-gai veterans' experiences and deeds, bringing a real-life dimension to the story.

The remaining sections address events during the Armistice and repatriation periods. The firing might have stopped but the need to keep troops in-theatre until the formal peace signing on 28 June 1919 is not usually covered elsewhere. Leave in Britain and the preparations for peace including education retraining and other issues of demobilisation receive the same treatment via letters and diary entries to support the illuminating story of what needed to happen - repatriating 165,000 Australians, something never before attempted on such a scale and which, in some cases, took up to a year.

Sections include the effects on the mothers and wives of the dead and wounded, and those unscathed physically but suffering psychologically. The role and fate of animals in war, internments of 'aliens' in Australia, soldier settlement efforts, local war effort fund raising and other support, and how Australia sought to cope with the many unemployed veterans now home, and worst of all, the large numbers of dreadfully wounded. Most of the information in these sections will be new to the reader. It illustrates the enormity of the war's effect on a total society, focussing on Ku-ring-gai citizen experiences in the telling of this story. The section on Lady Davidson Home, used as a repatriation facility from 1920 until privatised in 1997, reminded the reviewer of a harrowing experience he had in 1975 when as a young officer visiting injured soldiers from a modern unit, he met two World War I veterans in Concord Hospital, Sydney. These veterans, still suffering phosgene burns sustained in 1917, needed twice-daily immersion in soothing oil baths. Such was the suffering of so many, and for some for so long.

The biographical segment of the book contains 372 pages of all enlistments with the surnames starting with S to Y (no one with surnames X or Z enlisted). These rich data are supplemented with an Addendum of new personnel with surnames featuring the letters A to R identified after the publication of Volume 3 and added in this final volume.

The Appendices, as for the earlier volumes, provide excellent support material. Easily followed information is provided on military organisations, awards, references and an index.

Volume 4 completes a marvellous sociological achievement, blending rich personal stories into the historical narrative. The motivation of the team to produce this entire series of *Rallying The Troops* is remarkable and can in part be understood by a terrible legacy of World War I. A tragic consequence of the death of British Commonwealth service personnel was the receipt by the next of kin of a Memorial Plaque and Scroll. The former is a large

bronze medallion bearing the words: *'Let those who come after me see to it that his name not be forgotten'*. Britain's initial order for these in 1914, expecting a short war, was 50,000. A tragic consequence was the eventual manufacturing of millions, many of which were issued to Ku-ring-gai next of kin. That this philosophy became the key driver for the concerted effort in writing these volumes, is eminently understandable.

Throughout the project, additional veterans were identified as a result of ongoing research and from public feedback as each volume was published. Starting with 1,300 names the project culminated in 1,800 identified eligible veterans who joined the AIF, with more known to have enlisted in the British and French forces. Given that Ku-ring-gai had a population of 12,000 at the start of the war, this represents 15% enlistment. Of these, over 300 perished. 170 were decorated, including one Victoria Cross. Little wonder that the team to produce ***Rallying The Troops*** felt it necessary for the people of Ku-ring-gai in particular, and the rest of Australia, to be the beneficiaries of their devoted work a hundred years later.

There are many individual sub-stories. One is the tragedy of Private George Legge, believed to be the last Ku-ring-gai soldier to die in action on 4 October 1918, serving in 22 Battalion. This was the last Australian ground combat unit withdrawn from the front and placed into reserve near the French coast for a well-earned rest, the AIF taking no further part in the fighting. Another is the courage leading to the award of the Victoria Cross to Major Blair Anderson Wark VC, DSO, MID. The biographies alert us to numerous social consequences aside from the many acts of bravery, suffering, deaths and wounds: the large number of brothers, father-son, cousin connections; Spencer Brown (re-) enlisting at almost 59 years of age to resume a military career, was one of the oldest men to enlist in the AIF; the Windeyer family's extensive family service, itself already the subject of an entire publication; the five Woods brothers, two of whom had already served in the Boer War, with four serving in the AIF, all now commemorated in the one place.

And the dead, identified in the biography section, mostly as 'Killed in Action'. Some still have no known grave, although most bodies were eventually located. None was bought home, and many were to never be visited by anguished relatives. One was located and identified only recently at Fromelles over a hundred years later and re-interred at nearby Pheasant Wood. These, and many other stories, abound with personal photos of fine young men and women in civilian attire and/or in the famous baggy uniforms and slouch hats. It is truly compelling reading, remembering that all of these people lived in the one municipality prior to enlistment going on to serve in the Army, Navy and the Flying Corps, in nearly every unit of the AIF. Descendants of Ku-ring-gai's 1914-18 population today should be well proud of their ancestry, and any of them reading these volumes should be proud of the team who brought ***Rallying The Troops*** to reality.

There are many pleasing technical positives to observe with Volume 4 which contribute to the success that this final volume and its precedents enjoy. Again, the high-quality paper, binding and layout makes reading a pleasure. Large numbers of photographs from a wide range of private and official sources help convey the human drama. Crediting of photographs is consistently achieved and maps crystal clear, cutting out information not directly relevant

to the battle in question. Notable is the exacting effort to ‘get things right’ in all technical aspects of this masterpiece. The volume of specific information on individuals and what they had to say (write) in both the history and biographical sections is staggering; anyone who has researched one individual will understand that only too well. Here, we have the blending of military records with diary and letter extracts along with other personal data of personal lives. To do this for hundreds of subjects is simply remarkable, and to then present it in a common format that still results in unique stories is a great credit to the team responsible. Volume 4 concludes ***Rallying The Troops*** in the manner this colossal work started. All four volumes deserve a place on the shelf of every good library. I doubt that ***Rallying The Troops*** will be matched.

**Reviewer:** Lieutenant Colonel Russell Linwood, ASM (Retd)

The books can be purchased through the Ku-ring-gai Historical Society. For details see [www.khs.org.au](http://www.khs.org.au), or contact the Society on (02) 9499 4568 or PO Box 109, Gordon, NSW 2072.

Copies of all four volumes are available: Volume I at \$40, Volume II at \$35 or both Volumes I and II at \$70. Volume III at \$50 and Volume IV at \$35. Postage per volume within Australia is \$15.