

Jack's Journey

By Jenna Stacey

In the town of Nubeena on the Tasman Peninsula, lay the stories of the Stacey family. The names of the Stacey boys and their pictures are scattered on plaques and in the local RSL, but this small-town legacy comes with great sadness as these once well-known and respected men lost their lives as they fought for our country in World War 1 (WW1).

When starting to research my chosen soldier John Davis Stacey, known as Jack, little did I know I was discovering the story of something much bigger. Through this experience I have learnt about the journey of not just Jack but his other brothers who also served. Overall, I have followed the story of my five great, great uncles who fought for our country in WW1 and discovered the effect this had on them as individuals, as brothers and the rest of the family and the impact this had on the small Tassie community that they called home.

The Staceys grew up on a farm at Roaring Beach just west of Nubeena. Robert (Jim) and Henrietta Stacey (my great, great, great grandparents) had 14 children in 21 years, so they definitely had their hands full. Sadly, Henrietta passed away on the 12 August 1907, just after her fourteenth child Emily was born. Daughters Phyllis and Emily also passed away at a young age and father Jim was left to raise his remaining nine sons and three daughters on his own, while grappling with the pain of many losses.

In the same year Jim's role as a respected leader in the community was recognised when he became an inaugural member of the Tasman Municipal Council. The Stacey family was well known in their small community and people still recall the stories of their strength in character and physique, not just on the footy field but in life in general. Between walking the daily ten kilometres from Roaring Beach to school in Nubeena, then to footy training and back home again and helping out on the farm in between, they were nothing short of hard working and overall tough young men. Jim owned a large amount of farm land therefore after leaving school the majority of his sons worked as farmers, except for the two eldest, William and Walter who had left to seek work as bushmen in New Zealand.

When the war broke out in 1914 it was seen as a great honour and duty to serve your country, and although Jim was too old to volunteer himself, he was active in recruitment and encouraged the men in his community to enlist. Amongst his nine sons, five enlisted and went to war (the other four were either still too young or had illnesses that prevented them serving). For his sons and the rest of the community there was an expectation to go to war and I think there would have been much excitement and honour of the prospect of war amongst the Stacey family. They presumably felt like many other Australians that volunteering for war and serving their country was simply the moral and honourable thing to do. Growing up in a small town, the stigma associated with not going to war would have been immense and the boys must have felt a duty to go. There may have also been a sense of excitement at the thought of adventure and the whole idea of war that was presented to them.

Whereas in reality it was so different. The majority of Australian soldiers grew up knowing firsthand what hard work was and were seen as especially tough on the battlefield and I'm sure the Stacey boys were no exception. They were strong, healthy and in the officials' eyes, fit for war. Of course, as any father would, I can imagine Jim worried for his sons, but his pride would have overcome this sense of fear for the sacrifice his sons were making to their country.

Jack and his younger brother Robert first travelled several hours from Nubeena to Claremont on 12 February 1915 where they enlisted for WW1 together. At just 23 years old, they were both young and had their whole life ahead of them.

Jack was no taller than me and was missing a few front teeth but all in all he and Robert were in good health and were given the all clear from the reporting officers and doctors. These young men had their whole life ahead of them, yet it only took one piece of paper to be signed and with that one signature their lives were forever changed.

Jack and Robert were part of the 26th Australian Battalion which was made up of recruits from Tasmania and Queensland – based in Egnoggera, Queensland. The Tasmanian boys, including Jack and Robert, trained for several months at Claremont in Tasmania, before leaving Australia for Egypt as their unit embarked from Brisbane on board HMAT A60 *Aeneas* on 29 June 1915. Just leaving Tasmania for the first time would have been an amazing adventure for the Stacey boys let alone travelling overseas. Once arriving in Egypt, the 26th Battalion trained some more with the other Brigades before they were assigned to the 7th Brigade. They then left for Gallipoli, arriving on the 12 September 1915.

While at Gallipoli the 7th Brigade played purely a defensive role, but during this time Jack became ill and two months later was transferred to the 3rd Field Ambulance where he stayed and was treated before returning to his Unit five days later. Jack along with Robert continued to fight alongside their Battalion in Gallipoli for another two tedious months. They played a major role in defending their trenches and were even responsible for the defence of Courtney and Steeles Post and Russell's Top. After a total of four months of defence they were withdrawn and sent back to Egypt for a two month stop over before proceeding to Europe as part of the Second Australian Division. They arrived in France on 21 March 1916 where they served in the trenches on the Western Front. Here Jack fought for a month before his health started to deteriorate, most likely because of the horrendous trench and overall war conditions. Eventually, he had to be transferred and admitted to the 8th Casualty Clearing



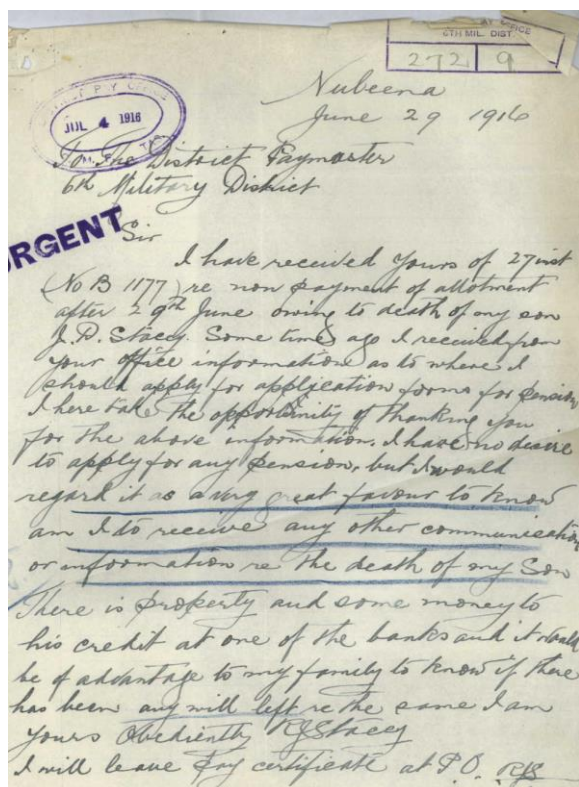
John and Robert Stacey training at Claremont

Station. Here he stayed for nine days but sadly his pneumonia got the best of him and on 28 of April 1916 at the age of 24 and 10 months, he passed away. Although Jack's story ends here the effect of war on my family continued through as each brother had his own story and each had a ripple effect into their own futures and to the rest of their family in the years to come. Therefore, the story continues...

Jack was gone and Robert was left to push on and continue fighting. It was at this time that Robert's mental health rapidly deteriorated and by the end of May 1916 he had to be admitted to the 26th General Hospital in France due to shell shock. In June his Battalion joined with the 28th Battalion and together on 6 June they performed the first trench raid undertaken by Australian troops on the Western Front. However, Roberts's mental battles continued and once again he had to seek medical help. He was admitted to the Northampton War Hospital in England with a reported case of severe shell shock. Several months later, he proceeded to join his unit overseas. The 26th and 28th Battalions continued to fight in most of the Australian battles on the Western Front such as The Battles of Broodseinde Ridge, Flers, Menin and Pozieres as well attacks such as the Beaurevoir Line, German Spring Offensive, Hindenburg Line and Peaceful Penetration. Unfortunately, in April 1917 Robert received a shell wound to his right shoulder and was hospitalised to the 3rd London General Hospital for about a month before again returning to his regiment. The 26th Battalion fought a long tedious battle and were away from home for four years and finally, Robert returned to Australia on 17 March, 1919.

Jack was buried at Buried Bailleul Communal Cemetery Extension (Nord), France. To some, Jack was just another number on a page, another letter that had to be delivered home, another man to bury and another grave stone to carve. Jack's death was never able to be commemorated with a funeral at home and he couldn't be buried alongside his mother and two little sisters at home. Instead, his death was one full of deep pain and sorrow for those who knew him, those who never got to say goodbye. Robert had to continue the fight without his brother by his side. Back at home the family beared the bad news through a single letter, as they continued to hold their breaths hoping that the other boys would return home safely.





His father, Jim, was left with very few reminders of Jack. There was a wallet, two notebooks and a leather belt. There was also meant to be some money, but this was never returned to his bank account. Even through the sadness and anger he must have felt Jim wrote back to the officers, with firmness yet such respect, asking for the money that was meant to come home to please be returned and for a photograph of Jack's grave site. There were numerous letters back and forth with months between each delivery. His persistence was admirable, but unfortunately the money was never found or returned. In his lifetime, Jack's father, like most Australian families, would never have had the money to travel to France to see his son. He only had a photograph of his son's grave and a few items to remember Jack by, which is heart breaking.

Jack's two eldest brothers, William and Walter, had moved to New Zealand in 1911 to seek work as bushmen, so when WW1 came around, they too enlisted together, but with the New Zealand Army. Some time after this however, Walter developed pneumonic fever which prevented him from serving in the war. So, William embarked alone at Wellington, New Zealand, on 26 April 1917, aboard HMNZT *Tofua* 83 with Auckland's Infantry Regiment 2nd Battalion. He fought in several battles on the Western Front including the Somme, Messines, Passchendaele and the Spring Offense which led to an advance in victory in 1918. Tragically, William was killed in action on 11 October, exactly one month before the Armistice was signed. He was buried in Romeries North Calais, France. He was so close to the war being over, so close to going home. In fact, amidst the Armistice being signed and the troops gradually being sent home, William's death notice was delayed and his father, who didn't know of his death, expected him to return to his brother Walter in New Zealand.



William and Thomas



William and Robert

Thomas Albert Stacey enlisted at age 22 on 15 March 1916 (just one month before Jack's death) and was part of the 40th Battalion. His unit embarked from Hobart on board the HMAT A35 Berrima on 1 July. At 21 years old, Arthur James Stacey was the last and youngest of the six brothers to enlist on 28 August, 1917 and fought with the 40th Battalion 9th Reinforcement. He embarked from Melbourne on board the HMAT A60 Aeneas on 30 October. The 40th Battalion was made up of all Tasmanians and spent most of its time fighting in the horrendous conditions in places such as Flanders, Somme Valley and the Western Front. Both men returned home, Thomas on 10 December, 1918 and Arthur on 25 September, 1919, but the traumatic life they had lived in those two years at war had changed them drastically.

I can only imagine for Walter not being able to go to war would have been devastating. Walter had to continue life in New Zealand on his own while he knew his mates and brothers were fighting and his close family were back in Australia. It must have been an incredibly isolating and tough time for Walter. In 1919 he married Evelyn May Edgar and together they had five children and eventually with his new family, Walter returned home to Tasmania to help his father work the family farm.

Robert, Thomas and Arthur all returned from battle and all would have suffered long lasting effects from the war, both physical and psychological. Each of the brothers married upon returning to Tasmania and between them had 16 children. I can only imagine the battle the boys had to continue to fight in their own minds after returning from the war, for the things they would have experienced and been exposed to would have been with them forever.

Back in Tasmania the Nubeena community were grieving for the loss of so many of their men. For many people their return was celebrated. For others it was a harsh reminder that their boys were never coming home. For the Staceys I'm sure there was a mix of happiness for their return but also sadness for the loss of Jack and the other men in their community - but definitely a sense of pride for all. Robert, Thomas and Arthur had all returned home and they presumed that William had also. It wasn't until several months after the soldiers had returned home and the community was trying to recover from the loss of so many men, that Jim as William's next of kin received the death notice of William Stacey who died in action. This must have been devastating for Jim who had presumed he had returned to New Zealand.

Beginning this journey, I didn't even know I had any family members who fought in WW1 let alone five of my great, great uncles. The war is in the past but has had such a big impact on all the lives of these men and have contributed to the way things are today. If Walter had

gone to war and lost his life a whole generation would have been lost, a generation that included my grandfather, my father and myself. I chose to research Jack as he missed the life that his brothers came home to live and in April this year, I had the privilege of going and visiting his grave. Before leaving for Europe my dad and I went to Nubeena and Roaring Beach. While there, we connected with the community and relatives and discovered bits of our family history scattered everywhere. This was when I properly realised that Jack's story doesn't just stop at Jack alone. It is a story of brotherhood, family and community connection that will forever hold a special place in our hearts.

WW1 didn't just stop when the Armistice was signed, families didn't just go back to normal. There were so many devastating effects, not just on those who fought in the battle, but also on the ones who loved them. The war took the lives of thousands of innocent men, men like Jack and William who were young and had their whole lives ahead of them. And sometimes we forget when looking at a number on a page or the countless names in a row on a plaque. We forget that behind each and every name and number is a man, a woman, a life and a story. And travelling to the Western Front and seeing the rows and rows of headstones, a tiny part of a much bigger loss, is a reminder of just how many individuals' lives were lost. Individuals whose stories have never and unfortunately will never be told. "We will remember them," those words have never felt so strong, for all those lives that were lost and for those who remain there.

And there I stood on the other side of the world, overwhelmed as I imagined what the life of so many soldiers would have been like there over 100 years ago. Being there to remember them all on behalf of Australia, I was filled with honour, love and sadness for the loss of those great men. And I promised to all those boys lying there that on behalf of Australia we pay our respects and promise to forever remember them all, the ones who fought for us.

As part of my pilgrimage I wrote Jack a letter reflecting on the life that he lived, the family that loved him and the legacy of he and his brother William that still lives on today. This is a snippet of my letter to Jack in which I said the goodbye that so many families never got to give and so many soldiers never received:

"So, Jack I am here to say goodbye,
From the father who had lost too many loved ones already.
The brothers who had to come home without you by their side.



Saltwater River Roll of Honour Board (now in the Nubeena RSL)

From the sisters, my age and the other children at home who anxiously awaited the return of their six big brothers.

From the mates who fought alongside you and those back at home.

The teachers, coaches and the Tasman community who had lost far too many of their great boys already.

From the woman who never got to be your wife.

And from a lost generation.

The sons, daughters, grandchildren and great grandchildren you never got to have.

And from your family today.

Standing here as your great, great, niece and as the first family member from Australia to visit you Jack brings me deep sadness, but it also brings me honour. So, from all those who ever had the privilege of knowing you Jack, I am here to say the goodbye you never truly got. Thank you for your sacrifice Jack, thank you for helping to bring our family history together.

I am so honoured to be your great, great, niece and am so glad I found you Jack. You are forever in our hearts and I promise we will always remember you.”

“They shall not grow old as we that are left grow old.
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.
And at the going down of the sun and in the morning,
we will remember them.

Lest we forget”



Romerics Communal Cemetery
Extension 11.A.6 France