

RBDM Family History Journal

World War One casualty records revealed

Story by Adrian Harrison

Few people realise that RBDM holds comprehensive death registrations for a large number of service men and women^[1] who enlisted in Queensland and who died while on active duty during both world wars. Only the registries in South Australia and Tasmania took the trouble to compile similar archives. In total RBDM holds close to 10,000 death registrations for World War One and a further 5,000 from World War Two.

[1] There are at least two nurses listed in the records as dying in the line of duty; Norma Mowbray from St George and Rosa O'Kane from Charters Towers.



Above: Some of the registers holding the 10,000 World War One death registrations in the RBDM archive. Unlike the standard registers, these are in alphabetical rather than date of event order.

The First World War registrations were compiled under the direction of George Porter, who became Registrar-General in October 1921. Porter was by all accounts a bit of a maverick who did not necessarily rely on legislation to back up his decisions, and he took it upon himself to register the deaths of all the men and women who had, in his words, 'given their lives for Queensland'.

Porter believed that the registration of the death, and so the ready availability of a death certificate, would provide bereaved families with some form of closure for their lost loved ones, who at best were buried on the other side of the world—the British Empire had a strict policy of not repatriating its war dead—and at worst, had no known grave at all. Copies of the completed death certificates would be made available to the relatives for two shillings.

Compiling and entering the records was a mammoth and complex task. The battalion in which a dead soldier was serving when they died was not necessarily an accurate reflection of where they had enlisted. Although at the outbreak of war battalions had been raised largely within individual states, as the war progressed and casualties grew, battalions were merged and re-organised and reinforcements were sent wherever they were needed.

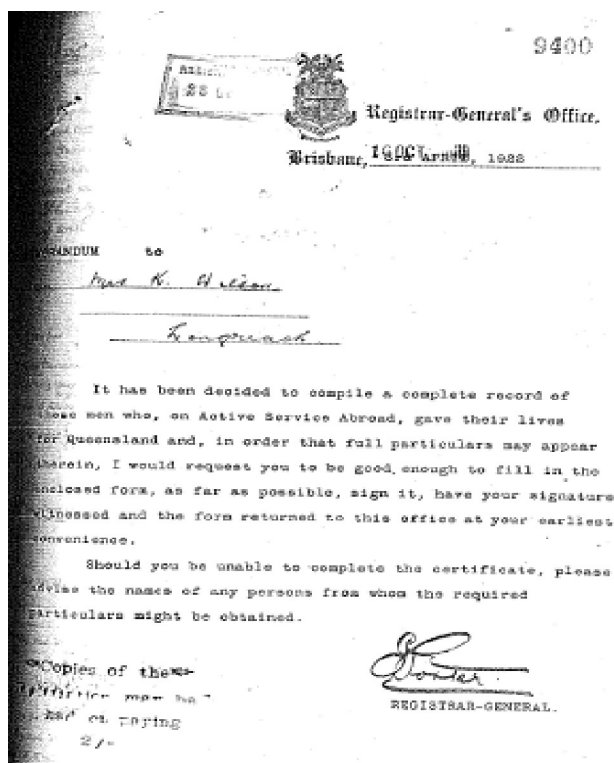
By the time a volunteer from Queensland died, they could well have been fighting in a unit raised anywhere in Australia. So not only was a list of dead service personnel needed—and Australia had suffered close to 62,000 killed and missing during the course of the war—this had to be cross checked against where the person had enlisted. There were nearly 58,000 enlistments registered in Queensland.

Once it was established that the dead soldier had indeed enlisted in Queensland, information

was taken from their service record and sent to the next of kin on a death registration form. This was accompanied by a letter from George Porter explaining the work the registry was undertaking.

The next of kin were asked to add further detail and sign to certify that the information was correct, and if they could not do so, forward it to someone who could. The certified details were then entered into the registers in alphabetical order. It was a process which could take years to complete as many Queensland volunteers had been born in another state and many in a different country altogether[2].

[2] Close to 20% of those who served in the AIF during World War One had been born in the United Kingdom



Left: George Porter's accompanying form letter sent to John Wilson's widow Kate, in Longreach, along with a death registration form. John Wilson was a railway worker originally from Rockhampton. He volunteered in September 1915 and was sent to the Western Front as reinforcement for the 26th AIF Battalion. He was killed in action on November 5 1916 during the assault on German trenches north of Gueudecourt. It was one of the last actions of the battle of the Somme which officially ended 13 days later on November 18.

This letter was sent to John Wilson's widow in April 1922 but the completed death registration wasn't received back at the registry until October, after being sent on to the soldier's bereaved father. John Wilson has no known grave and is remembered on the Australian War Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux.

The registers themselves were compiled between 1921 and 1924; separate registers were created specifically to record the war dead. As detailed in the first issue of our Family History Newsletter, these registrations were given the prefix letter 'F' in the index, indicating an AIF death from the First World War and an "S" indicating a World War Two death that may have occurred outside Australia; some of those registered had been repatriated to Australia and subsequently died of their wounds.

As a test to find out just how much information is contained in the World War One registrations, and how accurate they are, I looked at the entry for a Great War casualty who enlisted in Queensland that I knew a little bit about.

I lived for many years in South London and one day, while out running, I stumbled on a small Australian military cemetery in Earlsfield, near Wimbledon. I was fascinated, and after a little research discovered that the servicemen buried there had died in a war hospital—Wandsworth's 3rd London General Hospital—which had been housed for a number of years in the Royal Victoria Patriotic Asylum, a nearby school for orphan girls. During the war the hospital—housed in the school buildings and in tents which sprawled across the grounds—tended to thousands of allied wounded from Gallipoli and the Western Front[3]. As Earlsfield was the nearest municipal cemetery, more than 250 soldiers of the Great War had been buried there, 33 of them Australians.

One of the Australian casualties turned out to be a relative of my wife and I was able to piece together his story from various war records—[particularly his service record which can be viewed online at the National Archives of Australia in Canberra](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.au/)—and learned the journey an Irish émigré took to end up in a small Australian war cemetery in South London.

Terence Keating was the cousin of my wife's Irish grandfather. In 1914—just a few months before the outbreak of the First World War—they emigrated together from their home in County Cavan to Brisbane. In 1915 Terence joined the AIF, probably in the hope of getting a free trip back to Ireland rather than for any feeling of patriotic duty; as a Catholic from Southern Ireland he wasn't that well disposed to the British Empire. Unfortunately during August 1916, rather than wandering down Farnham Street in Cavan, he found himself on the Western Front in the mud and slaughter of the Battle of The Somme.

[3] The Australian War Memorial has a large canvas by war artist George Coats entitled First Australian wounded at Gallipoli arriving at Wandsworth Hospital, London



Left: Looking from Australian trenches across the desolation of no-man's-land toward Mouquet Farm August 1916. The 'farm' is the small pile of rubble on the horizon to the left of centre of the picture.

Picture from the Australian War Memorial Collection

He had been sent as a reinforcement to the Australian 52nd Infantry Battalion which on September 3 1916 made the last of a series of unsuccessful attacks against the German strongpoint at Mouquet Farm, just north of Pozières. The Australians had been trying to take the farm since August 8 and by September the farm had been reduced to little more than a pile of bricks and splintered wood; however, the tenacious German defenders continued to put up fierce resistance from the farm's cellar and a labyrinth of trenches and tunnels they had dug underneath the rubble.

Sometime during the September 3 assault, Terence Keating suffered multiple bullet wounds to both legs, probably from the sweep of a German machine gun[4]. Although his wounds weren't immediately life threatening he was left stranded in the mud of no-mans-land, in agony and unable to walk with his right knee shattered. Unknown to Terence, who was probably just happy to be alive, the bullets had forced pieces of fetid uniform deep into his wounds. Stretcher bearers recovered him after the battle and carried him to a field hospital where doctors cleaned his wounds as best they could and patched him up with bandages and dressings.

[4] The series of attacks mounted between 8 August and 3 September 1916 against Mouquet Farm resulted in over 11,000 Australian's being killed or wounded. All the attacks were unsuccessful.



Left: Allied soldiers struggle through the mud of no-mans-land with a badly wounded stretcher case. This picture can be dated as after 1916 as the troops were only issued with steel helmets at the start of the battle of the Somme after so many men had suffered head injuries from shell splinters and shrapnel.

Picture from the Imperial War Museum Collection

Needing more intensive treatment on his smashed knee he was evacuated back to England, and although it was only a relatively short journey, by the time he reached hospital in London he was already seriously ill with blood poisoning. Just seven days after being shot he died of septicemia and was buried in Earlsfield cemetery.

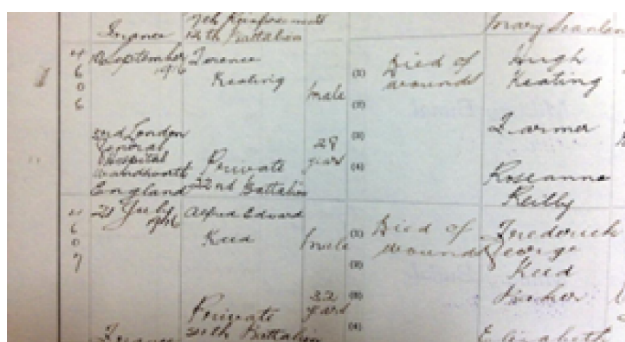


Picture from the Australian War Memorial Collection

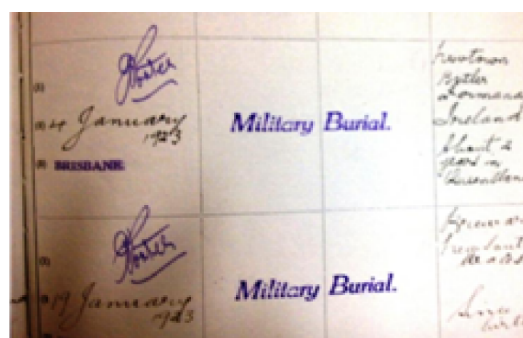
Left: Women laying flowers on Australian graves in Earlsfield cemetery during the Great War. The woman on the left is standing beside Terence Keating's grave **Right:** Terence Keating's grave as it looks today, after a fresh fall of snow.



I was surprised just how accurate and detailed Terence Keating's RBDM record actually is. It is largely complete, the only information missing from the registration are the burial details which just state 'Military Funeral'; for war records, burial information—or for those missing in battle the memorial they are remembered on—can easily be found online from the [Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#) or the soldier's service record.



Above: Terence Keating's entry in the RBDM death register. The registration shows he died of wounds, 3rd London General Hospital, Wandsworth. His service records, which can be viewed online at the National Archives of Australia, show he died of septicemia.



Above: The record even states how long he had lived in Queensland 'about two years'. As the registrar was recording so many deaths, stamps were made up for Registrar-General George Porter's signature, where the death was registered and the burial details.

Thanks to the meticulous research of Registrar-General George Porter and his staff, Terence Keating now has a death certificate in England, where he died, and Queensland where he enlisted.

You can order any of RBDM's World War One and World War Two certificates online through the [search index](#). The records are currently being digitised and we are hoping to release scans of the AIF Register pages during 2014 as part of the commemorations to mark the start of the First World War.

