

RBDM Family History Journal

The trees on ANZAC Avenue

Remembering Queensland's first Great War casualty

If you have to travel from Brisbane to Redcliffe, take State Route 71—ANZAC Avenue as it's better known—rather than the highway and look at the trees that line the road. They stand as a living memorial to the thousands of Queenslanders who gave their lives in the First World War, and one is very special, planted in remembrance of Queensland's first Great War casualty.

In the period after the First World War a grief stricken country erected thousands of memorials to the fallen. These were places for people to mourn loved ones who at best were buried on the other side of the world and at worst had no known grave at all. Most were sombre sculptures, diggers in slouch hats with their heads bowed; however, some were more utilitarian—halls, swimming pools, hospitals and roads—their construction providing much needed work for the unemployed soldiers who had returned. One of the most poignant was ANZAC Memorial Avenue, the 18 kilometre road that connects Petrie in North Brisbane to Redcliffe on Moreton Bay. Built by ex-servicemen, the road was lined with 1700 trees funded by public donations at a cost of £1/1s (just over \$60 in today's money) per tree, and each could be dedicated to a fallen digger.






Left: The original sign at the beginning of ANZAC Memorial Avenue, the road that connects Petrie in North Brisbane to Redcliffe on Moreton Bay. At the bottom it says 'In honour of Queensland's fallen soldiers, please help to protect the trees.'

Picture courtesy of the North Pine Historical Society MBRC Library Service P1276

One donor was Mary Uhlmann who paid for trees to be planted in memory of her three half-brothers killed during the war; Ernest, Walter and Frederick Blake from Norman Park in Brisbane's south. Walter and Frederick were both killed in 1915 on Gallipoli. Walter was shot in the face during the landing at ANZAC Cove on April 25, his unit—the 9th Battalion from Queensland—were the first to wade ashore at 4.30am. He recovered only to be shot again, this time in the back, at the start of the August offensive to break out of the ANZAC beachhead. Walter again recovered but was recorded as being killed in action on 2 November 1915. The day after Walter was wounded for the second time, 8 August 1915, his brother Fred Blake was killed on the slopes of Gaba Tepe during an unsuccessful and costly* attempt to take the high peak that loomed over the ANZAC beachhead.

Their other brother Ernest 'Ernie' Blake was even more unlucky; he earned the unenviable title of being Queensland's first Great War casualty. Ernie had joined the Royal Australian Navy (RAN) in February 1913 at the age of 21. Soon after finishing his training he was sent to England to join the crew of the *AE1*, Australia's first submarine. The *AE1*, with her sister boat the *AE2*—in the navy submarines are termed boats not ships—were being built for the Commonwealth Government by the Royal Navy at a cost of £105,000 each.

*The attack up the steep slope of Gaba Tepe cost 765 Australian casualties, with the 15th battalion in which Fred Blake was serving when he died reduced to just 30 percent of its normal strength in the attack.

1922 F729	Frederick Alfred Herbert	Blake	Edward Henry Blake	Mary Nichols ** late Stratford	Order 
1922 F729	Ernest Robert	Blake	Edward Henry Blake	Mary Nichols ** late Stratford	Order 
1922 F735	Walter Henry	Blake	Edward Henry Blake	Mary Nichols ** late Stratford	Order 

Above: The death index registrations for the three Blake brothers killed during the Great War. Their step sister, Mary Uhlmann, who had them commemorated with trees along ANZAC Memorial Avenue, was Mary Nichols daughter from her first marriage to Charles Stratford. Note the registration code 'F' denoting an AIF death from the First World War. [Find out more about RBDM's World War One casualty records.](#)

Based on an existing design of British E-class submarines, the *AE1* and *AE2* were small and technologically crude by contemporary standards as, unlike Germany, Britain still concentrated on developing the might of its surface fleet.

Ernie joined the boat when it was commissioned into the RAN on 28 February 1914 and was a member of the Anglo-Australasian crew—made up of 14 Australians, one New Zealander and 20 British submariners—who sailed in the *AE1* on an epic 20,000 kilometre maiden voyage from Portsmouth in the UK to Sydney. The two submarines were greeted with great excitement when they sailed into Sydney Harbour on 24 May 1914; however, while bringing the *AE1* and *AE2* half way round the world was hailed as a great feat of seamanship, both submarines broke down on the voyage and had to be towed for long stretches of the journey. It was possibly a portent of future tragedy.

Ernest is listed in the crew as a stoker although on a submarine this is a misnomer. While most ships in 1914 were still steam driven, and incredibly, there were steam driven submarines used during the First World War*, the *AE1* was powered by diesel engines on the surface and electric motors powered by batteries when submerged. However, although they weren't shoveling coal, the stoker still toiled away in the boat's cramped and sweltering engine room, the air rank with diesel fumes or toxic gas if sea water seeped into the battery compartment.

Following the outbreak of the First World War in August 1914, the *AE1* and *AE2* were dispatched from Sydney to German New Guinea as part of a combined Australian naval and military expeditionary force tasked with capturing the enemy colony. The troops landed at Rabaul on 11 September to be confronted by a small garrison of German and Melanesian troops. The defenders put up a brief yet fierce resistance, killing six Australians—Australia's first casualties of the war—before surrendering*.

On 14 September, a day after the official German surrender, the *AE1* left Rabaul harbor accompanied by the destroyer *HMAS Parramatta* to patrol Cape Gazelle to the south. At 3.20 in the afternoon *Parramatta* lost sight of the *AE1* in the haze and the boat was never seen again. Despite numerous searches no trace of the submarine was ever found and she was listed as lost with all hands. An investigation surmised that it had sunk during a practice dive either due to technical difficulties or from hitting one of the

many uncharted reefs that dotted the area. The disappearance was Australia's first major loss of World War I, earning poor Ernie the unenviable title of Queensland's first Great War casualty*. He was just 22 years old.

*During the First World War the British had a fleet of 17 large K-Class submarines which were powered by steam turbines when they were on the surface.

*Although there were comparatively few casualties, the battle for New Guinea was historically significant as Australia's first battle as a sovereign nation.

*There is another Queenslander listed as part of the AE1's crew, John Moloney, a stoker like Ernie Blake. The naval record records John Moloney as born on 25 January 1889 in Capalaba, south-east of Brisbane; however, RBDM has no birth record for anyone with this or a similar name born within 10 years of 1889. As the record states he enlisted in Victoria, RBDM do not hold a death certificate for him.



Left: One of the last pictures of the AE1 taken on 9 September 1915—five days before the boat disappeared—from the bridge of the cruiser HMAS Encounter. The vessels rendezvoused off Rossell Island to exchange mail before proceeding north to Rabaul. It's evident just how small the boat was, just 55 metres long and less than 7 metres wide, yet 35 men were packed inside alongside the engines, electric motors, batteries and torpedos.

Australian War Memorial Image A02604

The AE1's sister sub the AE2 went on to achieve legendary fame for its operations in the Dardanelles at the start of the Gallipoli campaign in which Ernie's two brothers were killed. On the night of the landings AE2 became the first submarine to break through the Turkish defenses protecting the Narrows and reach the Sea of Marmara, torpedoing a Turkish gunboat along the way. While AE2 was picking its way through the minefields, just a few miles over the peninsula at ANZAC Cove the landings were going badly and many in the commanders wanted to abandon the bridgehead. News of the AE2's exploits was used by British General Sir Ian Hamilton to buoy his fatigued troops, issuing the following order:

'the Australian submarine has got up through the Narrows and has torpedoed a gun boat ... you have got through the difficult business [landing on the beaches], now you have only to dig, dig, dig, until you are safe'.

Purportedly, it is from this order that Australian troops gained the nickname diggers, although other theories to its origin abound.

The AE2 remained at large in the Sea of Marmara for five more days disrupting Turkish shipping and preventing reinforcements reaching the Gallipoli peninsula before sustaining irreparable damage while under heavy fire. The submarine was scuttled and the crew surrendered. The wreck of the AE2 was located in June 1998; however, despite many searches—the last by an RAN expedition in 2007—the wreck of the AE1 has never been found.

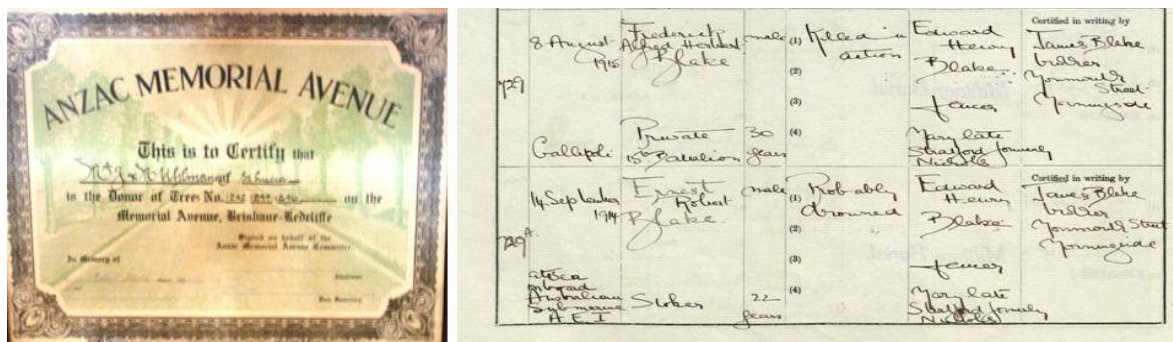
Ernest Robert Blake* is remembered on the Plymouth Naval Memorial in the UK which commemorates all sailors from Britain and the Empire killed in World War One and who have who had no known grave. Memorials to the 35 men who perished in the AE1 have also been unveiled in Barrow-in-Furness in the north of England, where the submarine was built, and Sydney's Garden Island naval base.

Like Ernie, his older brother Fred also has no known grave and is remembered on panel

45 of the Lone Pine Memorial on Gallipoli*, while Walter is buried in Shell Green Cemetery, just a few hundred metres from Lone Pine; the family were sent a photograph of his grave, while his meagre possessions—which comprised a chocolate tin, some postcards, coins, letters and a leaf—were sent to his girlfriend in Bowen. All three brothers are remembered on the Honour Role at Morningside Methodist Church.

*Some lists of AE1's crew show his name as Ernest Fleming Blake; however, his RBDM birth and death certificates show his name as Ernest Robert Blake.

*The Lone Pine memorial carries the names of 4900 ANZAC troops who were killed on Gallipoli and have no known grave. More than half the allied graves on Gallipoli are unknown and more remains are discovered every year, nearly 100 years after the battle.



Left: The certificate sent to the Blake Brother's half sister Mary Uhlmann in recognition of her donation of three trees on ANZAC Memorial Avenue. The certificate is now held by North Pine RSL Sub-Branch at Kallangur. **Right:** The death register entries for Ernie Blake and his brother Fred. The record mentions Ernie was 'probably drowned' 'at sea aboard the Submarine AE1'.

The fact that two of the brother's had no known grave while the other was 15,000 kilometres away in a remote and then inaccessible part of Turkey, motivated their half sister, Mary Uhlmann, to buy trees on ANZAC Avenue to remember them—the living trees a more appropriate memorial than lifeless names carved in stone.

It's fitting that as part of the commemoration of the centenary of the ANZAC landings work is underway to re-plant trees and update memorials along Brisbane's Anzac Avenue in preparation for the road's re-dedication next year. The sacrifice of the Blake brothers, and the thousands of others like them, should never be forgotten.

[Find out more about The Anzac Memorial Avenue Centenary Project.](#)

[Find out more about the North Pine Historical Society who provided invaluable help in the preparation of this article.](#)

[Find out about the State Archives upcoming seminars about researching First World War records.](#)

Great state. Great opportunity.

