ON THE HOME FRONT

ESSENDON REMEMBERS WORLD WAR I

World War I became established as Australia’s rite of passage. The blossoming of Australia as a nation germinated through its experience on the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East. The records of official war correspondents, battle illustrators and consular archives have allowed journalists, politicians and academics to extensively research this dark episode of human history.

The stories of the men from Essendon who volunteered to fight overseas is already well documented. This display tells of the impact of the war on the local community of Essendon and reveals some little-known consequences that changed our wider society.
Today, defence is the domain of the Federal Government, but during World War I councils such as Essendon City Council took an active role in supporting their local volunteers known as the ‘Essendon Boys’.

The Council organised a farewell for troops setting off for the war in September 1914. Many local businesses donated to the dinner and to the soldiers. Soldiers were presented with tins of tobacco and pipes and non-smokers were given pocketbooks or pouches.

Council coordinated numerous activities to raise funds for soldiers from the area including concerts, flag days and military fêtes in Queens Park. Council also established the Patriotic Fund, to which Council employees made donations.

Council regularly discussed the war at its meetings and flew the Essendon Town Hall flag at half-mast when details of the dead and wounded soldiers from the area were released.

In 1918 Council helped to organise a grand concert to aid disabled soldiers and sailors. It was held at the Essendon Town Hall under the patronage and in the presence of Dame Nellie Melba.
Australia had compulsory military training for men from 1911, however overseas conscription was not permitted. This became challenging as the war continued with an insufficient number of men enlisting. In 1916 the Labor Prime Minister, William 'Billy' Hughes, called a referendum to make overseas service compulsory.

The results from the referendum in the seat of Maribyrnong were:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Suburb</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ascot Vale</td>
<td>3,312</td>
<td>2,294</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essendon</td>
<td>2,036</td>
<td>1,181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moonee Ponds</td>
<td>4,166</td>
<td>3,048</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>18,983</strong></td>
<td><strong>15,668</strong></td>
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*Inclusive of Coburg, Broadmeadows, Footscray North, Hotham and Newmarket, which were part of the seat of Maribyrnong but not shown in the table.

Compulsory overseas service was narrowly defeated across Australia, which split the Labor Party.

The battle over conscription was very bitter. Those in favour of conscription included the Commonwealth Liberal Party, the Protestant churches and the Australian Women's National League.

Those opposed included most trade unions, the Women's Peace Army, the Catholic Archbishop of Melbourne Daniel Mannix and many ALP parliamentarians including Maurice Blackburn, MLA for Essendon.

Prime Minister Hughes was sacked from the party over the issue, so instead formed the Nationalist Party. Maurice Blackburn was defeated by the Nationalist Party candidate, Thomas Ryan, in the ensuing state election of May 1917. Ryan enlisted for overseas service in August 1918.

Hughes held another referendum in 1917, which was defeated by a larger margin than the one in 1916.
WAR AND PEACE

Australia’s involvement in World War I created discord in the community, with views of opposition and support vigorously expressed publicly by both sides.

The conservative Australian National Women’s League (ANWL) worked tirelessly supporting the war effort, encouraging young Australians to enlist through the activities of its many Australia-wide branches including in Moonee Ponds and Essendon.

Amongst the strong vocal members were Mrs Mott, a founding member of the ANWL whose husband was editor of the Essendon Gazette, Keilor, Bulla and Broadmeadows Reporter (Essendon Gazette), and Mrs Thomson, wife of an Essendon Councillor. The league banded itself by making items needed by soldiers. The Essendon Gazette reported at their 1917 AGM, “…the majority knitted steadily throughout the meeting…”

Opposing the war was the Women’s Peace Army (WPA) which was led by the well-seasoned women’s rights campaigner, Vida Goldstein. Another WPA member was the famous and fierce political activist Adela Pankhurst, daughter of the leader of the English suffragette movement, Emily Pankhurst.

Adela was sentenced to jail in 1917 for leading a demonstration against high food prices at a time when public gatherings were banned. She was released on the condition that she would not protest against the war, which she quickly contravened and was re-incarcerated in October until 1918.

This was despite a petition signed by thousands of supporters. It is rumoured that she spoke at a peace gathering in Essendon but newspapers of the day rarely reported peace activities.

There were a range of conscientious objectors who refused to enlist because of faith, ideology or politics, but they had to take their case for exemption to court, with the majority of cases rejected.
Life changed drastically at the home front with so many men away and so much energy and resources being used in supporting the war effort. Many groups were formed or changed to have a more military focus. For example, the scouts sought to teach young men military-like field-craft skills. First aid and nursing classes became popular, with nearly 80 enrolling for classes at a St John’s Ambulance Brigade meeting at the Essendon Town Hall 10 days after war was declared.

The 1st Moonee Ponds Bugle Band and the Ascot Vale Bugle Band were also formed and were successful in local and state competitions. Junior Cadet Corps were also very popular at many schools including Essendon High School. Members of the Essendon and Flemington Rifle Club volunteered to train new recruits in gun handling at Williamstown Rifle Range and thousands of horses were trained in Flemington for service in the Light Horse Brigade.

Women’s employment rates increased as women filled some occupations previously undertaken by men. Most noticeably locally was the large number of women employed at the munitions factory in Maribyrnong.

Wartime restrictions were imposed across everyday life, including the use of tokens for food, petrol and clothing, with many of the country’s resources now being diverted to the war effort. Hotels were restricted to close at 6pm instead of 11pm, which gave rise to the phrase ‘the six o’clock swell’, a Victorian expression used to describe the rush to buy drinks at the bar before the enforced 6pm closing.

The Temperance Movement, whose members strongly opposed the sale of alcohol, campaigned vigorously for shorter opening hours on the premise that those at home should not be enjoying themselves while their compatriots were fighting in the war overseas. This change was supposed to only last for the duration of the war but was made permanent in 1919 and enforced until 1966.

Another notable change with long-lasting implications on society was the necessity for women to join the paid workforce.
The Victorian branch of the British Red Cross was established in August 1914. It grew rapidly, having 800 branches including Essendon and Ascot Vale.

Mayorress Mrs Goldsworthy held a public meeting in December 1914 to set up the local branch, which was strongly supported by the community. A patriotic concert was held to support the cause in January 1915 by the North Melbourne Electric Tramway and Lighting Co. and was attended by 10,000 people.

By February 1915, 758 pounds had been raised to purchase a 550 pound ambulance from Dalgety and Co. The vehicle was displayed at Essendon Town Hall on 17 March before being presented to the British Red Cross the next day.

Many local churches supported the British Red Cross effort by establishing Ladies’ Guilds, which actively knitted and sewed items to be sent to the front.

Each week the Essendon Gazette listed dozens of fundraising teas, fêtes, musical evenings and other events, as well as donations of socks, underpants, shirts, hot water bottle covers and more.

The Red Cross made rolls of surgical bandages, sent care packages to troops overseas and created a national scheme for voluntary aids by recruiting nursing orderlies to work as support staff, in addition to caring for sick and wounded soldiers. The Young Men’s Christian Association was also active in supporting soldiers at the front, setting up a fund to build huts in France and at other battlefields where soldiers could rest and be provided with small comforts like letter-writing paper.
World War I officially ended on Monday, 11 November 1918 but its impacts were both immediate and long lasting.

Despite the homecoming parades and celebrations, returning soldiers exacerbated the spread of the Spanish Flu, which resulted in 4,000 Victorian contracting the disease. Public gatherings were banned and by January 1919 theatres, libraries and even some churches closed in an attempt to curtail the spread of infection. Many people wore white face masks in public and some even sterilised money. Essendon district doctors inoculated as many as 800 people per day.

In 1919, Essendon High School in Buckley Street became an emergency hospital to manage the disease locally and quickly. It was converted to a number of wards accommodating over 100 patients. The fibro-cement shed located on the Aberdeen Street corner became the mortuary. The students were re-located to the newly built Moonee Ponds Central School and were allowed back in term three of 1919.

Many of the returning soldiers nursed horrific physical and psychological injuries. A number of reparation hospitals and rehabilitation nursing homes were established to provide ongoing after-care. Many soldiers remained in care for the rest of their lives. The British Red Cross established the Janefield Sanatorium Training Farm for tuberculosis patients. The Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia (later known as the RSL) and Legacy were established to provide support to ex-servicemen and their families.

Women joined the paid workforce and were able to demonstrate that they could make a valuable contribution to the economy, as a consequence of the depleted male population. The right to allow women to stand for Victorian Parliament had been discussed on and off since they were given the right to vote in 1909, but it was their effort during the war that became such a strong factor in allowing the legislation to pass in 1923.

The parliamentary debate, reported in The Age on Friday, 8 September 1922 noted: “during the war women carried on the work of the world in such a way as finally to dispose of the tradition that the limits of their physical and mental capacity were the kitchen, and the drawing room.”
The majority of the servicemen and nurses who left for overseas service during World War I had rarely travelled beyond their own cities or rural towns and fewer still had travelled to other parts of Australia.

Duty-bound soldiers could hardly imagine the hardship, trauma and terror they would experience but the idea of overseas travel and the experience of the exotic was appealing and inviting. Many Australian soldiers and nurses were sent to base camps in Cairo and Palestine before being sent into battle, where they were able to purchase small mementoes of their travels and experience new cultures and diverse traditions. The war officially ended in November 1918 but many soldiers were not repatriated until 1919 and 1920, providing an opportunity for some to travel as tourists.

Some of those who returned home, chose to come back with cultural souvenirs while others chose to come back with mementoes of battles and reminiscences of the people they had met or the relationships they had made. All returned home with memories of the mateships forged and of the friends left behind.
The deep loss of those whose lives were sacrificed in World War I was felt by the entire community with many Avenues of Honour, Honour Rolls and Memorials erected across the country. Memorial and remembrance services became a tradition.

The Essendon Returned Services League (RSL) held its first Anzac Day service in Queens Park in April 1921. The local paper reported that "many returned men and several nurses were present including the city’s councillors. Prayers, hymns and two short scriptures formed the service. The 58th Infantry Band played the Dead March and the Moonee Ponds Bugle Band played the Last Post."

The Argus reported that 2,000 people attended the 1930 service to observe an air force plane drop a wreath near the monument. The Essendon RSL for many years had a site in Holmes Road and a memorial still exists there.

The Kelor East RSL was established in 1953 and is now located on Hoffmans Road where Anzac Day and Remembrance Day services are conducted. The Flemington Kensington RSL was established in 1931 and also observes an ANZAC Day service.

The first war memorial dedicated to the 30 officers and 585 non-commissioned officers from the City of Essendon area, who were killed in France, was unveiled in October 1933 by Major-General Sir Thomas Blamey at the 58th battalion headquarters in Pascoe Vale Road.
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The Annals of Essendon: vol.1 1850s to 1924 – R.W. Chalmers

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