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Anzac Sons by Allison Marlow Paterson

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Asking [Allison Marlow Paterson](#) – 10 Questions and Answers from the author of [Anzac Sons](#)

“Jim Marlow had six brothers, one died in infancy; the other five served on the bloody battlefields of the Western Front... Anzac Sons is the Marlow families story, but symbolic of so many other, a story of a family torn apart by the tragedy of the Great War. And of communities that would not recover from the loss of so many of their young men.

In 1924, Jim took the long sea voyage to walk in the footsteps of his brothers, five courageous men who went to war. Eighty-seven years later, in 2011, I journey back to France and Belgium with my father and my husband. It is a pilgrimage which is at times overwhelming. There are the green fields upon which thousands and thousands of men died. There are the relics of war stacked in the yards of the local farmer: shells, wire and chunks of broken metal. There are the hundreds of graveyards that scar the verdant fields. There are the imposing memorials with thousands of names, the missing, lost to the fields of Flanders and the hell of the Somme valley.

“We are here to find the graves of my great-uncles who gallantly gave up their lives in the shocking carnage of 1914-1918. This is their story...” – Allison Marlow Patterson

Point of Interest - The Cover Photo – Is that Allan Marlow?

A photo taken by either official war photographers, Frank Hurley or Hubert Wilkins, of Australians resting in this railway cutting, is one that we have explored the possibility that my Great Uncle Allan may have been one of these men.

Austin Garnet Henderson is one of two men watching the photographer. The exhausted soldiers rest amongst the dead. Austin was a signaller with the 38th Battalion. He was originally a member of D Company along with Percy, Allan, Charlie and Albert. He had travelled with Allan and Percy aboard the Runic. He had been shot at Messines but returned a few weeks later. By late October he was attached to the postal service of the 10th Brigade. He returned to Australia upon the *Rio Padro* in June 1919.¹

Though we cannot be sure, my father has often looked at the face of the other man and wonders if the haunted soldier is Allan Marlow, it could well be. The wonderful team of the Photographs Section of the Australian War Memorial have explored the possibility. While there is a definite likeness, there are no insignia or other identifiers that can confirm that the exhausted man is Allan.

1. Can you explain what your book is about?

It is a story of five brothers who served Australia in the First World War and the impact it had on their family and the small community of Mologa, Victoria, from where they came. It is told in the soldier’s own words as I use the collection of over 500 letters which they sent home, along with some letters sent to them from Australia. It is unique as four of the brothers served in the same company of the 38th Battalion and three of them never came home. It is also about their mates and neighbours who served with them. The letters are combined with my research and my observations during the time I spent on the Western Front. Ultimately it is a story of mateship, bravery and sacrifice; it is a heartbreaking account of a family torn apart by war and a mother who never recovered from the tragedy. It is about ordinary people who showed great courage and who suffered immensely in the hope they would preserve a way of life.

¹ NAA:B2455, HENDERSON, AUSTIN GARNET

More information, review copies ... Sharon Evans | 0410 332 789 or 029918 20168 | sharon@bigskypublishing.com.au

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2. What inspired you to write the book?

Primarily, I undertook the writing of this story to honour my family. I have a conviction that their story needs to be shared with others. I have a sense of empathy with my great-grandmother, who I never met but to whom I feel a sense of duty. The book is my undertaking that the sacrifice that our family made will never be forgotten.

3. Where were the letters found and I believe there is an interesting story about their recovery?

The letters were found in the crumbling family home at Mologa which the boy's parents had built in 1912. My uncle Jim had lived there all of his life and eventually the property was sold to my father. At this point my uncle left the home to live in nearby Pyramid Hill. He left everything behind, furniture, photos, food. It was a home frozen in time. As a child I recall there were rooms in which I refused to enter. Like most young children my imagination had few boundaries and I was convinced there were ghosts, there was a sense of emptiness and sadness, it was cold. It is in this house where this story begins.

Over 500 letters and postcards along with mementoes and photos of the Great War were uncovered in an old wardrobe, cupboards and trunks that Jim had left behind. They were once close to being destroyed. A group of thieves, who were scavenging antique furniture from abandoned homes across central Victoria, were interrupted by my father arriving minutes before their attempt to burn the timber home to cover all traces of their activities. My father arrived late one afternoon to the smell of cigarette smoke and old newspapers piled high in the centre of the living room, they were ready to ignite. The thieves escaped. I often wonder if my imaginary ghosts had anything to do with saving the home and the letters.

4. Did you have the opportunity to talk with WWI diggers?

I met some marvellous men. There was Jack Lockett who became Australia's oldest man at 111, I met him when he was in his nineties. He was living at home by himself and still drove his car. He was charming and so helpful; he spoke very fondly of the Marlow's. He told me the secret to a long life was to never worry. I guess when you have spent a night trapped in No-Man's Land hiding in shell holes while dodging searchlights, you could come to accept that in civilian life there are probably not so many things that should spend time worrying about. There was Bert Wishart, the Light Horseman who served at Gallipoli and the Middle East. Also Colonel Jack Swatton who drove horse teams through Hell-Fire Corner at the entrance to Ypres. He told me he never came back with the same number of horses he had left with. In later years he led the 38th Battalion. It was wonderful to have the chance to meet them and spend even just a few hours with them, it was an honour.

5. What are the main themes in the story; is there a message?

I explore the tragedy of war and focus on ordinary men who through a sense of duty and loyalty became heroes defined by their courage and the enormous sacrifices they made. The impact of war upon the families of those who served and how that long shadow continues to darken the generations is also a major theme. In addition, as I conclude, I describe how from tragedy came hope and new beginnings. It is also a story of love. The love the brothers felt for their family and their mates and the developing love between my grandfather and grandma which began in the letters and parcels she sent to Grandpa. Ultimately, I wrote Anzac Sons in the spirit of remembrance; it is my testament to my family and the soldiers who served with them.



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6. How long did it take you to research and write the book?

The thought first occurred to me thirty years ago when I was using the letters for a university assignment. Then life got in the way. I began transcribing the letters 12 years ago and reading whatever I could lay my hands on. It was not until we visited the Western Front in 2011 could I gain a greater understanding and move forward with a purpose.

I began by organising the letters chronologically and slowly transcribing each one, which took years. Many are written from the trenches with faint pencil and are badly stained. I then researched – I read everything I could find on Australian involvement in WWI, spent days in the online archives of the National Archives of Australia and on the Australian War Memorial website reading the details of the brothers, their friends and neighbours.

I ploughed through battalion diaries for specific information. I made contact with local museum curators who assisted with detail I could not find online and travelled to the Western Front where we toured the region, stood on the ridges, visited the graves and spent a lot of time reflecting. All the while I was writing, editing and gathering more information. I came to a point where I knew the research would never end if I did not draw the line. Which I did, I completed the work, gave it to a valued colleague for comment and then, with his comments digested I considered the purpose of my work and began a major edit. The result is publication, for which I am very grateful.

7. Was this an emotional process?

Absolutely, I came to know each of these men, in some ways they became like my own. The ages at which they died are the ages of my own children, so I feel a great sense of empathy with their mother. There are letters that I have read time and again that still make my cry. Then to stand on the battlefields and to look out upon them and attempt to visualise what happened, it is overwhelming.

8. What do you intend to do with the letters now?

I have a few thoughts on some further projects. I am a teacher librarian and obviously have an interest in children's literature. I would like to write a children's version of this story. Ultimately though and with my family's approval, I will donate the collection to the Australian War Memorial who do an amazing job at both preserving and sharing our military history.

9. Were there memorable people and places that you came across in your research?

The battlefields are heart-breaking. It struck me that this was such a small area yet millions perished here, many never to be found. At Pozieres where Charles Bean's words reverberate on the memorial at the site of the old Windmill, he said it "... marks a ridge more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth". Places like Tyne Cot cemetery near Passchendaele, rows and rows of white crosses. They are pictures in my mind I will never forget. Then there are the people who I have encountered – all those that provide encouragement or go that extra mile to help you.

10. What do you hope Australians will take with them from reading your book?

For those not familiar with the Western Front I hope it provides some understanding of Australian involvement and society at the time. Also an appreciation for the great suffering that both soldiers and their families endured and what it means to be Australian. I hope the reader will be inspired to research their own families and share their knowledge with others.

Allison Marlow Patterson is available for interview

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