



Virtual War Memorial Australia

Researching a Person – WWI

So, you want to research a person who served in World War One.

You have a name and a service number and probably not much else. What do you do?

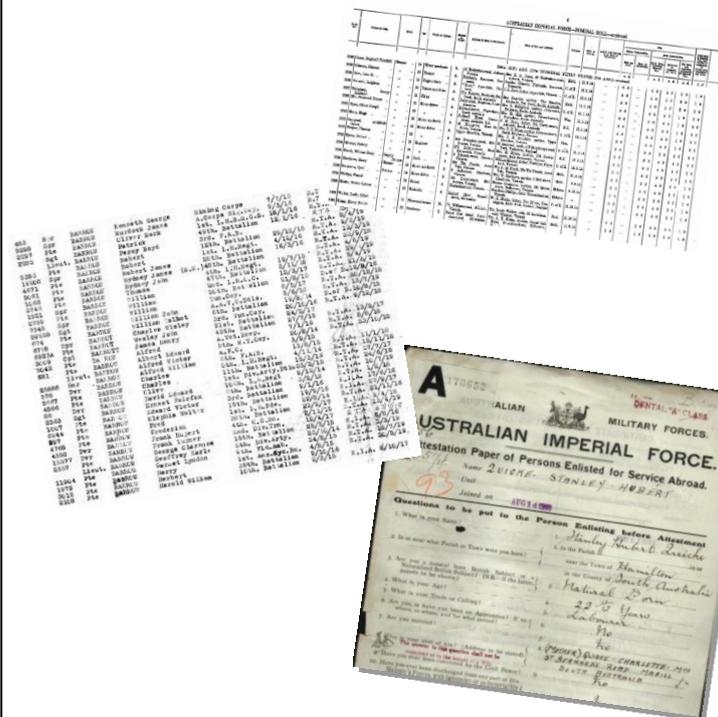
Your task has two parts: first, fill out their Service History, then use that to find other biographical information.

First, you need to find the details of the person's **Service History**: when they entered the AIF, when and how they left, and what happened to them while they were enlisted. There are three main documents you'll need for this:

The **Embarkation Roll** – a single printed page, found at the Australian War Memorial (AWM) website: www.awm.gov.au/advanced-search/people. Use the service number if the name is too common.

The **Nominal Roll** – a single typed page, also at the AWM.

The **Service Record** – a PDF, many pages long, found at the National Archives of Australia (NAA): recordsearch.naa.gov.au.



Of these three documents, the **Service Record** is the most important and will give you the most information. It is also the trickiest to use. Refer to the VWMA Research Guide on [How to Read a Service Record](#) for help.

The **Service Record** is effectively a personnel file. The PDF contains two documents which will be most useful to you: the **Attestation Paper** (which has printing and handwriting, and is usually the first few pages of the PDF) and the **Casualty Form** (often messy, with handwriting, typing and stamps, a few pages later on). It also contains other documents.



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What information to find and where to find it

The following basic information for the Service History can be found in the **Embarkation Roll**, the **Nominal Roll** and the **Attestation Paper**:

1. Basic details (name, place of birth, occupation etc)
2. When they enlisted.
3. Their home town (address at enlistment)
4. When they embarked (got on the ship overseas).
5. When they were discharged or died (and, if they died, how – Killed in Action, Died of Wounds, Died of Disease).

You can find other key information in the **Casualty Form** (note the unit they were with at the time, together with the other information in brackets):

1. Honours and Awards (type of award, date)
2. POW – Prisoner of War (date from, to)
3. Promotion (to which rank, date)
4. Wounded (rank, date, give details if known)
5. Involvement in a particular campaign or battle.

Tip

Write down information *as you find it*. Note where you found it. Save the hyperlinks. As an historian, you need to *show your evidence*.

Why? So anyone reading your work can check the evidence. That way, they can be confident you're *telling the truth*.

A 170652
AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES.
AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.
Attestation Paper of Persons Enlisted for Service Abroad.
 No. 1076 Name **LEITCH - STANLEY HUBERT**
 Unit
 Joined on **ATG 14 1914**

Questions to be put to the Person Enlisting before Attestation

1. What is your Name? **Stanley Hubert Leitch**
2. In or near what Parish or Town were you born? **Hamilton in the County of South Australia**
3. Are you a natural born British Subject or a Naturalized British Subject? (If the latter, papers to be shown.) **Natural Born**
4. What is your Age? **22 1/2 Years**
5. What is your Trade or Calling? **Laborer**
6. Are you married? **No**
7. Are you married? **No**
8. Who is your next of kin? (Address to be stated) **(MOTHER) MRS CHARLOTTE MARY ST. BERNARD'S ROAD, TADEMULLA, SOUTH AUSTRALIA**
9. Have you ever been convicted by the Civil Power?
10. Have you ever been discharged from any part of His Majesty's Army, with ignominy or as Ineligible and Wounded, or on account of Conviction of Felony or of a Sentence of Penal Servitude, or have you been discharged with disgrace from the Navy?
11. Do you now belong to, or have you ever served in the Militia's Army, the Militia, the Militia Reserve, the Territorial Force, Royal Navy or Colonial Forces? If so, state which, and of what class.

Casualty Form - Active Service.
 57th BATTALION AIF
 Regiment or **57th BATTALION AIF**
 Rank **Private** Name **FLEMING, James Holmes**
 Enlistment No. **2477** Rank **Private** Name **FLEMING, James Holmes**
 Enlisted (a) **13/7/14** Terms of Service (a) Service section with (a)
 Date of promotion to present rank Date of appointment to lance rank Numerical position on roll of N.C.O.s
 Extended Re-engaged Qualification (b)

Date	Event	Place	Date	Remarks
23 FEB 1916	Taken on strength from 57th Bn ex 23rd Bn	Gal-21-Kebir	23 FEB 1916	at 4169
23 FEB 1916	Taken on strength from 57th Bn ex 23rd Bn	Gal-21-Kebir	23 FEB 1916	at 4169
15/3/16	Discharged		15/3/16	at 4169
15/3/16	Re-enlisted		15/3/16	at 4169
15/3/16	Discharged		15/3/16	at 4169
15/3/16	Re-enlisted		15/3/16	at 4169
15/3/16	Discharged		15/3/16	at 4169
15/3/16	Re-enlisted		15/3/16	at 4169
15/3/16	Discharged		15/3/16	at 4169
15/3/16	Re-enlisted		15/3/16	at 4169

Attestation Paper (left) and Casualty Form (right)



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Involvement

Of these, Involvement is trickiest, and requires a bit of detective work. Start with the unit's **Battle Honours** (this can be found on the unit page on the AWM – search for e.g. “50th Australian Infantry Battalion”). Click on each campaign/battle and note the start and end dates. Was your soldier with his unit on those dates, or away? (probably at hospital) **If he was with the unit, then yes, he was involved in that campaign.** Note that involvement in a campaign is important when you come to fill out the Honours and Awards, POW and Wounded information – you can tie those events to particular campaigns.

50th Australian Infantry Battalion



STANTON, Archibald Job

Personal Details **Service History** **Personal Stories**

World War 1 Service

- 21 Sep 1914: **Enlisted** AIF WW1, Private, SN 1087, Pontville, Tasmania
- 22 Dec 1914: **Involvement** AIF WW1, Private, SN 1087, 15th Infantry Battalion, Enlistment/Embarkation WW1
- 22 Dec 1914: **Embarked** AIF WW1, Private, SN 1087, 15th Infantry Battalion, HMAT Ceramic, Melbourne
- 9 May 1915: **Wounded** SN 1087, 15th Infantry Battalion, ANZAC Gallipoli, GSW (head)
- 8 Aug 1916: **Embarked** AIF WW1, Private, SN R1087, 12th Infantry Battalion, HMAT Ballarat, Hobart
- 8 Aug 1916: **Involvement** AIF WW1, Private, SN R1087, 12th Infantry Battalion, Enlistment/Embarkation WW1
- 18 Apr 1918: **Involvement** AIF WW1, Corporal, SN 1087, 12th Infantry Battalion, Villers-Bretonneux

Units	<ul style="list-style-type: none">4th Australian Division13 BrigadeAustralian Imperial Force
Place	Mouquet Farm
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Attack on NoreuilAttacks on DemancourtBattle of AmiensBattle of MessinesBattle of Polygon WoodBattle of Villers BretonneuxExpansion and re-organisation of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in EgyptGerman Spring OffensiveHindenburg LineHindenburg Outpost LineThird Battle of Ypres
Battle Honours	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Albert, 1918Amiens, 1918Ancre, 1918BullecourtEgypt, 1916

Once you have completed this, you have all the information you need to fill out your person's Service History on the VWMA website.

Interesting fact: you might find it very hard to get an accurate date of birth for your person. That's because when soldiers in World War 1 enlisted, they were asked for their age, not their date of birth. You will still be able to figure out their approximate date of birth from this, but be wary of those who say they were 18/19 or 37/38 – they might be lying to meet the age restrictions.



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Finding more information

Now you have all your basic information, it's time to flesh out your person's wartime service. The records you've used so far are fairly dry and you'll need a bit more to tell an interesting story. For many (but not all) people, more interesting records exist, which actually do tell a story.

Was your person killed in action? Were they wounded, or promoted, or did they receive an award? Did something else interesting happen to them? You need to dig down into the detail of that event.

- If they were killed or wounded, they might appear in the **Red Cross Wounded and Missing** reports – these are found by searching the AWM site. There is a separate **SA Red Cross database** on the SA State Library site (sarcib.wv1.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au). Details might also appear in their **Service Record**. Red Cross files summarise short interviews with other men from their unit about the circumstances of death. Be aware, however, that the Red Cross records are not always reliable. Check whether several witnesses tell the same story.
- If they were recommended for an award (even if they didn't receive one), the AWM might record the reason for recommendation in their **Honours and Awards** database. This is great material. Search the AWM by the person's name to find this (note: try their surname and first initial).
- To understand the context in which the event took place, you need to know what their unit was doing on that day. You learn this by reading the **Unit Diary**, which can be found on the AWM site. The VWMA unit page will also provide a link. Unit diaries can also be tricky to read, as they are usually handwritten. For guidance, see the VWMA Research Guide on [How to Read a Unit Diary](#).
- Newspaper records in Trove might also give details.

There are two more things you should look for: photographs, and details of their life before and (if they survived) after the war. For help with these, see the VWMA Research Guides on [Finding Photographs](#) and [Researching with Trove](#).