



OLIVER
MAURICE
LEO SLEEP

13th January 1890 -
5th April 1918

2020 ANZAC Spirit School Prize

Mikayla Gillett

Mikayla Gillett - Loxton High School

News from the front line on the 5th of April 1918 reads: A counterattack at dawn by the 36th battalion of the Australian 3rd Division halted the German advance beyond the village of Villers-Bretonneux. The cost of this defence was a massive loss of lives, with 660 casualties from the 3rd division alone (also known as the 9th brigade). This hard fought battle halted (at least temporarily) further advances by the German forces towards the strategically important Amiens.¹ This was also the day my Great, Great Uncle, Oliver Maurice Leo Sleep was tragically killed whilst patrolling and keeping the roads safe for civilians near Amiens, France.

Oliver Sleep was born on the 13th January 1890 in Norwood, South Australia. His brother Kenneth was my Great, Great Grandfather. He was the eldest of seven children born to Mr Sam and Mrs Sarah-Ann Sleep. Life was often difficult and challenging for the Sleep family with four of his siblings dying as infants. Despite these tragedies, when he was three, his family relocated from Port Lincoln to Petersburg. (Petersburgh was later renamed in 1918 to Peterborough, to remove all German names from Australian towns). Oliver's parents opened a butcher's shop in Main Street, Peterborough².

As a young man, Oliver displayed great initiative and discipline leaving Petersburg High School at the age of 14 and starting work within the postal department. His employment began in Petersburg before moving to Port Broughton and later Norwood. Whilst employed at the post office in Norwood, war was declared in July 1914. Oliver enlisted, On the 16th September 1915 when he was 25 years old. Oliver was passionate about joining, begging to be enlisted.³ In his application he outlined his twelve years of telegraph experience and explained that he thoroughly understood telegraphy, telephony, Morse code and could read wireless telegraph messages.⁴ (Appendix 1) Only nine months prior to his enlistment, Oliver's father had tragically died after being thrown from a horse and buggy whilst delivering meat to homes around the township of Peterborough. With only two other brothers still alive to provide support, the decision to enlist must have been challenging. However, Oliver was still prepared to sign up and fight, displaying a willingness to sacrifice the needs of his immediate family to provide service to his country.

Correspondence shows Oliver was keen to enlist (appendix 1) We will never know for sure, his true motivations, but in his application, Oliver highlights his proficiency with the leading communication technologies of the day from his time working at the post office. As a technology enthusiast of his day, maybe he thought he could make a difference improving communications and intelligence. Whatever his motivations, correspondence shows he felt it was imperative to serve.

Oliver was assigned service number 746 and entered the 10th Australian Field Artillery Brigade as a Private. After enlistment Oliver continued to work in the postal service (transferring to Darwin as part of his

¹ *Australian Battlefields of world war 1* 2017, viewed 14 March 2020, <www.anzacsinfrance.com/1918>.

² Sleep, D 2020, pers. comm., 11 February.

³ National Archives n.d., *Enlistment Papers*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 11 February 2020, <Paper Copy>.

⁴ **Appendix 1** Enlistment Papers National Archives n.d., *Enlistment Papers*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 11 February 2018, <Paper Copy>.

training), before travelling to Melbourne to board the HMS 'Orsova'. Setting sail on the 12th of November 1915, he was headed to Europe.⁵ Oliver was assigned to the 10th Battalion which was among the first infantry units raised for the AIF during the First World War. The battalion was recruited in South Australia, and together with the 9th, 11th and 12th Battalions, formed the 3rd Brigade⁶ On the 11th February 1917 Oliver was transferred to the 11th Field Artillery Brigade. The 25th September 1917 saw him placed into the field again and promoted to temporary Sergeant; the previous Sergeant Rodgers was evacuated due to being wounded. In the 26th January 1918 (Australia Day) Oliver was made a permanent Sergeant of the 11th Field Artillery⁷.

The 10th Battalion was heavily involved in establishing and defending the front line of the ANZAC position, and served at Gallipoli until the evacuation in December 1915. After the withdrawal from Gallipoli, the 10th Battalion returned to Egypt and, in March 1916, sailed for France and the Western Front. A letter sent to his brother on the 20th September 1916 shows his love and care for his family: *'Hope Mother is ok and not worrying. Will be writing to Ken in a day or so'*. (Appendix 2) Oliver displayed the characteristics which are so symbolic of the ANZAC spirit; rather than dwelling on what must have been a horrible and extremely challenging time, his concern lay with his family, promising his mother 'a good holiday when I get back'.⁸ Tragically for Oliver and his family that day never came.

Oliver was placed on the Western Front battlefield⁹ from December 1916. From this time until his death on the 5th April 1918, the battalion took part in bitter trench warfare. The battalion's first major action in France was at Pozieres in the Somme valley. After Pozieres, the battalion fought at Ypres in Flanders before returning to the Somme for winter. In 1917, the battalion returned to Belgium to take part in the major British offensive of that year. From Belgium in September of 1916, Oliver's letter to his brother Doug relates "*We stir fritz up a bit every night and am beginning to think we have just about got him*"¹.

The Third Battle of Ypres was the major British offensive in Flanders in 1917. It was planned to break through the strongly fortified and in-depth German defences enclosing the Ypres battle front, a protruding bulge in the British front line, with the intention of sweeping through to the German submarine bases on the Belgian coast. The battle comprised of a series of limited and costly offensives, often undertaken in the most difficult of waterlogged conditions, a consequence of frequent periods of rain and the destruction of the Flanders' lowlands drainage systems by intense artillery bombardment. Offensives that Oliver's division participated in included: Menin road, Polygon Wood, Broodseinde, Poelcapelle and the First Battle of Passchendaele. The third battle of Ypres lasted for 8 weeks. Australia lost around 38,000 soldiers and no breakthrough was achieved. The most that was achieved was the capture of Passchendaele village, merely

⁵ Sleep, D 2020, pers. comm., 11 February.

⁶ Australian War Memorial n.d., *10th Infantry Battalion*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 18 February 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U51450>>.

⁷ Sleep, D 2020, pers. Comm, 11 February.

⁸ **Appendix 2 Letter to Dud**, Sleep, D 2020, pers. comm., 11 February

⁹ *10th Australian Infantry Battalion* n.d., Australian War Memorial, viewed 14 March 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U51450>>.

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widening the Ypres battlefield by a few kilometres.¹⁰ The best gains from the campaign were early on. Up until the end of July the allied front line pushed forward, but then there were minimal gains and a terrible loss of life until the end of the battle on December the 7th¹¹.

Finally, for the first time on the 10th March 1918, Oliver was granted leave to Paris for a mere 9 days. When he returned on the 19th March 1918, he was automatically sent back to the field¹². Only a few, short weeks later, on the 5th April 1918 Oliver's service came to a tragic end (Appendix 5). There is little written documentation, however, it is believed he was patrolling the roads of Amiens, with either French or Italian soldiers at the time of his death, keeping the roads safe for civilians. It is simply recorded in the intelligence summary for 5th April, there were other deaths and a slight loss of ground to the enemy¹³. After Oliver's death the 10th Battalion helped stop the German spring offensive and was then involved in the operations leading up to the Allied counterstrike. After three long years of writing letters to the Government, his mother Sarah, received his only remaining possessions, consisting of a kit bag and scarf (Appendix 3). Oliver was posthumously awarded the 1914-1915 Star, ¹⁴British War Medal and Victory medal in recognition of his brave service.



Figure 1 War Medals

Oliver was just one of many Australian men who displayed the attributes that have contributed to the legend of the ANZAC spirit. Oliver's courage to fight for his country, ultimately cost him his life. An excerpt from the premier's office sent on the 21st May 1918 to his mother states:

'A man can render no greater service to his country than to give his life for it, and the heroic deeds of those who have fallen in the cause of liberty, justice and civilisation'. (Appendix 4)

The courage of the Oliver and other Australian soldiers is recognised at the school in Villiers Bretonneux. This sign was a gift to the town by the school children of Victoria, Australia as proof of their love and good will towards France and in memory of the 1200 Australian soldiers who lost their lives in the heroic recapture of their town on 24th April 1918.¹⁵ The sign 'DO NOT FORGET AUSTRALIA' remains on the shelter shed to this day, as shown in Appendix 6.¹⁶ - **Part A (1501 words)**

¹⁰ Australian War Memorial n.d., *Third Battle of Ypres*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 18 February 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E104/>>.

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² Sleep, D 2020, pers. comm., 11 February.

¹³ Australian War Memorial n.d., *Intelligence Summary*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 18 February 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/transcribe/C1355921/4>>.

¹⁴ Sleep, D 2020, pers. comm., 11 February.

¹⁵ Australian War Memorial n.d., *Villers-Bretonneux*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 18 February 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/noublions>>.

¹⁶ Miranda, C 2016, 'The school kids that 'don't forget Australia' in Villers-Bretonneux', *News.com.au*, 23 April, viewed 14 March 2020, <<https://www.news.com.au/national/the-school-kids-that-dont-forget-australia-in-villersbretonneux/news-story/fd4e566140410dd27d65ad207c208a80>>.

Courage can be defined as showing strength in the face of great pain or grief. Oliver's courageous spirit was evident from before he enlisted until the time of his death. His willingness to fight for his country knowing the pain this would put his mother through, given that she had just recently lost her husband, was necessary to allow him to brave the horrors of the battlefield. Serving in the First World War, Oliver would have endured some of the most brutal forms of warfare ever known to man. The new technologies such as artillery and machine guns made the battlefields of the Western Front a truly horrific and terrifying place¹⁷. Oliver constantly had to display great courage in the battlefield, knowing that every day could be his last. Although Oliver's communication home, bravely avoids the true awfulness of the situation, the horrific conditions are now well known. The Australian War Memorial refers to trench warfare as 'hell on earth'. Not only were trenches constantly under threat of attack from shells or other weapons. The inescapable cold winters in France, meant trenches were often completely waterlogged and muddy, and crawling with lice and rats¹⁸.

Along with courage, his time away from home would have demanded great perseverance. Despite a brief break in Paris, from his enlistment date Oliver was involved in active service for more than two years, a total of 875 days (including leave). Often living outside for long periods with limited shelter in cold, damp, and muddy conditions, life must have been very difficult. Along with the conditions, it is hard to imagine the experience of isolation from family and friends. With modern technology most people have easy access to a telephone, email, or other communication strategies. Soldiers spent a great deal of time waiting around as battle was rarely continuous and boredom was common. Oliver's letter to his brother Doug (Appendix 2) demonstrates both his perseverance and courage. In it he writes: 'everything is ok here and I go out to the trenches every two or three days and have a look round'. (Appendix 2) Oliver would have also required great patience in waiting for a return letter from home. According to George McCrae on 9 January 1915¹⁹:

When word is passed around that a mail has arrived the whole camp buzzes with suppressed excitement, they are the days to which we look forward but alas they are very irregular, and far between.

We must remember the fallen who built the ANZAC legacy. In remembering the individual stories and courage of soldiers such as Oliver Maurice Leo Sleep we can more deeply appreciate the cost to not only the individuals who chose to go and fight but also their families. Since the time of Oliver's death it is clear why the ANZAC legacy has grown and is such an important part of Australia's history. The courage and perseverance of these men and women is a story that needs to continue being told.

Part B – (503 words)

¹⁷ <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/technology>

¹⁸ <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/1918/battles/trenchwarfare>

¹⁹ *So far from home: sending and receiving mail in the trenches* 2015, Australian War Memorial, viewed 14 March 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/so-far-home-sending-and-receiving-mail-trenches>>.

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Bibliography

10th Australian Infantry Battalion n.d., Australian War Memorial, viewed 14 March 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U51450>>.

Appendix 1 Enlistment Papers National Archives n.d., *Enlistment Papers*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 11 February 2018, <Paper Copy>.

Appendix 2 *Letter to Dud*, Sleep, D 2020, pers. comm., 11 February

Australian Battlefields of world war 1 2017, viewed 14 March 2020, <www.anzacsinfrance.com/1918>.

Australian War Memorial n.d., *10th Infantry Battalion*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 18 February 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U514504>>.

Australian War Memorial n.d., *10th Infantry Battalion*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 18 February 2020, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/U51450>>.

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Miranda, C 2016, 'The school kids that 'don't forget Australia' in Villers-Bretonneux', *News.com.au*, 23 April, viewed 14 March 2020, <<https://www.news.com.au/national/the-school-kids-that-dont-forget-australia-in-villersbretonneux/news-story/fd4e566140410dd27d65ad207c208a80>>.

National Archives n.d., *Enlistment Papers*, Australian Government, Canberra, accessed 11 February 2020, <Paper Copy>.

Sleep, D 2020, pers. comm., 11 February.

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AUSTRALIAN MILITARY FORCES
24th. How. Bde.

AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.

ATTESTATION PAPER OF PERSONS ENLISTED FOR SERVICE ABROAD

No. 146 Name SLEEP Oliver Maurice Leo
Unit 1st Rescount Unit
Joined on 26th Nov 1915

Questions to be put to the Person Enlisting before Attestation.

1. What is your Name? Oliver Maurice Leo Sleep
2. In or near what Parish or Town were you born? near the Town of Stowood in the County of Sid Australia
3. Are you a natural born British Subject or a Naturalized British Subject? (N.B.—If the latter, papers to be shown.) 96. B.
4. What is your age? 25 1/2 years
5. What is your trade or calling? Civil Servant
6. Are you, or have you been, an Apprentice? If so, where, to whom, and for what period? No
7. Are you married? No
8. Who is your next of kin? (Address to be stated) Mother Mrs Joseph Ann Sleep, 27 St Albans Street, Sid Australia
9. Have you ever been convicted by the Civil Power? No
10. Have you ever been discharged from any part of His Majesty's Forces, with ignominy, or as incorrigible and Worthless, or on account of Conviction of Felony, or of a Sentence of Penal Servitude, or have you been dishonoured with disgrace from the Navy? No
11. Do you now belong to, or have you ever served in, His Majesty's Army, the Marines, the Militia, the Militia Reserve, the Territorial Force, Royal Navy or Colonial Forces? If so, state which, and if not now serving, state cause of discharge. 17 years member of Imperial Telegraphs still serving
12. Have you stated the whole, if any, of your previous service? Yes
13. Have you ever been rejected as unfit for His Majesty's Service? If so, on what grounds? No
14. (For married men, widowers and children, and others who are the sole support of widows or orphans.) Do you understand that any application for discharge will be issued (where applicable) only after you have been notified of the same? Yes
15. Are you prepared to undergo inoculation against smallpox and enteric fever? Yes

I, Oliver Maurice Leo Sleep, do solemnly declare that the above answers made by me to the above questions are true, and I am willing and hereby voluntarily agree to serve in the Military Forces of the Commonwealth of Australia within or beyond the limits of the Commonwealth.

And I further agree to attend and bear the expense of the pay payable to me from time to time during my service for the support of my wife and children.

Date 27 Nov 1915 O. M. Sleep
Signature of Person Enlisting

SEP 19 1915

At Sea
Nov 26th
1915.

Sir,

I respectfully beg to be enrolled as a member of the Signaling Corps, in the event of one being formed, with the view of obtaining a non commissioned officers position therein.

I have had 12 years Telegraph Experience in South Australia, where I was a Telegraphist in the Head office prior to enlistment in this ~~unit~~ ^{as unit}.

I thoroughly understand Telegraphy, Telephony, the Morse Code and am able to read Wireless Telegraph Messages.

Thanking

I CERTIFY that this Attestation of the above named person is correct, and that the required forms have been complied with. I accordingly approve, and appoint him to 1st Squadron

Date 2nd November 1915 W. J. Rescount
Place Warrabynong Commanding 1st Bn Light

Belgium
3/20/16

Dear Dad
Am sorry to have
heard of your illness but
know that ere this you are
well again. Am glad to
know you are keeping things
straight up home and will
promise you and mother a
good holiday when I get
back as I will be able
to manage things for a
while. Everything ok here
I go out to trenches
every two or three days and
have a look round. The
star Feb up a bit every
night and am beginning
to think we have just
about got him. Hope Mother
is ok and not worrying
Will be writing to her
in a day or so. Just
Love
Dud

E. R. M.
Australian Imperial Force.



A.I.F. KIT STORE.
110, GREYHOUND ROAD,
HAMMERSMITH,
LONDON, W. 6.

Inventory of Effects of - No. 746. Sleep O.M.L. 10th. F.A.B. A.I.F.
Forwarded to - MOTHER.

Sarah Ann Sleep,
Main Street,
Petersberg,
Sth. Australia.

46045.

EFFECTS.

Ex. Kit Store. Book No. 15.

Savings bank book 18234, Scarf, Testament.

Per "Barunga" 21.6.18.
In Case No. 1172.

D/S. 33618.

No. of Package

Checked by



PREMIER'S OFFICE,

ADELAIDE, SOUTH AUSTRALIA.

21st May, 1918.

Dear Madam,

It has been reported to me that your son, Sgt. O.M.L. Sleep, has been killed in action whilst serving with the Australian Imperial Forces, and I desire, on behalf of the Government, to convey to you an expression of sympathy in your bereavement.

A man can render no greater service to his country than to give his life for it, and the heroic deeds of those who have fallen in the cause of liberty, justice and civilisation will be ever remembered.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'H. H. Peacock'.

Premier.

Mrs. S. A. Sleep,
Main Street,

PETERBOROUGH.

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Appendix 5- Death Registry Paper/ Letter informing of his death, obtained Sleep, D 2020, pers. comm., 11 February.

Transferred to **D**

AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE.

DEFENCE
S.S.
D 50145

No. *26*
Rank *Serjeant* Name *SLEEP O.M.L.*
Unit *10th Field Artillery*
Casualty *Killed in action*

"WHERE THE AUSTRALIANS REST."
Buried on *11th Sep. - 1918*

A.F. D. 100 Received *1/1/18*

APPROVED FOR ACTION *1/1/18*

CONFIRMATION RECEIVED BY *1/1/18*

U.S.S. 401086 Shaded as Death Registered *1/1/18*

WAR HISTORY INDEX

WAR STAR
23724

WAR SERVICE
23724

VICTORY
23724

2637

in duplicate

587/105

The Rectory
Peterborough
S.A.
2 May 1918.

Dear Sir,

Having communicated the news of death of No. 746 Serjeant O.M.L. Sleep 10th Field Artillery (late 1st Remount Unit), A.I.F. killed in action, to his mother M^{rs}. Sleep of this town by direction of the military authorities of this State, on her behalf I herewith beg to apply for provisional certificate of death authorized by the Minister of Defence.

I am Sir
Yours faithfully
(Rw) J.W. Stringer

To The Officer in Charge
Base Records Office
Melbourne

SENT 10/5/18

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Appendix 6 - Miranda, C 2016, 'The school kids that 'don't forget Australia' in Villers-Bretonneux', *News.com.au*, 23 April, viewed 14 March 2020, <<https://www.news.com.au/national/the-school-kids-that-dont-forget-australia-in-villersbretonneux/news-story/fd4e566140410dd27d65ad207c208a80>>.

