Profiles of official representative widows of Australian veterans of the First World War attending the Anzac Day 2015 centenary commemorations at Gallipoli.
Introduction

The First World War had a profound effect on the families of those who served, both during the war and in the decades that followed. From the time Australians first went into action, widows, parents, siblings and friends grieved for men who were killed in action, mortally wounded or lost to illness. As the war progressed and the seriously injured returned home, many on the home front took on caring responsibilities for those who were physically and psychologically damaged by the war. Many men who survived the war succumbed to their injuries in the decades that followed. Though not always spoken of in the home in the years after 1918, the war touched the lives of many who had never served on the battlefield but were nonetheless connected to it by virtue of a loved one’s service.

The first casualty lists from Gallipoli were published on 3 May 1915. Already, some 1100 Australians had been killed or died of wounds. A church newspaper described the impact of this first wave of grief for those lost in the war:

There are sad hearts all over Australia this week. Australia is experiencing the baptism of blood. The cruel curse of war is finding us out, leaving homes desolate and hearts bereaved. There is no glamour in war for those who have to suffer or lay down their lives. It becomes a scourge, a desolation, an anathema.
Though she did not yet know it, Minnie Christian would become one of the ‘hearts bereaved’. Initially reported wounded, her husband Captain Andrew George Christian was in fact killed in action at Gallipoli on 1 May 1915. In addition to the official notification of her husband’s death, Minnie also received letters from fellow soldiers offering their condolences and details of the circumstances of his death and burial. The First Battalion Regimental Medical Officer, Wentworth Thompson, was among those to offer his sympathies. He wrote:

_I had the good fortune to be a friend of your husband’s ever since I first knew him eight month’s ago, and in common with everyone who came in contact with him conceived for him a deep affection. His death is most keenly felt by all the Battalion where he was known as a man who did his work ably and thoroughly; was courteous to all, and kind hearted to a fault. He is a great loss and will be greatly missed._

The extent to which these and other words from soldiers who knew George were of comfort to Minnie is something we will never know; her voice, like the voice of many widows is largely silent in the record.

The lives of some 60,000 Australian families were irrevocably changed by the loss of a loved one in the war. Many other families also confronted a different life than they may have expected when seriously wounded men returned from the front. While the Department of Repatriation was created to support returning soldiers, much of their daily care was often carried out by family members, wives and mothers.

While the war had a lasting effect on Australian society, the men and women who served and their families, it is important to remember that their wartime experiences did not always consume their post-war lives. As the stories in these profiles illustrate, the post-war lives of First World War veterans and their families varied considerably. Gallipoli veteran Frank Beasley, for example, became a distinguished academic, and was foundation Professor of Law at the University of Western Australia. Others were more profoundly affected by their war experiences. Arthur Pockett was only a teenager when he was wounded in action and became an amputee. The war had a lasting effect on his life, as it did on Jean’s when she became his wife decades later.

The stories told in this book of the ten widows and their husbands are representative of the ongoing impact of the war on Australian society. These women stand in the place of women like Minnie Christian, who probably never had the chance to visit George’s grave. By the nature of their own experiences, they also represent the women and families who did not live through the war but were, because of their loved one’s service, touched by it.
Veronica (Niki) Alldritt

Niki Alldritt is the widow of Private Robert (Bob) Gregory Alldritt. He enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in July 1915, putting his age up from 17 to 18. Bob joined ‘A’ Company of the 18th Battalion on Gallipoli on 29 September 1915, but soon fell ill. Admitted to the 5th Field Ambulance on 4 October, Bob was evacuated to Mudros on 8 October. As his condition deteriorated, Bob was evacuated to Egypt and then Australia, where he was discharged in September 1916.

Bob and Niki met on a ship travelling from England to Sydney. Niki was on her way to New Zealand as part of the ‘ten pound pom’ scheme. They continued their friendship after they disembarked, and were eventually married in a quiet ceremony in St Stephen’s Church in Macquarie Street in Sydney. The newlyweds spent their honeymoon in Surfers Paradise. Niki still feels very lucky to have been married to Bob. When they married he was an architect with the Bank of New South Wales. Taking her on his visits to the branches he supervised, she said he ‘showed her more of Australia in twelve months than most Australians had seen in twelve years’.

When Bob retired from the Bank of New South Wales in 1968 he was the last First World War veteran among the bank’s salaried staff. It was noted that his departure ‘closes a book on an age of men who are now history’. Bob never spoke of his war experiences, but he did take part in the Anzac Day marches, which Niki watched every year. Bob passed away in August 1969. Though many decades have passed, she still misses the patient, kind and generous man she loved so deeply.
Ann Beasley is the widow of Lieutenant Frank Beasley. Frank Beasley was born in Oxfordshire, England. He travelled to Western Australia in 1914 to join relations and it was from there that Frank enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in May 1915. He served with the 11th Battalion at Gallipoli, arriving on 4 August 1915. Wounded in action with a gunshot wound to the arm on 12 August, Frank was treated at Lemnos and Malta, returning to Gallipoli in October. Following the Gallipoli campaign, Frank served on the Western Front serving with the 11th Battalion until 1918.

In 1919 Frank was granted leave to study with the Council of Legal Education in London and the Wadham College in Oxford, earning a BA with honours in jurisprudence. He returned to Australia and was demobilised in October 1920. In Australia, Frank continued his education studying law at the University of Sydney before pursuing a career in law and higher education. In 1927 Frank was appointed the Foundation Professor of Law at the University of Western Australia.

Frank and Ann met at the University of Western Australia, where Ann was also working – part of her job included proofreading Frank’s manuscripts. They married in May 1956 at the registrar’s office in Perth with close friends in attendance. Soon after their wedding Frank and Ann travelled around the United States and Europe for 18 months. During their time in Europe, they visited Ypres and the Somme Valley. Frank showed Ann some buildings that he remembered which had survived since the war, but was largely silent during the visit, reflecting on his experience.

Ann remembers her husband as a charismatic and witty man. She remembers laughing with him almost every day of their marriage. Frank was a devoted father who adored his children, including their son Julian who will be travelling to Gallipoli with Ann. Frank passed away in 1976; the University of Western Australia’s law library bears his name, as a tribute to his commitment to higher education and the law.
Marjorie (Marj) Cameron

Marj Cameron is the widow of Fitter Ernest Adkins. Enlisting under the surname Rogers in November 1915, Ernest embarked for overseas service in June 1916. He served on the Western Front with the 12th Field Artillery Brigade, remaining with the unit until 1918. Ernest returned to Australia in November 1919 and took his discharge in January 1920.

Marj and Ernest met in the home of mutual friends in Sydney. They quickly formed a friendship, but it was some time later that a romantic relationship developed between them. In 1950 Marj and Ernest married in a ceremony at Earlwood Presbyterian church, followed by a reception at a friend’s home. It was a small wedding with family and close friends which Marj remembers as a wonderful day.

Ernest rarely spoke of his war experiences with Marj; when he did, he remembered the wonderful support he received from the Salvation Army who offered cups of tea, cigarettes and words of comfort to men coming and going from the trenches. He told her of the pain of seeing mates killed and wounded. He also related one narrow escape in which he left his tent to attend to a sick horse and returned to find the tent destroyed by shellfire. Marj recalls that Anzac Day ‘was never a happy day’ for Ernest, but one when he ‘remembered his mates and the horrors of war they shared’.

Some of Marj’s favourite memories of Ernest are of the work they did together establishing the first nursing home in Glen Innes, an enterprise of which they were both immensely proud, and their annual holidays on the coast with their three children. Marj still misses Ernest for his companionship and conversation, his company on holidays and the flowers he grew in their garden.
Rita Chisholm

Rita Chisholm is the widow of Captain John MacKellar Chisholm. John Chisholm was a grazier from Goulburn before he enlisted in October 1914. He served with the 6th Light Horse Regiment in Egypt, where he was responsible for caring for the horses left behind when his unit went to Gallipoli. He remained in Egypt serving with the 6th Light Horse until he was invalided home due to illness in July 1917. Returning to Sydney in August he was discharged in November 1917.

John and Rita first met when he offered Rita a job managing his café and doing office work in Beechmont. Rita met and married her first husband while working for John and moved to Mackay. Returning to Beechmont with three children after the breakdown of her first marriage, Rita again worked for John, ultimately managing his Romney Marsh sheep stud. They fell in love and married in Brisbane among close friends. When they returned to Beechmont John and Rita were delighted by a surprise gathering at their house with members of the community keen to celebrate their marriage.

John mentioned very little about his experiences of war to Rita; he spoke of the horses and of being injured in Egypt and waking up to find he was in hospital in Cairo. He remembered his mother and sister travelling from England to nurse him. Anzac Day meant a great deal to John, and he flew to Sydney each year to take part in the services, thinking of fallen mates and meeting up with other comrades at the service.

Rita remembers John as a man who was ‘young at heart’, an excellent companion, mentor and teacher. They were happiest working together on the farm, going to shows and travelling.
Claire Forbes is the widow of Private Wilfred Roy Forbes. Roy, as he was known, enlisted in October 1916. After undertaking training in England, he joined the 423rd Battalion in France in November 1917.

Roy served alongside Claire’s father, William Hannaford. The two left Australia together, trained together and joined the battalion on the same day. On 30 March 1918, Roy was seriously wounded in the arm and back by shrapnel. It was William who found Roy and carried him back to a casualty clearing station. Their friendship lasted a lifetime and was further strengthened by Claire and Roy’s marriage many years later.

Like many servicemen Wilfred spoke very little about the war; these conversations were reserved for time spent with fellow ex-servicemen. He attended the Dawn Service in Adelaide, participated in the march and the service that followed at the Cross of Sacrifice; a picnic consisting of Claire’s handmade Cornish pasties was shared by all for as long as they were able to attend. Claire fondly recalls the honour she felt in maintaining this tradition for the men.

Claire remembers Roy as an outstanding citizen and an honourable, intelligent man. She misses the conversations they had about world events, the practical advice he was always able to give and the time spent together at home in their garden with their daughter Margaret. Claire very much admired her husband and his ability to live life to the full despite increasing health problems associated with injuries sustained during service.

A member of Legacy, Claire remains dedicated to the memory of all who served in the First World War. She believes Anzac Day ‘should be perpetual so that those who made the ultimate sacrifice in Gallipoli and on the Western Front will always be remembered’.
Betty Johnson

Betty Johnson is the widow of Trooper Frank Osmond Maidment. Frank was an 18-year-old labourer when he enlisted in February 1916. Arriving in Egypt in August 1916, he joined the 9th Light Horse Regiment in October, before becoming ill with mumps. Re-joining the unit in February 1917 he was with the regiment when they took part in fighting around Gaza in March and April. Frank served in Egypt until 1919, when he left for the United Kingdom to take up employment.

Betty met Frank, whom she affectionately called Oss, when she replied to an advertisement in Livestock Weekly for a position assisting with show horses in Perth. Betty learned a great deal about horses from Oss. In 1967 they took up a rundown farm in Busselton running beef cattle; later they bought a smaller but ‘better’ farm further out of town. In 1980, with Oss’s health deteriorating, they moved to Capel, where Betty cared for him through his illness. Oss was six weeks shy of his 90th birthday when he passed away.

Oss never attended Anzac Day services and very rarely spoke of his experiences in the war; the memories he shared were confined to stories about the horses he encountered during service. Betty believes that for the most part Oss ‘chose to block the war out of his mind’. She remembers Oss as a great mentor, with much foresight and great strength of character.
Ruth Littler

Ruth Littler is the widow of Lieutenant Burnett Guy Littler. Enlisting in May 1915, he joined the 1st Battalion in Egypt as a reinforcement in January 1916, moving to the Western Front with the battalion in March. During his service, Guy wrote many letters to his mother in which he wrote about ‘doing one’s duty and staying the course until it’s over’. On 29 June 1916 Guy earned the Military Cross for ‘conspicuous gallantry during a raid’ during which he led a storming party ‘with great dash’. He was wounded directing the withdrawal and, as a result, carried a piece of ‘souvenir’ shrapnel in his neck all his life. Guy was hospitalised and returned to Australia in October 1916; he was discharged in April 1917.

As was often the case, Guy was not the only member of his family to serve in the war. His father and brother served at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. While serving at Gallipoli, his father, Captain Charles Augustus Littler, became known as ‘the Duke of Anzac’. Captain Charles Littler landed at Gallipoli on 25 April, and as commandant at North Beach played a significant role in the evacuation; according to some reliable sources he was probably the last Australian to leave the Anzac area.

During his service Captain Littler earned the Distinguished Service Order and was Mentioned in Dispatches.

Of the three Littler men who left for war, only Guy and his brother returned home, both having been wounded in action. His father was killed in an attack at Mouquet Farm on 3 September 1916, a month before Guy arrived back in Australia.

Ruth met Guy in Newcastle while she was making arrangements for her family to move to the city. She remembers him as an extremely genuine, well-mannered, thoughtful and kind gentleman. They married six months after they met; the wedding was a private family affair. Having been widowed for nearly fifty years Ruth’s memories of her husband are fading, but the memories she does have of their time together raising their three children are happy ones.
Diane Melloy is the widow of Major Robert (Bob) Sydney Melloy. As Armourer Sergeant of the 42nd Battalion, he departed in June 1916 and served on the Western Front until the end of the war. Returning to Australia in late 1919, he was discharged medically unfit. During the Second World War Bob served with the army again, in Queensland.

Diane met Bob when she began work at the Real Estate Institute of Queensland, where Bob was State Treasurer. Seven years later, when Diane was 23 and Bob was 69, they married. Diane recalls that while they realised theirs was a ‘May–December’ marriage ‘we knew we were headed in the right direction, right from the start’. Bob and Diane travelled extensively, and returned to many of the places where Bob served in both World Wars.

Soon after they were married Diane began collecting Bob’s life stories. Her work culminated in a book titled *Time Will Tell: Memoirs of a Kangaroo Point Kid*, which was published just before Bob’s 96th birthday. Though Diane believes that Bob ‘took some of his grimmest stories to the grave’, he did not hold back from sharing with his wife his experiences in Flanders and on the Somme in 1918. He vividly recalled the painful ordeal of being gassed on the Western Front:

_I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was blown up with a 5.9 shell and the impact parted me from my gas mask. I was unprotected when Fritz sent over the gas. I inhaled the phosgene. For days afterwards, my lungs felt as though they were being continuously ripped apart by barbed wire. Breathing was agony ... Shell-shock also got me. The shakes were uncontrollable._

Reflecting on her husband’s experiences, Diane says Bob ‘carried the scar on his lungs for decades and wounds to his heart and mind forever’.

Nonetheless, Bob himself declared:

_There is no doubt that the one single event which has shaped my life and thinking more than any other was the First World War and my role as Sergeant in the 42nd Battalion._

Twenty years have passed since Bob Melloy died, aged 97, and Diane still misses him every day.
Jean Pockett

Jean Pockett is the widow of Private Arthur Herbert Pockett. Arthur first enlisted in the AIF in May 1915, but was discharged at Fremantle due to illness. Still only a teenager, he re-enlisted in November 1916 to serve in a war that would forever change his life. Embarking for overseas service in December 1916, after a period of training in England, he joined the 38th Battalion on the Western Front on 6 October 1917. Arthur was wounded in action only six days later at Passchendaele; he would ultimately suffer an amputation of both legs as a result of his wounds.

After a period of hospitalisation, Arthur was invalided home to Melbourne; arriving in February 1918 he tried to adjust to his civilian life as an amputee. After his first wife died of cancer, Arthur was introduced to Jean, his neighbour’s daughter. Jean loved animals and enjoyed helping Arthur look after his cat. As their relationship progressed, she began helping Arthur around the house; ultimately, they married in 1947. Jean wore green on her wedding day and remembers the wedding, which was a small family event, as a very happy occasion.

Married life was not easy for Jean and Arthur. He was severely impacted by his war service and injuries. Arthur did not speak about the war with Jean, or attend Anzac Day services. Jean worked to maintain the home and cared for Arthur until he passed away in 1978.

Since her husband passed away, Jean has been an active member of the War Widows Guild of Queensland, serving as Vice President for many years. Jean also serves as a Director on the board of the Gallipoli Medical Research Foundation. Committed to the welfare of war widows, she takes time to volunteer at Greenslopes Hospital, visiting widows from the country who have few visitors and who look forward to someone ‘saying hello’.
Valarie Trevithick is the widow of Company Quarter Master Sergeant Leslie Sinclair. Leslie was 19 years old when he enlisted in September 1915. He embarked for overseas service in April 1916, undertaking training in Egypt, then joined the 53rd Battalion on the Western Front in October 1916. He was twice wounded in action. Shot in the hand in May 1917, he was hospitalised in England before re-joining his unit in August of that year. On 25 September 1917 he was again wounded in action, receiving a gunshot wound to the chest and neck. Invalided home to Australia, Leslie was medically discharged in August 1918. He re-enlisted in September, but with the war over in November he was demobilised in December 1918.

Leslie and Valarie first met through a small business transaction he made with her family. Later, through a connection with his sister, Valarie started doing office work for Leslie. They married in a quiet ceremony at a Registry Office before gathering at Leslie’s sister’s house for refreshments.

Leslie rarely spoke of his experiences during the war, only making the occasional oblique reference, with comments such as: ‘This isn’t cold – cold was the winter of 1916 in France!’ He chose not to attend Anzac Day services; Valarie believes this was because he preferred to forget the war and get on with life.

Valarie remembers Leslie as generous, funny, supportive and talented man. He was ‘quite the raconteur among the family’ and was a passionate supporter of the local community, often organising local fund raising concerts for charitable organisations. Leslie was a supportive husband, often encouraging Valarie to participate in the wider community and ‘praising her every endeavour’. After Leslie passed away Valarie continued to honour his commitment to the community, working for the RSL and later for the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales at Elizabeth Farm.
COVER IMAGE. Awaiting the return of badly wounded men, Sydney, June 1919, after receiving a warning not throw confetti and some unnerving official advice that the ‘names of cot cases, if any, will be posted ... as soon as disembarkation commences’. In the centre, holding a camera, is Myra Harvey, perhaps waiting for Private Charles Godfrey, the man she would soon marry. (AWM H111576; Sydney Morning Herald, 11 February 1919, p. 6)

INSIDE FRONT COVER IMAGE. A passionate welcome back to Sydney in 1918. (AWM H111574)

IMAGE PAGE 2. Troops embark at Port Melbourne on HMAT Ceramic, c1915. (AWM H19500)

IMAGE PAGE 27–28. A two-up game behind the firing line at Gallipoli. At the end of the campaign, such games were staged to distract the enemy from preparations leading to the evacuation of Anzac in December 1915. (AWM P06382.009)