

# ORPHANAGE SOLDIERS

MAKING MEN OUT OF BOYS (8 April 2015)

By Frank Golding

This a work in progress. It focuses on one aspect of the larger project – the youth of the Ballarat Orphanage soldiers of World War 1.

Superintendent Kenny dubbed them the Last of the Mohicans, but Percy and Bertie Cooper and their sisters, Lily and Sophie, never understood The Mister's joke. The Coopers had no books of their own in the Ballarat Orphanage. Learning to read stories from the *Bible* and *Deeds that Won the Empire* was deemed sufficient for the world they would inhabit in later life.

The Coopers had not seen their father for many years. They thought he was dead. He had tried to look after them when their mother died; but finally the Orphanage was the only way. Bertie was the youngest, just five. There, among the masses, he would come to see less of his siblings as the years went by until he almost forgot who they were to him. Billy Broker was more like a brother, especially after The Mister told Percy Cooper he was old enough to earn his keep at 14 and sent him out to service. Billy Broker had come into the Orphanage the same year as the Coopers. He was Bertie's age when his father had died. Billy and Bertie looked out for each other over the years, the one keeping watch for the other when they raided the apple orchard at Woodman's Hill. When Bertie and Billy were nearly 13, a new kid, Ivo Ignatius Bibby, joined their small raiding parties – but only after a sharp bout of fisticuffs had proved his merit. Ivo Ignatius was his name, and he wasn't going to let any snotty-nosed brat make fun of him. Not like the 'Yard Boys' – Charles Foott, Harry Foott and John Foott. Harry was called the middle leg – and his brothers laughed along with the mob.

Within a year, Bertie Cooper, Billy Broker and Ivo Ignatius Bibby had become so tight in one another's company that The Mister dubbed them The Three Musketeers. And when the war broke out, had they been old enough, they would have joined the excited rush to the AIF recruiting stations. In 1914, no one imagined that the war would last so long that fifteen boys still living at the Orphanage would grow old enough to enlist – including Bertie, Billy and Ivo Ignatius.

Many boys from the Orphanage had already shown them the way. Ballarat 'orphans' still in their teens enlisted at more than double the rate of the nation's teenage recruits.

**And they were quicker to put their hands up. More than 20 former Orphanage residents enlisted in 1914 – twice the proportion nationally. Another eleven Orphanage boys enlisted in the first half of 1915.**

**We should not be surprised by the boys' enthusiasm to 'have a go' given the militaristic culture of the institution. From the outset, drills were part of daily life and, from 1894, The Mister appointed military instructors to provide gymnasium classes. In the 20 years up to 1914, the leading instructor was Sergeant-Major William Brough of the Ballarat Militia, a Boer War veteran and policeman. The Mister set up a brass band in 1900 and in 1909 the Orphanage adopted "a rousing marching song" of its own.<sup>[1]</sup> The *Argus* may have been closer to the mark than it realised when it commented in 1889:**

*when the time comes, [the children] will go out to fight the battles of the world, well prepared physically, and armed with a store of useful, practical knowledge.<sup>[2]</sup>*

**In all, 105 'old boys' enlisted; and of these, exactly 100 embarked for overseas to fight the battles of the British Empire.**

**All single men under 21 were required to have the written consent of a parent or guardian – and this was always going to be problematic. Just 25 of the 43 Orphanage boys who admitted being under 21 gained consent, although it is likely that some of these forged the signatures.**

**Twelve of the boys gained the consent of a 'guardian' – a capricious term. Some guardians were self-appointed, others were nominated for the occasion: a sibling, grandparent, uncle or aunt, and some just friends. The Mister gave consent for a number of boys, including both of the boys he employed at the Orphanage, Walter Granland and Harry Reed. Harry nominated his brother William Reed as next-of-kin; but when Harry won the Military Medal for "conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty", the citation was sent not to his next-of-kin, as was the usual practice, but to The Mister. Even when The Mister gave his consent as guardian that was no guarantee that the boy was 18. Alf Glassford, for example, was barely 17. The Mister also signed for Percy Cooper, Bertie's then 20-year-old brother, even though he had left the Orphanage in 1912.**

**Eleven of the boys under 21 gained consent from their nominee as next-of-kin, a term even less precise than guardian. Percy Lowen, for example, told the recruiting officer his mother was dead and he did not know where his father lived. He brought along a**

friend as his next-of-kin to sign the consent form declaring himself 18 years and 9 months old. In 1946, Percy confessed that he was just 16 at the time. In fact, he had not yet had his 16<sup>th</sup> birthday.

Thomas Watson and his younger brother Norman were typically inventive. Both claimed to be 18: Thomas enlisted in April 1916; Norman enlisted in March 1917. Both said both their parents were dead. Thomas nominated an aunt as next-of-kin while Norman nominated Thomas. Norman was not entirely convincing and he was asked to clarify matters. In his statement, he maintained he was 18 but confessed:

*I told [the recruiting sergeant] that my mother left me when I was 13 months old and I have only seen father twice during my lifetime. I have been out working since I was able to and I generally lived with the people I worked for...My grandfather... looked after me until I was seven years old, and then my uncle William Watson now deceased had me placed in the Ballarat Orphanage. I am 18 years and 5 months and was born at Ballarat. My mother's name was May Watson, she lived at Ballarat. I do not know my parent's [sic] whereabouts. I think my mother has married again and lives somewhere near Colac. My father's last address was Mount Magnet, West Australia. My next of Kin is my brother Thomas Watson at present on active service in France.[3]*

Their 'dead' father was indeed living in Mount Magnet and, hearing of Norman's enlistment, wrote to the AIF in May 1917: 'This is to certify that I am willing to give my son Norman Edward Watson, age seventeen years, my consent to enlist in the Australian Military Forces.' Confirmed in their suspicions, the AIF could not continue with someone known to be just 17, even with his father's consent. They discharged Norman who had already served for 102 days. But three months later, he was back in the army – a girlfriend was his next-of-kin – and within a few weeks he was on a ship bound for the Middle East. A number of other under-age boys managed to volunteer for service without anyone's consent at all. Some recruitment officers were known to turn a blind eye if a lad was strong and keen.

The system itself turned a blind eye to Lindsay Irving's enlistment. He had joined the Navy as a 'ship's boy' in 1912 two days before his 16th birthday. On his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday, 3 June 1914, he signed up for seven years' service. Two months later when war was declared, Lindsay was automatically assumed to be 'in' for the duration. His widowed mother living in Ballarat was not asked to approve his war-time enlistment. Seaman Irving did not return to his mother until February 1919.<sup>[4]</sup>

The Government relaxed the recruiting regulations in May 1918 to allow men under 21 to enlist without the consent of parents or guardians. They were now able to join up at 18, but could not serve at the front until they were 19. The Minister for Defence, Senator Pearce, afterwards ruled that youths could be enrolled without consent if they proved they were over 19.<sup>[5]</sup>

And so it was that the Three Musketeers, now 19, were finally able to enlist. They didn't know it then, but they would be the last three boys from the Orphanage to put on the uniform.

Bertie Cooper had been discharged from the Orphanage to his older sister Sophie (now Mrs White of NSW) back in August 1915. He was working as a farm labourer when he heard about the new rules. By 4 July 1918 he was in training camp impatient to join his brother Percy on the Western Front. For months, he endured what he thought were pointless drills and route marches. Finally, on 22 October 1918, he was among the 900 reinforcements aboard the troopship *Boonah* which sailed from Adelaide bound for the Middle East. When the ship arrived at Durban on 16 November, to his utter consternation, Bertie was told that the Armistice had been signed five days earlier. To make matters worse, he would never set foot on foreign soil. 'Spanish' influenza was rampant in Durban and the ship was quarantined. On 24 November, the *Boonah* steamed back to Australia. During the journey home the dreaded virus erupted on board with devastating results – hundreds were stricken and 27 soldiers and four nurses later died.<sup>[6]</sup> Bertie was bitterly disappointed that he did not make it to the front, but he could say he had been with some who died for Australia.

Meanwhile, Ivo Ignatius Bibby was aboard the troopship *Carpentaria* when it set sail from Sydney on 7 November 1918 bound for Europe via the Panama Canal. Just off Auckland, the news of the Armistice came through by wireless. Like Bertie, Ivo never set foot on foreign soil because Auckland was also hit by the deadly influenza epidemic.<sup>[7]</sup> The troops were transferred at sea to the SS *Riverina* to return to Sydney. After a short period in quarantine, the *Riverina* was declared clean and the troops disembarked on 28 November. Discharged in time for Christmas, Ivo Ignatius glumly shared the roast turkey with an even glummer roommate in their boarding house in Footscray.

That roommate was none other than Billy Broker. Billy had left the Orphanage in November 1914 and bided his time to 'do his bit'. But, despite his enthusiasm, Billy would not even set foot on a ship. His mother put her foot down. Under the new rules he

knew he didn't need his mother's approval, but Jane Broker wrote to the State Recruitment Committee in July:

*I am a widow and an invalid. I desire to have my son with me until he is 21 as he is my whole support.*

Technically, she had no rights, but a sympathetic recruitment office thought her claim should be checked. How much of his pay did he give his mother? he was asked. He did not dillydally with his answer: 10/- out of £2/10. A simple enough exchange, but, together with a bout of illness, the process caused Billy's enlistment to be delayed. By the time he was accepted, on 25 September, Billy's dreams of getting to the front had sailed away. He sat around in suburban barracks, cleaning his rifle, attending parades, for 91 days, awaiting the inevitable notice: 'surplus to requirements' and demobilisation. They let him go home on Christmas Eve 1918. Around the Christmas dinner in their 'civives', Bertie Cooper and Ivo Ignatius Bibby could at least talk about their all-expenses paid sea voyage, but what could Billy Broker say about his 91 days military service?

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In 1919, the Orphanage was welcoming back many of the old boys who had been away at the front. It was time to take stock:

*Some have returned who have been in the fighting line from 1914 to 1918, some have gained commissions, some are maimed, others have lost their health, while still others seem to have gained by their experience. We welcome them all home again and it shows that they still love their old home and have happy memories and feelings of gratitude when they so uniformly return to visit it after their years of absence. Some have been away for as much as twenty five years returned to recount their adventures and experiences.<sup>[8]</sup>*

And the 20 who did not come home? Not a word was spoken of them. Perhaps the grief and the guilt were unspeakable.

Many of the surviving boys had grown to adulthood in the trenches. As early as February 1916, Dr. John Richards, an honorary Medical Officer at the Orphanage and an officer in the Army Medical Corps, told the Orphanage committee that he had seen many youths at Gallipoli who were not strong enough to carry their knap-sacks in storming heights. Some had collapsed and were hospitalised, he said. In Richards' opinion no recruits under 20 years of age should have been allowed to go to the

front.<sup>[9]</sup> The bullish Prime Minister, Billy Hughes, conceded in Parliament on 1 September 1916, that:

*...it would have been better if the boys under 21 had not been sent. They succumb more quickly to hardships and do not recover from wounds as rapidly as older men. The fight is for grown men.*<sup>[10]</sup>

And yet much worse was to come in the slaughterhouses in France and Flanders. For some, the war did not end with the Armistice. Bertie's brother, Percy Cooper, for example, had enlisted in May 1916 and was involved in the last major action of the War in France. The Minister had approved his enlistment because both parents, it was said, were dead. However, in December 1918 his father wrote to the AIF from New Zealand asking for 'full particulars' of Percy's death. He was thrilled to learn that he had been misinformed. In September 1920 Percy returned to Ballarat and married his sweetheart, Doris. But he was not the young man who had left to fight the battles of the Empire. Without notice, he deserted Doris and their two small children. In 1926, Doris wrote to the AIF from Ballarat pleading with them to

*...help me trace my husband Percy Cooper who has been missing from home since first week in September 1925 & suffering from nervous breakdown...Please help me if you can for the sake of his little ones & for what he did at the war. I am ill and long for his return.*

Percy did not return. Many years later, he wrote to the AIF from New Zealand to say he had been with his father for the past 22 years. Was the boy making up for a childhood lost, or was the man still fighting a war that would not end?

[1] Morris, Ethel, *A Century of Child Care: The Story of Ballarat Orphanage 1865-1965*, The Committee, Ballarat 1965; and the *Ballarat Orphanage Annual Reports* of the respective years.

[2] *Argus* (Melbourne), 8 June 1889: 10.

[3] Unless otherwise indicated, quotations are from individual soldiers' dossiers held by the National Archives of Australia, Series B2458.

[4] *Courier* (Ballarat) 20 February 1919: 4.

[5] Scott, 1941: 460. Senator Pearce's clarification is in the *Argus*, 10 May 1918: 8.

[6] Darroch, Ian, *The Boonah Tragedy*, Access Press, Bassendean, 2006.

[7] *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 19 November, 1918: 6; and 27 November 1918: 7.

[8] Ballarat Orphanage Annual Report, 1918-19: 6.

[9] *Argus*, 20 March 1916: 2.

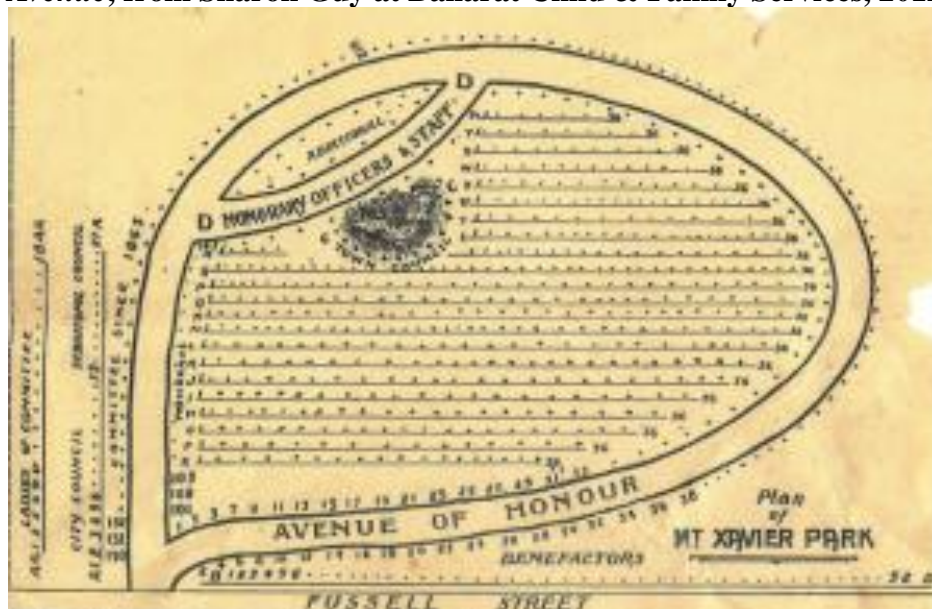
[10] *Argus* 2 September 1916: 19. He was explaining why the conscription proposal would not apply to men under 21. A few days later Hughes appeared to resile from that position: *Argus*, 7 September 1916: 8.

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When organisations like the RSL and other civic groups memorialise service men and women who served in theatres of war, they can only get so far when relying on official records. They often rely on families to provide further information.

In the case of service men and women who grew up in orphanages and children's Homes, many came from families so fragmented or disrupted that no one was in a position to know about their enlistment. A few Homes erected Rolls of Honour and a couple even created their own Avenues of Honour, but in most cases these have fallen into disrepair or have long been forgotten.

The Ballarat Orphanage Avenue of Honour launched in 1917 and lost from around 1925 was recently rediscovered and relaunched. You can obtain a copy of the commemorative booklet, *The Re-Discovery of the Ballarat Orphanage's Arthur Kenny Avenue*, from Sharon Guy at Ballarat Child & Family Services, 2012.



Each soldier from the Ballarat Orphanage would have a tree, but dignitaries would have two, three or even four trees in their honour.



An aerial view

showing the lost Avenue of Honour adjacent to the Mt Xavier Golf Course.

**The Booklet contains a brief bio of just over 100 ‘old boys’ who served in World War 1 (no ‘old girls’ were discovered).**

**The analysis of their service showed that on average they enlisted younger, earlier and at a greater rate than other Australians. My extended paper on this, “Making Men out of Boys”, is published here.**