Personal diaries and letters from the First World War

Voices from war, a remarkable collection of over 550 personal accounts that reveal the diversity of service and impact on individuals lives.

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The Principal Librarian
Mitchell Library
Sydney

Dear Sir,

I beg to submit a full account of my experiences covering 14 months imprisonment in eight different prison camps in Germany.

This account was written up whilst I was convalescing on my return to Australia. It contains full details of two escapes.

You will readily understand that it was impossible for me to keep any diary or memorandum, because prisoners were frequently searched; but I have given a truthful record of my own experience as a prisoner of war.

I enlisted on July 24th, 1915, at Adelaide, South Australia; my brother also enlisted then, the same week. He was both killed in action the same day that I was taken prisoner.

I was a private in the 32nd Battalion, sailed from Adelphi, Nov. 19th, 1915. Trained six months in Egypt, Canal Zone, Chantilly and on to France.

In action at Fromelles, took our objective, but were eventually cut off, made a prisoner with about 900 other English Australian soldiers.
Choat war narrative, 1916-1918

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What's in the collection

The Library holds a rich and significant collection of personal diaries and letters written by those who served in the First World War. The collections also include photographs, maps, artwork and all kinds of printed material that document the events and experiences of those who were involved in the War, both overseas and at home.

How the collection was formed

Soon after the Armistice was declared in November 1918, Principal Librarian William Ifould and the Trustees of the Library established the European War Collecting Project (also known as the Soldiers' Diaries Collection or War Diaries Collection). Advertisements were placed in newspapers around Australia, New Zealand and in the United Kingdom for servicemen and their families to deposit material with the Library. Ifould was particularly interested in purchasing descriptive collections which expressed the personal feelings of the men, their experiences in battle and their observations of the conflict.

The Library sought out high quality, detailed and descriptive accounts from all theatres of war where Australians had served. Accounts were sought from soldiers, sailors, airmen and nurses of all ranks. Each diary collection was appraised and suitable collections purchased. Purchase prices varied from £5 to £75.

Throughout 1919 and into the 1920s material such as diaries, letters, photographs, maps, artwork and printed material were acquired by the Library.

In March 2015 the diaries and letters acquired via the European War Collecting Project were added to the UNESCO Memory of the World register.

The Library has continued to receive personal diary and letter collections and now holds over 550 collections. The Library continues to make this collection available via its World War I website and research guide.

You can find more information on the European War Collecting Project in our Manuscripts & Pictures catalogue.

Additional information on the Library's World War One collections can also be found on the Centenary of the First World War website [5].

[6] a8566001h.jpg
Collection of World War 1 recruitment and patriotic posters: and some relating to the 1916 conscription referendum.