

## BOOK REVIEW:

# *Untraceables: The Mystery of the Forgotten Diggers*

By John Gillam and Yvonne Fletcher

*Legends and Lessons: Greenhills, NSW; 267 pp; ISBN 978-0-646-99923-4 (softcover); RRP\$35*



*Untraceables: The Mystery of the Forgotten Diggers* is not a conventional military history text detailing the battles of World War One. It deals with the aftermath of war, focussing on its effects on veterans and their families—many of whom were at the margins of the AIF. It contains the stories of men killed while in the service of their country; those who forfeited their right to medals by their actions; and others who were “misplaced” by the Department of Defence. Each story is different, some enlightening, others heart breaking.

417,809 men enlisted in the 1<sup>st</sup> AIF, over 60,000 were killed and 156,000 wounded, gassed or taken prisoner. Over 331,000 served overseas and were eligible for the 756,000 medals sent to Australia between 1920 and 1930. In 1986, over 80,000 medals remained unclaimed.

*Untraceables* details the many reasons why so many medals remain unclaimed and is the result of 10 years’ research. It deals with the men who did not fit the same mould as the vast majority and discusses why this occurred. While there are many and varied reasons for non-collection of medals, the main reasons can be classified as an inability to contact the next of kin (NoK) of deceased soldiers; wrong name and information on attestation papers either as a result of underage enlistment or leaving behind an unhappy existence; soldiers suffering from mental incapacitation; disillusionment from their experiences, often because of the loss of comrades.

John Gillam is a military historian and author following a 22-year RAAF career in Weapons Systems Engineering and Technical Training. After leaving the service, he had 22 years’ experience in curriculum and courseware development and adult education. Yvonne Fletcher holds a Bachelor of Arts/Teaching (Hons) from Newcastle University, majoring in Australian History and Heritage. She is currently employed by the NSW Department of Education and Communities as a primary school teacher and has received an Excellence in Teaching award for Anzac Research. They have published seven volumes dealing with WW I: *Turkish Charlie Ryan: Cannakale’s Anzac Hero; No Shirkers from Kurri; Their Story: Service and Sacrifice and Community Support Part One 1914 - 15; Men in Sheep’s Clothing: The History of the Digger’s Vest; A Tale of Two Diggers* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition; and *You Can’t Fight you’re a Girl*. Several of these are accompanied with teaching notes.

While the focus of their books is the education of young Australians, *Untraceables*, has a broader remit providing a serious and effective research of a subject little known by many within our community. The book has

several goals, including a highlight on the harsh treatment given to some veterans over 100 years ago and to encourage descendants and schools to research veterans from their districts and families. They also include instructions and templates for them to follow.

Tasked to compile and maintain the service records of 420,000 soldiers, the Army Records Office was established at Victoria Barracks, Melbourne in October 1914 and was headed by Major James Lean. With little direction from the Government, Lean largely established his own guidelines concerning the allocation of medals and while this generally worked well, it tended to serve harshly those soldiers in the margins of the AIF, obfuscating the distribution of medals to them.

*Untraceables* contains the stories of 92 veterans who fell into the margins for a variety of reasons and who were in the main denied their medals, or their families were denied the medals, and often a reduced or withheld pension right either by reason of familial entitlement under Lean’s strict regime, or forfeiture because of soldiers’ actions. Such was the case of John Gribble who served at Gallipoli as an observer and assistant to master bomb thrower Lieutenant Keysor who was awarded the VC. He was wounded, evacuated and returned to battlefield. He fought in the battle of Pozieres on the Western Front, commissioned and remained on the Western Front until wounded a third time. After serving on special duties in Italy he was afflicted with shell shock. During a period of hospitalisation in England, he went AWL on two occasions and bounced two cheques for £20, was court-martialled, cashiered and denied his medals.

There are numerous cases of men not properly identifying NoK, or nominating NoK that could not later be confirmed by Major Lean. Not only did this make medal collection extremely difficult, if not impossible, it generally carried significant financial implications regarding the payment of pensions with resultant financial hardship. The system was unbending; however, the authors have not viewed these instances through a 21<sup>st</sup> century prism, but have reported them as they happened.

*Untraceables: The Mystery of the Forgotten Diggers* is a combination of text book and historic narrative. While the focus is to encourage students to research “forgotten diggers” in their home districts, it serves equally well for the wider community as an excellent account of military history beyond the battlefield.

**Bob Treloar**