

May we never forget them.

WW1 - 1918

I hate this day so much. It is so sad. We all walk to the same place, slowly and quietly. The strong, ruthless soldiers lower their guard and let their sadness and pain escape. We towns people try our hardest to comfort these mourners and show our respect to the people who died fighting for us and their countries. Everyone is wearing their best dark clothes with their heads down and hands in their pockets. I drag my black boots through the mud trying to keep my mind off of all the thoughts that would be running through the soldier's heads. The walk is long towards the graveyard, but the Australian soldiers are never out of line.



As we approach the gates my stomach tightens and I hold my breath. My brother has always said that we should hold our breath around graveyards so that we don't inhale evil spirits. I don't believe this but I do it anyway, it brings back good memories that I never want to forget.

We all bunch around the new graves and it is uncomfortably quiet.

"Welcome everyone to this sad day....." The mayor of Vingacourt addresses the crowd. "I'd also like to thank the troops from around the globe for being here and helping to fight this war"

I knew, just from helping Louis Thuillier and his wife take photos of the soldiers here, that there are people from Britain, India, France, Australia, America, and even some of the Chinese Labour Corps. Louis is here today, taking lots of pictures as always. I wish I had that kind of passion for something.

"Today we commemorate these soldiers who have given their lives so we can be safe. We also have the handover ceremony taking place."

The skinny man spoke loudly. He had spoken these words far too often since the war started. This time there were many Australians being buried. I had met a few of these men around town this year- they called themselves 'Aussies'. They were so nice and I found them hilarious. The Australians always had the brightest, happiest smiles and gave me piggy backs.

The mayor read out the names of the soldiers who had died. This is the point when most people start crying. Sometimes the mayor would read a few sentences about the soldier, but the worst part of the day was when people were buried who were not named or whose injuries made them unrecognisable. When I die I don't want to be buried in a grave with 'unknown' on my grave stone.

“Now I am glad to hand over the care of the graves to the children of Vignacourt,” The mayor addresses us children standing with our mothers. “The lives and memories of all these soldiers live on in the hearts of our young children.”

The local florist then hands all of us children tiny posies to place on a soldier’s grave. I normally place mine on one of the ‘unknown’ soldier’s graves because they are typically neglected by the other kids. This time, however, as I walk through and read the names on the graves, a certain name catches my eye; Lieutenant R. Hunter.

I feel a hand rest on my shoulder. I turn around and see Louis standing there looking at the grave as well.

“Did you know him?” Louis asked.

“No,” I answer. I feel bad, like I should have known him. “Did you?”

“I remember seeing him, his smile,” Louis added. “He was going to come for a photo too. I asked him twice, I think, but he always said he was too busy.”

I could imagine this man, Lieutenant R. Hunter, his killer smile and bright, blue eyes. His short brown hair with a bit of a curl. He would have been the type of person who was always laughing and making jokes but when it came down to it, his loyalty and selflessness shone through. I had never known this man, though. I can’t remember seeing him around Vignacourt with the Australian crew. Who was he?

I place my posy, full of purple flowers, against Lieutenant R. Hunter’s small grave stone. For the first time since my brother died, tears start to slide down my face and land on freshly dug dirt which held the key to a family’s lifetime of pain.

The next couple of days were a bit brighter. A few more soldiers were admitted into the hospital though, so I had to help Mama clean all the hospital bed sheets and do any other laundry they needed. It is a gruelling job and it never seems to end. I am constantly taking big bundles of sheets and clothes to and from the hospital. It is good for me, I guess, because it keeps my mind off the soldier, R.Hunter, for now anyway.

This morning is very nice and sunny. I can hear the quiet footsteps of my Mama, and the splash of water as she finishes her washing from the night before. It would dry quickly today, I can just feel it. I don’t think I ever heard my father’s footsteps early in the morning. Like most kids in this area, the face of our fathers is only known in black and white; from old, foggy photos. ‘Sent to die,’ Mama would say, ‘he had no choice’. The same thing happened to my brother, only I don’t feel comfortable making jokes about him, not yet anyway. The war has taken a huge toll on this town. I have learnt the hard way not to get too attached to any of the men or boys because once they leave there’s a good chance they won’t be coming back.

After lunch the washing is dry so I unpeg the massive white sheets and stained rags from the piece of string that we have tied to two trees and carry them all the way to the hospital. This town is known for being the place of recovery. Thousands of troops from many different countries have come here to recover from their injuries. It definitely explains why we have such a big cemetery. The only good part of this job Mama makes me do is that I get to know many of the soldiers in the hospital and see them recover and soon walk around and enjoy the peace and pleasures that Vignacourt has to offer.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIALS PHOTO 471

Vignacourt is also good because it is away from all the fighting and noise but close enough to be an important place for the soldiers- offering them a rail centre, a base and a training area for troops within the British sector of the front.

The streets are quite as I walk, heaving two giant baskets of white cloth. Most of the troops would either be in the surrounding fields that were alive with training grounds and camps or in the hospital. There are not many other people who permanently live in this town, there are mainly the business owners and workers and the families of soldiers. All of the other people left when the war started.

Evenings here are normally the busiest. It's when the troops trudge into town, sometimes exhausted but generally happy that they are here and not in the war. They enjoy the experience of this town, I can tell, when they fill the air with boisterous joking and cheerful laughter. The soldiers relish plates of eggs and chips and glasses of beer or wine. I love the atmosphere that the troops bring to this town. They're always kind and never take anything for granted.

I walk into the hospital. There are four main, big rooms holding around fifty beds each. I can see that there are a lot more patients here than last time, as I walk into the first room. Placing the baskets down I then start to make the empty beds.

"G'day Harri" A soldier on the next bed welcomes me. I really don't like being called Harri but it makes him feel better, so I let it slide.

"Hello Jackie" I smile at him. Reaching for the basket, I keep making beds.

Just as I finish and am about to leave I hear some people talking. They are talking about a man called Hunter. Lieutenant R. Hunter! I can't believe it. I might finally get to know who this person is. The nurse who the soldier was talking to about Lieutenant R. Hunter left so I approach the man in the bed. He has short, sandy, blonde hair and deep blue eyes. There are cuts on his face and it looks like he has a broken leg.

"Hello," I said placing my hand on his bed. "My name is Harriet and I was wondering if you could tell me about a Lieutenant named R. Hunter".

"Ah, Reginald," The man smiles making his cuts widen. "Now, why would a little French girl like you want to know about Hunter? How is he anyway?"

"Um, he is dead," I tell him bluntly. He stares down at his broken leg, the smile fading. "I'm sorry, but when I put some flowers on his grave I thought to myself that I had never actually saw him around Vignacourt before."

"I knew something was up when I asked a nurse about him. She didn't give me a straight answer so I suspected the worse" He frowns. "So, Reginald. The first thing you should know is that Reginald is..... I mean, *was* Hunter's first name but he hated it. He made everyone call 'im Hunter" The man explains.

He tells me a fair bit about Hunter but I am not too sure it is accurate as the nurse comes in and injects a pain relief serum that seems to slur his speech a bit. He tells me that his name is Bradley.

I run all the way home and now am I writing down everything Bradley said. I don't want to forget.

8/6/1918 Bradley's version

I was at Battns H.Q. at Morlanocurt when Reg Hunter was brought in, he had been very badly knocked about while getting more machine guns ready for patrol work. Part of a shell had hit him on several parts of the body. When I saw him he was quite conscious. I gave him a cup of tea and we said a few words to each other. I told him he would soon be back in Australia but he replied "I'm finished". He died some hours afterwards.

It's a good start, I guess, but it doesn't really tell me much. It just makes me cry.

The next day I did the same thing; drag the laundry to hospital, make the beds and then interview as many soldiers as possible before the nurses 'drug' them. Many of them had no idea who Hunter was.

9/6/1918 William's version

I was on night patrol with Lieutenant Hunter at Morlancourt, the night he was hit. We had just come back to the trenches to get the machine gunners to go to what we thought was a working party but turned out to be a raiding party, when Fritz started barrage and Hunter sent us back to Coy. HQ. He stayed up in the front line with the machine gunners and must have been hit shortly after we left him. Fritz rushed the trench and a few of them got in and took Hunter as far as the barbed wire but a couple of others went over and got him back. I saw him about two hours later (about day break) being carried down on a stretcher – he was badly hit in the head – and I think in the shoulder too. That was the last time I saw him.

9/6/1918 Scott's Version

I knew Hunter; he was a Lieutenant and was about 5'10", well built, medium complexion.

I saw that he was wounded on the side of his face and shoulder by a shell which exploded very close to him. Some of the Germans took him through our wire, back towards their lines. Three or four of us saw this getting on, and promptly killed the Germans carrying Hunter. I personally shot one, right in the forehead. We had to go grab him and then he was finally taken to a hospital.

9/6/1918 Eddie's Version

On the morning of 5th June between about 2 and 3 am he was wounded on patrol. He got back but the enemy breaking through I understand carried him some 50 yards towards their lines but he was rescued by us in No Man's Land. I saw him a short time after at our D/S where he appeared to be badly wounded all over. One of our Machine Gunners, Jelbart, was with Mr Hunter that morning and no doubt could give more information. Hunter was short, clean shaven, age about 25, rather full face, and I believe his mother kept a hotel in Illawarra, New South Wales, Australia.

I compile all these soldier's versions and write down what I think is true to describe Hunter. There is still something missing. This afternoon I walk to Louis Thuillier's house which he had turned into an outdoor studio. He advertises for soldiers to have their photographs taken. I beg him to let me have a look at his glass negatives to find any trace of Hunter. He doesn't think we will find anything but he lets me have a look anyway. We search and search through millions of photos. I start to get annoyed and then angry. I just want to have a look at him. I just want to see him. My hands start to shake, and then Louis stops me. He grabs me by my shoulders and tells me to calm down. We won't find anything. I can see it now. Disappointment overwhelms me.

Now that I am lying in bed I can't get Lieutenant Hunter out of my head. All the questions about him, all the things I've been told from the wounded soldiers – They're all swirling around in my brain making it difficult to sleep. Why does knowing him mean so much to me?

Why do I have this burning desire to know more about this man?

Sleep gradually creeps up on me as all the thoughts and questions roll into one statement;

He was brave, he was loved but he will be forgotten.

It's been a week since I last visited Hunter's grave and now it is time to go back. I walk down the quiet, cobble stone street, slowly and contently, carrying another tiny posy that I just bought from the florist. It is early in the morning, about 8.00am, and there are not many people around. I walk through the cemetery gates and head towards Lieutenant R. Hunter's grave. As I get closer I can see a woman, I think. She has a mop of brown curly hair on her head and it sounds like she is crying. I walk up to her.

"Hello," I said quietly. "Are you okay?"

The lady turns around. "Oh, darling, I'm sorry. It's just my son.....I came here all the way from Australia to visit him because I heard he was in the hospital but instead, he's here," The Lady sniffs. "A man named Bradley broke the bad news to me".

I feel so bad for her. To have come all this way, from Australia, to find that your son is dead. What a horrible thing to have to go through.

"I am so sorry," I empathize "If I may ask, who are you?"

"Evelyn Hunter" She answers. What?! I nearly fall over. This can't be true. Can it?

"And you're Son?" I ask "Who was your son?"

"Reginald Hunter" Evelyn replies. I cannot believe this.

We start talking all about Hunter and how I want to know who he was. It turns out that she has had barely any contact with her son since he was twelve because Hunter was taken away to war to train and fight.

Today I wake up and I know exactly what I have to do. I grab my pencils out and paper and then start to draw. I draw Hunter's clean shaven, full face. It is strong and his nose is pointy- just like his mother's. I draw nice brown curly hair on his head, broad shoulders and blue eyes. This is what I believe he would have looked like. I place this in the booklet.

I take the booklet with the title; Lieutenant R. Hunter and walk back over to Luis' house to show him. I knock on the door many times but there is no answer. I open the door and there is no one there. There is nothing there. No clothes, no food and no personal items. All that is left are the glass negatives just as we had left them the night before. Where is Luis and his wife? Why did they only leave the photos here?

I place all the glass negative in a large box and put them up in his attic. If Luis never comes back then maybe someone one day will find these and the soldiers of this time will be remembered. And maybe, just maybe their memories will live on forever.

My next stop is the little vacant house on the corner where Evelyn is staying for the night. She is leaving today, to make her way back to Australia.

I knock on the door with the book in my hands. I wait. I hear footsteps and the door swings open.

"Good morning Harriet" She smiles, a soft, sad smile.

"Hello. I have something for you" I say as I give her the book.

As she looks through it her eyes start to swell up and tears roll down her cheeks. She puts her hand over her mouth.

“Oh Harriet, thank you!” She exclaims as she throws her arms around me. “Thank you so much. You didn’t need to do this!”

“Yes I did.” I say. “I know now why I wanted to know, so badly, about your son. It’s because he is just like my brother. We still don’t know how he died and I didn’t want any of Hunter’s family- you, to have to go through that.”

Evelyn smiles and puts her arm around me. We walk towards the cemetery and then sit down on the grass next to Hunter’s grave.

Together we read my interviews, my story of what happened and look at my pictures.

She tells me all about Hunter and his character and I hope, I just hope, that he will never be forgotten.