

NEATH - HOME OF THE MINER'S LAMP.

by Ross Pogonoski

Residents of the Coalfields who regularly commute via Neath and visitors to our region passing through will see on the approaches to the village a sign depicting a locked oil flame safety lamp with the caption - "Neath, Home of the Miner's Lamp."

Not long after passing these signs the motorist will come across the imposing structure that is the Neath Hotel. The 3 storey hotel is by far the most substantial building in the small, ribbon-like village of Neath. But in the past there was an even more important set of buildings and structures in the village - those that comprised the Neath Colliery. The colliery was the reason for the existence of the village and its hotel, because without the jobs at the mine Neath would never have materialised.

One of the miners working at Neath Colliery was Harry Littlefair, who lived in Harle St., Weston. On his way home after a hard days toil at the pit Harry regularly called into the pub at Neath for his "black pint" and to yarn with his workmates. Harry, who was 24 years of age, was in particularly good spirits in the early Spring of 1915 because he had finally succeeded in joining the AIF, after several earlier unsuccessful attempts to enlist. While he was enjoying the company of his mates and a cleansing ale. Harry spoke to Edwin Anstey, the publican. He told him he was going off to the war and asked him if he would look after his lamp and miner's tools (in those days miners had to buy their own lamp and tools) until he came back from the war.

Harry never came back, he was killed in action in France in 1918 and so the legend of the "lamp above the bar" was born. Harry's lamp is still proudly displayed in the hotel to this very day - probably unknown to many locals and nearly all tourists who pass by every day.

Having always had an interest in local history I've known about the "lamp above the bar" for as long as I can remember. In 2001 Jenni and I were lucky enough to go on a pilgrimage to Gallipoli and the Western Front with the Australian War Memorial. My main reason for going on the WW1 battlefields trip was to visit my great, great uncle's grave in France - but while there we wanted to see Harry Littlefair's grave and pay our respects to him as well. We therefore did a little bit of research before we left. We learned that Joseph Henry (Harry) Littlefair enlisted on the 30th August 1915 in the 14th Reinforcements of the 3rd Battalion. Private Littlefair sailed from Sydney on the troopship "Osterley" on the 15th January 1916. After arriving in France and going to the Front, Pte. Littlefair was badly wounded by an exploding shell. He was sent to England for treatment and to convalesce. After recovering the Army's Medical Board decided he was unfit for active service and was to be sent home. Harry told them he wasn't going home - "I've got a great lot of mates over there and I'm going back to them." Because of the rate of attrition suffered by the armies on the Western Front and the constant need for reinforcements Harry paraded again and this persistent, battle-scarred miner was allowed to rejoin his Battalion. Back in the field Harry Littlefair was promoted to the rank of Lance Corporal and found that his Battalion and Division, like all the Australian Divisions, were being used as spearhead troops and were sent to many areas where the fiercest fighting was occurring. During the German advance in April 1918 the 1st Division, of which the 3rd Battalion was a part, was rushed in to turn the tide of the British retreat. During the Battle of Lys, near the village of Strazeele, L/Cpl Littlefair was killed in action on the 15th April, 1918, when he was hit in the head by a German machine gun bullet.

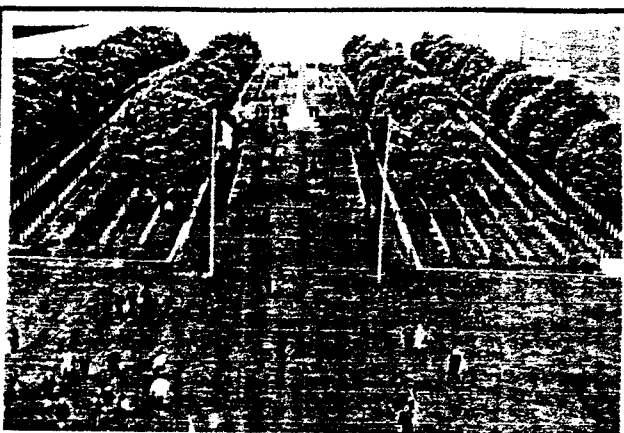
L/Cpl Littlefair's body was not recovered after the war and therefore he is not buried in one of the many hundreds of Commonwealth War Cemeteries. He has no grave or headstone. His name



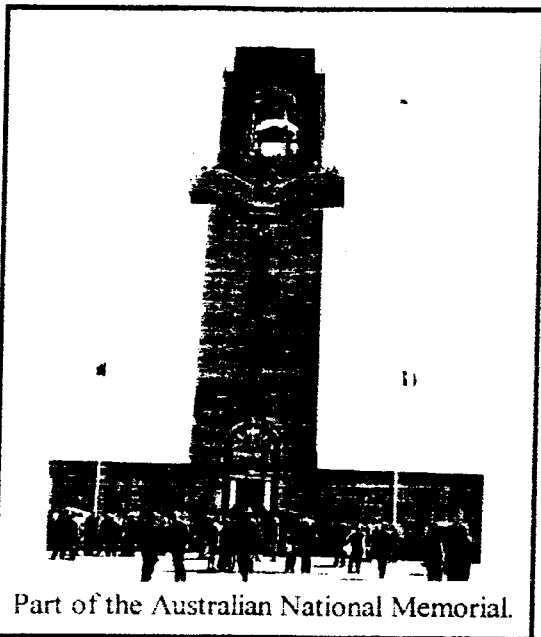
is, however, commemorated on the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, near the Somme River, with over 10,700 other dead Australians who have no known grave.

We visited Villers-Bretonneux and the Australian National Memorial. It was a very moving experience to see the scores of headstones marking the graves of Australian soldiers who fell in the battles in this part of the Front. Many just had the inscription - "An Australian Soldier of the Great War" - so badly mutilated were the bodies because the ground was continually fought over. One distressing headstone had the inscription - "Three Australian Soldiers of the Great War." We surmised that the three comrades in arms were probably killed by the same shell and their mangled bodies and body parts were buried in the same grave. Their names were not recorded on the headstone because their bodies couldn't be identified - only shreds of their uniforms identified them as Australian.

This year is the 85th anniversary of the death of L/Cpl Harry Littlefair. A fitting tribute to Harry would be a gathering at the Neath Hotel on April 15 and to symbolically light a lamp, as his mates used to do, and drink a toast to him and that special breed of men that made up the first AIF.



Cemetery in front of the Australian National Memorial.



Part of the Australian National Memorial.

HOLD SWORTH C
JEPSON F. I.
LITTLEFAIR J. H.
MEREDITH H.

Harry's name on the wall of the Australian National Memorial - France.