

## **UNDER A FOREIGN FLAG**

*21 February 2006*

*Mr Martin Kerby*

Nudgee was established in 1891, some 16 years after Gregory Terrace, as a boarding school for Irish Catholic boys from the bush. The Irish were a minority over-represented in the working class, and such a school was seen as both a religious imperative and a means of facilitating social mobility. Tom Boland, noted old Boy and College Historian, wrote of an interesting paradox in these early years, when he observed that Nudgee students of the period

...were conventional, patriotic, imperialistic, even jingoistic. The boys at Nudgee might not have been so fervent for the Gospel of Empire as those of Grammar, Shaw, or Wesley but they accepted the manifest destiny of the British races to hold dominion over palm and pine. The Irish, for all their own disputes with Governments of Westminster, still generally saw themselves as one of those British races. The Irish Australians were aware that they belonged to the Imperial pattern in a different fashion from that of the Irish in Ireland. They knew that they were Australian.<sup>1</sup>

It is this very quality that ensured that, at least prior to the Easter Rebellion, Home Rule suited the Australian Irish perfectly, allowing them to reconcile without difficulty their various loyalties – loyalty to Australia, Ireland and Empire. It also explains why large sectors of Australian society that may well have chosen to oppose the war, supported it with such vigour.

The conflict was not played out at Nudgee as school fights across the world have traditionally been, ‘down the back’, but rather on the front lawn. For it is here the Old Boys of 1904 erected two statues – St Patrick, patron saint of Ireland, and St Francis Xavier, patron saint of Australia, who stare at each other from opposite ends of the front lawn. The Christian Brothers [CB] were part of this process – the first full time headmaster born in Australia was Br O’Neil in 1934, the rest were Irish-born and, based on the articles which appeared

frequently in the Nudgee College [NC] Annuals which made pointed reference to the English Invader, they were very, very Irish. As Father Boland noted 'they were founded in Ireland, their purpose was to serve Ireland in its deprivation, as well as Christ.'<sup>2</sup> Indeed it was some time before local vocations were accepted and successfully integrated into the congregation. Some were, as Boland noted, 'flaming agitators for Ireland's rights.'<sup>3</sup> For as Patrick O'Farrell in his wonderful book, *The Irish in Australia*, noted: 'these were ambivalent, ambiguous people; thinking Irish, talking English: hating the tyranny, serving the tyrant.'<sup>4</sup> (As an interesting aside, one of the first students to attend Gregory Terrace [GT] was Kevin O'Doherty, whose father Dr Kevin O'Doherty, had participated in the 1848 Rebellion and been transported to Australia).

So from its very inception Nudgee, as Terrace had done before her, has inculcated in her students a strong commitment to the ideal of service in the national interest, Australia's national interest. As early as 1900 an article appeared in the College Annual entitled *Australia's Future Danger* in which the writer argued that

In 1906 Neal Macrossan contributed an article entitled *The True Australian*, in which all the virtues of patriotism were extolled as worthy of a true Christian. Its author became Nudgee's first Rhodes Scholar the following year

The True Australian...will be ready on all occasions to defend his country with voice and pen, when her enemies vilify her. First among his temporal concerns, he will put the interests of his native land...he should be filled with that enthusiastic devotion, that simple elemental passion of love for his country and his people, that sacrifice of all for hearth and home and liberty, that animated Hornito on the bridge, that inspired the resistance of the Greeks to the myriad hordes of Xerxes or that in our own times, has strengthened the resolution of the true hearted sons of Ireland through long centuries of tyranny and oppression...To right his country's wrongs, to vindicate her cause, to protect her from an alien yoke, the True Australian must be content to devote himself to his country's service, and if necessary to pay her in the last extremity the supreme homage of the sacrifice of his own life, in the full

confidence that he is thereby performing an action most acceptable to the Creator.<sup>5</sup>

This is very much the voice of Irish Catholic Australia asserting the right to establish a national identity – neither Irish nor English.

The *Compulsory Defence Act 1911* ensured that boys between the ages of twelve and eighteen were trained as cadets in order, as Macrossan would have seen it, 'to manfully play the part imposed on him by his Creator (and) to fulfil the duties of citizenship.'<sup>6</sup>

Both Colleges embraced the concept, but for Nudgee the cadets were one of the first great successes experienced by the College; although, like its military heritage generally, they too have disappeared. Clearly, however, the outbreak of war would be a sterner test of Empire Loyalty.

Britain's declaration of war on Germany in August 1914 was received with a degree of national support almost inconceivable to modern audiences. Every political party and most of the newspapers and the churches were eager to pledge their support for the Empire. Recruitment proceeded at a frenetic pace so that by October 1914 some 20 000 men were ready to sail, initially to Europe but eventually they were disembarked in Egypt. This support for military service is obvious in the invitation extended to Australia's new Governor General, Ronald Munro Ferguson, to attend the 1914 NC Speech Day. Ferguson was unable to attend and was represented instead by his wife. Her speech, delivered in front of a large Union Jack, was met with universal approval and was summarised in the College Annual.

Just now they all realised that if the British Empire was to be beaten it would not be in war, for the army had done as well as the army of old. But that was not the only way in which the Empire could gain distinction; they must also have the men of training, ability and intellect to win in peace, for the future was to the nation with ideas...She was certain that among the college students there were many who would like to be fighting for the Empire, but they were still too young, and it was for them to look forward to doing service to the Empire by making the utmost of their opportunities in the

college, and by going forward determined to make the Empire, including their Australia, one of the richest, most prosperous, and happiest countries in the world.<sup>7</sup>

Old Boys began to enlist almost immediately, and continued to do so for the duration of the war. The journey to Egypt alone often proved a culture shock for many Australians who had not ventured from their State, let alone pursued overseas travel. T. P. McSharry (2 LH) disembarked in Cairo on 8 December and commented with all the enthusiasm of the first time traveller that Egypt was a wonderful place in which

everything was beautifully mixed up, such a sight, mule carts, donkey carts, camels and natives galore. Can see three pyramids across the Nile to the West and on the east and south-east is a defensive line held by Napoleon. Within three days he noted in his diary that some of the Australian and New Zealand troops seem to be misbehaving themselves by all accounts.<sup>8</sup>

Like many other Australians S. Stratford (GT) feared that the AIF would be employed as garrison troops in Egypt and thus miss the 'real' war in Europe.

It is now a recognised fact on board that we are proceeding to Egypt and disembarking at Alexandria which will be about this day week. If we do disembark at Alexandria I feel pretty sure it will mean that we will be kept in Egypt for the term of the war, for I hear we are the British Garrison and permanent force there.<sup>9</sup>

Dr H. G. Leahy (NC and GT) arrived in Egypt in August 1916 by which time the bulk of the AIF was on the Western Front. His view of the inhabitants reflected the racial attitudes of both the AIF and the broader Australian community.

It's about a week since I wrote my last letter to you, but instead of the dull monotony of the boat we've had new scenes and experiences, in fact a world of travel in a few days. It was such a peculiar feeling to step ashore at Suez – the first time on African soil in the land that I'd heard so much about. Niggers everywhere, and flies in more places. And such scenes – the water is so startling blue, and the hills and cliffs so brown, and the sky so beautifully coloured.

Sunset is gorgeous too, and taking it altogether, even the dirty clothes of the natives, and it's a flash of colours.<sup>10</sup>

T. McGrath (NC) described his impressions of Egypt in a letter published in the 1915 College Annual.

I don't suppose I ever longed to visit any country as I did to visit Egypt, but I never expected to come to such a rude awakening. Certainly the sights are beautiful and unique, but the people are the most filthy I have ever seen or read about. I don't suppose there is a city in the world to equal Cairo in wickedness, maybe the arrival of so many soldiers has had a great effect, but certainly at present, it is terrible. No wonder that many of the weak-minded succumbed to the numerous temptations and are now disgraced and dishonoured for life. I shall never judge them too harshly after what I have seen. Doubtless the percentage would be greater were it not for the YMCA organisation. They have left religion aside for the present, and have instituted reading rooms and recreation clubs at all the camps with a central place in the heart of Cairo. It is a great rendezvous, and a fellow can put in a very enjoyable evening without harm.<sup>11</sup>

Conceived as a means to break the stalemate in Europe by removing Turkey from the war, the landing at Gallipoli ended in failure and the loss of 8 000 Australian soldiers. The campaign on Gallipoli can be divided into distinct phases – the naval operations (February-March), the battle for the beaches (April), the consolidation (April-May), the first major offensive (June), the last great offensive (August), stagnation (September-December), and evacuation (December-January). The direct Australian participation began at 4.29 am on 25 April 1915 when the first boats of the invasion force touched land. The honour of being the first troops ashore went to the Queenslanders of the 9<sup>th</sup> Battalion (which included nine Old Boys) although within days that number would swell to over two dozen, with a final total of close to forty.

C. Corser (NC), a member of a prominent family in Maryborough, was Second in Command of C Company. He landed early on the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> despite having been seriously ill just before leaving Egypt.

In an interview with the Maryborough Chronicle and in letters written from hospital Corser emphasised the difficulties faced by the Australian troops. Those who landed on that first morning were like

...picnickers, so helpless were they in the boats, but instead of some snug retreat they landed on a beach seamed by entrenchments, and backed by a steep, scrub covered cliff, affording admirable cover for the defenders...When looking back from the position we now hold, one cannot help wondering how ever we could have advanced so far. It is very hilly and all covered with undergrowth, just the country for snipers. Had we been in their position with the time they had to prepare I don't think any power in the world would have landed.<sup>12</sup>

The relief of the Australian Battalions began on 28 April, and it was then that the extent of the losses became evident. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division had lost 5 000 men, with some of the battalions reduced to half their strength. Many shared Corser's view, however, that 'England has taken on a big proposition at Gallipoli, but we must go through with it now at all costs, success must be ours in the end.'<sup>13</sup>

On 1 May, T. P. McSharry (GT 2<sup>nd</sup> LH), who was still with his regiment in Egypt, witnessed trains of wounded arriving from the Dardanelles. Destined to become Terrace's most decorated soldier he noted '...that it must have been fairly thick where the 9<sup>th</sup> landed...heavy casualties among the officers.' Over the next few days he heard numerous rumours concerning a possible deployment to Gallipoli due to the heavy casualties amongst the Infantry Battalions. On the 7<sup>th</sup> the news arrived '...that we are going to get our chance at Gallipoli and I suppose the reality will teach us, we don't understand yet what the job is but I believe we will do it alright.' Within four days he was in a ship moored off Anzac Cove, conscious of his proximity to battle due to the sound of heavy firing ashore, yet still able to write'... that we are in historical water now, the Aegean Sea where all those Grecian heroes used to range about. Beautiful seas – blue and smooth' The next day he landed under shrapnel fire and promptly found himself in a dugout barely twenty-five yards from the Turkish lines at Quinn's Post.

McSharry's diary records the horror of warfare in a direct and dispassionate manner. On 14 May he wrote:

Very lively last night. Dead Turks and Australians lying everywhere and the stench is bad. Water is scarce...One poor Australian soldier is lying across the trench; we cannot bring him in. There are piles of Turkish dead around the trench...Had a lovely afternoon, with the Turks in the trenches, they threw bombs at us from a trench 10 yards away, we lost a few of our chaps.

On 16 and 18 May he again made reference to the prevalence of death in the frontline positions.

The sight from our trenches looking toward the Turks is a grim one. Turks and Australians lying dead together in heaps...Sleep is a luxury we know nothing about. The men are heroes, digging all day and fighting all night. We are losing men all the time, so are the Turks. The Turkish batteries bombarded us today very heavily, evidently preliminary to an attack.

The Turkish general attack on Anzac (19 May) during which 10 000 Turks were killed or wounded occurred the next day.

Turks attacked all along our line simultaneously at 3.30 this morning. A terrific fight lasted until noon when enemy withdrew after losing very heavily. Our position, Quinn's Post, the hardest to hold. We had heavy casualties, it was terrible to see our grand fellows killed and mangled, principally by hand grenades.

A general cease-fire was observed on the 24 May during which McSharry was able to observe the enemy at close quarters which he felt was 'a wonderful sight. I was rather interested in the German officer. One young Turkish officer took my fancy. I rather liked him. We exchanged courtesies and cigarettes. He was quite a sport.'

Five days later the Turks fired a mine under the Post and assaulted the position. As a result of the ensuing combat, during which McSharry led a counter attack with jam tin bombs while yelling to his men 'Come on, Australia' he was awarded the Military Cross, the first old Boy to win a gallantry decoration. His recommendation recorded that on many occasions he had 'shown exceptional bravery and resourcefulness'.

In August an attempt to break the stalemate was made, involving diversionary attacks by the Australians at Anzac in support of strong attacks at Chunuk Bair and a British landing at Suvla Bay to the north. The first attack was launched on 6 August at Lone Pine, which was taken after three days at a cost of 2 300 casualties, one of whom was M. Morrison of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bn who was killed in the most violent and sustained hand to hand fighting of the war. The collection of the wounded under fire by units such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Field Ambulance was a dangerous activity, and for his gallantry in this and other actions on Gallipoli, T. Deasy (GT) was awarded the Military Medal.

The onset of winter saw the exhausted troops face further debilitating health problems. At one stage it was believed that up to 40 percent of the force would be lost in any evacuation. In reality however the evacuation of 35 445 men over 11 nights was achieved without loss. On the last two nights alone (18 and 19 December) 20 277 were evacuated. An Old Boy prominent during this period was T. R. Williams, an officer in the Royal Australian Engineers. He was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for his contribution to the safe evacuation of the Gallipoli force 'through his sound technical advice and loyal co-operation'.

One of the last soldiers to leave was J. R. Cassidy (NC), a former Rhodes Scholar and future Air Vice-Marshal in the RAF, who had enlisted while studying at Oxford. Illustrated *London News* article reported that Cassidy and his sergeant were left behind at Suvla after the bulk of the army was evacuated. They were tasked with the destruction of stores to prevent them falling into Turkish hands, after which they swam to a warship standing by waiting for them. He was mentioned in despatches, and was reputedly the last man to leave the beaches, which were evacuated later than the Australian positions. Thus Nudgee can claim to be represented both amongst the first and last to leave Gallipoli. Later while recovering from enteric fever in Egypt, Cassidy was promoted to Captain and invalided to England.

By the onset of winter 1914, the stalemate on the Western Front was complete, with the opposing trench lines stretching 475 miles from the Swiss frontier to the Belgian coast. Neither side had proved able to break the deadlock, despite the slaughter of hundreds of thousands



of soldiers hurled against barbed wire and machine guns. It gave to the world startling images of man's inhumanity to man as each side sought to grind the other down in a grim war of attrition. It was here that the Colleges were to suffer their most dreadful losses.

The bulk of the AIF arrived in France just in time for the great British Offensive on the Somme that promised to break the German line and end the war. It ended instead with the deaths of almost half a million Empire troops, and left an enduring mistrust of British leadership amongst Australian soldiers that would extend into the Second World War. T. P. McSharry (15<sup>th</sup> Bn) disembarked at Marseilles on 7 June 1916, before proceeding northward by train the next day.

What can I write of the lovely valleys, the beautiful fields of poppies and buttercups, it is a lovely country...We had lunch at Avignon at an inn where D'Artagnan could easily have dined. The wholesome children here and the sad eyed old women and very thoughtful old men, lovely avenues of trees and the welcome we get from everyone.

The next day he visited the Palace of Versailles and passed through Boulogne and Calais on the way to the 15<sup>th</sup> Battalion's billets, located just behind the lines. Ominously he could hear the sounds of battle that heralded the big offensive that was to end the war.

The opening of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916 indicated what the Australian Divisions could expect. For it was this battle, the first day of which would cost the British Army 60 000 casualties, that has become synonymous with the futility and carnage of trench warfare. 1916 would be a foretaste for both Colleges of what was to come – 27 Old boys killed, wounded or captured, with four decorated for gallantry. On 23 July the 1<sup>st</sup> Division attacked Pozieres, a heavily fortified village that had already withstood no fewer than five attacks by British Infantry. The 1<sup>st</sup> Division was replaced by the 2<sup>nd</sup>, which in turn was replaced by the 4<sup>th</sup> after ten days and the loss of 6 848 men. Never have Australian soldiers, either before or since, endured a bombardment of such intensity. Step by step the Australian Divisions, replacing each other in turn, captured the crest of the main ridge and the Pozieres windmill before turning north toward

Mouquet Farm. In less than seven weeks the Australian Divisions had mounted nineteen attacks at the cost of 23 000 officers and men killed, wounded or missing. On 3 September a final attempt to capture the farm was made by the 49<sup>th</sup>, 51<sup>st</sup> and 52<sup>nd</sup> Bns. In bitter fighting over two days, B.W. Keid and L. Keid (GT 49<sup>th</sup> Bn) were killed, two of four brothers from the same family to lose their lives in the First World War. After a total advance of less than two miles, the Canadians relieved the Australians on 5 September. The Memorial at the site of the Old Windmill records that the surrounding land is '...more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth. The ridge for which they fought so heroically is barely discernible to the modern pilgrim travelling by car, yet 6 741 Australians died within sight of it.

The experiences of V. A. Bowman (NC 9<sup>th</sup> Bn) can probably speak for them all.

We attacked and captured two lines of trenches, including the outskirts of Pozieres. What a bombardment! You could not hear yourself speak. We crawled out and lay on our jumping off lines for some time and then about 1a.m. the barrage started in earnest. We were right up to it and when it lifted we were into the first trench. We met with little resistance here, and then the waves that were detailed for the second objective moved forward behind the barrage. When they reached the objective there was little or no trench to be seen, so some pushed on through part of the village to the windmill.<sup>14</sup>

For two days Bowman and his companions struggled to hold on to the ground that they had won.

An awful night. Fritz appears to realise what has happened and is continuously shelling our positions and our communications trenches. Our losses are heavy, and are mounting up every hour. Bomb fights going on all night...Constant cry of 'more bombers' and 'more bombs'. Fellows hurry up with bombs to take their turn at throwing only to crawl back in a short while wounded...A lot of old hands went west yesterday.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> he wrote that it was:

...another terror of a day. Stood to all night, and are being shelled to pieces. Am satisfied that it is not the taking of a position that counts, but the holding of it. Late this afternoon Lt Armstrong and I went out between Pozieres trench and the village to collect water bottles from the dead. We got two sandbags full.

Bowman and his fellow survivors were finally relieved and returned to Albert. In his section of 28 there remained only six to answer roll call.

Nearly every man has a German forage cap or spiked helmet or some German souvenir. The reaction is remarkable after being through that hell. Nearly everyone chatters or laughs loudly. It is really forced, but it far better than sitting down and brooding on what we have been through.

The winter of 1916 - 17 was the harshest in France for almost fifty years. The rain started in October, turning the shell torn landscape into a morass of mud and decaying bodies. This period was the most testing of the entire war, during which over twenty thousand Australian soldiers were evacuated from the line due to illness, a dozen of them Old Boys. Most would have agreed with T. P. McSharry when he wrote *snow is very beautiful – in pictures*. There were no major battles during the winter, although limited attacks and raids would be conducted in order to assist the French. The major battles that the AIF participated in during the first half of 1917 were the First and Second Battles of Bullecourt (10 – 11 April and 3 – 17 of May). By 9 April the Germans had withdrawn behind the Hindenburg Line, and the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was ordered to break through this barrier east of the village of Bullecourt. Eighty percent of the 3 000 who attacked were killed, wounded or taken prisoner, while the British battle plan was later used by instructors as an example of how not to plan an attack. The Australian infantry performed magnificently, despite the failure of the British tanks and artillery. They had broken into the ‘impregnable’ Hindenburg Line with little more than rifles and grenades. T. P. McSharry (15<sup>th</sup> Bn) was mentioned in dispatches for his skilful leadership when his brigade attacked the Hindenburg Line near Bullecourt and again in the operations near Messines between 7-14 June. McSharry confided to

his diary on the day before the battle that 'things are messed to hell...it looked like the retreat from Moscow.' Of the first day he was even more scathing:

...Tanks late and making hell's own row. They moved out across the railway line at about 4.20am. 15<sup>th</sup> Bn moved out at 4.15am, they moved to sunken road and then forward. Wire was intact and tanks a tragic failure. Intense enemy machine gunfire and much artillery on either side.

Over the next four days he struggled to come to grips with the enormity of the losses.

All my splendid officers and men gone...they achieved the impossible. I went up to enemy wire and our fellows had crossed it over a bridge of their own dead. Were cut to pieces with machine gun fire.

E. Cleary (NC) recalled with tragic clarity the effect of the casualties suffered at Bullecourt by the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion.

Austin Lennon MC (also a Nudgee Old Boy) and I were the only officers as far as I can recall – out of about sixteen – who survived the 25<sup>th</sup> Battalion's massacre at Bullecourt. Only between two or three hundred of our Battalion out of at least one thousand came out of that slaughter. You had to have a good deal of luck to survive. The bodies were like pumpkins strewn across the field – as you see in the Lockyer Valley at harvest time – blue for the Jerry and khaki for us. I had a bullet through my helmet on one occasion and on another a bullet went right through my gas mask across my chest.<sup>15</sup>

In September and October 1917 the AIF was engaged in four battles around Ypres intended to push the Germans off the Passchendaele-Messines Ridge. The Battles were considered momentous victories; the most resounding the armies of the Empire had won. Yet the AIF lost 17 000 men for an advance of 4200 yards.

During September and October Old Boys would win more decorations, and suffer more casualties, than at any other time in the Colleges' history – 14 killed and a further 14 wounded or captured – against the questionable balance of eight gallantry decorations. P. J. Smith's (GT) death was described in some depth by one of his

friends in the 42<sup>nd</sup> Battalion, but it is his final statement that is so wonderfully Australian.

It was not very dark but he said goodbye to me, and I wished him luck and that was the last time I saw him...However, he played the game always, and if I go under hope to see it out as game as Perce. <sup>16</sup>

The winter of 1917-1918 was not as bad as the previous year, but the mud of Passchendaele left many soldiers resigned to death or wounding as the only escape from the trenches, for as the final year of the War opened, prospects for an end to the slaughter appeared dim. The agony of the Third Battle of Ypres was still fresh, the French Army was recovering from the mutinies of the previous year, the Italians were tottering and, most damagingly, the Russians had surrendered. This left the Germans free to concentrate their forces on the Western Front before sufficient numbers of reinforcements from the newly belligerent USA arrived. Over 50 Old Boys would be killed or wounded in the final year of the war with a further 4 gallantry decorations. The slaughter continued – for example. to the north of Villers Bretonneux, the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was in action at Dernancourt. The Germans held the protective railway embankment near the town on one side, while the Australians sheltered on the other. On 5 April, following heavy German shelling, fierce fighting broke out. At the end of the day four Nudgee Old Boys and one from Gregory Terrace were dead.

One of the five was J. E. Macdonnell, whose death at age 20 gives the words of his school speech an added poignancy, for this was the young man who three years before had written

...for what can more tend to the glory and greatness of an empire than the original and independent action, inventive faculty, and commercial enterprise of its small nations? <sup>17</sup>

T. R. O'Sullivan (41<sup>st</sup> Bn) was killed in action by a German shell twelve days later on the 17<sup>th</sup>. His Battalion History records that 'this gallant and courteous officer was killed while asleep in his dugout.' <sup>18</sup> A Brisbane newspaper reported the death of these two Old Boys from Toowong in a manner that emphasised their membership of Brisbane's Catholic community.

The war continues to make its merciless levy upon the lives of our young men. During the last few weeks the Catholic community in Brisbane has felt its dread visitation most severely. Four of our brightest and best have laid down their lives for their country. Of these two lived here amongst us at Toowong: Private John Edward MacDonnell and Lieutenant Real O'Sullivan. We can ill spare these splendid young Catholic Australians. While offering our sympathy to the relatives of these two young heroes, we cannot forget those whose boys are still fighting and for whom these days are so full of anxiety. Let us all who have to stay behind, remember their great need. By our prayers we can put a shield around them more impenetrable than any that human skill can devise. It will, indeed, be well for them and for ourselves if these sad days bring us all nearer to God.<sup>19</sup>

Even at this stage soldiers were not immune to propaganda. On 21 March 1918 the Germans launched their last attempt to win the War before the Americans arrived in strength. The offensive opened with a barrage from nearly six thousand guns followed by an assault by 63 divisions. As they rushed toward Amiens they recaptured all the ground they had lost in the previous two years. On that same day J. (Chum) Tully NC (11<sup>th</sup> AFA) wrote a letter home from his hospital bed in Bolougne.

I suppose the papers in Aussie are full of the Hun rush. Don't get the wind up; they won't get far. Such a wild rush of millions of fresh troops could not possibly be checked in the beginning. The slaughter inflicted on the Fritzies was something terrible, so he has paid for his advance with compound interest. He cannot possibly keep up this wild rush for the price in losses would far exceed the advantage gained. Oh! Those gallant baby killers will go back faster than they came.<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the last word on this conflict in which a hundred Old Boys of Gregory Terrace and Nudgee College were killed (and a number would still lose their lives in the influenza epidemic and from war-related wounds) is best left to the NC Annual of 1915.

Still numbers who call themselves good Christians feel and express their joy and delight when they hear of thousands of their fellow Christians being killed or wounded, provided they are not on the side

for which they feel what is called a Patriotic feeling...A few short years ago, the Russians were looked upon by us English as outside the pale - an enemy we were to slay and wound. Today we clasp him to our breast because he will slay Germans for us. We looked, for hundreds of years, on Frenchmen as deadliest enemies. Now we use every man we have to help him to kill these Germans by whose aid, not so long ago, we succeeded in slaying the French...What mockery to tell the afflicted mother: 'dry your tears, your son died in the cause of the Triple Alliance'.

Of all engaged in it, the only country that can claim to be fighting for Home and its Altars is little Belgium; all others are simply engaged in a political struggle, in which the people of the various countries are not really affected. Let all Australians be true to their magnificent Country and its Homes, granted to them by a kind Providence, and let them be ready and willing to defend those Homes should dire necessity compel them. But as they love their Homes, let them not be too ready to make wretched the Homes of those who have never injured them.<sup>21</sup>

World War II was a very different experience for Old Boys of both Colleges. Whereas all of the casualties in WW1, numbering in excess of 80, bar one, were found in the ranks of the Army, most casualties in the second war occurred far removed from the trenches of France and Belgium. Barely a dozen, and I use this word advisedly in that I refer to a dozen family tragedies, occurred in the ground wars against Germany and Italy. For there appeared to be three rules for survival that needed to be heeded by Old Boys intent on reaching old age – avoid being in Singapore in February 1942, avoid aircraft accidents in training, and whatever you do avoid being in a Wellington bomber over Germany at any time. Yet there were of course exceptions, three Old Boys were lost on the *Centaur*, one on the *HMS Hood*, others on the *HMAS Perth* and *HMAS Sydney*, one drowned on leave, and one drowned off the coast of WA during a Z Force training exercise.

One of the major differences was of course the POWs - the Japanese captured 55 Old Boys – six were executed or believed executed, six drowned when the ships they were being transported in were sunk, and a further five died of malnutrition or disease, a rate slightly better than that experienced overall. The majority were captured as

members of the 2/10 Field Regiment and the 2/26<sup>th</sup> Bn at the fall of Singapore. The executions ranged from the beheading of downed airmen, the massacre at the Tol Plantation to the Sandakan Death March. Some had amazing escapes - the most famous of the Nudgee Old Boys to be taken prisoner by the Japanese was Captain J. J. Murphy, a coastwatcher who would later suffer the indignity of being court martialled for collaborating with his captors.

He recalled that:

...the Japanese had published that they had caught the great Australian spy – Captain John Joseph Murphy. The German papers had it and the British and American papers picked it up and it was printed in Australia. My mother took a fit, my wife took a fit, and my uncle hopped into his car and drove down to Sydney. He got in touch with the government and the cardinal of our church and they sent representations both through Switzerland and the Vatican that I was not a spy, that I was captured in uniform, and they wanted to know about my whereabouts and welfare...I think the Japs thought they had a real catch. I made them call me Murphy-tai or ‘Captain Murphy.’<sup>22</sup>

Murphy was certainly more fortunate than many servicemen captured alone or in small groups. J. I. Newman (NC) was executed after being shot down, while J. J. O’Dwyer (NC) was killed after being captured in mid-1945. Others such as John Reid (GT), who was shot down over Burma, survived to return home. Sir William Webb, in charge of the Tokyo War Crimes Trials, lived at the College while he was studying, a fact I discovered while writing a detention for one of his great-grandsons.

While recuperating in Bangalore in September 1945, F. Tully (NC) wrote to his family in Australia and attempted to make sense of what he had experienced as a prisoner of the Japanese.

At last this horrible curse has lifted from the world and man can think and feel as he did way back in 39. I never felt the same after war was declared...Each night of my life over here I prayed that God would safeguard my health and faith and it seems he has. Did you ever read the lines ‘to anyone with a drop of Irish blood in his veins, the land he lives on is – like his mother – the only thing worth having and



fighting for?’ True words indeed...I am coming back to ‘Ray’ and mark my words I will then take some shifting...Let us hope the new order will be alright. They say England has gone red.<sup>23</sup>

R. Ashton (NC) recalled his own desire to return home outweighing any inclination to seek revenge against the Japanese.

Although we had hated the Japanese, by the time the war ended we were more concerned about getting home and did not really care very much what happened to them. We were interviewed by the War Crimes Team and we made statements about the treatment we had received from various guards. We wanted to see justice done, but above all we wanted to go home.<sup>24</sup>

Sixteen were captured by the Germans, either in North Africa or Greece or after having been shot down over Europe or the Mediterranean. They tended to fare better than their counterparts under the Japanese - all but two returned home - one hung by German civilians of Cologne in early 1945, enraged by the destruction of their city, and the other marched out into the forest and shot by German police, I suspect, tragically, because it was - to them - an easier option. R Corbett (NC) even made the point that the German paratroopers who captured him on Crete could have been boys from Nudgee.

Another significant difference was that it was a war fought in two distinct phases – first against the Germans and Italians in North Africa, and then against the Japanese. The need to defend Australia while also pursuing the defeat of Nazi Germany did bring some old antagonisms to the fore. K. Snee (NC) said that :

...my father didn’t serve in World War One, because he was of deep Irish stock. Both his mother and father were Irish immigrants and he didn’t have any great love for serving the King. My father spent these years during the war on Thursday Island, where there was a fort with some artillery that was expected to blow an invading army out of the water. My wife’s family held a similar view of Empire service – her father was of German origin, and her mother would go to the pictures and refuse to stand for ‘God Save the Queen’, to the embarrassment of any member of the family that might be with her.

The Brothers at Nudgee were very Irish and they were hard men who were generally well educated. They were certainly not advocates of Empire. Sometimes in a history lesson, or even a religious lesson, you'd hear of The Troubles. When war broke out in 1939 my father said to me 'It's all very well to get patriotic, but I'm more concerned about things that might happen around here, so don't go rushing in there to go overseas.' I don't know how widespread the Irish influence was on enlistment, but it certainly was in my family. My father couldn't see the sense of being in the Middle East with the threat of Japan in the North.<sup>25</sup>

W. (Bill) O'Reilly (NC) also remembered the Irish influence at Nudgee College:

Patriotism springs from different sources than purely from school instruction, because we were certainly not taught a love of Empire. I'm sure that we were all dedicated Australians. During the First War my father didn't serve – he was Irish, anti conscription and anti war. There was a sense in the late 1930s that war was approaching. Things were just beginning to improve economically around 1938/39 when, not content with spoiling our childhood with a depression, fate decided to mess up our young manhood with a bloody war.<sup>26</sup>

D. G. Andrews' (NC) motivations for enlisting reflected his university education:

I enlisted because having read Mein Kampf I thought Hitler was mad. I thought that there was every indication that, if possible, he would conquer the world. In addition to which, in my day we were all British. We could have British passports, my grandfather was born in England and my grandmother was born in Ireland. My wife's father was born in England; we didn't sit around the table and speak of England, Ireland or Scotland, we talked about home or the 'Old Country'. We were all fed British propaganda right through my schooling. What we read in our history books was how Nelson defeated Villeneuve at Trafalgar and what happened to Gordon at Khartoum and the like.<sup>27</sup>

The other significant difference was the strength of the link between Old Boys and the RAAF. The tragedy of the link would only be apparent after 1945, for the education provided by the Brothers in the inter-war years made entry into the RAAF possible for many

students who might otherwise have served in the infantry as the majority of their counterparts had in 1914. It was in the Infantry Battalions that so many of the preceding generation had been maimed or killed. Yet in an irony lost on those called upon to endure casualty rates which exceeded those on the Western Front, just as their education began to facilitate a greater social mobility it offered many of them a direct passage into a new armageddon devised by modern technology. For in World War Two, apart from isolated instances such as the annihilation of the 49<sup>th</sup> Bn at Sanananda (during which my great uncle was killed) the angel of death reserved his most potent work for Bomber Command aircrew, in which many of Nudgee and Gregory Terraces' airmen served.

The 45 Old Boys of Gregory Terrace and its brother school Nudgee College who were killed serving in Bomber and Coastal Commands came from 36 squadrons, only nine of which were even nominally Australian. A further dozen met their deaths flying fighter aircraft, and over fifty died in accidents. Men such as Frank Curr (NC) DFM and Bar flew 70 operations when the odds suggested that you could not survive 25. V. P. Brennan (NC) DFC DFM, fighter ace with ten aerial victories over Malta, was killed in an aircraft accident in Townsville in 1943; A. Heap (NC) who took his leave of his brothers in England, and said 'I cannot survive this is goodbye', was killed two weeks later over Berlin on Christmas Eve 1943; K. Biltoft (NC) flew 34 operations, and while returning home to his billets one night in England in 1944, heard a drunken Nudgee War Cry from a pub, and on entering found six Nudgee airmen in a state modern police might refer to as tired and emotional. The 1936 Lifesaving team at GT – G. Windsor shot down over North Sea, J. Venning RAN, Reid (POW), B. Mulcahy (RAAF POW), or Evan Thompson who wrote a final letter to his mother before his death and said:

Don't grieve you, darling Mother of mine, but rather be glad that I died for an ideal; an ideal that many others beside me have given their all, their life blood to fight for.<sup>28</sup>

**The last word for the almost 200 old boys killed in the second world war belongs to Leo McCormack (NC) in his final letter home:**

*It may be that I will not come back some night from the operations which are our part in the scheme of things. The possibility is always there, and while I have no premonition of death, I am preparing for that possibility by leaving this letter in the care of my best friend, Dick Williams. I have given him instructions that this letter is only to be forwarded when it has been definitely established that I have been killed. Therefore you must not go on hoping, for that would make only the more cruel, the inevitable confirmation of my death.*

*You must have no regrets, only a deep pride in the knowledge that one of your sons has been granted the honour of dying for his ideals. We all must make sacrifices, and your sacrifice is greater than mine. I give only a life, which was first given to me by you. I give it cheerfully because I believe that a world as yet unborn will be forever free from the terrorism, and tyranny and horror, which our world has known. I am proud that our country has earned her place as a foundation member of a free world.*

*The benefits of this war will not be reaped immediately after victory. Many people will be blinded by bitterness and greed; many more will become apathetic through the inevitable delays and confusion. Only a comparative few will possess the initiative and courage and tenacity of purpose to make concrete realities out of the ideals for which we are now fighting. That will be the real victory. I want Australia to lead these few, and you the people are Australia. That is why you will make your sacrifice as cheerfully as I do. You will realise that yours is the task we cannot attempt, that yours is the obligation we cannot share. You must never lose sight of the ultimate aim, a decent world for everyone.*

*It must never be allowed to happen again, that people should be barred from sharing the heritage that is theirs by right. I speak for youth everywhere, in any country, when I insist, none of us are fighting for patriotism, or loyalties, or religions. We are not dying that any one country or group of countries can dominate a world by force. We are fighting and dying so that the average man will receive a fair deal, no matter what he does, or where he breathes. Just*

*recognition of the right of man to a decent living, to happiness, to personal freedom, must be given.*

*When this recognition comes, though we are not alive to see it, you will be happy, for you will know we have not died in vain. When this war is ended, and secrets have to be kept no longer, you will learn just what my job was, how important it was, and how worthwhile. At present all I can say is that I am navigating night fighters. This is the trust that has been given to a privileged few of the youth of the free world. Our immediate task is the protection of the people of England, from the death dealing hell of enemy bombers. That we are not protecting you, our own people, when yours is the greater need, is just one of those anomalies or blunders which occur, through selfish politics, or blind stupidity. Even so I feel great satisfaction in the knowledge of the nature of our job. To know that through our efforts some little toddler may some day learn that the night sky is something beautiful to love and admire, not just a huge bomb bay for fire and death, that some young mother may not fear, with a selfish fear, the coming of night, that young men can look forward to rearing his children, in a better world than we have known, and look to a future, without an unknown dread. That is the satisfaction, that is mine today, and which dear home, must be yours till we meet again.<sup>29</sup>*

*Martin Kerby is currently the Head of Middle School Social Science at St Joseph's Nudgee College and curator of the School Museum.*

*He is the author of two books – 'Undying Echoes: A History of St Joseph's Nudgee College at War' (2003), and 'Where Glory Awaits: A History of St Joseph's Gregory Terrace at War' (2005).*

*Martin has also had articles published both in Australia and the United States, most notably by the Napoleonic Society of America, investigating the role of sea power in the defeat of Napoleon. His current research interests include the Empire Air Training Scheme and the experiences of Bomber Command Aircrew during the Second World War.*

## ENDNOTES:

---

- 1 T.P. Boland, *Nudgee 1891-1991* (Brisbane: Boolarong Publications, 1991), 38.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Patrick O'Farrell, *The Irish in Australia* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1987), 5.
- 4 Boland, op cit, 38.
- 5 Nudgee College Annual, 1906, 30-31.
- 6 ibid.
- 7 Nudgee College Annual 1915.
- 8 AWM 3DRL/3250. All subsequent references to this record.
- 9 AWM PR88/053 All subsequent references to this record.
- 10 Letter 1916.
- 11 Nudgee College Annual 1915, 33-34.
- 12 The Maryborough Chronicle.
- 13 ibid.
- 14 AWM 1DRL/0141.
- 15 Undated letter.
- 16 AWM Red Cross File 2560502.
- 17 Nudgee College Annual 1914, 67.
- 18 J.W.Alcorn, *History of 41st Battalion*, (Lismore, NSW: Self Published, 1985).
- 19 Unidentified Toowong newspaper.
- 20 Letter, 21 March 1918.
- 21 Nudgee College Annual 1915, 42.
- 22 H.Nelson, *Australians under Nippon* (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1985).
- 23 Letter, September 1945.
- 24 Interview - with Ron Ashton, 2003.
- 25 Interview - Kevin Snee, 2003.
- 26 Interview - W (Bill) O'Reilly.
- 27 Interview with Dormer Andrews, 2003.
- 28 Undated Letter from Evan Thompson.
- 29 Undated Letter from Leo McCormack.