

# The Military Historical Society of Australia

ACT BRANCH

## **LE GROGNARD!**

May 2010

Committee 2009/2010

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### NOTE!

Next Meeting – Monday 24 May 2010

Venue: Hellenic Club, Matilda St, Woden, 7:30pm

Next Meeting:

## AUSTRALIA'S PART IN THE MANHATTAN PROJECT

Presented by ROHAN GOYNE

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### MILITriviARIA

#### THE LAST MAN, AMONG OTHERS

In 1949, two years before her death at 88, Daisy Bates (the self-taught anthropologist renowned for welfare work among Aborigines) enquired of government authorities as to the whereabouts of the son of her second marriage, born 63 years earlier. She'd had no such need to enquire as to what had happened to her first husband. Lieutenant Harry Harbord Morant - the 'Breaker' - had died in front of a firing squad, along with Lieutenant Peter Joseph Handcock, on 27 February 1902 in Pretoria, South Africa.

Some visitors to the Australian War Memorial are confused when they see the name of Handcock inscribed on the Roll of Honour under the Boer War listings, but not that of the better known Morant. The listing for Handcock is, however, for Private Hugh Hunter Handcock, NSW Imperial Bushmen, who was killed in action at Reneke, Renoster Kop on 29 November 1900, and who was not related to Morant's fellow officer. [Lieutenants Morant and Handcock are of course not listed as they were not serving in an Australian unit at the time of death.] The name of Morant, however, does appear elsewhere on the Roll of Honour, along with others by the name of Handcock, as well as that of Witton - the other Australian officer

continued next page

*Any person, irrespective of occupation and age, who has an interest in the study and research of military: history, customs, traditions, dress, arms, equipment, medals, and kindred matters, is most welcome to attend meetings.*

*Anyone interested in joining the Society may contact the ACT Branch Secretary, PO Box 7139 Watson, ACT, 2602.*

*Feel welcome to visit our website at: <[www.mhsa.org.au](http://www.mhsa.org.au)>.*

found guilty during the court martial proceedings that led to the execution of Morant and Handcock. Included are:

- \* Flight Sergeant Allan Ralph Morant - no relation - a 28-year-old accountant from Melbourne; a navigator with 460 Squadron, he died on 19 September 1942 along with the rest of his crew when the Halifax they were flying between RAF dromes in southern England twice overshot a landing, following which one engine caught fire and the aircraft stalled, then spun and crashed.
- \* Lieutenant Commander Richard Daniel Anthony Handcock - no relation - a 36-year-old career naval officer from Sydney, who lost his life when HMAS Sydney was sunk in November 1941.
- \* Leading Telegraphist Bertram Lindsay Witton - no relation - a 25-year-old sailor from Perth, who was another of the 645 personnel onboard HMAS Sydney when it sank.
- \* Private John Augustus Witton - no relation - a 24-year-old boundary rider from Sydney, who had the extreme misfortune to be shot by [not-so] "friendly fire": 'He went out at Fleurbaix, France on the night of 13 July 1916 to try to locate a German sniper. As he came back he was challenged but apparently did not hear it. One of our men shot him, in the belief he was an enemy'.

As for George Ramsdale Witton, found guilty along with Morant and Handcock, his sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. After serving 28 months he was released when his life sentence was overturned by the British House of Commons in August 1904 following intervention in his case by, among others, Alfred Deakin and Winston Churchill. Later on he wrote that 'When war was declared between the British and the Boers ... I could not rest content until I had offered the assistance one man could give ...'

However, upon the outbreak of the Great War, unlike many Boer War veterans who rushed to enlist, Witton's disillusionment and bitterness caused him to stand back. Prime Minister Andrew Fisher had pledged Australia's assistance to "the last man", and Witton is reported to have said: 'I am the last man'.

There was no such hesitation on the part of one of his brothers: Sydney Watson Witton, who had been too young to serve in South Africa, enlisted on 17 August 1914 less than a fortnight after the declaration of war. Two nephews, sons of two other brothers, also served. One went on to receive the Military Medal late in the war 'for conspicuous courage and devotion to duty during [a Western Front] attack'.

And what of Daisy Bates' son? Arnold Hamilton Bates, born in Bathurst - as was Peter Handcock - was just eight years old when in 1894 Daisy returned to England from where she'd emigrated ten years earlier, leaving him in the care of his father. She returned to Australia in 1899, and in 1901 temporarily rejoined her husband and son before finally leaving them the following year when Arnold was aged sixteen. It seems possible that she never saw her son again. [In 1918, seeking the Army's assistance to trace Arnold she advised that she'd written 'many, many letters to my son from whom I received no reply'.]

Arnold had trained as a motor mechanic and early in 1916 enlisted in the 4/4th Pioneers, AIF, only to be discharged five months later on compassionate grounds - his wife was seriously ill, and together with three small children, one recently born, had been turned out on the street when her mother and step-father with whom she'd been living moved from country NSW to Sydney. Subsequently things presumably settled down on the domestic front as Arnold went on to serve overseas for nearly two years from late 1917 in the Australian Flying Corps as an Air Mechanic 2nd Class. In 1940 he wrote to the Army to obtain a copy of his discharge certificate, describing himself as 'a stranger ... in a strange land' - he was in New Zealand at the time. What eventually became of Daisy's son is not known; she may have outlived him.

Daisy herself was born Daisy May O'Dwyer in Tipperary, Ireland in 1863; her mother's maiden name was Marguarette Hunt. And it was of course the death at the hand of the Boers of Captain Percy Hunt - no relation - that led to the series of incidents which subsequently resulted in the charges of shooting Boer prisoners for which Lieutenants 'Breaker' Morant, Peter Handcock and George Witton received their capital punishment sentences.

**Ian Stagoll**