

Broken gargoyles: the disfigured soldiers of the first world war

The amputees, the blind and the shell-shocked formed the public, stoic face of Australia's Great War 'sacrifice'

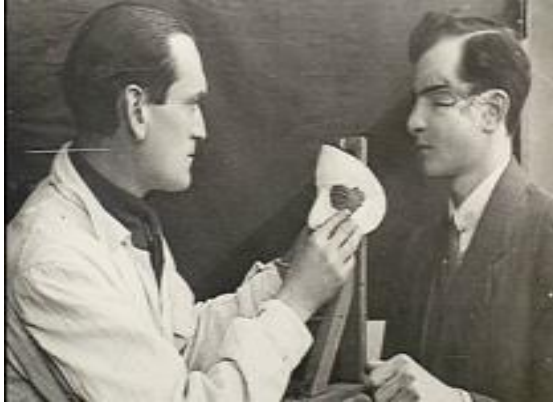


William Kearsey, a 25-year-old infantryman from Inverell. Photograph: Public Domain/Australian War Memorial Photograph: Public Domain
By Paul Daley, 25 May 2014

Tens of thousands of badly wounded Australian veterans stoically participated in the earliest Anzac Day parades after the end of the first world war.

Look at the old photographs and you'll see many of the 155,000 service men who were wounded on the various fronts, being pushed in wheelchairs by fellow veterans, or hobbling along with the aid of prosthetic limbs, crutches and walking sticks. There are the many blind men too, tap-tap-tapping their way along the main streets of the towns and cities with their white canes, clinging to the elbows of comrades.

Study those sepia images carefully today and you might see them off to the side – ghostly figures with faces shadowed under broad-rimmed hats or even more self-consciously concealed with scarfs. They were the old soldiers who were so horribly facially disfigured that even they referred to themselves as the “broken gargoyles”.



English army medical officer making a mould for a soldier's facial injury. Photograph: Public Domain/Australian War Memorial Photograph: Public Domain/Australian War Memorial

Many of the limbless ex-servicemen could disguise their disabilities. For the facially disfigured, however, the return to civilian life could be far more conspicuous and unforgiving.

The amputees, the blind, and even those with “shell shock”, formed the public, stoic face of Australia’s Great War “sacrifice”.

But despite numbering as many as 37,000, so confronting – even frightening – were the facially disfigured, that many became socially marginalised on repatriation. While a few wore special custom-made masks to conceal their missing noses, ears, mouths and jaws, others simply withdrew from normal civilian life by abandoning parents, wives and children – upon whom they were often dependant for tube or spoon feeding – for the bush, where they were less conspicuous.

Many others killed themselves or died in suspicious accidents.



William Kearsley: In October 1917, shrapnel struck Kearsley in the face, severely gashing his face. Photograph: Public Domain/Australian War Memorial Photograph: Public Domain/Australian War Memorial

A century after the war began a young Australian academic has been moved to tell the stories of these shunned servicemen from Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada and New Zealand. Kerry Neale, an archivist at the Australian War Memorial and a PhD candidate at the University of

NSW, has spent six years tracing the plight of thousands of soldiers – with particular emphasis on the Australians – who received revolutionary facial reconstruction treatment at what was then known as the Queen’s hospital in Sidcup, Kent, England.

Using repatriation files and Australian and English medical records, so intimate has she become with her research subjects that she now refers to them with the deepest affection as “my boys”.

“Although they are strapping men, some of whom went on to live fantastic lives, when I consider their stories and look at their photographs, they become my boys,” she says.

Their stories are invariably deeply moving, often tragic. The photographs of the men – with lower jaws, noses, mouths and eyes missing – are very confronting and disturbing. You look and immediately wonder: how did they manage to live?



Queen’s Hospital football team for wounded soldiers. Photograph: Public Domain/Australian War Memorial Photograph: Public Domain/Australian War Memorial

Neale points out that while the weapons of modern warfare – cannon and mortar shells, and the machine gun – increased the prevalence of such terrible wounds, rapid advances in battlefield medicine and facial reconstruction surgery meant that men with such terrible injuries to the face and neck were often saved.

“Obviously, I had that initial gut reaction to the photographs – that physical response that a lot of people do when they see the photos – and I thought the only way that I’d be able to overcome that is through understanding. Understanding the medical technique, the innovation that was going on at the time, and then what their lives were like afterwards,” says Neale, [who is speaking about her research in Canberra on Monday night](#).

“That was the only way I was going to be able to come to terms with what I hadn’t even realised was such a high proportion of facial wounds among the casualties that were coming back. I’d never even thought of it. It was the amputee, the shell-shock victim – that is the first world war wounded.”

About 12% of Australian casualties were men wounded in the head or neck. They are men like William Kearsley, a 25-year-old infantryman from Inverell, New South Wales, who wanted to

serve so badly that he had corrective surgery on his eyes before the enlistment officer would accept him into the 33rd Battalion.

In October 1917, shrapnel struck Kearsy in the face while he was serving on the European western front, severely gashing his face from the forehead, across the bridge of his nose and through his cheek.

Saved at a battlefield clearing station, he was then evacuated to the Queen's hospital where he – along with 5,000 other soldiers of the empire – underwent revolutionary facial reconstruction surgery under the expert guidance of the highly skilled New Zealand surgeon Harold Gillies. And then he was shipped home to Inverell.

Although Kearsy's reconstructive surgery was a comparative success, he initially withdrew when he returned home. He broke up with the woman to whom he had been engaged before the war, and worked as a farm labourer.

“Of course we don't know for certain what happened. But it is fair to assume – maybe she was worried that he would never be able to find work and wouldn't be able to provide. Obviously that's a real concern going into a marriage,” Neale says of Kearsy's broken relationship.

“Your personality, your identity all shines through your face. And for these men, they had to learn how to talk again, how to breathe again, how to engage with their loved ones – you know, you can't just smile at someone and have them understand, now that you no longer have a mouth to smile with.

“You read stories of alcoholism, of becoming estranged from families and of them abandoning wives and of being unemployed, just an ongoing trial and error with trying to find work ... I mean these men would refer to themselves as broken gargoyles. They knew that they no longer looked like the men who had gone off to war. They were different. And they would be constantly reminded, while they were at the Sidcup hospital, of how people, once they returned home, would react. You had nurses who were worried about taking off bandages because they knew there was going to be no face under there. So they knew how people responded to the types of disfigurement that they were carrying. Obviously, on the flip side, you have wives who were not able to adjust to the changed appearance.”

Gillies referred to his patients at Sidcup as “my boys” and “my brave lot”. The patients supported one another as a strong community grew around the institution and its legion of disfigured men.

The men wrote musical scores about their plight. They also staged dramatic performances that hinged on questions of the existential, of identity, and often included elaborate costumes and masks. The hospital also raised its own football team to compete against non-hospital teams.

“They had a football team. And they used to say that they were always guaranteed of a win because whichever team came up against them they'd take one look at the patients and run in the opposite direction,” Neale said.

After everything was done for an injured veteran surgically, the more badly disfigured would be offered prosthetic facial features and masks, which were custom-made at the so-called “Tin noses shop” at the Third London general hospital in Wandsworth.

Unlike the limbless veterans, who were assisted by special support groups on repatriation, the facially disfigured were largely left to find their own way. Their plight was rarely mentioned in the newspapers or specifically taken up by the Returned and Services League.

But somehow some men like William Kearsy endured and even flourished.

“The men who did best realised that this injury would affect the rest of their lives. But it didn’t have to define it,” Neale says.

William Kearsy became a professional wool-classer and, after a period of isolation, became heavily involved in his local community and the affairs of the RSL. He chose to live on, where others in his situation permanently retreated from the world.

Like the disfigured veteran from Caulfield in Melbourne, who returned to his wife’s boarding house where he drank heavily while, in his own words, “suffering from nerves”. With his terrible appearance and drinking, he frightened the boarders and his wife expressed fears for her own life to the authorities. Eventually, and inevitably perhaps, he suicided with poison. Afterwards, in order to attain a pension, his widow struggled to convince the authorities that her husband’s suicide was war-related.

Another facially disfigured veteran from nearby Richmond went to his local bowling club on Anzac Day, 1954. That day he drank – as he often did, according to his wife – “because his face used to get him down”. He drowned in the nearby river. His wife explained that he would have “drown [sic] easily because he hardly had any swallow poor fellow” (his mouth having been so distorted and reduced in size).

Kerry Neale understands why some people might be “turned off” by looking at the photos of these men.

“But that is the whole point of my research. These men weren’t looked at, they were ignored, 100 years ago. Isn’t it time that we afforded them the respect they are due by just looking at them?”

Some of the photographs are, however, easier to contemplate. Like William Kearsy’s wedding picture from 1951 when, at 59, he married Verdun Frances Mary, a young woman born in 1917 – the year he was so badly injured on the western front. Later, the Kearsys adopted a son and William lived contentedly well into his seventies.

“I’ve had a few photos sent through from family members of the men once they got into their old age,” says Neale. “And all of a sudden their disfigurement changes. They just become old. The lines and everything soften and you just get these men whose faces are worn – just well worn rather than disfigured. It’s really a very beautiful thing.”

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Personal battle told

By Michèle Jedlicka

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Only 16 days into his war, Inverell man, William Kearsley, was in the line of an exploding shell that would alter his life forever.

It was the third battle at Ypres, on October 3, 1917. The injury was so devastating, the member of the 33rd Battalion was initially left for dead.

It was a fellow Inverell resident, Sergeant Jack Gaukroger, who recognised there was life in the wounded man, and he had him transported to the field hospital. It was from that point the arduous journey to healing began for the man, known back home as Bill Kearsley.

The irony is that the young soldier had an elective surgery on his eyes to enlist in 1916.

Bill's story will be one of eight in an exhibition at the Melbourne Museum titled World War I: Love and Sorrow, telling personal stories of individuals afflicted by the conflict, including a mother, soldiers and brothers fighting side-by-side.

Local man, Peter Kearsley was adopted at age 14 after his arrival from England by Bill and his wife Verdi in 1960. It is Peter's voice that museum visitors will hear as they view the images and learn about Bill's story of injury, healing and life beyond the war.

The exhibition opens on August 29 and will run until 2018.

Australian War Museum collection curator and researcher, Kerry Neale, has spent the past six years invested in thousands of lives of disfigured World War I soldiers from Australia, New Zealand, Canada and England. It is the subject of her current PhD, and the idea came to her while listening to a radio program.

“A gentleman rang in saying that he had a series of photographs of his grandfather’s nose reconstruction. He’d lost his nose during the Battle of the Somme,” Kerry said.

“What struck me was this grandchild described his grandfather’s eyes as dimming a little in each of the photographs; that he’d lost that spark of life.”

Kerry said she was intrigued to learn more about how the injuries had robbed that soldier of his essence and she resolved to learn more.

During her research, she came across Bill Kearsley more than once, and it is her work on the man with help from Peter and other Kearsley relatives that is seen in the Melbourne exhibit.

Bill Kearsley’s face was literally blown apart by shrapnel from an Allied shell seized by the Germans. Photos taken do not reveal the initial extent of his wounds, but they do show the crevasse which cleft his forehead in half.

He endured 29 major surgeries at the Queen’s Hospital at Sidcup, England in 18 months. Those who resided at Sidcup benefited from the care of a New Zealand surgeon, Harold Gillies, and a team of dedicated nurses who looked after not only the physical care but mental well-being of the healing soldiers.

There was also mental stimulation with patients learning toy-making and woodwork. Gillies also came onto the wards and visited with the men. He actively consulted with them about their reconstruction and asked for their preferences.

What makes the Kearsley story so remarkable is the extent of his injury, medical treatment and how early 20th century plastic surgery, infection management, and anaesthesia rocketed in their advancement during a time when surgeons were faced with horrific injuries on the wards.

“The trauma that he would have gone through physically as well as emotionally, wondering what life was going to be like after he left the hospital, but physically he could have gone through quite a bit of pain,” Kerry said.

“It’s a slow process. You had to undergo one operation, recover from that before you could move on to the next phase in the reconstruction. A lot of it involved pedicle tubes, which were flaps of skin, which actually meant the skin could be grafted and still attached to the body so there was a continuous flow of blood.”

The process gave good results, but meant months between operations.

Peter said during his father's reconstruction, he actually had his arm attached to his head to facilitate blood flow to the healing facial tissue.

Allegedly engaged or at least involved with a young woman before his departure to the front, Kearsy was a single man after his return in 1919. Peter said when his father was due to return home, he was advised to keep to himself.

"He told me that when he came back, the surgeon said down go out to the towns, stay in the bush as much as you can, because you'll be shunned by the people. And basically, he did," Peter said.

Incredibly, Bill was denied a soldier's pension until 1964, and did not receive a soldier's settlement plot.

He began his life back in Inverell as a lease holder at Long Plain and gradually built up a life at Severn Vale as farmer, cattle and wool producer on his own property of 100 acres to a holding of 4500 acres. He eventually became a husband at age 59, and active community member.

Bill married Verdun Forsyth, a young woman on a neighbouring property in 1951.

"It was one of those long-time friendships before they eventually got married. I loved her right from the start," Peter said, recalling the moment he met his future adoptive mother when she met him at the Inverell train station.

Peter was taken in by the Kearsys as a last in a line of young men who came through the Big Brother program, to give boys a start in Australia. The couple grew attached to the boy and decided to adopt Peter to carry on the Kearsy name.

"He was hard, but he was fair," Peter said.

"He never expected anybody to do anything that he wouldn't do. For a man who'd had his disfigurement and been knocked about so much by his wounds, he was a very successful man. He just got on with life."

Though he was affected by dust and dry weather as he no longer had tear ducts as a result of the war injuries, and he was compelled to go to bed during thunderstorms due to the psychological trauma, it was diabetes that eventually affected Bill's vision and health.

Peter said Bill began to seriously decline after he received devastating news about his beloved Verdi's terminal cancer. Verdi died in 1969 at age 58 and Bill followed her, passing away at age 80 in 1971.

The couple is buried together at the Inverell cemetery.