

PLOD ESSAY

Wonthaggi in Wartime



Wonthaggi Citizen's Band marches towards the railway station to farewell Wonthaggi's first group of WWI volunteers (seen marching behind) in 1914.¹

"I would say to the House... I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears and sweat", was Winston Churchill's submission to the House of Commons in his first speech as Prime Minister.² This bitter truth reflected the lived experience of the Second World War for soldiers and citizens alike. It also highlights the terrible toll extracted by all wars and armed conflicts. It is a burden known all too well by the residents of Wonthaggi and the surrounding area.

The stoic citizens of the Wonthaggi district have played an important role in Australia's wartime history. Hundreds of men and women have served with great distinction. Tragically, many have paid the ultimate sacrifice in service of their country. But enormous contributions have also been made, and tragedies borne, by families, workers and citizens away from the frontline. This essay highlights a small sample of Wonthaggi's eclectic wartime experiences.

World War I

At the outbreak of the First World War, Wonthaggi was still very much in its early stages. Even though the town had only been established five years in 1914, the State Coal Mine was up and running. About 6,000 people lived in the town and its surrounds. Approximately 1,000 men were working underground. Thousands of tons of coal had already been mined.³

¹ Photograph from the W&DHS collection (P02822)

² Winston Churchill, *First Speech as Prime Minister to House of Commons*, May 13, 1940.

³ Sam Gatto, *Contribution and Conflict*, pp.8-12.

This made the mine and the town an important strategic national asset in support of the wartime effort. As such, much of the town's workforce – the miners, railway employees and auxiliary staff – were deemed to hold essential roles. But that essential status didn't stop many of Wonthaggi's men enlisting. Throughout the war, many left the mine and travelled to Melbourne to enlist, most gave 'labourer' as their occupation.

News that Britain had declared war on Germany reached Wonthaggi by cable on the night of August 4, 1914 or in the early hours of August 5. Wonthaggi's councillors, mine staff and its residents took immediate action. By August 6, members of Wonthaggi's Rifle Club had been allocated to guard the State Coal Mine around the clock.⁴

A public meeting, held on the McBride Ave. hill, was attended by between 1,500 and 2,000 residents. At the meeting Cr. Wishart proposed that, "Wonthaggi form a citizen's defence league for the purpose of doing our share in the defence of the State, Australia, and if need calls, the Empire."⁵ The motion was carried unanimously.

A local Patriotic Fund was also established to raise money in support of the war effort. Under the heading 'Troops for Europe', the local paper also announced that Lieutenant Maxfield of the 48th Infantry (which was the local militia unit) would take enrolments from volunteers for the war in Europe.⁶

On the Tuesday afternoon of August 18, 1914 the Wonthaggi railway station was overflowing with people there to farewell the town's first group of volunteers. Boys and girls were given the day off school and many businesses closed to mark the occasion.⁷ It was nearly nine months (in March 1915) before first letters from the troops began arriving back to the town.⁸ Those letters, and many others, were published by the local papers.

News of the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli was reported in *Wonthaggi's Sentinel* on May 7, 1915. The next week, the paper reported, "By their heroism and self-sacrifice they have won congratulations on their magnificent and brilliant achievements against a remorseless and implacable foe."⁹

At that point in time, the community was not yet aware, but Wonthaggi had already lost two residents – Robert Johan Oliver and Harold Vernon Jordon. At least another eight would pay the ultimate sacrifice in the Gallipoli Campaign.¹⁰ The Wonthaggi War Memorial commemorates the names of twenty six men who lost their lives in WWI.

News of heavy casualties at Gallipoli and on the Western Front began to appear in subsequent news reports. The 'Roll of Honour' section became a regular feature:

PRIVATE C.W. GRAY, wounded, is a son of Mr. W. ("Billy") Gray, well-known member of the Powlett branch of the Australasian Coal Miners Association. He is 23 years of age and was

⁴ Sam Gatto, *Contribution and Conflict*, pp.27-28.

⁵ *Powlett Express*, August 14, 1914.

⁶ Sam Gatto, *Contribution and Conflict*, p.30.

⁷ Sam Gatto, *Contribution and Conflict*, p.31.

⁸ Sam Gatto, *Contribution and Conflict*, p.35.

⁹ *Powlett Express*, May 7, 1915.

¹⁰ Sam Gatto, *Contribution and Conflict*, p.37.

employed in various capacities at the State coal mine almost from its commencement. He was one of the first of the Wonthaggi boys to volunteer and is a member of the 6th Battalion.¹¹

It would have made tragic reading for local the families and friends of those serving abroad. Those reports would last three long years through until November 1918.

The exact number of men who enlisted from Wonthaggi, or were from Wonthaggi and enlisted elsewhere, is impossible to tell¹² but the local papers reported it as being more than 800.¹³

When news of the armistice with German finally arrived, Wonthaggi's citizens celebrated for days. "[A]ll the town closed up, and splendid demonstrations took place during the afternoon and night" the *Powlett Express* reported.¹⁴

World War II

The strategic importance of Wonthaggi and its mine was again obvious, perhaps even more so, during the Second World War. So much so that, in early-1942, Prime Minister John Curtin publicly praised the contributions being made. "The miners of Wonthaggi have voluntarily and without cost to the government built a splendid system of air raid shelters to meet the town's requirements", Mr Curtin stated in a public address.¹⁵

PRIME MINISTER PRAISES WONTHAGGI MINERS

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THE Prime Minister was making a comparison between Wonthaggi and the miners in New South Wales who absented themselves from work. The actions of these men were in complete contrast with that of the coal miners as a body whose efforts now had resulted in a greater output of coal in Australia than ever before. All the northern pits of New South Wales and all miners in Victoria, Queensland, Tasmania and Western Australia were working at full capacity.

The Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser, March 6, 1942

While geographically a long way from the action, Wonthaggi was deemed to be a prime target for attack. This importance was due to an acute demand for coal to operate the railway system and power the Nations munitions factories. "Every ounce of coal is wanted for our war efforts. Australia wants coal as much as she does guns, planes, and munitions", claimed *The Powlett Express* in February 1943.¹⁶

Prior to the war, Victoria's railway and industry supplemented supply with imported coal, most of which arrived by sea. This arrangement was a byproduct of the fact that the country's various State railway networks used different gauge tracks which made overland interstate freight both difficult and expensive.

¹¹ *The Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, May 21, 1915

¹² Sam Gatto, *Contribution and Conflict*.

¹³ *The Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, May 16, 1916.

¹⁴ *The Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, November 15, 1918.

¹⁵ *The Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, March 6, 1942.

¹⁶ *The Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, February 20, 1943.

During the war, Japanese submarine activity along the eastern seaboard disrupted maritime shipping supply lines meaning Victorian industry, including its munitions factories, were heavily reliant on local coal.

Wonthaggi's miners heeded the call, and the Union pledged, on behalf of its miners, that the workforce would be fully mobilised. That meant the miners would restrain from strike action. Shifts were increased, from two to three each day. The miners also worked Sundays and during their holidays.

In a 1942 public address, the Wonthaggi Union Official Mr J. McVicars highlighted the important work the town's miners were doing, "We can't let our men down. We will not let them down. We intend to discipline ourselves, to see that no irresponsible action on our part leaves one ton of coal below that should be speeding on its way to some war factory."¹⁷

Throughout the Second World War, coal mines across Australia operated at full capacity. That effort resulted in a greater output of coal than ever before.

Many of Wonthaggi's residents also mobilised. This included individuals, local clubs and business raising a significant amount of money to support the war effort. It also meant adhering to strict blackout and food rationing requirements. Notably, that meant beer rationing across the state, much to the concern of local reporters, publicans and (most vocally) imbibers!¹⁸

Humour aside, inconvenience and fear pervaded many aspects of daily life. Elaborate measures for civilian evacuation were discussed and planned. This included proposals to use disused mine tunnels as shelters in the event of invasion.

Wonthaggi residents volunteered to monitor the skies for enemy activity. Sam Gatto's book *Wonthaggi Volunteer Air Observers Corps 1942-1945* details the exploits of the 32nd Wonthaggi Air Observers Corps. They commenced operations in January 1942. Volunteers observed the skies day and night for enemy planes, ready to alert the town of enemy invasion. Their vigilance continued for four years. Up to 200 air-spotters were involved, 70 per cent of whom were women.¹⁹

Wonthaggi's recent wartime experiences

Wonthaggi's various local newspapers also contain many mentions of service men and women from the Wonthaggi area who have been involved in Australia's other armed conflicts over the years. This includes accounts from Korea, Vietnam, the East Timor peacekeeping efforts as well as the Afghanistan and Gulf War conflicts.

For example, an edition of the *Wonthaggi Sentinel* from April 1952 includes a letter from Able Seaman Thomson of North Wonthaggi who served in Korea aboard the HMAS Bataan. Thomson writes of bitterly cold temperatures and the action he saw with 'The Reds', against enemy gun positions positioned ashore. He

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Use of this and other mine tunnels in the event of an air raid was suggested at a meeting of the council last week when consideration was being given to anti-air raid precautions.

Cr. Evans suggested that steps be taken to investigate the possibility of using the tunnels for such a purpose but the council decided to hold the matter over for a while.

¹⁷ *The Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, March 6, 1942.

¹⁸ *The Powlett Express and Victorian State Coalfields Advertiser*, April 2, 1942.

¹⁹ Sam Gatto, *Wonthaggi Volunteer Air Observers Corps 1942-1945*.

also shares a humorous anecdote about how the ship's captain lost his best suit. According to Thomson, "[the captain] swore revenge and from our past activities he is getting it."²⁰

The local papers also include many pieces on Wonthaggi's experience of the Vietnam War. There are reports of conscription call-ups, departures, visits home, the men's experiences while in country and their returns. Daryl Kerslake, Rob Dent, Jim and John Dowson, Bruce McKinnon, Graham Otte, John Quilford, Stan Whitford and many others are regularly mentioned.

The August 28, 1967 edition of the *Wonthaggi Express* includes a report headlined 'Our first boy is back from Vietnam'. It describes the return of Russell Morgan of Reed Crescent.

The interview describes Russell's time in Vietnam, the foods he ate, his interactions with the Vietnamese as well as action with the Viet Cong. Russell talks of his impending return to work as a storeman at Cyclone Forgings as well as his wedding plans. His parents are interviewed and speak of their relief at having him home safely.²¹

Jim Dowson talks of the importance of ANZAC Day commemorations in the documentary *The Tunnel Rats*, which the W&DHS has a copy of. It recounts the regular ANZAC Day reunions of the men he served with in the 3rd Troop, 1st Squadron, South Vietnam. In it, Jim says:

"Why are we so close? You know, forget the war, why are we so close? Really, I can't put a why it happened. But there's blokes out there, they're like brothers. And I always try to think, know why is it? We were there, we had a job to do. We came back. Now we're great mates."²²

Jim's comments provide a fleeting glimpse of the comradery shared by those who have served but also hint the broader sacrifice and toll of war. This essay highlights only a tiny sample of the diverse contribution and eclectic experience of Wonthaggi's servicemen and women as well as the town's residents during wartime. However, in doing so, hopefully it conveys the importance of acknowledging the contributions and sacrifices that have been made by so many – both at home and abroad – during Australia's armed conflicts.

This essay is an extended version of a speech delivered by Rees Quilford for Wonthaggi's 2023 ANZAC Day commemorations. It draws heavily on the W&DHS local newspaper collection as well as Sam Gatto's books 'Contribution and Conflict: A History of Wonthaggi and the First World War' and 'Wonthaggi Volunteer Air Observers Corps 1942-1945'.



²⁰ *Powlett Express*, April 18, 1952.

²¹ *Wonthaggi Express*, August 28, 1967.

²² Jim Dowson in *The Tunnel Rats* which is held in the W&DHS Oral History collection (OH-0224).