

CROKER PRIZE FOR BIOGRAPHY 2021

2114 The Day the Spanish Raiders Went out the Window

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The Day the Spanish Raiders Went Out the Window!

'Look out Jack!', Colin yelled as he hurled the venomous snake that had just crawled out of the cane field, in Jack's general direction. Jack hollered back and flung his machete high. Whether it was aimed at Colin or the snake, we cannot be sure!¹

Oh, those family trees! Certified documents become the leaves, and once they are in your hands, the tree can be added to - or pruned, with confidence. However, the fruit of growing a family tree, is the discovery of the human stories hidden behind those leaves. They are sweet morsels! Like the wedding location at the 'Hit or Miss Hotel'; or the baby born 'onboard' just shy of Sydney; or the young man mysteriously changing his name, affecting six generations; or brothers working in cane fields.¹⁻⁶

'Who *are* these people?!' I have asked myself.

I had never wanted to be a family history buff, but I too have had my historical epiphany. One day a simple question came up, needing an answer.

'Did we really come from Spanish Raiders, like Nana said?'⁷

I decided to find out, and the rest as they say, is history - family history to be exact! The Spanish Raiders quest had not been underway for very long however, when it dawned on me, that my Nana had two little brothers who enlisted in World War 1. I had *never* heard of Jack and Colin being soldiers. Ah, a morsel!⁴

I spread two sets of war records across my dining table and began to absorb the details. As I did so, out the window went the Spanish Raiders! I also pieced together the family story that was rolling out around the brothers as the war broke out. It was fascinating. Their father had died suddenly in 1915, and the future was changed forever. Letters were written to request Jack be released from duty because his mother needed him. He was sent home before he saw combat. Some months later, his younger brother enlisted, and when Colin embarked from their nearest capital city, it is assumed that Jack was there to send him off because the following day, Jack re-enlisted. He seemed determined to go.^{8,7,4}

I learned how young they were when they each signed up and what battalions they joined. I discovered who was injured and where they rested and recovered. I learned if they were sick with Spanish flu or not, or if they went AWOL or not, and how they both survived the Western Front and returned home to make their way back into civilian life.⁸ On the day I found a confirmed photograph of Jack with a group of soldiers, I stared at him for a long time. I could see my Dad.⁹



The type of details I had found – wars, marriage, children, occupations, residences etc - was where online websites came into their own, but in this next moment, so did the phone book. Digital white pages to be exact!¹⁰ I knew Jack and Colin's home region. My Nana had spoken of those days a little bit, and I had one childhood memory of a visit to an old aunt there.⁷

'How hard could it be to find their descendants?', I thought as I typed their last name into the white pages. On my third attempt, I found a third cousin. We connected instantly, sharing family details.¹¹ This cousin turned out not to be a direct descendant to the soldiers, and those lines of our family were no longer in the town at all. I kept searching.

Real breakthrough came when I received a reply to an online message I had sent.¹² Yes, they knew who I was looking for. Their great aunt had married my great uncle, Jack-the soldier! They were also sure their Uncle Lenny might be helpful. Helpful indeed! Lenny was in touch with a living daughter of Jack's. He also connected me to a relative on my side that he thought could lead me to Colin's family. As I tapped in the phone number, I sensed that this time, I was on a roll.¹³

Gordon was over ninety. The old aunt I recalled meeting, turned out to be his mother. Gordon remembered everything, and had all kinds of stories, phone numbers and photos. Yes, he had the phone number of the two living daughters of Jack, and the one living son of Colin. Twelve months after I set out to search for Jack and Colin's family, I introduced myself to their children. Everyone was very kind. Delightfully, Colin's son Harry, lived less than an hour from me! He and his wife and I had catch ups over cuppa's, whilst I asked questions and they shared stories and photographs of Harry's father.¹⁴ At last, I had a photograph of each of my Nana's brothers in their AIF uniforms. I could also see my Nana reflected in Harry's real-life face. Amazing!

All this connecting made me realise how late a bloomer I was with my family history, and how much story I had missed. I was so grateful for the openness of others, like Gordon, to share their morsels with me.

Story is important. It gives life to certificates and faces to names and connects you to your lineage. You know you belong there. I was so impacted by the stories of the war¹⁵, I wrote an ode¹⁶; and on an ANZAC Day during the 100th anniversary years of WW1, I laid a wreath in honour of Jack and Colin. Their story and my response to it, was complete.

So, don't waste another minute – get your genealogy on! Like a beautifully hedged maize, you will get lost, stumped, turn back, double check, follow your instincts and find your way to the end. It will turn out to be very fruitful.

...Now, where was I? Oh yes, those Spanish Raiders ... google Scotland¹⁷ ... oh, wait just a minute ... click here, click there...

'Ah! This is a bit unexpected ... perhaps they were Vikings!'¹⁸

References

1. Story passed along the family line, as quoted to me by Gordon, 2016.
2. <https://www.bdm.vic.gov.au/proving-your-identity/certifying-documents>
3. [https://ballaratpubs.mirraheze.org/wiki/Hit_or_Miss_Hotel_\(Kooroocheang\)](https://ballaratpubs.mirraheze.org/wiki/Hit_or_Miss_Hotel_(Kooroocheang))
4. <https://www.ancestry.com.au/search/collections/61177/>
5. <https://familyhistory.bdm.nsw.gov.au/lifelink/familyhistory/search;jsessionid=96F0E4975B3E4286C04BA63A4C64B52C?0>
6. Story passed along the family line, confirmed to the family by a relative visiting NZ in the 1980's; later confirmed by my DNA that we belong to the NZ family line whose surname is not the same as my maternal great-grandfather. All his Australian documents refer to him with a new full name. He never used his birth name again.
 - a. <https://www.ancestry.com.au/dna>
7. My paternal grandmother's memoirs are in two forms taken down by her children in the 1980's: dictated and typed; interviewed and taped onto cassette, both formats copied and shared with the family.
8. <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRRetrieve/Interface/SearchScreens/BasicSearch.aspx>
9. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection>
10. <https://www.whitepages.com.au/>
11. Direct descendant of my paternal grandmother's eldest brother.
12. <https://www.ancestry.com.au/messaging>
13. Connection via ancestry message centre. They provided Lenny's phone number.
14. A copy of a family owned portrait photograph of Colin in his uniform.
15. A sample of some of the books, magazines, and media sources I have used to learn about WW1: bookstores, second-hand bookstores, libraries, online.

Books

Van Emden, Richard. Sapper Martin. Great Britain: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009.

Bevan, George. Jum's War. China: Pier 9, Murdoch Books Australia, 2007.

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Prilaux, Beuvin, Fiechtner, Fiechtner. The Silent Soldiers of Naours. Australia: New Holland Publishers Pty Ltd, 2017.

Ferguson, Penny (Editor). Ben and His Mates. Australia: Echo Books, 2018.

Periodical

The Complete Illustrated History of World War 1 – The Centenary Edition.

Sydney: Citrus Media, 2014.

Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6CTFQWqoyU>

The Lost Diggers | Never before seen photos of Australia's World War I soldiers | Sunday Night. 7News Spotlight, Nov 15, 2018

16. **Ode: Mud:** Unpublished, 2018
17. <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryMagazine/DestinationsUK/The-Battle-of-Glen-Shiel/>
18. <https://www.scotsman.com/arts-and-culture/vikings-still-running-rampant-scottish-dna-1504237>