

4: How did Soldiers Get to the Western Front?

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

During World War I, the Australian Government requisitioned dozens of merchant ships from commercial shipping companies for use as troopships. In addition to carrying troops, horses and military stores, these vessels also carried wool, metals, meat, flour and other foodstuffs, mainly for Britain and France. The fleet consisted mainly of British steamers and a few captured enemy ships. The ships were given the title 'His Majesty's Australian Transport' or HMAT. For the great majority of Australians who volunteered for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) the journey to the Western Front in Europe was the longest and most significant journey they had ever undertaken in their lives.

Lieutenant John Maguire, a reinforcement for the 24th Battalion AIF, from Bowen Vale, Victoria, went to Europe in two stages. He left Australia on HMAT *Afric* on 5 January 1916 and disembarked in Egypt where the AIF was training and preparing to head for France. On 25 March, Lieutenant Maguire boarded the converted British passenger liner *Megantic*, built by Harland and Wolff of Belfast, for the port of Marseilles in southern France. In his diary he wrote:

And now I have time to describe the Megantic. She is a fine boat originally a passenger but now a troopship. She has one funnel and has about 16,000 tons displacement. She has four decks ... we are pretty high out of the water. The gun is mounted on the stern and there are also four machine guns posted on both port and starboard sides ...

The main danger to the troopships was from German submarines — U-Boats — and Maguire reported that a day and night watch was kept for submarines on their trip to France.

There was little to do during the seven day voyage except hold inspection parades, mount guards and participate in lookout sessions for U-Boats. At Marseilles, Maguire encountered the French for the first time:

The French have quaint uniforms. Baggy looking red trousers with sky blue overcoats with the flaps buttoned back and postman's caps, also blue. A Frenchman with a cocked hat, like Napoleon, came aboard to change our money ...

From Marseilles, Maguire made the long train journey north to St Omer and his billet near Armentières. On the way, he passed through the Rhone Valley and the great city of Lyons:

The people ... gave us a great reception. I could see them waving towels, hats etc. in all directions ... Passed through Lyons on Sunday mid-day. By Jove, it is a great city. From what I saw a bit, it puts Melbourne in the shade. Broad clean streets with magnificent buildings and gardens.

Maguire's journey from Australia ended with a march of 15 kilometres, from St Omer to a village about 8 kilometres behind the front line:

We are now billeted in a barn ... I can hear the big guns booming like thunder. At night it is the worst. It makes our barn tremble and shiver.

Lieutenant John Timothy Maguire MC (Military Cross) was killed in Belgium at the Battle of Broodseinde on 4 October 1917. He has no known grave and he is commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing in Ieper (Ypres), Belgium. His diary is in the Australian War Memorial (AWM 2DRL/0322).

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AIMS

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| Students at Level 1/2/3: | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Identify and locate the Western Front in relation to Australia on a world map• Map how Australians travelled to the Western Front• Empathise with soldiers and families being parted |
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CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

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| Level 1/2/3 | <p>This is a simple activity that could be set as homework or for work during a library period.</p> <p>The understanding of the parting can be added to by having pairs of students role play the farewells. One person in a pair can be the soldier, and the other a friend, sibling, parent, fiancée, mate, etc. In this way several different relationships can be illustrated.</p> |
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AWM A00887

Soldiers sleeping and reading on the deck of HMAT (His Majesty's Australian Transport) *Ballarat*, 1915. Some men appear to be suffering from sea sickness.

Troops travelling to the Western Front would go from Alexandria in Egypt (if they had been to Gallipoli), to Marseilles in France, and by train to northern France or to the French port of Le Havre to go to England for training.

If they were leaving from Australia it would be from Fremantle, to go through the Suez Canal linking the Mediterranean with the Red Sea, or around Africa via Cape Town in South Africa, and then to Marseilles or England.

- ▮ Use an atlas to find the places named above, and then mark them on this map. Draw lines to show the different possible routes to get to the war from Australia.



Here are some photographs of soldiers departing for the war.

- 1) What do you think the soldiers might have felt at the time? List as many emotions as you can.



AWM H02236

HMAT A73 *Commonwealth* departing from Pinkenba wharf, Brisbane, QLD, with Australian soldiers on board, c1915.



AWM PB0084

Australian soldiers standing on the deck of troopship HMAT A31 *Ajana*, Port Melbourne, VIC, 8 July 1916.

- 1D Private Jim Martin was only 14 when he left for World War I. He died of disease at Gallipoli. Among the personal possessions which were sent back to his family was a streamer like the one below. Why do you think soldiers kept such things as streamers?



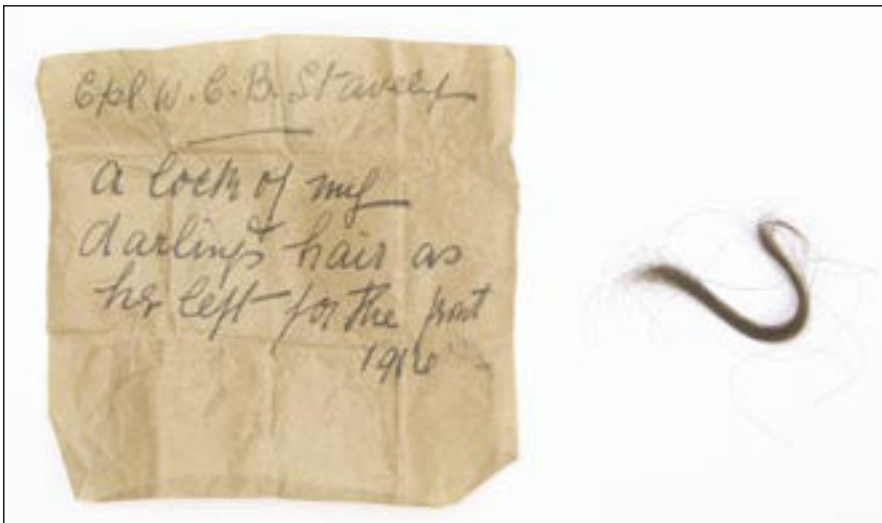
AWM P00069.001

Private James (Jim) Martin



Department of Veterans' Affairs

A paper streamer like the one kept by Jim Martin and returned to his family after his death



AWM REL30979

A lock of Lieutenant WCB Staveland's hair kept by his family

- 1D Many families kept locks of the soldier's hair. Why would they do this?
- 1D What do you think would be the best and the worst things about going to the war as a soldier?