

Note: This written version of the digital narrative will be published by Penguin/Random House in Bruce Scates, Rebecca Wheatley and Laura James, *World War I: A History in 100 Stories*, November 2015. We thank Penguin for permission to reproduce this extract here.

Marked 'secret': Samuel Mellor

The officer in charge of AIF records Melbourne looked at the pile of letters mounted in his in-tray. He wondered if there would ever be any end to it. Thirty years since the signing of the Armistice, families still kept writing – hoping for news of a son or a husband or a brother taken by the war. Sometimes they'd heard that a man without a memory had been admitted to the asylum. Sometimes they'd seen a photograph that answered their boy's description. Many had spoken with the men he'd served with, desperate for some detail the authorities may have overlooked. All believed that the missing might one day be found.

The Major sighed and pulled the first of the envelopes towards him. The families of the missing lived in a kind of limbo, and already he knew what this particular letter would say. There was no definite news of their boy's death; no actual sighting of the body; not the cold, conclusive evidence of a grave. For the bereaved he could offer something – they had the right to choose an epitaph, or carve a name on a memorial, they could find the words to say goodbye. But there were no words for the families of the missing. And many were simply not ready to grieve.

The Major sighed again. He recognised the writing on the next envelope, the stilted, shaking hand pleading for his attention. This letter he knew was special, it was different. No one but himself would be permitted to read it, and soon it would be locked away in a steel cabinet marked 'secret' in his office.

Elizabeth Mellor had first written to Base Records in 1917. She had heard nothing from her son Samuel in years and feared 'something must have happened to him'. She wondered if the Army could tell her anything. 'This lad kept the home together and supported me ... He was always such a good lad and very proud of being a soldier.'ⁱ

But the Major knew otherwise. Samuel Mellor had not been a good lad at all. Barely seventeen years old when he enlisted, the boy fell into bad company. He went

AWOL in Egypt and deserted from the Army not long after arriving in England. In 1917, his mother had been told that her son was 'illegally absent'. And that was something she couldn't believe.

At the end of the war, Mellor's official status was still 'absent'. The Major flicked through the file a busy clerk had brought him. In June 1919, Mrs Mellor sent him a photograph and asked it be forwarded on to London:

My son has a very faint scar at the corner of one eye ... brown moles on his neck and body ... it is now over three years since I've had a letter from him.ⁱⁱ

The next year she thought she recognised her son in the picture published in the evening papers headed 'Who is He?' – one of a legion of nameless men who surfaced in the wake of war. And in 1921, she drew her own conclusion:

It has come to my knowledge that he is in an asylum badly shell-shocked and [suffering from] loss of speech. He is a place 100 miles from London called Leicester, it is the one on a hill near the cemetery. Would you kindly investigate this matter for me.ⁱⁱⁱ

'The anxiety is terrible,' she went on, 'sometimes unbearable. Trusting you will do your best for me.'

But what was the best thing for Mrs Mellor, the Major wondered? His eyes looked down at the letters again, page after page of them: 'My kind and loving boy', 'one of the best lads', 'my darling'. And now this latest letter, surely the last he would place in that file, dated 3 March 1939, as the world prepared for another war:

I had a son named Samuel Rowley Mellor. He joined up with the first light horse, 11th reinforcements, he left Sydney 1915 on 23 October ... Now it is a long time ago, though my tears don't dry when I think of him. He joined up under the name of Richard Rowley Mellor, that was his older brother's name, he gave his age as 22 but my darling was only 17 years ... I am now nearing the closing of life I am 80, I would feel very grateful to you for a reply.^{iv}

The Major knew the reply the official channels would send her. But he also knew the truth and the reason this file must remain locked away. Having deserted the First AIF, Mellor had adopted yet another name and joined the British Army. He had served out the war as Gunner Frank Oswald Wills of the Royal Field Artillery. In 1919, the young man was arrested in Paris. In a drunken brawl, he had killed a military policeman. Gunner Frank Wills was sentenced to death by firing squad; his last request was to speak to an Australian officer.

Samuel Mellor made no attempt to save his life. But he did ask that his mother in Australia be told what happened to him. Without delay, the officer cabled London for instructions. What action – if any – should be taken regarding the fate of Gunner Wills? London wired back several days later: 'message not understood'.^v

The Major sighed again, this sigh much deeper than the last. By the time AIF headquarters in London had replied, it was too late anyway. Samuel Mellor had been shot at dawn on 27 May 1919. He was buried under the name he'd adopted, and the truth was buried with him.

The Major placed Mrs Mellor's last letter in the file and turned to face his typewriter. He wound a crisp white sheet of parchment into the Remington and thumped out the first letters on the keyboard. 'Dear Madam', he began ...

Sources and further reading: This semi-fictionalised account is based on a close reading of Samuel Mellor's service dossier NAA: B2455 MELLOR RICHARD. See also Tim Lycett and Sandra Playle 'A Mother's Son: The World War I Mystery of Private Richard Mellor', *Inside History*. June 2013. For further reading on military executions see Julian Putkowski and Julian Sykes *Shot at Dawn: Executions in World War One by Authority of the British Army Act*, (London: Pen & Sword, 1998).



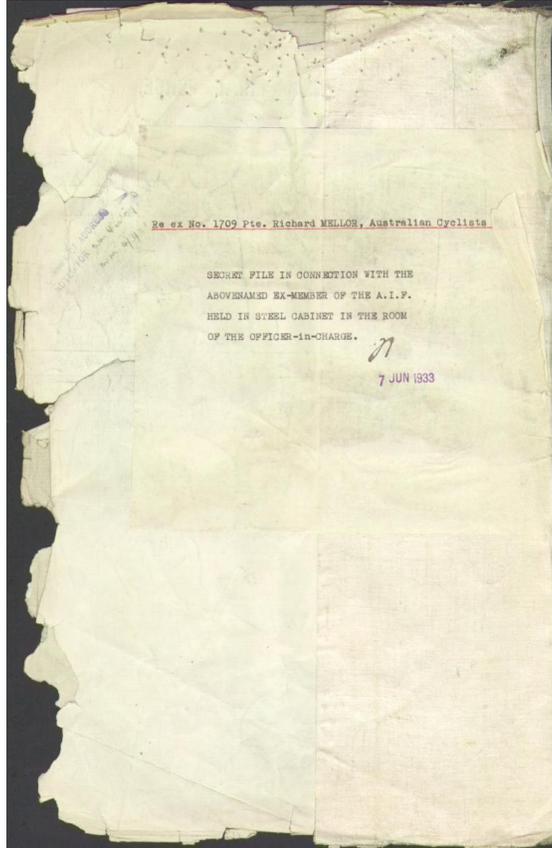
Shot at dawn: Herbert Burden was one of over three hundred British soldiers executed by their own side during the Great War. Burden was 17 when he was put to death for cowardice and desertion, the same age Samuel Mellor was when he first enlisted. Burden was posthumously pardoned in 2006. Source Shot at Dawn memorial at the National

Memorial Arboretum courtesy NMAguide

www.commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shot_at_Dawn_memorial.JPG



Who is he?: This photo appears in a number of Sydney newspapers. Elizabeth Mellor claimed it was her son, Samuel. The authorities denied that it was Mellor, insisting it was some other deserter. There is a note however in the margins of her letter. A clerk at Base records has scrawled 'photo probably was of her son.' Source courtesy of *Evening Sun*, June 13, 1919



Locked away in a steel cabinet: The secret files pertaining to Samuel Mellor were held at Victoria barracks for decades, guarded by an army of officials and strong bluestone walls. Source NAA: B2455, MELLOR RICHARD courtesy National Archives of Australia.

To the Officer in Charge of Base Records
March 3 1959
17 Hepburn Avenue
Clydeville
Seydney

Dear Sir
I had a son named Samuel Rowley Mellor, he joined up with the 1st Light Horse Bⁿ Reinforcement. He left Sydney 1915. on the 23rd October by the Tangi Bay or some name like it his number was 1709 or 209 I forgot now it is so long ago, though my tears don't dry when I think of him he joined up under the name of Richard Rowley Mellor, that was his elder brother's name, he gave his age as 22 but my birthday was only 14 years but could very well pass for 22. He was well grown, I had another son William Basil on the 9th February 1914 but he returned on the 13th June 1914 ~~but~~ I am now nearing the closing of life 70 years. I would feel very grateful to you for a reply.
Yours Sincerely
Mrs Elizabeth Mellor
Widow 64 years

My tears don't dry: Mrs Mellor's last letter to the authorities. Mrs Mellor wrote on the eve of World War Two. Her grief had already spanned three decades. Source NAA: B2455, MELLOR RICHARD courtesy National Archives of Australia.

ⁱ Letter from Elizabeth Mellor to Base Records 13 November, 1915, NAA: B2455 MELLOR RICHARD

ⁱⁱ Letter from Elizabeth Mellor to Base Records June 30, 1919, *ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Letter from Elizabeth Mellor to Base Records February 2, 1921, *ibid.*

^{iv} Letter from Elizabeth Mellor to Base Records March 3, 1939, *ibid.*

^v Message to AIF Headquarters Wimereux June 6, 1920, *ibid.*