



GUARDIAN 1: Peter McLady

I first met Peter at Heathrow; I was going to Turkey and he to a concert.

Since then we have travelled together throughout the World War I centenary years, working on our respective projects.

He did not pose for a portrait nor allow an interview.

His is a private journey: one he keeps separate from a busy corporate career and two children.



Long strides take him across the lawn under the Villers-Bretonneux Australian National Memorial directly to the grave. Bending his long frame, he gently lays the wreath against the stone. Wind hurtles through, knocking it over. He bends again, standing it upright. Stepping back a metre or so, he silently stands for a minute in the soft rain. Then he lifts his camera and captures the moment.

Peter McLady has conducted this ritual at every grave of the 39 men who did not return to their homes in the Granite Belt, Queensland, after World War I – all except for two who remain in Egypt, and one on the Gaza Strip. Eyes twinkling, he tells the story of being at a London garden party where he met a guy who knew a guy who could get him photos of the grave in Gaza. Being Peter, he has the photos a few weeks later. Gleeefully he emails them through, proud as punch to have completed the series of images. It is a project that has taken him all over Europe and Turkey.

This impatient ambition no doubt saw a young Peter leave his home in Stanthorpe to ultimately make his way to London, where he lives today. It is from here he first phones me, having read that article in the Stanthorpe Border Post. This suggests his links to home remain strong. We agree to meet up next time we find ourselves in the same city. That turns out to be Heathrow a few months later.

Nursing my coffee, I see Peter walk into the terminal, books and notes in hand. I smile. He smiles politely back and walks straight past. He walks past the other way and I smile again, with a wave this time. He looks at the newspaper article in his hand with confusion. But he stops.

‘They printed a photo of the Art Gallery manager next to the story about my war project, not of me,’ I explain.

His face breaks into a grin and we are friends.

His offer of 'What can I do to help?' is not meant lightly. A few weeks later he is pulling up outside my Stanthorpe motel in his hired 4WD. He spends the day showing me the signposts and memorials he remembers from his childhood days – places I would struggle to find on my own. Then he returns to family duties for the remainder of his Australian visit. I travel home to do the same.

The following April Peter arrives in the village of Peronne, France, with tour guide and translator Lionel Rosemont in tow. Peter hurls my suitcase into the back of Lionel's van and we are off. He sits quietly as Lionel translates interviews with people I meet, and patiently climbs in and out of the van on my regular shout-outs: 'Oh, can we stop here for a photo?' Peter can only stay a day or two before rushing back to London for business and family commitments; however, he leaves me Lionel. Lionel is my initial entrée into the community of Guardians I meet throughout these French and Belgian villages.

And so it went on for years: Peter, always in a 4WD, would pull up outside some grim motel at Stanthorpe or Gatwick, London, to bundle me in, and off we would charge around the countryside – laying his wreaths and interviewing my Guardians. He artfully dodged my probing questions while re-directing our chats back to share some of his immense knowledge of the battles of World War I.

In 2015 he began publishing profile stories about those World War I Diggers who never returned to Stanthorpe after the war. He has traced the story behind every name on the Stanthorpe World War I Honour Board. The Stanthorpe Border Post faithfully published these pieces, alongside the photos Peter has of each grave, on the 100th anniversary of their deaths. They never included his phone number in the articles. It is a remarkable body of work that successfully brings these men to life and is eagerly read by a faithful audience.

I cannot say for sure what motivates Peter to travel so extensively on his quest to commemorate these men. He speaks of growing up in Stanthorpe surrounded by the signposts and memorials, and being aware in a general way of the links to World War I. I sense it is the way most children relegate such things within the importance of their immediate concerns of school, play and friends.

Peter's father was president of the Stanthorpe RSL, and he enjoys telling stories of the time years ago he

spent with his parents travelling through the Western Front battlefields. Under the guidance of Colin Gillard, they too discovered the stories behind the links to their hometown. Sadly, Peter's father passed away a few years back so will not see the impressive work created by his son. I know he would be proud.

During the interviews for many of the stories found in the coming pages, Peter is there, watching, listening and silent. At the end of the day, he always enjoys a beer or two and the company of the locals who are happy to see us return for our short visits. He then unloads me, and all my gear, back at Gatwick or a Stanthorpe motel before returning to his busy life.

LOUISE GRAYSON



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