

Carlton Footballers Who Fought and Died in the Wars

A book called *Fallen - The Ultimate Heroes*¹ details the lives and military careers of footballers who fought and died in the Boer War and World Wars 1 and 2. Each time I hear or see the figures, I am reminded of a comment by W. McMahon Ball, 'the only peace armaments can provide ... lies in graveyards'. To illustrate that point, in 1914 Australia had a population of just under 5 million. Of those 416,800 enlisted in World War 1, 60,000 died and approximately 156,000 were badly wounded or taken prisoner. The figures for Victoria show a population of 1.45 million, with 112,400 enlisting and 19,000 killed in action or dying from their wounds later. In World War 2, 39,700 died, a total of about 118,700 Australian men. Against that the 520 Australians who died in the Boer Wars seems almost insignificant, but the population was very different.

We have selected eight of the 115 in the book who played for Carlton to look at. Their names are Wilf Atkinson, David Gillespie, Tom McCluskey, Fenley McDonald, Mathew Stanley McKenzie, James Pender, Alfred Williamson, and James Park.

These men had many things in common: they were fathers, husbands, brothers, sons, friends, they were patriotic, they not only thought they were doing the right thing but also that right was on their side, they were healthy and yet it is their footballing talent which brings them together in this book. There is no doubt they were good footballers, although they played as few as one game, to as many as 128 games, for Carlton. Of course the deaths of these soldiers is important, just as the scars of the wars in which they fought left on the soldiers who returned, and families at home, are important. What does this record show as significant in the lives and deaths of these soldiers?

Their stories highlight the brutality of war in a personal way, the courage and bravado of those involved, the randomness of outcomes and the importance of chance. Some died instantly, others lingered on for months or even longer. Their deaths are labelled as making the supreme sacrifice and yet none of them set out to die. They undoubtedly knew it was a possibility, but it seems very unlikely they really wanted to die. They were, however, sacrificing part of their lives to fight in wars. Some died of war wounds, other of things as mundane as appendicitis or influenza. They were, in fact, ordinary men in extraordinary circumstances, but were they any different from their comrades? They are certainly different from the young suicide bomber who in 2015 blew himself up in Iraq. He was deliberately sacrificing his life for a cause, Islam, he thought was right. Their deaths were not deliberate.

The eight men ranged in age from 23 to 39, they were all healthy, they held ranks from Private through Sergeant to Captain and Lieutenant. Some had nicknames, Gentleman Jim, Lofty, Fen and Tammias. Their occupations were varied: policeman, flour miller, teacher, watchman, 2 bank clerks, stock agent, wool classer, not a wide range of occupation, but unsurprising. None were from occupations which were protected for the good of the country, but also there were no shopkeepers, labourers, factory workers, farm workers, tradesmen or men identified as unemployed, as might be expected among our eight. As a sample they really tell us very little, just that they were men who gave up their jobs, to enlist in very difficult circumstances. Perhaps we need records of all the men who went to fight, and the breakdown of those who survived, as well as those who died, to learn more about what war does to people and what occupations make up most of the combatants.

Glorifying those who died as 'making the ultimate sacrifice' and not recognising those who survived, simply distorts the picture. We need a better way to honour those who helped us win wars or better ways of preventing war altogether.

Flight Sergeant Wilf Atkinson played only one game for Carlton in May 1942, having just joined the club from Hampton, but World War 2 put an end to what might have been a distinguished career as the *Sporting Globe*, after his first game, included him as 'an outstanding recruit'. However, he joined the RAAF and began aircrew

training as a Flight Sergeant and was posted to Europe. A plane in which he was flying was shot down over Sicily 15 months later in August 1943. This 23 year old, like many others, has no known grave.

Sergeant Major Dave Gillespie was a twin and his brothers Bruce, Gordon, Wallace and his twin Doug all served in World War 1. He was hit in the spine by a shard of shrapnel at Armentieres on July 19, 1916. Unable to move and crippled he spent 6 months in bed at home but then contracted peritonitis and died in March 1917. His twin brother Doug went on to become head keeper at the Melbourne Zoo.

Private Tom McCluskey (Tammias) one of the youngest of 10 children and two of his brothers, William and Malcolm, also served. His father was a farmer and local storekeeper at Mooroopna and his parents also took in 2 orphans. The family must have been close as William's hair is reported to have turned white when he heard of Tom's death. Tom was a wool classer and an excellent sportsman who also played very good cricket, but had played only 4 games with Carlton, before moving to other clubs. Shepparton locals were very displeased when he moved to the city. He had only just joined his battalion about 2 weeks before he was killed at Passchendaele, after a fierce battle, killed in a shell hole in which he was subsequently buried with others who had shared the space with him and the '18 pounder' or 'whiz-bang' which killed them.

Private Fenley John McDonald (Fen) was born at Nagambie in a family of eight, the youngest son of 5 brothers and 3 sisters. He was a quietly spoken stock agent and played 10 games with Carlton and some more at Melbourne, before he enlisted. He was among the first to enlist and his AIF contingent was landed in Turkey. He was only 23 when he was among the first killed at the landing at Gallipoli and his body was not found, so his name is engraved at the Lone Pine Memorial, along with that of 4199 other Australians. 'Grief engulfed every city and town and hamlet' according to *Fallen: The Ultimate Heroes*.

Sergeant Mathew Stanley McKenzie (Stan) was born in Launceston on 7th of May 1890, educated at Scotch in Tasmania, a steady student and a talented sportsman. He was a bank clerk. He not only played football and cricket brilliantly, he was a fast runner and an all round athlete, who was also particularly interested in racing. He mainly played for Tasmania, but before enlisting he played 14 games with Carlton. Stan died of appendicitis in Alexandria, not of war wounds, but according to *Fallen*, 'he made the supreme sacrifice as he probably would have survived appendicitis had he not volunteered and served so far from home.' His brother George survived the war and was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for saving the life of a comrade. Stan is buried at the Chatby Military Cemetery in Alexandria, Egypt, along with 2000 other casualties from the two World Wars.

Private James Pender's story is even more complicated. He was born in Hotham, (North Melbourne) in 1877, one of four brothers who played VFL football. He played 15 games for Carlton in 1898 before moving to Western Australia to play football for the East Perth Club in 1908-11. But he was back in Melbourne, working as a watchman, married with a wife and family of 4 children, with his footballing career well over, when he enlisted, in North Melbourne at 38 years of age. He became a batman for a Lieutenant Julian. He was reported missing on the 2 July 1916, but after 7 months waiting to find out what had happened to him, his wife wrote a desperate letter to Base Records asking them to clarify whether he was missing or dead. It was finally confirmed that he had gone searching for Lieutenant Julian, who had not been seen for some time. Their two bodies were subsequently found entangled in German barbed wire but neither of them could be released. James Pender has no known grave but is commemorated at the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial in France. We do not know where Lieutenant Julian is remembered. Pender's wife finally received a pension of 2 pounds a fortnight, and was left to raise the family assured that her husband had indeed been killed in action.

Captain Alfred Williamson (Lofty) was born in 1893 at Coowarr in Gippsland. He attended the local school and then Sale High, where he undertook a continuation course aimed at training teachers. He did well academically, played 11 games of football for Carlton, and later 8 games for Melbourne, while undertaking a Manual Arts course. He became the manual arts teacher at Melbourne High School, where he was admired for his height, his good looks and his moral character. In the words of a chaplain who knew him later, which would not be acceptable now, 'One of God's white men.' That picture does not quite fit his record with the VFL's Tribunal,

which suspended him 4 times, totalling 36 missed matches, for unduly rough play. The army however suited him and he quickly progressed from Private to Sergeant Major and became an officer in February 1916. He was killed in action in April 1917, part of a group known as 'Jacka's mob'. He has no known grave and he too is commemorated at the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial in France.

Lieutenant Jim Park (Gentleman Jim) was born on 14th of February 1910 on St Valentine's day in Bendigo, one of a family of 4 sons and 3 daughters of Dr Alexander and Ethel Park. The family moved from Tatura to Moonee Ponds in 1919 and the boys attended Scotch College and the girls PLC. After Jim gained his Leaving Certificate he went to Dookie Agricultural College, excelling in both studies and sport, becoming dux of his second year, runner up the following year, receiving a scholarship, becoming a prefect and a member of the school committee as well as captain of the football and cricket teams, and also competing in the athletics team. He and his equally gifted brother George graduated from Dookie and went to work on the land before joining two uncles in their flour mill. He joined Carlton playing 128 games from 1932-1943 and earned a reputation, not only as a brilliant footballer but as 'Gentleman Jim'. He enlisted in the RAAF and attained the rank of Flying Officer. He was killed in action on 9th of February 1942 in New Guinea, having endured a stint in the Middle East. He is buried in the Lae cemetery and was survived by his wife and only daughter Joan who, as a 3 year old, had refused to have anything to do with the stranger in uniform when he returned briefly from the Middle East, but still treasures a memory of him cradling her in his arms saying good bye when she fell down some stairs and broke her leg, as he left for New Guinea.

These brief histories give only a hint of what these men experienced and how their deaths affected those who knew, loved, and depended on them. In a way they obscure the horrors of war in all its aspects, just as almost all such accounts do. Perhaps it is because to face those horrors squarely would be too much for us all. Nevertheless, unless we do, devastating wars will continue.

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¹ Fallen - The ultimate heroes : Footballers who never returned from the war, Jim Main and David Allen, Crown Content, Melbourne, 2002