



Lest We Forget is a pledge that has forsaken hundreds of South Australian World War 1 soldiers, who are lying in unmarked graves in this state more than 100 years after serving their country.

Determined to right past wrongs, volunteers are now giving these men the final honours they deserve, as Rebecca DiGirolamo reports.

We won't forget: The missions of grave importance



REBECCA DIGIROLAMO

ARMED with a cemetery map and burial records, a growing battalion of South Australian volunteers is scrutinising hundreds of unmarked graves across the state in search of World War I soldiers lying forgotten in possibly more than 1000 burial sites. They are soldiers who served in some of the bloodiest of battles and returned home to confront high unemployment, wives who had abandoned them and parents and siblings who had passed away from old age and illness, or who were casualties of war themselves.

They had no welfare support and died alone, many with the burden of physical and mental illnesses that war brings. Without close kin, or a penny to their name, they were buried in unmarked plots without a visual trace of who they were or what they had sacrificed.

Some died at the height of The Great Depression, leaving behind children and wives, or elderly parents and siblings, who had to choose between bread on the table or erecting a headstone.

It's a heartbreaking history that is today being corrected by 30 South Australian volunteers.

They are young and old, amateur historians, husbands and wives, servicemen and women, retirees and RSL members who form part of The Headstone Project South Australia.

More, however, are needed as the number of unmarked graves identified in SA rises.

"I had no idea that so many of our

They served. They deserve to be remembered

The Headstone Project South Australia

soldiers had been left without recognition of their war service," says Rachel Manda, a 19-year-old Bachelor of Archaeology student who joined the group this year.

"It is a massive injustice. It is very important that we remember every one who served, regardless of how or when they died. Everyone took the same risk when they signed on, no body should be dismissed or denied proper recognition."

The Headstone Project SA has so far identified 70 unmarked graves of

World War I servicemen who were posted overseas. They are scattered across 30 cemeteries, from Port Pirie to Kimba and Cheltenham to Berri. Once a gravesite is identified and service credentials verified, The Headstone Project SA team erects a pedestal headstone and memorial plaque and runs a commemorative service to honour the soldier's service to country.

Six unmarked graves have been dedicated since 2017. The most recent headstone dedications took place yesterday at Port Pirie Cemetery.

Four World War I soldiers buried there up to 91 years ago were properly recognised and remembered. Among the crowd of 100 at the special service was Robert Sjöstrom. The 59-year-old mining contractor from Port Pirie and his son, Kristofer, came to commemorate his great-uncle Private Albert Julius Sjöstrom.

Robert was born seven years after his great-uncle's death. "I knew that he was single, that he never married and spent a considerable amount of time in and out of hospital – but I don't know whether it was war-related," says Robert.

Private Sjöstrom was one of five brothers who served in the war – and all of them returned from the battlefields. He worked at the smelters in Port Pirie from 1919 to 1925 as a labourer. Robert says his family is grateful to The Headstone Project SA for giving their ancestor the military memorial he deserved.

PORT Pirie RSL president Malcolm Bond says the fate of these WWI soldiers "makes me feel so sad". About 25 unmarked WWI soldiers' graves have been identified at Port Pirie. "People have fallen through the cracks," he says.

Macclesfield RSL president Dennis Oldenhove says it's important to remember "that 'Lest We Forget' is not a catchphrase but a commitment".

In 2017, the Macclesfield RSL and the local community raised funds for the headstone of WWI soldier Private August Julius Nicolai after learning of his tragic end (see panel at right).

"Men like August Nicolai returned from the war to no family members, no employment and no fixed address as well as no welfare following their war service," Mr Oldenhove says.



VOLUNTEERS: Former RAAF wing commander Clive Huggan, Flinders University archaeology student Rachael Manda and The Headstone Project SA research team co-ordinator Jo Cotterill. Picture: TRICIA WATKINSON

"It's no surprise then that The Depression years a soldier down on his luck could not be afforded a neat gravesite with a headstone that honours his service to our country," he says.

"Organisations like The Headstone Project are a way in which the community can ensure those who have served and suffered for their country, and our way of life, are truly remembered by those who owe them so much."

Mr Brownlie first became aware of the issue of WWI soldiers in unmarked graves after being invited to a special meeting in Hobart while visiting family in Tasmania in 2016.

The meeting revealed the work of Hobart historian Andrea Gerrard and her husband, Ron, who, with volunteers, had located hundreds of unmarked WWI soldiers' graves across the state since 2001.

The group had conducted a study approximating that up to 12,000 of these graves existed nationwide – with at least 1000 in SA. The Tasmanians wanted to expand their project to the mainland and Mr Brownlie felt compelled to take up the cause.

"We are finding that a number of these men took their own lives," he says. "Others came back pretty knocked about and took to the drink and became estranged from their family and ended up in paupers' graves."

"A lot of them died in the 1920s and '30s when there was no money around and family were unable to afford a memorial."

Mr Brownlie, a retired two-way radio communications consultant from Valley View, and former fireman Neil Rossiter, from Sefton Park, founded The Headstone Project SA in 2017.

"I'm driven to honour my father's service and by an interest in history," Mr Brownlie says. His father, Bob, served in the 2/40th and 2/43rd Infantry battalions and was posted to Darwin during the Japanese bombings in WWII.

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with a headstone under the project. That dedication ceremony, also at Port Pirie Cemetery, drew a crowd of 150 people, including up to 30 of his relatives from as far away as the Northern Territory, Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland.

His granddaughter, Adelaide-based chief financial officer Geraldine Cox, says The Headstone Project SA not only honours the dead but has the power to connect the living.

"It became a family reunion that lasted all that weekend and hasn't stopped," Ms Cox says.

She says the dedication service brought together family members who had not seen each other for years and who were now connected for life.

"It gave me an experience I could never imagine – reconnecting with people I knew very little of through a man one of us had never met," she says. "It really is difficult to find the words to explain how amazing this project is and the passion and dedication of its volunteers."

The ripple effects of Private McVicar's headstone dedication in 2017 ran far and wide.

"Mr McVicar is the start of a very long journey," Harry Quick, the former federal MP for Franklin, from The Headstone Project in Tasmania, said at the time.

Plans are now afoot to establish a national Headstone Project organisation, with representatives from



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The Headstone Project SA president John Brownlie stands near war veterans' graves at West Terrace Cemetery. The group has not conducted a systematic search of the cemetery, but suspects a number of unmarked graves will be identified.



FAMILY: Robert and Kristofer Sjöstrom at the Port Pirie Cemetery where their relative, Private Albert Julius Sjöstrom, is buried. Picture: TRICIA WATKINSON

Tasmania, SA, WA, NSW and Victoria having met in April.

In February, former governor-general Sir Peter Cosgrove called The Headstone Project "a nation-leading scheme" and "a labour of love – one headstone at a time".

MR Brownlie says The Headstone Project SA has grown from two volunteers to about 30 in the past seven months, but many more are needed, as are funds.

The group has attracted grants from the Marshall Government and Federal Government up until 2020 and relies on donations, with each dedication costing up to \$800, including the headstone, travel and the service.

With 70 unmarked graves identified for dedication so far, they'll need to raise more than \$56,000.

"We don't currently have the funding or the volunteers needed to do the work," Mr Brownlie says.

New volunteer Clive Huggan, a

retired Royal Australian Air Force wing commander of 25 years, says The Headstone Project was of national importance. He and wife Hilary – a retired education officer for the Australian War Memorial and the Office for Australian War Graves – offered their services and experience to the group in January.

The couple say it's been one of the most rewarding and poignant community projects they have been involved in.

"I know first-hand the camaraderie and devotion of men and women who serve their country and knowing these soldiers lie in unmarked graves has really resonated with me," Mr Huggan says.

"It's a real tragedy. Everyone says 'Lest We Forget'. By definition these men have been horribly forgotten."

FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT: WWW.THEHEADSTONEPROJECT.SA.ORG.AU OR CALL 0423 279 214



Once forgotten, now forever remembered

Soldiers commemorated by The Headstone Project SA JULY 2019

PRIVATE ANDREW O'FLAHERTY: Born in Crystal Brook, July 1882. Enlisted aged 32. Served with the 10th and 50th Infantry battalions from August 1915 to April 1919. Was part of the covering force for the Anzac landing at Gallipoli on April 25, 1915. He was wounded four times, once suffering gas poisoning. Served on the Western Front in France and Belgium. Medals: 1914-1915 Star, British War and Victory. He never married and died in September 1950 in Port Pirie.

PRIVATE CLIFFORD VICTOR PRICE: Born in London, July 1898. Enlisted aged 18. Served with the 32nd Battalion from September 1916 to January 1920 in France and the UK. Fought in the Battle of the Somme. Wounded in thigh during Battle of Amiens. He married but had no children and worked as a fireman in Port Pirie. He died November 1931 in the town.

PRIVATE LESLIE THOMAS SIMPSON (above): Born in Port Pirie, August 1882. Enlisted aged 32. Served with the 12th Infantry Battalion from September 1914 to January 1919 in France and Belgium. He was twice wounded in action. He was awarded Military Medal for bravery at the Battle of Bullecourt after carrying wounded men by stretcher back to safety under heavy fire and thwarting enemy capture through a rifle counter-attack. He never married and died June 1928 in Port Pirie. Medals: 1914-1915 Star, British War and Victory. **PRIVATE ALBERT JULIUS SJOSTROM:** Born in Port Pirie in August 1888. Enlisted aged 26. Served with the 27th Infantry Battalion from August 1915 to June 1919. He saw action in Gallipoli, Belgium and France. Medals: 1914-1915 Star, British War and Victory. He never married and died April 1953 in Port Pirie.

MARCH 2018

PRIVATE AUGUST JULIUS NICOLAI: Born in Australia, April 1883. He enlisted aged 22. Served with the 1st Pioneer Battalion and 6th Infantry Battalion from June 1916 to April 1919. He saw action on the Western Front, in France and Belgium. His marriage did not last the war and his last remaining family member – brother Carl – died before the war broke out. Took his own life, aged 46, in March 1930 and was buried in Macclesfield Cemetery. The Macclesfield RSL and local community raised funds in 2017 for his headstone and proper commemoration with support from The Headstone Project SA.

NOVEMBER 2017

THOMAS ARCHIBALD JOHN KENNETH MCVICAR (left): Born in Redhill in 1883. Was a widower with one son when he enlisted aged 31. Served with the 8th Machine Gun Company, in the 38th Battalion from January 1917 to early 1919. Saw action on the Western Front in France and Belgium. Was wounded by shrapnel to the face. He remarried, leaving behind a widow and five children when he died in Port Pirie in December 1941.