



AWM P06003.001

# Search for soldier's identity



AWM PB0054

**A**ustralia has a proud military history. Our national identity was forged in war on the Gallipoli Peninsula in 1915 and Australian Service personnel, past and present, are poignantly honoured for their sacrifice. It is for this reason that the Australian War Memorial is asking for public help to discover the identity of an unknown soldier from World War I, whose photograph features on the cover of this magazine and in the Memorial's latest exhibition, *Icon & Archive: Photography and the World Wars*. Many Defence personnel have a strong connection to this issue, so **Alisha Welch** spoke to the Senior Curator of Photographs at the Memorial, **Shaune Lakin**, about the significance of the photograph and why it is important to identify the soldier in this now-iconic image.

Open to the public until October 12, the exhibition showcases the nation's photographic record of the World Wars and features in excess of 400 photographs from the War Memorial's collection, as well as images sourced from personal collections across Australia.

Dr Lakin says the idea for the exhibition stems from research he conducted while writing a book for the AWM called *Contact: Photographs from the Australian War Memorial Collection*.

"While writing this book, which details the history of Australian war photography, I became really interested in these wonderful artefacts and realised that there was an impressive story in each of them," he says.

"An exhibition is a good opportunity to bring things out of hiding – to give them an airing and let people look at and appreciate them. There was also the idea of making sense of the material – some of the artefacts have not seen the light of day for decades and are now displayed alongside images that have become incredibly well known."

According to Dr Lakin, the exhibition is intended to show people how significant photography was as a means for people to make sense of their experience in wartime, whether they were participants in operational theatres

or whether they were people on the home front dealing with absence.

Dr Lakin says photographs are an inseparable part of our memory of war.

"Photographs have come to play a vital role in our efforts to remember and to commemorate events of which many of us have no direct experience.

"While they can't bring home the terrible experience of war, photographs can provide us with images that at least indicate something of its horror. This has been, from the start, one of the primary intentions of the war photograph."

Arguably the most famous photograph in the collection – due entirely to the fact that it was chosen by Dr Lakin, out of hundreds, to promote the exhibition – is the photograph of the unidentified World War I soldier above.

"It's funny that people now refer to this picture as 'famous,'" Dr Lakin says.

"Up until the opening of the exhibition, the photo certainly wasn't famous or iconic. It is one of many, many portraits and, to be honest, I could have selected any of them and they would have all had a similar effect.

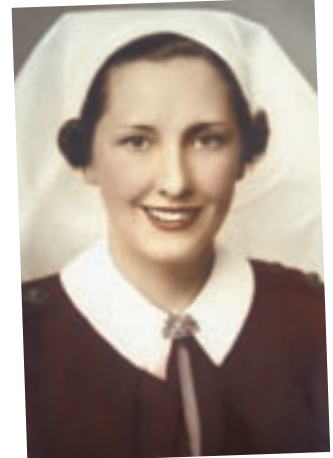
"It's a very picturesque portrait and that's probably why it has been so well received. It is a photo that symbolises the war but it is important to



**LEFT: A group of soldiers standing on the deck of troopship HMAT Ajana.**

**RIGHT: Studio portrait of Sister Myrle Mary Eileen Moston, 2/3 Australian Hospital Ship Centaur, killed in action at sea after the Centaur was sunk by a Japanese torpedo.**

*Photos courtesy of Australian War Memorial.*



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**RIGHT: Family and friends wave farewell to the departing ship, Strathallan, which was carrying the Advance Party of the 6<sup>th</sup> Division AIF to service overseas.**



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## Valuing the individual

Dr Roger Lee, Head of the Army History Unit, says it is important to try and identify the soldier in the photo because Australia is a society that values the individual.

“Our soldiers, who were all volunteers, died defending our values and our freedoms. They joined up as individuals, the Army treated them as individuals while they were alive – the least we can do is treat them as individuals in death,” Roger says.

Identifying fallen soldiers also impacts strongly on the Army’s collective identity.

“The Army is what it is because of what it was,” Roger says. “Intangible things, like esprit de corps, depend on past achievements and contemporary pride in historical events. Tangible things, such as our highly developed skills at the tactical level of warfare, reflect our history and our experiences.

“By identifying an individual, it is his story and his experience that we learn about and this serves as another personal experience of war.”

remember that it is just one of millions.”

Dr Lakin says it is vital to identify the soldier for a number of reasons.

“I think it’s always important to identify people who are represented in our exhibitions; however, there are many Service personnel in our photographic collections who we will never be able to identify in any absolute way.

“However, given that this man has generated so much interest, there is a chance that he has become a little objectified because he is displayed in such a public way. I think it is important that we pull him back down into his space, which means discovering his name, his Service history and his family context. For me, it is becoming more urgent. As it goes on, my own feelings are that we owe it to him and this drives my interest. I don’t want to see him become just a generic Anzac poster boy.”

If you think you have information that may help the Australian War Memorial identify the soldier, please email [photographs@awm.gov.au](mailto:photographs@awm.gov.au)

**A member of the 7<sup>th</sup> Australian Light Horse Regiment having a bath in the desert preparatory to revisiting Gallipoli.**



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