

AN UNFORTUNATE LIFE

By Allen Hancock

I have a medallion in my office. Sometime's called the King's or the Dead Man's Penny it's made of bronze and is about the size of a saucer. The inscription reads, "He Died for Freedom and Honour". The medallion is engraved with the name 'Stanley William Rupert Preston'.



Figure 1 – King's or Dead Man's Penny with covering letter

Stanley Preston was a digger in the true sense of the word. The term today is used widely to refer to Australian soldiers but its origins are hazy. I was taught that digger comes from the Boer War when most Australian soldiers had been miners. That's probably doubtful since the gold rush was generally long gone by then. Another story is that it originally referred to New Zealand and came from gum diggers. But it was not until 1917, well into the Great War that the term became widely used for Australian soldiers. Up until then they always referred to each other as ANZACs.

Australians like nicknames. They adopted the British term Tommies although the British hated being called that. The New Zealanders were also ANZACS but the Australians referred to them as Kiwis. During the slog of trench warfare in northern France the Australians earned themselves a reputation for digging their way through to the German lines and blowing them up. The Germans referred to the Australian "diggers" in a derogatory way but it's the Australian way to take derogatory terms and to use them as our own. So the Australian soldiers became diggers. And Stanley Preston was one of them. As a combat engineer he dug holes. Lots of holes.

Stanley Preston had no known relatives and his service record listed 'Mr Smith' as his next of kin. When he enlisted at 18 years of age he had to obtain permission, but the only guardian he'd known was the State of Victoria. So his next of kin is shown as the Secretary of the Department for Neglected Children, Mr John Smith. On his

death the medallion was sent to the department and there it's stayed, buried in the darkness of an archive box, locked away from view and any other acknowledgement that Stanley Preston ever existed.

When you look at his record of service from the war you could get the idea that Stanley Preston was not a nice person. But when you look at his record as a ward of the state, his story is not nice either. His destiny was set on the day he was born.

Stanley William Rupert Preston was born in Armadale, Victoria on 13 June 1898. His mother was Bessie Preston, a servant living in the home of a Mrs Pitman, although there is no record of who Mrs Pitman was. Maybe her employer. His father is alleged to have been one John Thompson of unknown address but nothing more is known about him. Somebody must have had hope for him though. You normally don't give a baby three christian names unless he's named after somebody.

Stanley's future is told in a single hand-written line in a dusty leather-bound government register stored in the Victorian State Archives.

"Illegitimate: Mrs. Groves, Salvation Army has made inquiries into the case."

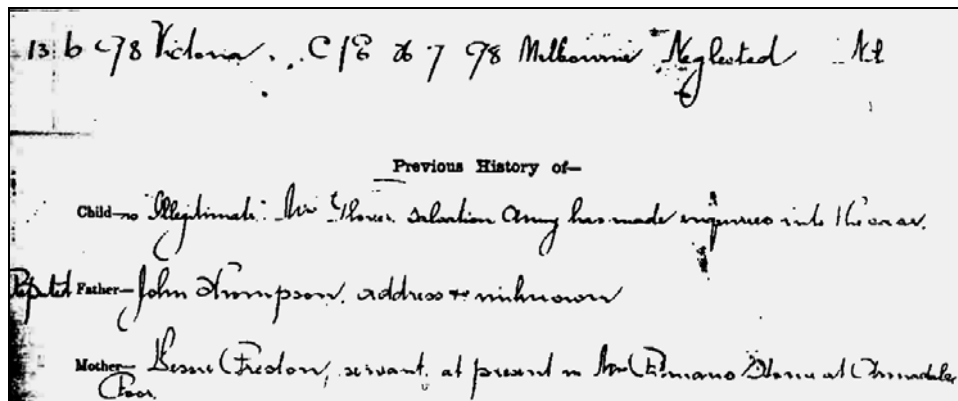


Figure 2 - Extract of Ward Register entry

The Victorian *Neglected Children's Act 1890* allowed that when authorised representatives of agencies such as the Salvation Army considered children to have no "visible means of subsistence" they could have them taken before a magistrate and committed to the care of the state. So at the age of only three weeks, Stanley was 'apprehended' without a warrant, taken before two Justices and charged with being a 'Neglected Child'. This was the first entry in the record of bad conduct in what could be described as an unfortunate life.

On 6 July 1898 Stanley was formally committed as a ward of the Department for Neglected Children, commonly referred to as a ward of the state, and placed into the care of the Salvation Army. As his new legal guardian the Secretary of the department would have the sole responsibility for deciding what happened to him for the next 18 years.

“In the 19th century the term ‘boarding out’ was commonly used to describe foster care. In 1874 an amendment to the *Neglected and Criminal Children Act* introduced boarding out as a way of placing children under state guardianship. The government hoped that boarding out would entirely replace the need for institutional care, except for the children in reformatory schools. Boarding out never entirely replaced institutional care but for several decades the clear majority of children under state guardianship were in foster care.”

“Replacing institutional care with a boarding out programme seemed like an excellent path forward to the Victorian Government. It was a move that was in keeping with leading views about child welfare of the time, and also offered a less expensive model of providing for children under state guardianship. Even accounting for the payments that foster mothers received for each child boarded to them, boarding out was less expensive than acquiring new buildings and employing staff to run industrial schools. The payments were based on the assumption that foster children should provide a small boost to the income of the foster family, accounting for the cost of providing for the children as well as the value of their labour. As children got older the payments were reduced because they were expected to be working within the household.”

<http://www.findandconnect.gov.au/vic/biogs/E000817b.htm>

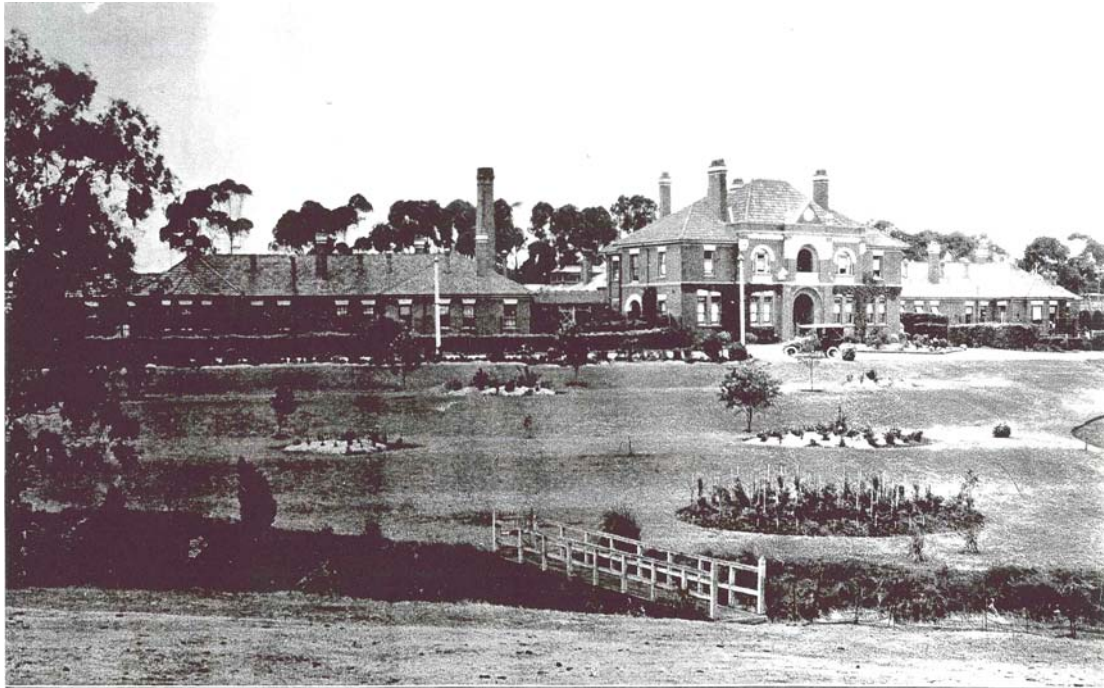
For the first five years of his life Stanley was “boarded out” to no less than seven private homes. Stanley’s mother would have maintained some contact for a while but on 21 February 1902 she married Samuel Spry, a stonemason. From this point there is no evidence of any further contact. She passed away in May 1915.

On 9 August 1904 Stanley was moved to the Boys Depot at Royal Park. “A series of cottages, with an adjoining farm, the Depot was designed to provide short-term care for up to 60 children. Ideally, infants were dispatched to local wet nurses within a day, and older children moved on within one week, but over time the numbers in the Depot grew, with 'hard-to-place' adolescents, children with intellectual disabilities and syphilitic infants forming a core of long-term residents, some of whom stayed on as workers when their wardship came to an end.

“In the early 1880s, there were two separate institutions at Royal Park, the Boys' Industrial School (Receiving Depot) and the Girls' Industrial School (Receiving Depot). In 1883, the boys' institution was placed under the supervision of J.S. Greig, formerly of the Immigrants' Aid Society. The girls were under the care of a Matron. The Girls' Depot was originally situated in an old powder magazine, a building that was acknowledged by the government as unsuitable. Apart from problems with the structure itself, the Department sought additional accommodation for 'the girls moral and sanitary isolation'. In 1887, plans were approved for a new Girls' Depot. The Boys' Depot was to be altered as well, to make the classification of boys an easier task.”

“The Department reported on further changes at Royal Park in 1898, with the completion of a new building for 'isolation and recreation purposes'. Despite the new buildings and the renovations, the structures were still less than ideal. At the turn of the century, the Department raised concerns about the inflammability of the wooden buildings in which older boys were housed. By 1907, plans were finally being prepared for a brick dormitory for older boys at Royal Park. This would later become “Turana” in 1955.”

<http://www.findandconnect.gov.au/vic/biogs/E000118b.htm>



THE RECEIVING HOME FOR THE MELBOURNE DISTRICT. 40 BEDS.

Figure 3 - Melbourne Receiving Depot, Royal Park, Victoria

On 8 September 1904 6 year old Stanley was boarded out again. This time to a family in Carlton where he stayed for a little over a year, but he was again in the Boys Depot in Feb 1906. The next month saw him boarded out to a home in Drysdale, near Queenscliffe. Stanley was back at the Boys Depot by Christmas but this time with the notation placed on his record that his conduct while boarded out had been ‘bad’.

From January to September of 1907 Stanley was boarded out to a home in Nunawading, then a rural area to the east of Melbourne. ‘Bad conduct’ again saw him returned to the Boys Depot but in October he had once more been boarded out to a home in the Central Victorian town of Talbot, located between Clunes and Maryborough. On 1 September 1908 he was boarded out to another family in Talbot but was sent back to the Boys Depot again, this time described as ‘unmanageable’.

Now that Stanley had reached 10 years of age the options for him were narrowing. He was too old to continue boarding out but too young to be apprenticed or placed into a service position. Instead he was committed to the reformatory at the Bayswater Boys Home where he was to spend the next five years of his life.

“Following a request from the Government of the day, the first Salvation Army home at The Basin was established in 1897 to cater for boys who had been placed in legal custody by the Courts for care and supervision. (A similar reformatory home 'Morning Star' was established by the Catholic Church at Mornington.) The name Bayswater Boys Home was adopted as this was the closest railway station.”

“Bayswater also had a separate junior section (Bayswater No 2 Home) which catered for boys who could not be satisfactorily placed at the Salvation Army's Box Hill Boys Home because they were a little too old and in 'danger of falling into criminal tendencies because of neglect'.”

“The No 2 Home also catered for boys who had committed offences or were in need of care and protection. The No 2 Home provided a level of segregation from older and more serious offenders in the No 1 Home. The No 2 Home housed about 50 boys, including many who were 'educationally retarded'.”

(Victorian) Department of Human Services, Guide to Out of Home Care, 2000



Figure 4 – The Salvation Army's Bayswater Boys Home at The Basin

When he turned 15 Stanley was old enough to be placed into service. He was sent to live with Mr W G P Frost of 'Terryn' near Camperdown to learn a worthwhile rural occupation. After seven months Stanley absconded from Frost's and was back at the Boys Depot in January 1914. He absconded again in February and was returned to the reformatory at Bayswater, this time with his conduct described as being 'generally bad'.

In 1916, on his 18th birthday, Stanley's status as a ward of the state ceased and he was sent out to find his own way in the world. After a lifetime of being told what to do, although not always doing what he was told, Stanley had to decide for himself what to do and to take responsibility for it.

There was undoubtedly some degree of fascination in the prospect of travelling to what in any other circumstances would have been an unthinkable destination to a boy raised in institutions. But adventure beckoned and at the age of 18 years and 4 months Stanley William Rupert Preston enlisted in the AIF for service in France. In the first few weeks of training with the 6/37th Reinforcements at Seymour there was probably some sense of security in being told what to do in a regimented way of doing things. His first training reports were in stark contrast to his previous record of 'bad' conduct. They show comments such as "Good Lad", "Work proceeding, nothing to report at present", "Good Progress". On the fourth week, though, it changes to "Isolation".

On 26 October 1916 Stanley was transferred to the Ascotvale Isolation Camp at the Melbourne Showgrounds. In response to the prevalence of infectious diseases such as meningitis spreading through the Army's ranks, the Isolation Camp was established to quarantine soldiers who had been exposed but who had not necessarily contracted a disease. Often whole units would be in isolation at Ascot Vale for 3 weeks at a time.

Stanley returned to Seymour and his training on 17 November 1916. But he wasn't going to be off to France in any hurry. He was too young. He needed to be 19. Instead he was sent to the serve with the guard unit at the Domain Camp in St Kilda Road beside Government House.

But you can't show your frustration when you're in the Army. Even if you didn't have a childhood. On 24 January 1917 the Commanding Officer of the Permanent Guard wrote to the Assistant Adjutant General at Victoria Barracks:

"I enclose herewith copy of Conduct Sheet of Pte. Stanley Wm. Preston, and strongly recommend that this man be discharged form the A.I.F. as not likely to become an efficient soldier. As will be seen by conduct sheet he has had every chance to make good. He is 18 years 7 months, thus having 5 months to go before he can be embarked. This request is made in view of the latest crimes. Crime sheet attached."

23-Nov-1916	(1) Absent Without Leave when warned for duty 21/11/1916. (2) Absent Without Leave from 6:30 am to 9:30 am parades 23/11/1916.	Forfeit 1 days pay 3 days Confined to Barracks
6-Dec-1916	(1) Guilty of misconduct prejudicial to military discipline. (2) Absent Without Leave after being warned for duty.	10 days Confined to Barracks. Fined 10/-

10-Dec-1916	(1) Absent Without Leave from 2 pm to 12 pm. (2) Damaging Government property. (3) Quitting his arms. (4) Quitting his equipment	Forfeit 3 days pay Fined £2 14 days Confined to Barracks
22-Dec-1916	(a) Theft from a civilian. (b) Leaving parade without permission (c) AWL from defaulters roll call 6 pm	168 hours detention
1-Jan-1917	Absent from Guard Room without permission.	5 Days Confined to Barracks
10-Jan-1917	Feloniously breaking into cupboard in YMCA building.	Not to enter YMCA building till 1 Feb 1913

Figure 5 - Conduct Record extract, January 1917

Stanley was discharged on 27 January 1917 as ‘service no longer required. Conduct bad’.

Once again Stanley was alone. But not without purpose. On 29 January 1917 Stanley enlisted again but this time his enlistment application was in the name of ‘James Preston’, occupation ‘Tin Smith’. It didn’t take long for the Army to find out though. Documents on Stanley’s new file show that questions were being asked. Within a fortnight of his second enlistment Stanley had to make a statement regarding the erasure of ‘bad’ conduct from his discharge certificate and the substitution of the word ‘good’. According to Stanley’s statement, somebody else did it.

Enquiries were made to the Department for Neglected Children and his real identity confirmed as well as his history as a ward of the state for 18 years. Now you’d think that enlisting under a false name or falsifying an official document would have had repercussions, but once the truth was out that’s where it seems to have ended. ‘James’ was ruled through on his enlistment documents and Stanley’s real names were added. Stanley was posted to the First (Depot) Battalion then located at Royal Park close to the receiving depot. Stanley was attached to the 10/2nd Cyclists.

“The Cyclist Corp is a little known part of Australia’s military history. The first recorded British military application of the bicycle occurred in 1885 and within three years the first cyclist unit had been formed. In 1887 bicycles appeared in the French Army and by 1891 the Swiss and American armies also had cycle units. Bicycle units were used in the Boer War and prior to the 1st World War, Belgium, France and Germany had established cyclist companies.”

“On the 10th March 1916, the Australian Army circulated a memorandum (No.32) regarding the formation of the Cyclist Corp. The Corp was formed in Egypt and was initially made up of volunteers in the 1st and 2nd Divisions and in April 1915 the 4th and 5th Divisions were formed. The Standard issue cycle was made by BSA (Birmingham Small Arms Company). The Australian cyclists in Egypt had to persevere with a variety of BSA bicycles ranging from the Mark 1 to the Mark IV. It

was not until July 1915 that the Mark IV was introduced, fitted with hand-operated rear brakes, and a freewheeling hub in place of the coaster hub. Shortly after the Australian cyclists had reached France, this bicycle became the standard issue to cyclist units.”

“The Cyclists were also given Lee Enfield SMLE .303 rifles which they normally slung over their shoulder but bikes were fitted with clips to carry the rifles, as well as straps and clips for the soldiers personal equipment. The units were also equipped with lightweight machine guns. The Cyclists arrived in northern France in June 1916 and formed into II Anzac Corp Cyclists Battalion.”

“During the war the Cyclist Battalion undertook many tasks including, forming guards to escort the Corps Commander, traffic direction, frontline fighting, delivery of dispatches and cable burying. The Cyclists became so proficient at cable burying, they could lay large distances in a short time and eventually became the supervisors of cabling operations. They also provided work parties for various other battalions, including the Engineers and were often attached to other units and battalions.”

<http://wheelheat.com.au/story-soldier-served-australian-cyclists-battalion-world-war-1/>

The camp at Royal Park was built in late 1915 to house around 3,000 men. With declining recruitment by the beginning of 1917 only the Depot Battalion remained to provide guards for many local facilities such as the explosives and ammunition depots at Footscray. The camp closed permanently in March. Stanley’s service record shows him as being in Bendigo on 4 April which probably means he was helping to guard the munitions factory there.

On 11 May 1917 Stanley boarded the “Shropshire” at Port Melbourne and was finally on his way to France. The voyage was not without its problems though and Stanley managed to start a new conduct record.

04/06/1917	Disobedience of Troopship's Order. (Spitting on Deck).	Award 7 days CB
------------	--	-----------------

Figure 6 - Conduct Record extract, June 1917

Stanley disembarked at Plymouth on 19 July and joined the Cycle Reinforcements at Parkhouse the next day. But Stanley’s destiny did not include cycling off to war. On 2 August he was transferred to the Engineer Training Battalion at Brightlingsea, a fishing and shipbuilding centre at the mouth of the River Colne on the Essex coast.

Stanley’s life so far had been littered with acts of disobedience and punishment. But he was about to learn an important lesson. An army training unit on active service is not a place to show disobedience.

24/08/1917	Failing to appear on parade at place appointed by OC.	Award 3 days Field Punishment No 2
------------	---	------------------------------------

Figure 7 - Conduct Record extract, August 1917

“Field Punishment was introduced in 1881 following the abolition of flogging, and was a common punishment during World War I. A commanding officer could award field punishment for up to 28 days, while a court martial could award it for up to 90 days, either as Field Punishment Number One or Field Punishment Number Two.”

“Field Punishment Number One, often abbreviated to "F.P. No. 1" or even just "No. 1", consisted of the convicted man being placed in fetters and handcuffs or similar restraints and attached to a fixed object, such as a gun wheel, for up to two hours per day.”

“In Field Punishment Number Two, the prisoner was placed in fetters and handcuffs but was not attached to a fixed object and was still able to march with his unit. This was a relatively tolerable punishment.”

In both forms of field punishment, the soldier was also subjected to hard labour and loss of pay.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Field_punishment

Then things started to get really serious for Stanley

23/10/1917	Absent Without Leave from 8.30 am	Award 10 days Field Punishment
	20/10/1917 to 8.30 am 25/10/1917.	No 2
		Forfeiture 13 days pay.

Figure 8 - Conduct Record extract. October 1917

Finally on 31 October 1917 Stanley Preston headed for France via Southampton and Rouelles and he was taken on strength with the 3rd Field Company Australian Engineers which was at the time located in Belgium south-west of Ypres. For the next few weeks strengthening and repairing fortifications, including the building of a hospital in the cellar of the ruins of a cordial factory near Zannebeke.

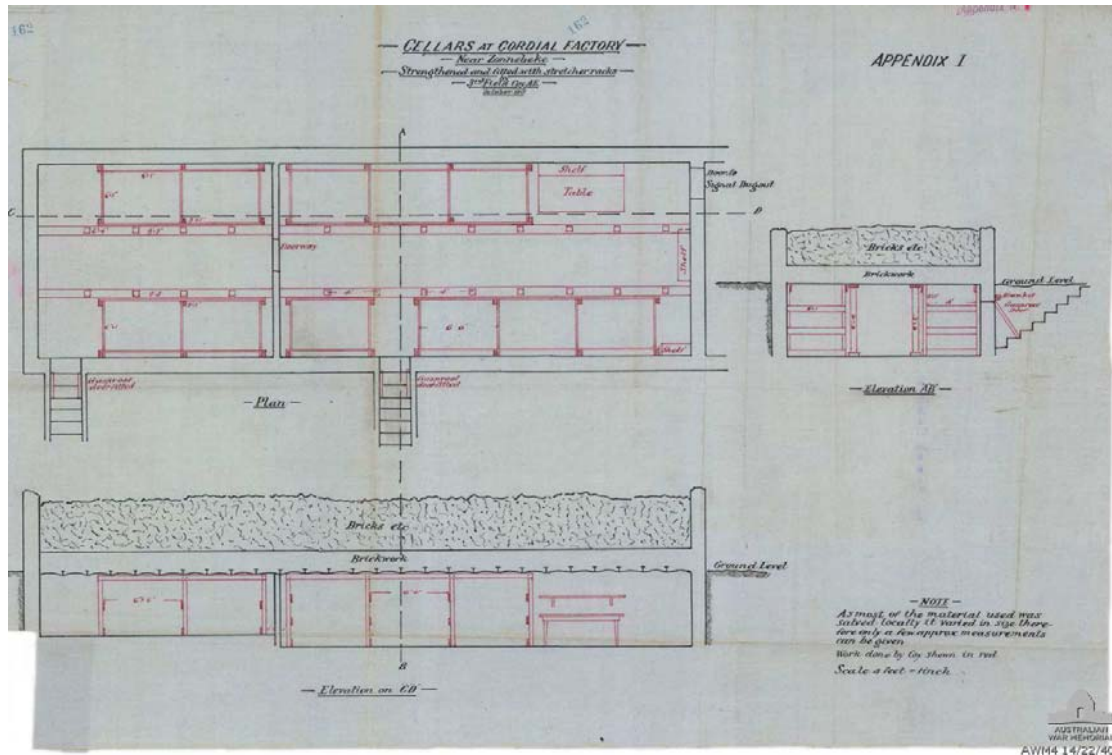


Figure 9 - Cellars at Cordial Factory near Zannebeke

On 10 December the unit was in camp at Wierre-au-Bois near Samer, north-east of Etaples. According to the war diary its main activity at the time was Company Training, so we can assume there wasn't much happening.

We don't know why but perhaps it was the lure of the bright lights of France. No matter what the reason though, the Army has a rule. You can't just take off for the afternoon. Not when there's a war on. They take a very dim view of that sort of thing.

24/12/1917	<u>Field General Court Martial.</u>	
While on Active Service absenting himself without leave from 12.45 pm 10/12/1917 till 7.30 am 11/12/1917		Award 30 days Field Punishment No 2 Forfeiture 44 days pay.

Figure 10 - Conduct Record extract, December 1917

The unit was soon in the field again setting up in split locations to the east of Hazebrouk. According to the War Diaries of the 3rd Field Company Australian Engineers the unit spent the next few months of winter moving from one camp to

another in the stalemate that trench warfare in Northern France and Belgium had become.

We don't know exactly what happened on the day Stanley was wounded. His service record states only that he was 'Wounded in Action' on 4 May 1918 with a compound fracture of the femur. The war diary shows that on that day the unit's soldiers were at Borre and Strazele to the west of Hazebrouck working on defences on the Support Line, the area to the rear of the Front Line where the supporting units were situated. The work included digging and spit-locking new trenches and laying barbed wire. They were also constructing a new Brigade Headquarters and excavating beneath the main road to lay a mine.

The unit's strength on that day consisted of 7 officers, 224 soldiers and 74 horses. 1 soldier is shown to have been gassed and 3 soldiers were wounded including Stanley.

We can only guess at how Stanley came to be among the 3 wounded on that day. The unit was well back from the Front Line. Based on the fact that 1 soldier was gassed and that gas was normally delivered by artillery we can assume that Stanley's wounds were also caused by artillery as were most casualties during this period between major actions.

Stanley was evacuated to the 1st Field Ambulance Advanced Dressing Station at Borre and then on to the main hospital at Caestre. The organisation of medical units had developed only since the start of the war and it says a lot that in May 1918, a quiet month, the 1st Field Ambulance treated 1,528 sick and wounded with only 19 deaths. 1 of those however was Stanley Preston. Stanley died on 5 May and was buried in a field adjacent to the hospital.

Caestre War Cemetery lies between fields accessible from the Avenue du Général de Gaulle by a track running off the Rue du Four à Briques (in English, Brick Oven Street).



Figure 11 – Caestre 1998.

“At the going down of the sun and in the morning,” who will remember Stanley William Rupert Preston? Ward of the State of Victoria, “bad conduct” and serial absconder. A boy who nobody wanted.

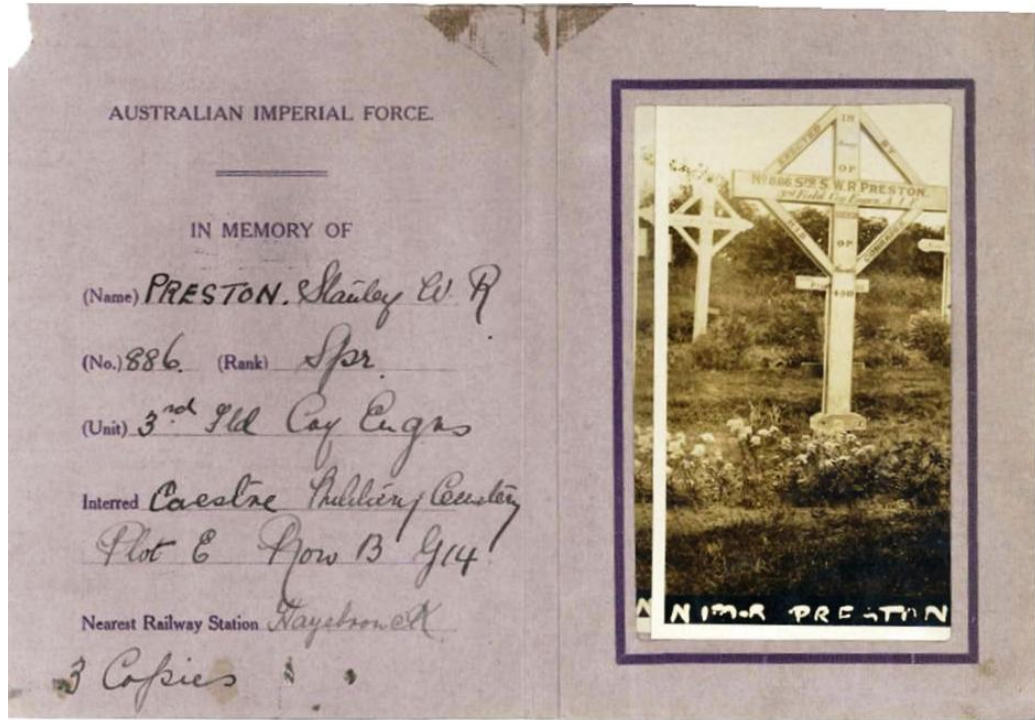


Figure 12 - Stanley Preston's grave at Caestre War Cemetery.