



AIR FORCE ASSOCIATION OF VICTORIA BALLARAT BRANCH

Newsletter



Summer 2026

PRESIDENT: Peter Dowling

SECRETARY: Sue Alexander

NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Sue Alexander

Phone 0419696091

Email: ballarat.afa@gmail.com

Email: ballarat.afa@gmail.com

FROM THE PRESIDENT

We are already well into 2026, with our summer period taking a more casual approach to our meetings.

This year we had a new venue for our Christmas lunch at the Park Hotel. We had our own room with an outstanding lunch offering and great service. See photographs of this highly enjoyable day later in this issue.

In the past many years, the January meeting has taken the form of a picnic by the lake but this year the venue was moved to our normal meeting place at Hut 48. In line with other Air Force Branches we have an aging membership and of our regular attendees we now have eight nonagenarians. In deference to mobility issues and location of conveniences, we deemed the picnic format no longer suitable.

The February meeting returned to the normal monthly format with the AGM forming a part of this meeting. The treasurer presented a brief overview of the financial picture and a new committee was elected.

This year's committee is:

Peter Dowling - President and Treasurer

Sue Alexander - Secretary and Newsletter Editor

Janet Bates - IWAGS Co-ordinator and Committee

Keith Lanyon - Chaplain

Bob McDonald - Committee

We look forward to another great year full of interesting meetings. We will once again stage the Battle for Australia Ball and we are already engaging with Ballarat Council to showcase Hut 48 and the Ballarat Branch of the Air Force Association during the Ballarat Heritage weekend later in the year.

Peter Dowling

President



IMPORTANT DATES COMING UP

Anzac Day

Saturday 25 April

9:30 for a 10:30 start.

Meet at corner of Lyon St North and Sturt Sts. Taxis and carts can be arranged for those requiring mobility assistance.



Social Luncheons

Social luncheons will continue throughout the year on every second Tuesday, commencing 12 midday.

Christmas Lunch 2025



Members, family and friends celebrated at our Christmas lunch at the Park Hotel in December.

We had special guests from U3A, our co-tenants at Hut 48, in Miriam Peck and Nina Netherway. Another special guest was Louise Humble from the Ballarat Air Museum.

Janet Bates who organised the day was greatly missed, being absent for family reasons.

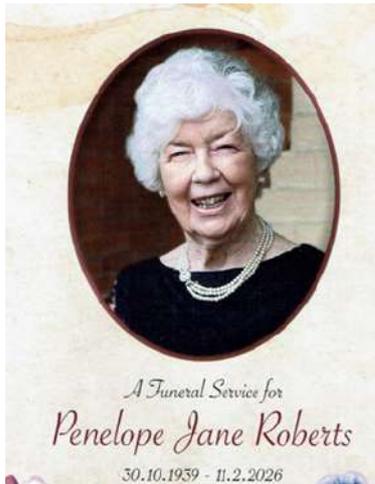
We had a table full of wonderful raffle prizes. President Peter played Santa and the diminutive Pixie couldn't even see over her lucky prize.

In addition, David turned 90 and Louise Humble was acknowledged with a certificate of appreciation for her support of 1WAGS initiatives through the Ballarat Aviation Museum.

Prizes were generously donated by APCO, Catherine King and our member Margaret Chapman.



Vale Penny Roberts



Vale Penny Roberts, an esteemed former member of the Air Force Association Ballarat Branch and wife of current member and long-serving past president Dr Tom Roberts, who passed away recently following a long illness.

Top Accolade for APCO Alfredton - Retailer of the Year 2025



APCO Alfredton has been the valued sponsor of the 1 WAGS website 1wags.org.au for the past three years. Without this sponsorship, the website would not be able to continue to host the resource material for the history of the wireless air-gunner training school at Ballarat Airport over the war years.

We are delighted that our sponsor has now received a top accolade, achieving the highest result in the APCO Retailer Excellence program. The APCO team of over 50 staff, led by Olivia Bates and Ivor Riesewyk, received the award for consistently providing quality fuel, fresh food and convenience to their customers.

Pictured at right—APCO Alfredton owners Olivia Bates and Ivor Riesewyk



1 WAGS REPORT

Sponsored by APCO Alfredton



As of the 20 January 2026 there have been 1,730,966 individual browsers worldwide.

The new FEATURE STORY honours the crew of Beaufort A9-211 lost over New Guinea in December 1943. A newspaper article details the finding of the crashed Beaufort 82 years later bringing closure to the crew's family.

READ MORE on the website:

Lost Hudson Aircraft found after 82 years

An Australian warplane disappeared 82 years ago. Now, it's been found.

By PNG correspondent Marian Faa

Topic: World War II

Sun 14 Dec Sunday 2025

Murray Fairbairn pictured on the right graduated from 1WAGS course 20.



Flight sergeants John Kenny, Arthur Davies, Thomas Burrowes, and Murray Fairbairn of No. 100 Squadron Beaufort A9-211. (Supplied: Australian Defence Force)

Janet Bates - 1WAGS Co-ordinator



Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial

In February, we commemorated the 22nd anniversary of the Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial. Keith Pitman, Janet Bates, and Peter Dowling attended the commemoration on behalf of the Ballarat Branch and Peter Dowling laid a book tribute in lieu of a floral tribute.



The Australian Ex-Prisoners of War Memorial in Ballarat is one of the most significant commemorative sites in the country, honouring more than 35,000 Australians who were held captive in conflicts from the Boer War through to the Korean War. It stands on the southern edge of the Ballarat Botanical Gardens, beside Lake Wendouree, and has been recognised as the National Prisoner of War Memorial.



Key features of the memorial include:

- Black granite walls engraved with the names of every known Australian POW - over 35,000 individuals.
- A long, linear design symbolising the journey away from home and the hardship of captivity.
- A central stone monument and surrounding landscaped areas that create a solemn, contemplative atmosphere.
- Its location in the Ballarat Botanical Gardens, enhancing the sense of peace and reflection.



The memorial was opened on 6 February 2004 by General Peter Cosgrove and designed by sculptor Peter Blizzard.

The memorial was created to acknowledge:

- The suffering, deprivation, brutality, starvation and disease endured by Australian POWs.
- The 8,600 prisoners who died in captivity and remain buried overseas.
- The lifelong impact on survivors and their families.
- The mateship and resilience that defined the POW experience.

It is designed as a place of quiet reflection, remembrance, and national healing.

Ballarat hosts an annual Ex-POW Memorial Service on the second Sunday of February.

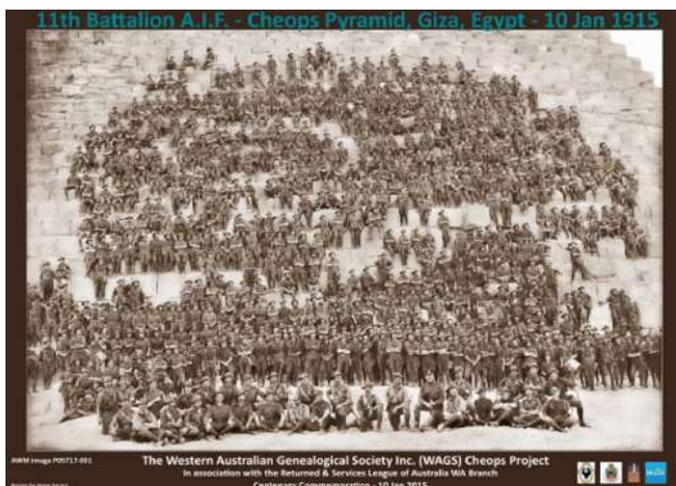


A WWI Prisoner of War Story - Bugler Frederick Ashton

Bugler Frederick Ashton is one of the most compelling figures featured in *Endurance: Stories of Australians in Wartime Captivity*, a commemorative publication exploring the experiences of Australians held as POWs. His story stands out because it spans the full arc of the First World War POW experience—capture, survival, and the long journey home.

Archival records confirm Ashton's background and service:

- **Name:** Frederick Ashton
- **Role:** Private/Bugler
- **Unit:** 11th Infantry Battalion
- **Service No.:** 743
- **Born:** 16 April 1893, Sydney
- **Residence:** Geraldton, WA
- **Captured:** Gallipoli, 1915
- **Released:** December 1918
- **Died:** 13 September 1981



These details come from the WA Military Digital Library, which also notes his presence in the famous 11th Battalion Cheops Pyramid photograph taken in Egypt in January 1915—one of the most iconic images of Australia's early WWI volunteers .

Frederick Ashton enlisted early with the 11th Battalion and trained at Blackboy Hill before sailing for Egypt. He appears in the famous Cheops Pyramid photograph, taken in January 1915, showing the battalion before the Gallipoli campaign.

On 25 April 1915, during the first chaotic hours of the landing, Ashton was separated from his unit in the rough terrain around Mule Gully. Turkish forces captured him - an extremely rare fate for Australians on that first day. Contemporary accounts and later research confirm his capture at this location.

Ashton was transported inland, beginning a long period of uncertainty. In a 1976 interview, he described the shock of capture, the confusion of being marched away from the battlefield, and the sudden loss of all contact with his battalion and with news from home. He spoke candidly about the emotional impact of those first days, when he had no idea whether anyone even knew he was alive.

Ashton spent more than three years as a prisoner of the Turks. His captivity included:

- Forced marches across harsh terrain, often with little food or water
- Chronic hunger, which he later recalled as one of the most grinding hardships
- Disease, worsened by poor sanitation and minimal medical care
- Isolation, as Australian POWs in Turkey were few in number
- Unpredictable treatment, ranging from indifference to harsh punishment

A photograph taken at the San Stefano POW camp in 1918 shows Ashton with seven other Australian prisoners, wearing civilian clothing and looking gaunt but composed. He is identified in the back row, left.

This image is one of the most important visual records of Australians held by the Ottoman Empire.

WWI Prisoner of War Story - Bugler Frederick Ashton (Cont.)



Australian War Memorial
Frederick Ashton - back row left 1918

In his recorded interview, Ashton reflected on his feelings toward his captors. He did not romanticise the experience - conditions were undeniably harsh - but he also noted that treatment varied depending on individual guards and officers. He described moments of cruelty, but also occasional gestures of humanity that helped him survive.

These reflections align with the broader themes explored in *Endurance: Stories of Australians in Wartime Captivity*, which includes a chapter dedicated to Ashton's story.

Ashton was finally released in December 1918, weeks after the Armistice. His return to Australia was slow, involving medical checks, debriefings, and the long voyage home. Like many POWs, he faced the challenge of rebuilding a life after years of deprivation and isolation.

He lived a long life after the war, passing away on 13 September 1981, but the experience of captivity remained a defining chapter of his story.

A WWII Prisoner of War Story - Flight Lieutenant Paul Gordon Royle, an Australian in the Great Escape

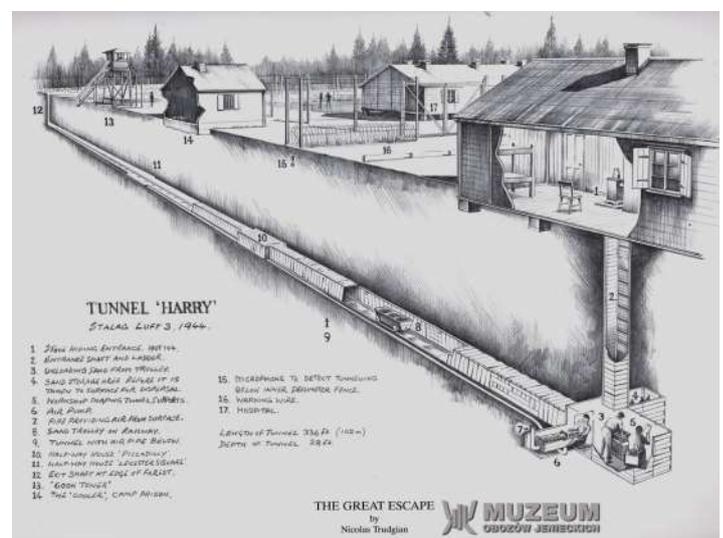
Stalag Luft III, a Luftwaffe-run POW camp in Sagan (now Żagań, Poland), held hundreds of British and Commonwealth airmen. Australians were a significant part of this community - 351 Australians were imprisoned there, and five were among the fifty escapees murdered by the Gestapo after the breakout.

The escape itself was the largest planned breakout of the war. Prisoners spent nearly a year digging three tunnels - Tom, Dick, and Harry - with extraordinary secrecy and engineering skill. On the night of 24 March 1944, 76 men made it out before the escape was discovered. Only three ultimately reached Allied lines.

Paul Royle was born in Perth in 1914 and joined the Royal Air Force before the war. After being shot down, he was captured and sent to Stalag Luft III. He became deeply involved in the escape effort and was one of the men who crawled through the tunnel "Harry" on the night of the breakout.

Royle made it out of the camp and into the surrounding forest, beginning the desperate attempt to reach freedom. Like most escapees, he was recaptured. Unlike many others, he was not executed - he was returned to captivity and survived the war. He lived to the age of 101, becoming one of the last surviving participants of the Great Escape.

While Royle survived, five Australians were among the fifty escapees murdered by the Gestapo after their recapture. Their deaths became one of the most notorious war crimes committed against Allied POWs. The Australian War Memorial and later historical works, including *Kriegies: The Australian Airmen of Stalag Luft III*, have helped restore their individual stories and the broader Australian contribution to the escape.



Australia Day Award for Major Neil Leckie



At our February meeting, we took the time to acknowledge Major Neil Leckie, RFD (Ret'd) OAM whose contributions to the community and military heritage earned him the award of Order of Australia Medal of the Order (OAM) in the January 2026 Australia Day Awards.

Major Leckie has a distinguished history of service in the military, commencing as a National Serviceman in 1968. Following his retirement in 2011, he has maintained his role as Manager of the Ballarat Ranger Military Museum.

Coincidentally, February 14 also marked the 75th anniversary of the beginning of the 1951 National Service Training Scheme.

History of National Service in Australia

Australia's history of National Service spans more than six decades and reflects shifting defence needs, political pressures, and public attitudes toward compulsory military service. The story is not one single scheme but a sequence of four distinct systems introduced between 1911 and 1972, each shaped by the strategic anxieties of its era.

Early compulsory training (1911–1929)

Australia introduced its first national service system in 1911, becoming one of the first countries to adopt compulsory military training in peacetime.

- Boys aged 12–18 and young men aged 18–26 were required to undertake cadet and militia training.

- The aim was to build a citizen militia capable of defending the nation without maintaining a large standing army.
- The scheme ended in 1929 as the Great Depression and changing defence priorities made it politically and financially unsustainable.

World War II conscription (1939–1945)

With the outbreak of WWII, Australia reintroduced conscription for home defence.

- Men were required to serve in the Militia, which could not be deployed outside Australian territory until 1943.
- The system expanded as the war intensified, but it remained separate from the all-volunteer Australian Imperial Force.

This period cemented the idea of conscription as a tool for national survival rather than routine defence.

Post-war National Service (1951–1959)



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P07803.001

Group photo 14 National Service Training Battalion circa 1955

Cold War tensions and conflicts in Korea and Malaya prompted the Menzies Government to reintroduce compulsory service in 1951.

- Around 287,000 young men were called up between 1951 and 1959.
- Eighteen-year-olds were required to complete 176 days of training, usually split between the Regular Army and the Citizen Military Forces.
- The scheme aimed to build a large reserve force in case of regional conflict.

History of National Service in Australia (cont.)

It ended in 1959 as strategic assessments shifted and the system was deemed too costly for its military value.

Selective National Service during the Vietnam era



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

EKN67/0100/VN

(1965–1972)

The most controversial chapter began in 1964, when the government introduced a selective conscription lottery.

- Birthdates were drawn randomly to determine who would be required to serve.
- Those selected completed two years of full-time service, later reduced to 18 months.
- From 1965, conscripts could be deployed to Vietnam, making Australia one of the few Western nations to send conscripted soldiers to an active war zone.
- Public opposition grew sharply, culminating in the Vietnam Moratorium protests.
- The scheme ended in 1972 with the election of the Whitlam Government, which abolished conscription and released imprisoned conscientious objectors.

Social impact and legacy

National Service shaped generations of Australian men and their families.

- Many valued the discipline, mateship, and sense of duty it fostered.

- Others experienced disruption to careers and education, and in the Vietnam era, deep moral and political conflict.
- A total of 212 national servicemen died on active service in Borneo and Vietnam.

The legacy remains visible in memorials, veterans' organisations, and ongoing debates about the fairness and necessity of conscription.

Why National Service ended

By the early 1970s, Australia's strategic environment had changed, and public support for conscription had collapsed. A fully volunteer defence force was seen as more sustainable and politically acceptable. Since 1972, Australia has relied entirely on voluntary enlistment.

