

CHAPTER 20

Summary and excerpts from Pax Sellick's Pro Patria

Old Muirite Pax Sellick (1935) penned an article which appeared in the **school magazine of 1983 titled PRO PATRIA**. This he did after visiting European battlefields of the Great War of 1914-1918 (WWI). Headmaster Paul Ellis had expressed concern that the current generation of boys knew very little about the names of those who were commemorated with the laying of wreaths in November each year, and little of the war itself. Sellick sketched the background to the war in Europe before turning to the part that South Africans played. Generals Louis Botha and Jan Smuts, who had led the Boers against the British at the turn of the twentieth century, took South Africa into the European (Great) War on the side of the allies. South Africa's army, which consisted of volunteers, had to quell a rebellion in South Africa itself by those opposed to participation in the war. Thereafter South African soldiers played a central role in subduing the German colonies of the then South West Africa (Namibia) and German East Africa (Tanzania).

One of those fighting in Africa whose name appears on the Roll of Honour is Lt. Anderson who won the Military Cross before being killed in action. Ernest Mills, only 17 at the time, died of wounds, and Sergeant W. Owen died in Nairobi in 1916. S. Grewar died in South West Africa, while C.H. ('Sonny') Frost succumbed to disease in an area infested with malaria, black water fever, dysentery and other diseases.

When the war in Africa was over, South African soldiers headed for the war in Europe. The South African Brigade landed in Marseilles in April, 1916. Prior to that some South African volunteers had gone to England and joined the British army. Sellick knew the names of three who were commissioned and all of whom won the Military Cross for gallantry. They were Reg Ruddle, an officer in the Rifle Brigade who was killed in action, his brother Cecil of the Scottish Rifles, who was wounded, and Noel Sellick of the 9th Northumberland Fusiliers, wounded twice. All had received their early education at Muir. Gordon Dolley, later to be six times Mayor of Uitenhage and a Member of Parliament, joined the Royal Flying Corps. H. Bennewith joined the Royal Navy, and died in naval action.

The South African Brigade first saw action in the trenches at Armentieres before being involved in the Battle of the Somme. The British artillery bombardment from the 24th to the 30th of June 1916 is said to have been heard across the Channel in England. In an ill-fated allied attack on the German positions, the loss of life was appalling and no ground was gained. South African troops were initially held in reserve and went into action a few days later at Bernafay Wood and Trones Wood. The epic battle of Delville Wood followed, from the 16th to the 21st July, 1916. Old Muirites were in all three of these battles, but Pax Sellick was able to trace the names of only a few. They were Charlie Ingram and the three Griffiths brothers, of whom Stanley was the sole survivor of Delville Wood, and in Uitenhage at the time of writing. Sellick succeeded in tracing the grave of Harry Hawkins, one of four Uitenhage brothers who served in the Great War. One of his brothers, Claude, was known as the bantam of the SA Brigade on account of his being the shortest South African soldier in France. He nevertheless won a Military Medal at Frampoux for an action in which he was wounded.

More Old Muirites who lost their lives were the three Magennis brothers, one of whom was buried alongside a fellow Old Boy Roper Witt in the main British Cemetery at Arras. Also nearby were the graves of Walter Wilson and C.S. Keates. The names of Old Muirites Allan Chase and Frank Cole are among the names of 55,000 soldiers who died and are recorded on the Menin Gate at Ypres in Flanders. 40,000 recorded on the Passchendaele

Wall, 75,000 at Thiepval on the Somme and many thousands at Vimy Ridge were further evidence of the scale of the casualties in a war. Pax Sellick's account continues as follows:

And what of those who survived? Look at the Past Pupils Honours Board and you will see the name of E.R. Roper. He became a very distinguished man. In the war he was a man who won the DSO and the MC. Afterwards he was an advocate who became King's Counsel, a Member of Parliament and finally a judge of the Supreme Court, and a member of the Appeal Court for the former High Commissioned Territories.

Douglas Mitchell's name also appears on this board. He was reported missing, believed killed, and I am told that a church service was held in Uitenhage in his memory. Nevertheless, he turned up, survived the War and became the Director of Forestry in South Africa.

Clifford Cawood served in South West Africa and was taken prisoner. On his release he went to Europe where he too won the Military Cross in the Flanders mud.

And there were many others. I wish I could do them all justice. Certainly we have reason to be proud of our Old Muirites who fought in the First World War.

Boys at Muir lived in stirring times. The names of the dead were announced in assembly and the Last Post was blown every Friday. Boys ran away from school to "sign up for overseas". Some were caught and sent back, others got through. The youngest South African soldier to die at Delville Wood was only sixteen. Some served under assumed names. At Ploegstert Cemetery appears the name of a South African soldier, "A. Anderson who served as E. Palmer". One wonders what the story was behind this. Fred Minty, still with us, was only seventeen when he landed in France.

Over half of the five million allied soldiers who died have no known graves. At Delville Wood there are 151 graves of South Africans. Only seventy-seven bodies were identified. The rest of the 151 have grave stones simply reading "A South African Soldier known unto God". Our total dead at Delville Wood were 2000, so most have no graves. These include Old Muirites.

I could tell you much more. The outstanding bravery of the men who carried no guns. The Medical Corps suffered enormous casualties for they were the men who had to go out to bring in the wounded. Many were decorated for bravery. I saw the grave of the only man who won the V.C. twice in the Great War. He was Captain Noel Chavasse, a doctor who was eventually killed while attending to wounded in the field. Incidentally, the emblem of the V.C. is embossed on the tombstones of the winners of the decoration. This is a privilege accorded to no other soldier. Thirteen South Africans won the V.C. in the First World War. The present generation of Muir boys must not forget these men, even though they never knew them and they died many years ago. They are part of Muir's proud traditions. Of those who died and of those who survived, let us say, their school motto was *Nec Pluribus Impar* which freely translated means "As good as the next man". Indeed were there any better?