Alfred Hartley Hurst

Private Alfred Hartley Hurst served in World War 1, but he did not appear to be known to those who were putting names forth to be included on the Laverton Honour Board. Another explanation is that he was merely overlooked due to the lateness of his enlistment. However, Alfred was certainly living in Laverton with his family when he enlisted in July 1918. With this knowledge, from our research, we include his story along with numerous others who too were not included on the Laverton Honour Board.

Alfred Hartley Hurst was born on 22 June 1895, in Maldon, Victoria, to parents Alfred William Hurst and Rosetta Ann Hurst (nee Palmer). He was the second eldest of six boys born to the couple. By the time that young Alfred was eight years old, and attending school, the family had moved to the Newport area to live and work. Alfred Hurst snr was a plasterer by trade and strong Labor party member who contested the local Williamstown Ward of 'Victoria' on several occasions, winning a seat in 1914.

Upon leaving school, Alfred jnr took up the trade of carpentry, rather than plastering like his father and elder brother, Charles George Hurst. Their brother, Archibald Stanley Hurst, also took up carpentry. and so. the family were very reliant on house building demand for their income. When World War 1 broke out, none of the brothers, even though three would have been old enough, volunteered to fight. This could have been due to their skills being needed locally to continue building homes, as well as to cover for the number of young men who had already joined the war effort.

By 1917, the Hurst family had either given up their building enterprises within the Newport area or were forced to due to restricted supplies and demand. Seeking an alternate source of work, they moved to the Laverton area, along Aviation Road, and took up farming. They moved as a whole family unit, seemingly a case of 'one in, all in'. Little information is known as to the type of farming they took up, but they certainly integrated themselves into the local community and its progress. The eldest brother Charles was a key member of the Laverton Progress Association alongside the Maher, Lohse, Newland, and Cameron families.

However, the farming lifestyle did not seem to fascinate Alfred jnr, for in July 1918, he made the decision to volunteer for service in the great war. It certainly couldn't have been for the great adventure because he would have been aware of the terrible conditions that our young men and women had to endure on the western front, and in North Africa. Nonetheless, Alfred undertook his basic training and medical examinations at the Broadmeadows camp and was allocated to the 14th (Vic) Reinforcements. By mid-October, he was on his way to Adelaide for embarkation aboard the *HMAT Boonah*.

The ship that Alfred boarded had its own interesting history. It was German built for the Australian trade, but was seized in Sydney the year war was declared and converted into a troop ship. His Majesty's Australian Troopship *HMAT Boonah* sailed from Port Adelaide on 22 October 1918, bound for the United Kingdom via Fremantle, and then South Africa. At the

time of its departure, there was little thought of an armistice, only that more troops were urgently needed to reinforce the efforts of their countrymen on the western front.

HMAT Boonah

Apart from her crew, the embarkation roll noted that the *HMAT Boonah* was carrying about 1200 servicemen, including 30 members of the Australian Army Medical Corp and Private Alfred Hartley. She was the last Australian troop ship to leave Australia during World War 1.

The *HMAT Boonah* arrived in Durban, South Africa just three days after the armistice had been signed on 11 November 1918. Upon receiving this news, her captain also received his orders to promptly return home to Australia. This must have been incredibly comforting news to all onboard the *Boonah*, that their services were not required, and that they would possibly be back home in Australia with their families for Christmas.

Unfortunately, the city of Durban was already coping with an outbreak of the deadly 'Spanish' flu[1]. In an ill-fated decision, local dockworkers were employed to service the *HMAT Boonah*,

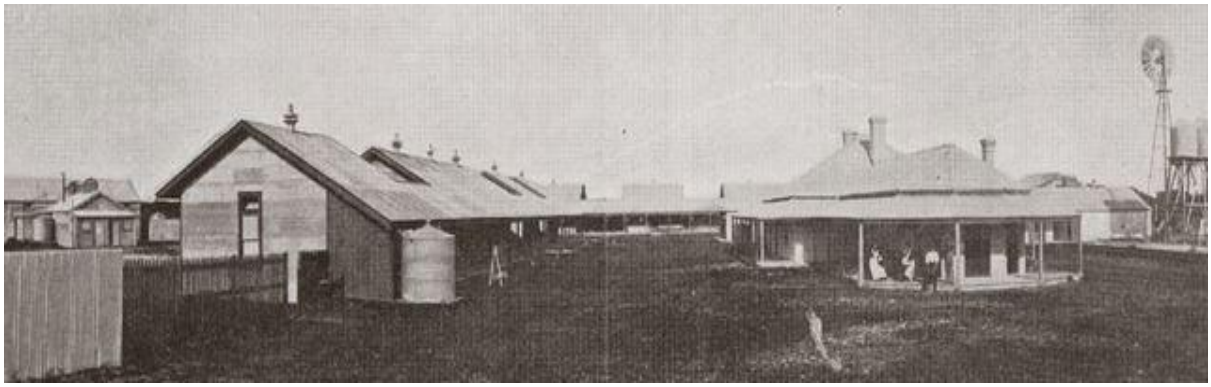
[1] During 1919, about a third of all Australians become infected with the "Spanish Flu" and nearly 15,000 people died. These figures match the average annual death rate for the Australian Imperial Force throughout 1914-18. More than 5,000 marriages were affected by the loss of a partner and over 5000 children lost one or both parents. However, it wasn't just the influenza pandemic victims who were affected. Across Australia, regulations intended to reduce the spread and impact of the pandemic caused profound disruption. The nation's quarantine system held back "Spanish Flu" for several months,

thereby transmitting the virus to the defenceless troops, who were billeted in crowded conditions throughout the ship.

Another troop ship, the *HMAT Wyreema,* sailing from England with a contingent of Australian Army Nursing Sisters onboard, had departed South Africa just two days ahead of the *Boonah*. Her captain remained in radio contact throughout the eastward return journey across the Indian Ocean. After leaving Durban, the *Boonah* experienced harsh weather conditions, cold temperatures, icy decks, and rough seas; and for the soldiers, two thin blankets in an unheated ship in a swinging hammock made life very uncomfortable. These conditions confined the crew and troops below deck for many days of the return voyage home.

After five days, the first indications of the 'flu' appeared. At first, it was suspected by the medical staff to be mild tonsillitis, but later symptoms of lower back pain which spread to other limbs, raging headaches, nose bleeds and fever often exceeding 40°C (104°F) soon forced all on board to assume the worst. Each day, the sick parades got longer and longer, and so, a fumigation chamber was hastily constructed and routines established to manage the spread of the 'flu' throughout the ship. Following the joy of being spared from the conflict and conditions of the western front, the troops now faced an even greater danger.

The *HMAT Boonah's* Captain had a dilemma: with 37 members of his crew affected, many of them stokers, he had to reduce speed as there was insufficient crew to load the boilers. Volunteers were called for and as the sailing time was to be extended, this meant the need for rationing of provisions and drinking water. News of the plight of those aboard *the Boonah* had been conveyed to the authorities in Western Australia. When the *HMAT Wyreema* docked in Fremantle, twenty of her nursing sisters were transferred to the Quarantine Station at Woodman Point, south of Fremantle.



Woodman Point Quarantine Station, WA (courtesy of Friends of Woodman Point)

The crew and troops aboard the *HMAT Boonah* endured a slow and staggered voyage across the baking heat of the Indian Ocean. At home, the authorities panicked. Fearing the arrival of

meaning that a less deadly version came ashore in 1919. But it still caused delays and resentment for the 180,000 soldiers, nurses and partners who returned home from the fighting that year.

a pandemic, they denied the ship permission to land. For weeks, the vessel was diverted from one port to another. One newspaper described the ship as 'a floating hell'. On 12 December 1918 the Sydney Morning Herald reported on the progress of the transport. By now, there were approximately 300 cases of pneumonic flu among the ship's crew and troops, one of which was Private Alfred Hartley Hurst.

The disease had not yet affected Western Australia, and the local authorities were hesitant to allow the troops to disembark. However, after much public outcry, approval was granted for 300 of the most unwell soldiers to be ferried to the nearby Woodman's Point Quarantine Station. These men were tended to by twenty volunteer nurses from the *Wyreema* and others from Perth.

After a public outcry, the *HMAT Boonah* was finally ordered back to Fremantle where men from the stricken vessel, including Private Hurst, were ferried ashore to Woodman Point. Once there, they were kept in strict isolation. Over the next twelve months, no fewer than thirty-one people would die.

The men not ferried to the quarantine station were forced to remain aboard the *HMAT Boonah*, where conditions were described as deplorable. Around 21 December, the *Boonah* sailed to Adelaide and during this journey a further seventeen cases of the 'flu' were discovered. Here, the entire crew and remaining troops were disembarked at Torrens Island Quarantine Station, South Australia. They remained in quarantine for a short period, and given that no further cases occurred, were soon given the all-clear to return to their homes.

Torrens Island, Quarantine Station, (courtesy of State Library of South Australia)

For Private Alfred Hurst, his stay at Woodman Point was about twenty-one days, before he was discharged and transported back to Victoria. Alfred likely considered himself quite lucky, though it would have been difficult not to face the reality of his situation during his time at the quarantine station. With 27 soldiers and 4 nurses dying at Woodman Point, the whole incident appears to have been a terrible waste of young lives. Lives of men and women who were prepared to die, if they must, in battle for their country, but instead, they were struck down by a disease when the war was no longer.

Private Alfred Hurst was eventually discharged from service on 31 January 1919, enabling him to return to civilian life. What short or long-term effects the 'flu' had on him we don't know, but he did quickly return to work as a builder and lived to the grand age of eighty-three years old.

At the time of Private Alfred Hurst's return, his family were still living and farming within the Laverton district, and it was to here that Alfred settled for the next few years. This immediate post-war period was quite a joyful one for the Hurst family as all six brothers would wed within the next five years. First was the eldest brother Charles, who got married in 1919. Next, it was Alfred's turn. On 1 April 1922, he married Pearl Dorothy Reitman in Williamstown, and the couple settled within the nearby suburb of Newport. His four younger brothers then followed suit, with most of them moving into the Newport area too.

Following his marriage to Pearl, Alfred returned to his pre-war occupation of carpentry/building. He operated a successful building business within the Newport area, where he may have worked with his brothers, and even his nephews down the line, but there are no records of there being a family business. Alfred would later buy a couple of vacant blocks within the area, build a dwelling to his design, and then sell it before moving on to the next property. Alfred and Pearl do not appear to have had any children of their own, but they were very close with Alfred's brothers, their wives, and children.

On 4 June 1960, Alfred's wife, Pearl Dorothy Hurst (nee Reitman) passed away at their home in Newport, aged 60. She was interred within the Williamstown Cemetery (Independent D, Row 2.5A, Grave 3). Shortly after, Alfred moved across town to reside in the Ringwood area where his brother, Clarence Aldous Hurst, and some of his children were living. Eventually, he sold up his home there and moved into the Judge Book Memorial Village in Eltham, remaining close-by with Clarence. Alfred passed away on 29 September 1978, aged 83, and was interred alongside his wife in the Williamstown cemetery.

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Edited: Adam Virgona

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