

# Beersheba centenary: family with most to lose in Great War



Ricky Morris with his aunt Laura Bell at the site of his grandfather Frederick Lovett's house in Heywood, Victoria, yesterday.  
Picture: David Geraghty

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If Australia as a nation knows anything about the Great War, it is surely this: everybody made sacrifices; everybody grieved.

Then there was the Lovett family of Lake Condah in western Victoria. There is no story in the nation like their story. No other family had as much to lose.

One hundred years ago this month, the Lovett family had five sons enlisted with the Australian Imperial Force.

Some had already been in battle, others were on the way.

“I’ve always known a bit about them,” says Ricky Morris, who is a descendant and will travel to Israel on October 31 to lay a wreath at Beersheba, as part of the centenary of the campaign. “But for my aunties (including Laura Bell, above) and me, this is very emotional, finding out exactly what they were prepared to sacrifice.”

The Lovetts are Gunditjmara people from the Lake Condah district, indigenous Australians whose links to this continent go back more than 60,000 years. In the 1840s, they were known as the “fighting Gunditjmara” for their fierce

determination to resist the arrival of white settlers. But their weapons and their warrior spirit were no match for European guns, and by 1869, the Lake Condah mission had been established by the Church of England for descendants of the Gunditjmara and neighbouring tribes.



Signalman Claude Henry McDonald and Aircraftwoman Alice Clarke Lovett.

By the time the Great War arrived, the mission had a population of 60, among them James Lovett and his wife, Hannah, who had 13 children, all living in tents and wooden huts, and worshipping in a small, bluestone church.

The Lake Condah Aborigines were not technically citizens of Australia, but when the call went out, five of the Lovett boys — Alfred, Leonard, Frederick, Edward and Herbert — volunteered to enlist. A fierce debate ensued — should they, not being predominately European, be allowed? — but ultimately, they went.

A photograph of Frederick leaving Australia survives in the archives at the Australian War Memorial. Looking over his shoulder, he is tiny compared with the others on the dock, and it is obvious he is indigenous. Frederick was born at the Lake Condah Mission in 1887. He joined the Australian Imperial Force in 1917. Nobody can say for certain why he enlisted. The dry had come to Victoria; there was precious little work around; the AIF was in desperate need of manpower; Aborigines would get equal pay; the money would go back to their families in the mission; he loved his country; he wanted to see something of the world. Maybe all or a little of all of the above.

Frederick became a private in the 29th reinforcements of the 4th Lighthorse regiment.

“What that means is, 100 years ago today, he was heading over there,” Mr Morris says. “Thinking of that is why we are feeling emotional right now.”

Frederick served in the desert campaigns, arriving shortly after the famed charge of the Australian Lighthorse brigade. He was discharged on June 15, 1919, and awarded two service medals. Upon his return, he married Mary Rose, and they had 11 children, including Margaret, who is Mr Morris’s late mother, and his Aunty Laura. Laura remembers her father working as a labourer for many years after the war, but his service didn’t end there.



Frederick Lovett, third from right, about to leave for WWI.

The family's service didn't end there, either. At the age of 52, Frederick re-enlisted, for World War II. Three of his brothers from the Great War again joined him for duties on the home front. A sixth brother, Samuel, signed up with them. Seventy years on from those battles, the Australian War Memorial now counts 21 members of the Lovett family as having served their country. Mr Morris is one of them, having served in the International Force for East Timor, and as a sergeant in Afghanistan. Also on the list are two women, including Alfred’s daughter, Alice Lovett, who served as an aircraftwoman in the Women’s Auxiliary Australian Air Force.

The Australian War Memorial says it cannot find another family like the Lovetts. The family’s willingness to sacrifice for Australia is formally recognised in Canberra, too. In 2000, the Lovett Tower — the city's tallest building — was named in their honour, with former veterans affairs minister Bruce Scott, saying: “This one family demonstrates how the Anzac tradition, born during WWI, has been passed down from generation to generation and endures today.”

Mr Morris said: “When I joined the army, I knew the Lovett story, but I didn't know how unique it was. They stuck together. They did this amazing thing. Then they did it all over again.”

When Mr Morris joined, he found himself attached to the 4/19th Prince of Wales Lighthorse, which is a descendant unit of his grandfather Frederick's unit, the 4th Lighthorse. “That was a pure coincidence,” he said. “I was walking in his footsteps.”

On October 31, he will do so again, in Israel this time, laying a wreath in honour of all indigenous soldiers, and those who fought in the desert campaigns, including the famous charge of the Lighthorse brigade — 800 men across 6km in the dying light — which for the Allies was a turning point in a war they had to win. As part of his pilgrimage, he surprised his aunty Laura, who still lives out Lake Condah way, by visiting her yesterday aboard a horse, in a uniform identical to that worn by her father. “To us, this is an honour,” Mr Morris said. “My family serves. I'm proud of that fact.”

*The Weekend Australian will publish a special magazine on October 28 commemorating the centenary of Beersheba*