



# Telling it like it was

## Cache of old letters brings home horror

Samantha Healy

IT WAS an unassuming box that instantly connected me with three men I had never met.

One was my great-grandfather Private Andrew Brown Wallace, a World War I veteran, who, I am told, regularly wrote home to Australia from the front line.

And the others, two Ost brothers, August and Henry, my great-great-uncles, who never made it home.

Their photographs, postcards and letters from the Great War survive in a wooden box – a box I only recently discovered, but had always been vaguely aware existed.

One of those letters, sent by Pte Wallace, is in remarkably good condition. His cursive handwriting in black ink has barely faded.

It is addressed to his mother – my great-great-grandmother Jessie Wallace – and gives a chilling account of the day the HMAT Warilda, on which my great-grandfather was being treated for mustard gas poisoning, was sunk by a German U-Boat torpedoed between France and England.

Dear Mother,  
You will see by the above address (British Red Cross Hospital, Hampshire) that I am again in good Ol' Blighty.

I came across on the 3rd August (1916) and was aboard the hospital transport (ship) "Warilda" that was sunk. We left Le Havre, France, bound for Southampton at 10.30pm on the 2nd (August) and were almost in mid-channel when we were torpedoed.

The torpedo struck us mid-ship on

the starboard side. It went right through one of the wards, blew away the staircase and entered the engine room. There was a tremendous hole in the side.

I was in a ward on the same ship but further back towards the stern. I was very weak on my feet and could not walk 10 yards on my own and was

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carried aboard on a stretcher, but it is marvellous, when certain circumstances face you, what you can do.

As soon as I heard the terrible crash and felt the boat tremble I knew what was up, so I got out of bed and up the stairs on to the top deck.

We all managed to get in to the lifeboats. Number two (lifeboat) that I was in, had 15 onboard and as it was being lowered, the stern rope got caught and the nose went on lowering and the stern (was) up in the air, so us poor unfortunates were all thrown in the water.

Number four lifeboat also capsized. On board it were nine nurses and two WAAC's (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps). They were all struggling in the water.

I happened to be in a position to save

one of these nurses from drowning.

The strings on her lifebelt came undone and a wave washed it away and I caught her as she was sinking. I took off my own lifebelt and put it on her and swam towards a raft some distance away, dragging her with me.

We were hanging on to this for an hour and a quarter before we were

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picked up by the destroyer.

I thought we were never going to be rescued. I was just about exhausted, for with the exertion of swimming and the gas in my lungs, I was fairly done up. . .

One of the officers on the destroyer offered the nurse his bed to lie in, but she refused and sat beside me on the deck till we got to Southampton.

There was no panic on board when we were struck. All were saved unless (sic) those that were in that ward that the staircase was blown away. Only one man escaped. It was three hours before the boat sank.

She (HMAT Warilda) was not a hospital ship with the red cross painted on the side but what they call an ambulance transport. She was painted grey and had a gun mounted on the stern.

We had two destroyers escorting us.

The submarine came up between us and one of the destroyers and fired from about 30 yards.

The destroyer dropped over 150 depth charges (but) I don't think they got anything.

The water was bitterly cold. . . Service records show that Pte



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Pte Wallace survived and eventually returned home but Mr Burness suggests his quality of life would have been poor.

According to the Australian War Memorial, 444 soldiers with the 41st Battalion were killed during World War I and 1577 were wounded as a result of fighting and the use of gas warfare.

One of those who died while serving with the 41st Battalion was August Ost, my great-great-uncle.

He was buried at the Heath Cemetery in Harbonnières, France – the final resting place of 110 Australians who died during the Battle of Amiens.

His older brother Pte Henry Ost, who served with the 49th Battalion, was also killed.

Pte Henry Ost's service records were stamped "Killed In Action" on August 12, 1918.

He was buried at the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial in France.

Two sons killed by war.

A postcard, sent by one of the brothers, the day before they left for the front said: *I know you and dad are both thinking of me, but nothing on Earth could have stopped me from going to war.*

Some day you will be proud of your darling sons at war.

Generations later, I am proud.

And with no Anzac veterans of World War I still alive, piecing together family history has never been more important.