

Pvt Lionel Dennis and Pvt Reuben Victor Kinna, The Great War

In 1916, the 'midpoint of the Great War', blood was shed on the fields of France. ¹ The Australian Infantry divisions arrived in France and took up the battle against the Germans, alongside the British and French forces in the Western Front. Countless innocent lives gave their all for 'King and Country'. Many never returned home, their blood staining the battle fields. Such is the case for two young men, one from Eastbourne, a small seaside village in England, the other from an inner-city town Richmond, Victoria, Australia. Two men, worlds apart, joined in death and now by their great, great niece. My ancestral researching revealed that within one month of each other Reuben Victor Kinna (my paternal great grand uncle) and Lionel Dennis (my maternal great grand uncle) paid the ultimate sacrifice on the battle fields of France. The romantic within me hoped their paths had crossed. That decades before I was born, their lives were intertwined. Only the war archives, the 'keepers of the truth' would let me know.

Lionel Dennis, it appears was keen on enlisting when the First World War began. Signing his service papers on September 10th, 1914, he was assigned the regimental number of 409 and became part of the South Down Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment. ² A 33-yearold, market gardener, this single man, had previously spent nine years as a seaman in the Royal UK Navy. ³ I sense his thirst for adventure was strong. With no wife or children to consider, this red headed, 5 ft 3" young man took up arms. ⁴ Researching the war archives for Lionel returned only two points of note. On July 9th 1916, he was at the '33 CCS', a casualty clearing station in Bethune, France having suffered a gunshot wound. ⁵ The records do not stipulate where Lionel was when this occurred. Further investigation revealed the Royal Sussex Regiment was involved in the Battle of Boars Head on June 30th, 1916. It appears that Lionel survived this battle, only to be wounded in the other offensive initiatives during the Battle of Somme.

¹ Peter Burness, Fromelles and the Somme 1916 Australians on the Western Front, Department of Veteran Affairs, ACT, 2006, p. 1.

² Attestation papers for Lionel Dennis, September 1914, 'UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920', ancestry.com, accessed October 2021.

³ Lionel Dennis, 'UK Royal Navy Registers of Seaman's Service 1848-1939', ancestry.com, accessed November 2021.

⁴ Attestation papers for Lionel Dennis, September 1914, 'UK British Army World War I Service Records, 1914-1920'.

⁵ Casualty Form - Active Service for Lionel Dennis, July 1916, 'UK British Army World War 1 Service Records, 1914-1920', accessed November 2021.

Reuben Kinna was 27 years of age when he signed his attestation papers on July 7th, 1915. Upon joining the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) he was given the service number 3801, and was placed into the 7th Battalion, 12th Reinforcements.¹ Having lived in a small Victorian country town, how it must have been for this young man as he embarked at Melbourne for the long journey across the seas to foreign lands. Like Lionel, he had no wife or children to consider. Reuben was a blacksmith, skills that could have been beneficial to the war effort. His service papers indicate he embarked at Alexandria, Egypt on board the troopship Transylvania on March 29th, 1916.² Here he joined the British Expeditionary Forces in France, where Lionel was serving. After disembarking at Marseille on April 4th, 1916, he joined the 1st Division Base Depot at Etaples, France on April 9th.³ By July 1916 Reuben found himself deep in the trenches of war.

Just one month later Reuben was killed in action, 'in the field', France on August 18th, 1916.⁴ The month prior, on July 11th, Lionel had died following his gunshot wound.⁵ Reuben and Lionel never made it home to their families. As a mother, I cannot fathom the grief their parents endured. It goes against the natural evolutionary cycles to bury a child. But even this was taken away from the family as both men lie in foreign French land. Lionel is buried in Bethune War Cemetery, Pas de Calais, France.⁶ Reuben is memorialised in name only at the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, Pincardie, France.⁷ My great grandparents continued, raising their families on different continents, and somehow, these ancestral lines would merge and result in 'me'.

Lionel is memorialised with his name scribed on a small marble tablet in the Willingdon Parish Church.⁸ Reuben is remembered with his name listed in the 'Roll of Honour' and on one of the bronze panels in the Commemorative Area of the Australian War

¹ Attestation papers for Reuben Kinna, 'Australia, WWI Service Records, 1914-1920', ancestry.com, accessed September 2021.

² Statement of Service papers for Reuben Kinna, 'Australia, WWI Service Records, 1914-1920', ancestry.com, accessed October 2021.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Casualty Form - Active Service for Lionel Dennis, July 1916, 'UK British Army World War I Service Records, 1914-1920', accessed October 2021.

⁶ Find A Grave, 'Pvt Lionel Dennis', <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/56164922/1ioinel-dennis>, accessed July 2021.

⁷ Virtual War Memorial Australia, 'Reuben Victor Kinna', <https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/70867>, accessed November 2021.

⁸ International War Museums, 'Willingdon Parish Church WWI and WW2', <https://www.iwmorg.uk/memorials/item/memorial/17322>, accessed August 2021.

Memorial, Canberra.⁹ And in what was the beginning point of my discovery of this great uncle, his name is recorded in one of forty 'Books of Remembrance' placed at the Shrine of Remembrance, Melbourne, Victoria.¹⁰

I cannot definitively conclude that Rueben and Lionel served side by side. However, given the sheer size of men who fought, were wounded, and died during the Battle of Somme and ensuing war operations, it is ever so slightly possible that they did. So many men, united in service, came together and paid the ultimate sacrifice. My great grand uncles Reuben and Lionel, being two such men.

⁹ Australian War Memorial, 'Private Reuben Victor Kinna', <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10242956>, accessed November 2021.

¹⁰ Shrine of Remembrance, 'Shrine Highlights', <https://www.shrine.org.au/shrine-highlights>, accessed November 2021.

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