

Online Scholarly Engagement with the Australian Pilgrim: The Case of the Australian History – International Explorer Guide ¹

Nathan Wise and Rebecca Wheatley

ABSTRACT: Between 2012 and 2015, historians from the University of New England and Monash University collaboratively developed the online Australian History - International Explorer Guide [www.ahieg.com.au]. The project was conceptualised in anticipation of a growth in Australian travel to the region to coincide with the centenary of the First World War, and the 75th anniversaries of key events during the Second World War. As such, the primary objective of the project was to provide an online tool those Australians could use to facilitate their travel to the Egypt and Lebanon, and to incorporate sites of commemorative and historical significance into their travel plans. However, despite their best interests, researchers soon found that continued political and social unrest in the region demanded a modification of their objectives and their approach towards this. In the hope that these experiences may serve as a guide for future projects of a similar nature, this paper will document the experience of researching and developing the Australian History - International Explorer Guide, and argue for continued attempts at academic engagement with the digitally-oriented and historically-minded independent traveller of the twenty-first century.

Introduction

Self-guided travels to historical sites in Gallipoli (Turkey) and the Western Front (France and Belgium), also increasingly referred to by scholars as ‘pilgrimages’, due to the quasi-spiritual and moral significance of the experience,² have become essential aspects of many Australian international travel experiences. Every year, thousands gather for the dawn service at Gallipoli on Anzac Day. Thousands more visit the peninsula throughout the year. Tens of thousands tour the battlefield sites of France

1 The authors would like to acknowledge the assistance provided by the Council for Australian–Arab Relations [CAAR], part of the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, in funding this project.

2 See for example B. Scates, *Return to Gallipoli*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006, pp. 16-18. Scates also notes that the distinction between ‘travel, tourism and pilgrimage is bound to be ‘slippery’ and scholars have long debated the difference’. Scates, *Return to Gallipoli*, p. xix. For more on that distinction see P. Fussell, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1980, p. 38.

and Belgium, and stand solemnly as the last post is played every night at the Menin Gate memorial in Ypres. But, in contrast to the close connection Australians today have with the Australian experience of war in France, Belgium and Turkey, very few Australians visit similar sites in North Africa.³ Indeed, Australian travellers are, for the most part, unaware of the presence of Australian memorials and historic sites in Egypt and Lebanon. During the First World War, Australians served throughout the Near East, including modern day Egypt, Palestine, Israel, Lebanon and Syria, and Australians once again returned and participated in campaigns throughout this region during the Second World War. To address this relative dearth of knowledge about Australia's involvement in these campaigns, between 2012 and 2014, historians from the University of New England and Monash University collaboratively developed the online Australian History – International Explorer Guide [www.ahieg.com.au]. As outlined in more detail below, one of the immediate goals of this project was to utilise the internet to inform people of this history among Australian travellers to the region, and to raise awareness of specific commemorative and historical sites associated with that history.

The growing popularity of these travels has resulted in the proliferation of a broad body of supporting literature, largely in the form of travel guides and contextual histories.⁴ Similarly, the preservation of the sites have also been the subject of several recent histories, again, many published to provide information for travellers to those areas. Philip Longworth's detailed study, *The Unending Vigil*, provides an in-depth examination of the history of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, including changes to their commemorative practices and the nature of their work around the world. And similar studies have also been made in recent years by David Crane and Julie Summers.⁵ The visual appeal of these sites

3 The clearest evidence for this contrast is a comparison of the registers at the relative sites. While not every visitor will sign the register, there is a clear difference in the frequency of comments in French and Belgian cemeteries compared to those in Egypt. We found several registers in Egypt that had not been signed for several months.

4 P. Stanley, *A Stour Pair of Boots: A Guide to Exploring Australia's Battlefields*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2008; Garrie Hutchinson, *Pilgrimage: A Traveller's Guide to Australia's Battlefields*, Black Inc., Melbourne, 2006; Gary McKay, *Australia's Battlefields in Viet Nam*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2003; Tonie and Valmai Holt, *Major and Mrs Holt's Battlefield Guide: Gallipoli*, Leo Cooper, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, 2000; Tonie and Valmai Holt, *Major and Mrs Holt's Battlefield Guide to the Somme*, Leo Cooper, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, 2000; Tonie and Valmai Holt, *Major and Mrs Holt's Battlefield Guide to the Ypres Salient* Leo Cooper, Barnsley, South Yorkshire, 1997; John Laffin, *Guide to Australian Battlefields of the Western Front*, Kangaroo Press, East Roseville, 1999; Phil Taylor and Pam Cupper, *Gallipoli: A Battlefield Guide*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, 1997.

5 D. Crane, *Empires of the Dead: How One Man's Vision Led to the Creation Of WWI's War Graves*, William Collins, London, 2013; J. Summers, *British and Commonwealth War Cemeteries*, Shire Publications, Oxford, 2010.

features prominently in many such works, most particularly in Julie Summer's heavily illustrated history of the CWGC, titled, *Remembered*.⁶

Scholars have also taken great interest in these pilgrimages and their historical origins, and the phenomenon has also spurred a broad body of academic literature, both within Australia and internationally.⁷ Attention is often drawn to the broader social and cultural benefits of these journeys, and historians such as Brad West found that these pilgrims are often relatively more open to learning about the societies and cultures in the nations they are visiting,⁸ and, as a result of research on these voyages, Australian historians are increasingly collaborating with international colleagues based near those sites, or working on related themes.

However, the popularity of these journeys, and the nature of the sites these people are visiting, has also been the subject of concern by other historians.⁹ Marilyn Lake, for example, argued that the popularity of these voyages, and the sentiments typically expressed by travellers, reflects the increased militarisation of Australian history.¹⁰ This may be partly true, and the popularisation of journeys to these sites may be a reflection of the pervasiveness of military values within civil society, but this does not necessarily mean that those who embark on those voyages are necessarily blind to the destructive effects of war, or that they support this militarisation, or that they cannot learn more about those destructive effects through careful engagement with history. Many of these travellers seek to enhance their connection with ancestors by visiting their graves, or the locations they served at during those conflicts. Indeed, in a 2007 article, Bruce Scates emphasised the diversity of those travellers, and argued that their 'intelligent, critical, reflective testimony often transcended what I have called the narrow nationalism of the Gallipoli experience'.¹¹

6 J. Summers, *Remembered: The History of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission*, Merrell, London, 2007.

7 Key works in the area within Australia include Scates, *Return to Gallipoli*; B. Scates, *Anzac Journeys: Returning to the battlefields of World War II*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013; F. Cheal and T. Griffin, 'Pilgrims and Patriots: Australian Tourist Experiences at Gallipoli', *International Journal of Culture, Tourism and Hospitality Research*, vol. 7, no. 3, pp. 227-241.

8 B. West, 'Independent Travel and International Civil Religious Pilgrimage: Backpackers at the Gallipoli Battlefields' in B. West [ed.], *Down the Road: Exploring Backpackers and Independent Travel*, API Press, Pert, 2005, p. 24.

9 For example Mark McKenna and Stuart Ward recently raised concerns about the political and commercial influences on the nature of these travels. See M. McKenna and S. Ward, 'It was really moving, mate': The Gallipoli Pilgrimage and Sentimental Nationalism in Australia', *Australian Historical Studies*, vo. 38, no. 129, 2007, pp. 141-151.

10 See for example, M. Lake, 'Introduction: What Have You Done for Your Country' in M. Lake and H. Reynolds, *What's Wrong with Anzac? The Militarisation of Australian Military History*, New South, Sydney, 2010, pp. 10-13.

11 B. Scates, 'The first casualty of war: A reply to McKenna's and Ward's 'Gallipoli pilgrimage and sentimental nationalism'', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 38, no. 130, 2007, pp. 312-321.

Australia's involvement in conflict is, sadly, a core component of the nation's history. The two world wars stripped the young nation of thousands of lives, and it permanently scarred the minds and bodies of hundreds of thousands more. Those who returned from the war often failed to readjust to the patterns of civilian life, and they subsequently left a lasting legacy on their family, friends and social networks. This simple fact, that war has had a large and destructive impact on Australia's past, is difficult to ignore, and indeed, it should not be ignored. If we are to challenge the more distasteful elements of the Anzac Legend in the public arena, and to challenge the political and commercial influences on that history, then we, as scholars, need to present our audience with a rigorous and honest account of the past. Scholars cannot simply ignore Australia's historical engagement in conflict, nor the desire for travellers to understand and engage with that history by travelling to significance sites. Rather, scholars should be leading the field in how to understand that past, and presenting that audience with an honest and accurate assessment of that history. In a similar vein, instead of discouraging Australians from engaging in historically-minded travel or 'pilgrimages', scholarly historians should be looking at the information offered to those travellers to help ensure that the public can engage with history in informed and critical ways.

Despite the novel and bold objectives of the project, this is not the first project of this type. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission [CWGC] website [www.cwgc.org] contains a range of details on the sites that they maintain. Such details include images of the sites, maps, opening times, historical information, and additional access information. The CWGC website is easy to search and navigate, and the authors were wary not to simply duplicate the CWGC offering, particularly as Australian war dead are typically located in CWGC-managed cemeteries. A similar site, the Australian War Graves Photographic Archive [www.australianwar Graves.org] enables users to search for an individual and a cemetery and retrieve a photograph of that cemetery, with a map indicating its location. There are also a number of similar international offerings, with many nations seeking to direct travellers to similar locations. For example, the websites of the German War Graves Commission [*Volksbund Deutsche Kriegsgräberfürsorge* - www.volksbund.de] and the American Battle Monuments Commission [ABMC - www.abmc.gov] are similar to that of the CWGC; both allow users to search for the grave of an individual, or to search for details on cemeteries in a particular location. There are also generic sites, such as historypin.org that enable users to upload historical photographs and 'pin' them onto maps.¹² The photographs can include a description and tags, thus enabling other users to link tagged sites together and plan their travels

¹² HistoryPin: A global community collaborating around history, www.historypin.org

around certain themes [and there have been numerous commemorative themes established by users in recent years].

The main factor setting the AHIEG project apart from those other websites was its purpose and its intended audience. The websites of the CWGC, the Volksbund, and the ABMC, among others, are generally aimed at people who are already planning to visit a particular location, even a particular grave. In contrast, as explored in more detail below, the AHIEG website was aimed more at the general Australian traveller, both those with particular familial connection with the history surrounding those sites, and those who may not have otherwise known about these sites and who may be visiting those countries for other reasons. As detailed later below, this resulted in a website with a slightly different design.

Intended Audience

The first consideration in designing a project such as this is who the users of the site will be. As noted above, the project was designed for historically-minded Australians travelling to Egypt and Lebanon, particularly descendants of those who served in the region. In recent years, self-guided pilgrimages to similar sites have become of increasing interest to Australians, and, as noted, scholars have spent much time exploring the nature of those travellers and their motivations. The number of visitors to Gallipoli has continued to grow, and has reached such large numbers that, in 2015, ‘attendance passes’ had to be secured well in advance of travel. The number of travellers are increasing for a range of reasons. Bruce Scates identified the most common visitor to those sites of military-historical significance as a ‘pilgrim’. According to Scates, these pilgrims seek ‘an emotional connection to people, places and events lost in the past’.¹³ Pilgrims often look for the grave of an ancestor, or for the location where their ancestor fought. Many others have no ancestral attachment to the sites, and for them the visit can be a way of ‘thanking’ those who they believe served the nation, or it can inform their understanding of the Australian significance of those sites. For many others, the trip to significant sites such as Gallipoli and Kokoda is simply something they feel must be done, often expressed as a requirement of being Australian. For example, one of Scates’ sources expressed the view that Gallipoli was where they ‘finally felt like an Australian’.¹⁴

13 B. Scates, *Anzac Journeys: Returning to the Battlefields of World War II*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p. 4.

14 B. Scates, *Return to Gallipoli*, p. 176. Indeed, this comment reflects the view put forth by former Prime Minister John Howard, who, in his nomination of Anzac Cove to head a National Heritage list, presented Gallipoli as the place where ‘You feel as an Australia’. ‘Patriot act: The uncritical and self-serving embrace of the Anzac Legend’, *The Australian*, 8 June, 2007.

Consideration must also be made of visits by both amateur and professional military historians. For some travellers, the visit to battlefield sites is partly about seeking a detailed understanding of what actually happened.¹⁵ To their list of preparatory reading, these travellers may also add military histories which detail the role of military forces in the area, and even biographical histories of key leaders in those battles. Peter Stanley's book, *A Stout Pair of Boots*, is particularly suited to this type of traveller.¹⁶ And for some travellers, there is also an element of black tourism [also known as dark tourism or grief tourism] surrounding their journey.¹⁷ Most of these locations, battlefield sites and cemeteries, are directly associated with death and tragedy, and people are often drawn to these sites because of the emotional response they invoke.

In the early twenty-first century, these types of travellers have access to an immense array of tools that has made the travel experience more flexible, personable and immersive than ever before. Smartphones and tablets that utilise an ever-expanding array of software, typically connected to the internet, enable travellers to access historical and travel information 'on the fly', and, as Dickinson et al. argue of travellers in general, this enables people to 'access place-related information and to visualise the spatial relativity of tourist facilities, resources and activities [which] leads to knowledge-rich visitors'.¹⁸ Online booking availabilities can be checked online minutes before arriving at the destination, and activities and destinations for each day can be mapped out online within minutes.

This array of tools has implications for both historians and travellers. R.H. Tawney's famous assertion, that the historian needed a 'stout pair of

15 For two pertinent examples, see Mark Johnston, 'The Blockhouse, El Alamein', *Wartime*, no. 8, 1999; and P. Stanley, 'Getting our knees brown: exploring the El Alamein battlefield', *Wartime*, 8, 1999.

16 Stanley, *A Stout Pair of Boots*.

17 However, Peter Slade cautions scholars against generalising too greatly, and suggests that few who visit Gallipoli are motivated by thanatourism. See P. Slade, 'Gallipoli thanatourism: The meaning of ANZAC', *Annals of Tourism Research*, vol. 30, no. 4, October, 2003, pp. 779-794. For general studies on the nature of dark tourism, see P. Stone, 'A Dark Tourism Spectrum: towards a typology of death and macabre related tourist sites, attractions and exhibitions', *Tourism: An Interdisciplinary International Journal* vol. 54, no. 2, 2006, pp. 145-160. There has also been discussion around whether or not this can be considered a form of thanatourism, described by Seaton as 'travel to a location wholly, or partially, motivated by the desire for actual or symbolic encounters with death'. See A. Seaton, 'From Thanatopsis to Thanatourism: Guided by the Dark', *Journal of International Heritage Studies*, vol. 22, 1996, pp. 234-244. For more on dark tourism, see R. Dunkley, N. Morgan, S. Westwood, 'Visiting the trenches: Exploring meanings and motivations in battlefield tourism', *Tourism Management*, vol. 32, no. 4, August, 2011, pp. 860-868; A. V. Seaton, 'Battlefield Tourism on the Somme and in Flanders', *Tourism Recreation Research*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2000, pp. 63-77.

18 J.E. Dickinson, K. Ghali, T. Cherrett, C. Speed, N. Davies, S. Norgate, 'Tourism and the smartphone app: capabilities, emerging practice and scope in the travel domain', *Current Issues in Tourism*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2014, pp. 98.

boots' to explore the physical ground that they're researching,¹⁹ is increasingly a practice that the amateur historian can employ in their travels. In dusting off their boots and preparing for travel, those people are increasingly able to draw on those internet-based tools and resources for information.²⁰ Furthermore, they can take their smartphones and tablets on their travels and access the information en route. As explored below, these considerations were made in the design and development of the Australian History – International Explorer Guide.

Design and Development

The Australian History – International Explorer Guide sought to appeal to all these types of travellers: those interested in military history, family history, and those just interested in travelling. Thus, there were several core components desired. Firstly, the site needed to outline to the intended audience some of the major sites in the regions with links to Australian history. This primarily included Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemeteries, and war memorials, museums, and battlefield sites relating to Australian experiences. Secondly, the site needed to provide images of those sites to both inform potential visitors of what they may see, and also to serve as a visual guide on what to look for when visiting the site. To accompany this, the site also needed to include maps to further help people locate the sites.

Once the sites were identified, they were grouped into several key areas; these included four areas of Egypt – Cairo, the Western Desert, Alexandria and the Suez Canal – while the sites in Lebanon was grouped together as one due partly to their close proximity, and for other reasons outlined below. This grouping would enable users to organise their visits to several sites within the one area. Each site within these groups areas would then have four pages of accompanying information, with a corresponding image for each page.

As noted above, the information accompanying each site needed to serve two key purposes: to help people locate and access the site, and to provide a historical context to the site. In the first instance, the idea was to communicate the ease and convenience with which many of these oft-forgotten sites can be accessed. For example, the Cairo War Memorial Cemetery, which contains the graves of 513 Australians from both the First World War and the Second World War, is located close to the centre of

19 Cited in E. Kerridge, 'Ridge and Furrow and Agrarian History', *The Economic History Review*, vol. 4, no. 1, 1951, pp. 14-36.

20 See for example, V.C.S. Heunt, 'Internet usage by international travellers, reasons and barriers', *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, vol. 15, no. 7, 2003, pp. 370-378; P. Björk and H. Kauppinen-Räsänen, 'Contemporary insights to the dynamic pre-trip information sourcing behaviour', *Tourism and Hospitality Research*, vol. 15, no. 1, 2015, pp. 39-53.

Cairo city, but is scarcely visited by Australians. By plotting its location on a map, and showing its close proximity to the city, and other nearby sites, we hoped to encourage people to visit the site. Similarly, as shown in Image One, the Heliopolis War Cemetery, containing the graves of 35 Australians, lies mid-way between Cairo International Airport and Cairo city, and can be accessed via a quick detour off the major road into and out of the city. To facilitate this aim, we imbedded google maps on each area, with a pin-point marker indicating the exact location of the sites in that area [this can be zoomed in and out of, and visual settings can be modified as with standard google maps]. In addition, the site description includes additional access information where needed, such as particular access roads. For example, the Cairo War Memorial Cemetery page advises travellers:

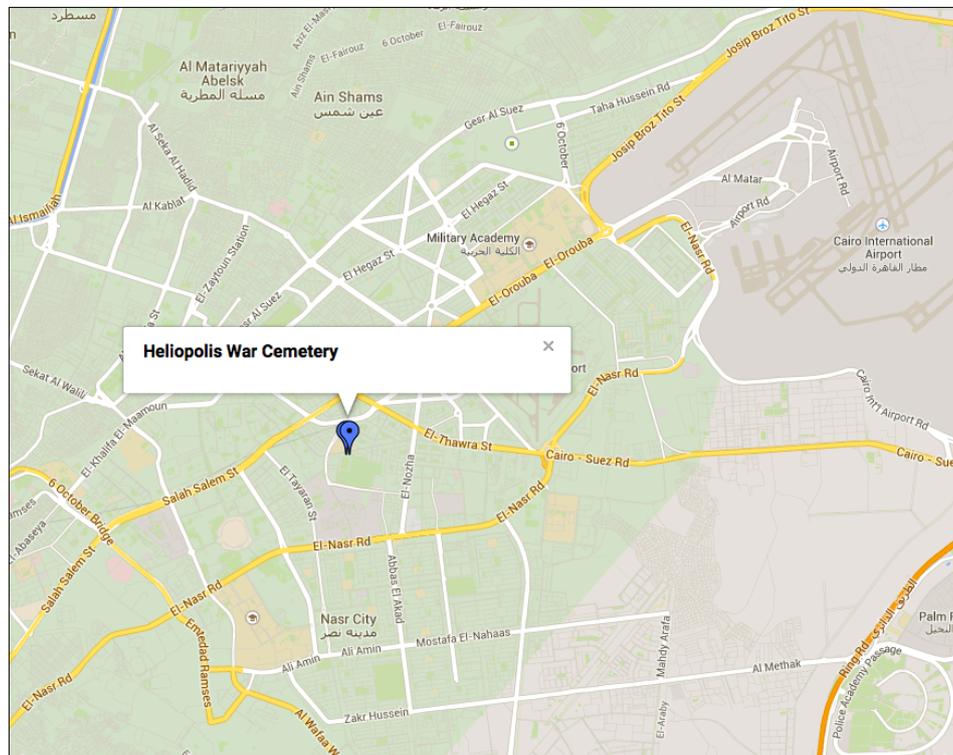


Figure 1. A screenshot of the Cairo map on the Australian History – International Explorer Guide, showing the location of the Heliopolis War Cemetery relative to the Cairo International Airport [in the top-right].²¹

²¹ Cairo, *Australian History – International Explorer Guide*, <http://www.ahieg.com.au/main-locations/cairo> - Accessed 10/4/15. Map data ©2017 Google

Access through the main gate is via Al Seka Al Hadid (as it appears on recent maps), parallel to the nearby train line and just off the larger road of Salah Salem. However, even when standing directly outside, the cemetery is easy to miss as the wall and gates blend in easily with the general style of cemeteries in this area.²²

Similarly, the site descriptions often include additional information such as entry fees, opening hours, permissions required, and additional recommendations for planning a visit. For example, the Moascar War Cemetery is located within an Egyptian Military Base and requires a security pass for access, which visitors must organise several days in advance.²³ Similarly, local approval is required in order to access sites associated with the Battle of El Alamein, and a local guide/translator is the best way to secure this. Thus, the site description, the maps provided, and the accompanying images are partly-designed to help travellers find and access the relevant sites. This is particularly important as these sites are typically not signposted, do not appear on most maps, and often require navigating difficult routes with the help of local guides.

The other key purpose, to provide a historical context, required more extensive research and planning. The objective here was partly to help users understand what had happened in and around those sites, partly to use those sites to explore broader themes surrounding Australia's involvement in conflicts, and partly also to provide a factual foundation for the interpretation of personal meaning and significance. In the first instance, the pages for many sites began by providing general details on historical events that took place in the area. For example an extract of the description of 'The Blockhouse' at El Alamein notes,

This Egyptian railway workers' building, known to Australian soldiers during the Western Desert Campaign as the 'Blockhouse', was the site of fierce fighting during the critical Second Battle of El Alamein in late October and early November, 1942. As one of few standing structures in the broader area, it served as a key landmark and thus the centre for much of the fighting in the local area.²⁴

In many cases, this general information could then be followed up with more detail, or it may highlight a specific incident, person, or theme associated with the site. For example, the pages for the Tel el Kebir War

22 Cairo War Memorial Cemetery – Cairo, *Australian History - International Explorer Guide*, <http://www.ahieg.com.au/sub-locations/cairo-1b-cairowarmemorialcemetery> - Accessed 10/4/15.

23 Even then, as we found out during our planned visit, an unexpected inspection of the military base by an important official can cancel all travellers plans and prevent access.

24 Battlefield Sites – Western Desert, *Australian History - International Explorer Guide*, <http://www.ahieg.com.au/sub-locations/2f-battlefieldsites> - Accessed 10/4/15.

Memorial Cemetery make note of the Egyptian Revolution of 1919, the Australian role in suppressing the revolution, and how Australian casualties of the fighting were buried at Tel el Kebir.²⁵

The role of the army in the two world wars is a recurring theme throughout these pages. But, in addition to the history of the army, particular importance was placed on emphasising the diverse range of contributions made by Australians serving and volunteering in different areas. This included the work of civilians such as Alice Chisholm, who established canteens for soldiers throughout Egypt during the First World War,²⁶ nurses, such as Beatrice Middleton Watson, who died while serving at Ismailia in 1916 and whose grave is located in the Ismailia War Memorial Cemetery,²⁷ and air personnel, such as Flying Officer Lawrence Cuthbert Pyke, died of injuries sustained in a plane crash in November, 1942, and whose grave [shown below] is located at the Heliopolis War Cemetery.



Figure 2. The grave of Lawrence Cuthbert Pyke in the Heliopolis War Cemetery, Cairo.²⁸

- 25 Tel El Kebir War Memorial Cemetery – Suez Canal, *Australian History - International Explorer Guide*, <http://www.ahieg.com.au/sub-locations/4b-tel-el-kebir-war-memorial-cemetery> - Accessed 10/4/15.
- 26 Port Said Cemetery – Suez Canal, *Australian History – International Explorer Guide*, <http://www.ahieg.com.au/sub-locations/4a-port-said-cemetery> - Accessed 10/4/15.
- 27 Ismailia War Memorial Cemetery – Suez Canal, *Australian History – International Explorer Guide*, <http://www.ahieg.com.au/sub-locations/4e-ismailia-cemetery> - Accessed 10/4/15.
- 28 Heliopolis War Cemetery – Cairo, *Australian History – International Explorer Guide*, <http://www.ahieg.com.au/sub-locations/cairo-1a-heliopoliswarcemetery> - Accessed 10/4/15.

By presenting the information in this manner, visitors to a particular site can gain information about its history and form a connection to the site by understanding those personal stories. It conveys the clear message that each of those graves represents a person, like Lawrence Pyke, who suffered and died in war. Beyond that, those stories of Pyke, Watson and Chisholm, among others, are representative of the broader history of those conflicts. Travellers can visit Pyke's grave, understand his story, and hopefully appreciate that there are life stories behind each and every one of those graves.

Images were also central to the design of the website, and the use of images served several important purposes. Firstly, they help people to identify the site. The importance of site identification through these images cannot be understated. Many of these sites are difficult to locate, even with modern GPS mapping, and even once the general area is found, it can be difficult to find the entry point. Several CWGC cemeteries are located in general cemetery districts where cemetery walls blend into one another, some are even located within the walls/boundaries of larger cemeteries. Entry gates to CWGC cemeteries are often small and discreet, and thus easily missed. Thus, to help people visually locate the cemeteries, we sought, where possible, to have at least one of the four representative images feature the cemetery in its environs, often with a focus on the entry gate.

In addition, images were often used to help communicate information about the sites. As Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie argue, 'A digital society moves us from a word to a picture-based information one. Additionally, as technology competency grows, barriers to use them become non-existent'.²⁹ The use of images often complemented the text and served to enhance users' engagement with the site. In doing so, we combined both historical and recent photographs of the site, or of people/events associated with the site. For example, the description of the Suez War Memorial Cemetery notes how Australians were based in the nearby area during the First World War to defend the canal, and one of the accompanying images shows Australians on sentry duty at the canal in 1915.³⁰

The final consideration was for people who may not be able to access this information during their travel, or who were using the website to plan their travel in advance. To accommodate this, all the information on the website was made available as a series of PDF files, each of which could be downloaded from the corresponding pages. Thus, if visitors were only

29 I. Yeoman, U. McMahon-Beattie, 'Tomorrow's tourist and the information society', *Journal of Vacation Marketing* vol. 12, no. 3, July, 2006, p. 289.

30 Suez War Memorial Cemetery – Suez Canal, *Australian History – International Explorer Guide*, <http://www.ahieg.com.au/sub-locations/4d-suez-war-memorial-cemetery> - Accessed 14 April, 2015.

travelling to the Suez Canal area to visit an ancestor's grave, they could download and print the Suez Canal file prior to their voyage. The PDF version contains the images and text, but without the imbedded google maps.

Challenges and Impact.

The project commenced in mid-2012, by which stage social action and unrest associated with the Arab Spring had subsided. The Egyptian Revolution took place in January and February, 2011, and in June, 2012, Mohamed Morsi became Egypt's first democratically elected president. During this period it seemed as though the region was regaining stability. The research and development of the website initially progressed smoothly, but soon encountered a series of challenges, as explored below.

Although Egypt was regaining stability, there were still large parts of the country that DFAT deemed unsafe for travellers, particularly the Sinai Desert, and the western side of the Western Desert near the Libyan border. In both regions, tourists had been targeted for kidnappings and assaults, and DFAT advised Australians not to travel to those areas. As such, we made the decision to exclude those areas from the website. Even so, during fieldwork for the project, we encountered a number of related challenges. As noted above, our pre-planned visit to the Moascar War Cemetery [located within an Egyptian Military Base] coincided with a visit to the base of a military official, and security fears surrounding their visit resulted in the cancellation of our access. Similarly, the volatile security situation in the Sinai region resulted in the cancellation of our visit to the Kantara War Memorial Cemetery.

Several days before our planned flights to Beirut, Lebanon, in mid-August, 2012, a pro-Syrian Shi-ite group kidnapped about 20 people, including foreign citizens, and set up roadblocks and barricades around Beirut's Rafic Hariri International Airport.³¹ Incoming travellers were isolated in the airport, while at least one later flight was diverted elsewhere in the region.³² After much deliberation, we were forced to make the decision, while based in Cairo, to cancel our planned fieldwork in Lebanon and reduce the scope of our Lebanon coverage on the website. As such, on the website, Lebanon was reduced to a single 'area', and our ability to communicate information on relevant sites via the website was severely limited.

31 Dalal Mawad and Damien Cave, 'Syrian Conflict Crosses Border Into Lebanon in Abductions', *The New York Times*, 15 August, 2012.

32 Margaret Besheer, 'Lebanon Kidnappings Cause Regional Scare', *Voice of America*, 16 August, 2012.

Following this fieldwork and additional research and writing, the website was launched in May, 2013.³³ Using Google Analytics, we were able to count the number of visitors to the site. We originally hoped to achieve 2000 visitor ‘hits’ on the site within the space of twelve months from launching [or an average of 167 visitors per month]. We believed that achieving this target would indicate that the site was reaching a broad audience. Even if only a small number of those people actually visited those physical sites in Egypt and Lebanon, we hoped these ‘hits’ would show that people were using the information presented to enhance their understanding of Australia’s historical links with the region.

Caution must be exercised when analysing traffic to websites. Much traffic to websites is directed from Google search results, and, in our case for example, people searching for general information on Cairo may click through a search result to visit our website without understanding its purpose. Fortunately, Google analytics can tell us how many unique people visited the sites [recorded as ‘sessions’], how long people spent visiting the site, how many pages they accessed [recorded as ‘hit’ or ‘page views’], and whether they later returned to the site. The information that emerged from that detailed analytical view was encouraging, as outlined below.

Following the launch of the site, in late May, 2013, there were 61 sessions that totalled 242 ‘hits’ or ‘page views’.³⁴ This was an encouraging start, but, in mid-June, 2013, political unrest again developed in Egypt, and Australians were advised against travelling to the region. Protests escalated throughout June and July, and culminated in the removal of President Mohamed Morsi on 3 July, 2013. International media also reported of violent civil unrest, focused around the capital, Cairo. This resulted in a rapid decline in visitors to the site, which reached an all-time low of 8 sessions for the month of August, 2013. However, as the country once again began to stabilise, and Australians gradually began to return to region, hits on the website rose once again, and in November, 2013, we recorded 68 sessions for 289 hits. Visits to the website remained steady at between 70-180 sessions and 200-300 hits per month throughout 2014. This was only marginally below our target.

Recent commemorative activities in the region for events of both the First World War and the Second World War have resulted in a substantial growth of traffic to the website, and, following ongoing development on the site, in March, 2015, we recorded 447 separate sessions to the site. From the launch of the website in May, 2013, through to April, 2015, we

33 This has been subject to ongoing changes and developments throughout 2014 and 2015. The most recent update took place in April, 2015.

34 A session is considered a group of interactions a single user will have with a website, and includes the various pages they may visit within a single site, whereas a ‘hit’ or a ‘page view’ counts every page visited.

have recorded a total of 2432 sessions, for 5035 page views, at an average of 101 sessions/visitors per month [or 1215 per year]. Although, across this period, this is below our goal, we are encouraged to see that this has been steadily growing in recent months as travel to the region increases. The fact that traffic to the site declines or increases alongside stability in the region, and in parallel with commemorative activities, strongly suggests that people are using the website for its intended purpose, to inform their travel to the region.

It is also interesting to note that, while the bulk of visitors to the site were based in Australia, we also recorded a large number of visitors to the website from internet users based in the United Kingdom [379 hits] and the USA [199 hits]. This may suggest that the information on the website is of interest to travellers originating from those countries, and it may suggest that Australians travelling around the world are planning their future travels en route. Indeed, in the past, many Australians based in Great Britain have taken advantage of the geographical proximity, and relatively low cost of airfares, to visit similar commemorative sites on the Western Front and on Gallipoli.³⁵ There were also a small number of visitors originating in Italy [34 sessions] and Germany [28 sessions]. During the Second World War these nations were involved in a protracted campaign throughout North Africa, and there are large memorials for Italian and German service personnel near El Alamein—indeed, both of these sites have pages on the AHIEG website. Thus, we can understand that there are a small number of Italians and Germans who are most likely visiting the site for information on those memorials.

One other surprising point to note, was that there were 54 hits from people based in Egypt. We had anticipated much greater traffic to the website from Egypt, as we expected some travellers to access the website from their hotels in Cairo, El Alamein, Alexandria and other locations near the sites featured. Internet access is intermittent, but is steadily growing in Egypt, and this may partly explain the relatively low hit rate. Perhaps this rate also suggests that users of the site are planning their travel well in advance. Indeed, given the careful planning often involved in visiting these sites [including organising travel to the sites, access to the sites, securing guides, and researching ancestors linked with those sites], this may well be a healthy indicator of good travel planning.

Google analytics can also tell us what type of device people used to access the website. We found that the vast bulk of users accessed the website from desktop computers [83.8 per cent], with only 11.27 per cent accessing from a tablet [the bulk of those being ipads], and 4.93 per cent

35 For example, Bruce Scates noted that many backpackers make their way to Istanbul from England. See B. Scates 'Soldiers' journeys: returning to the battlefields of the Great War', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 40, February, 2007.

accessing from a mobile phone. Contrary to our belief that these travellers would heavily utilise mobile devices to plan their research ‘on the fly’, we found that the vast bulk of visitors were using more traditional technologies and methods of planning their travel. Again, this suggests an element of pre-travel planning and research associated with the use of the website.

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Conclusion

The Australian History – International Explorer Guide attempted to pre-empt the expected increase in Australian travel to Egypt and Lebanon ahead of a series of commemorative events throughout 2014–2018. We hoped to provide a foundation of historical and travel information for Australians planning on visiting the area. Our key audience was people visiting the graves of ancestors, and sites associated with the military service of their ancestors, but we were also mindful that Australians may visit these sites for a range of other reasons. The use of a website to convey this type of historical-travel information is not necessarily new, but it is rare to see these various components evident on the AHIEG website being brought together for this purpose, and in this manner. This was the result of having a clear audience in mind with a clear need for information, and we sought to address that need.

This was a novel project for scholars engaged in a range of other research activities, but we found it to be an important area of public engagement. As noted above, as our research expands the frontiers of historical knowledge, academics need to ensure that they do not leave the public behind. The rigour, standards and integrity of academic inquiry should be extended, as much as is practical, into this online and public realm to ensure honest and accurate representations of the past for those seeking to put on a stout pair of boots and walk the ground themselves. There is no sign yet that pilgrimages to these sites, and other associated forms of historical travel, are waning. As visitors to these physical historical sites grow, scholars need to ensure they critically engage with the type of information made available to those visitors. While the Australian History – International Explorer Guide is just one website focused on Egypt and Lebanon, we hope it can serve as a foundation for further academic engagement with the public, particularly in online spheres.

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