



# Prelude

## Sounding the century

The Ballarat Memorial Concert Band, which started life 100 years ago as the Ballarat Soldiers' Memorial Band, has made a significant contribution to the sounds of Ballarat, its life and its culture over the last century.

The band has made a deep and lasting impression on many, many members' lives and continues to uplift and build community for band members right now and into the next 100 years of playing together. It's like the beloved axe whose handle sometimes wears out and so is renewed and whose head is sometimes replaced, but which continues on, recognised as the same axe from one generation to the next, chopping the wood that gives energy in summer and keeps everyone warm in winter. And anyone who has lived in Ballarat's climate will know how needed this is.

It is the same band but has transformed itself a number of times through name, uniform, repertoire, gender and instrumentation, to remain current and relevant to the times in which it plays.

How much is the band a reflection of the times in this regional Australian town and how much is it a forerunner of social change? What does it mean to the people today who meet on a Wednesday evening and who perform sometimes until their lips can't take it any more? To the members who have played with the band for over half a century? To those who join to play with their father, daughter, husband or girlfriend? Why was it so important to the returned servicemen who officially registered the band in 1920? Who are the people to whom this band is indebted?

Up until now, the band's history has existed as a collection of photographs, decaying scrapbooks, minute books becoming more and more fragile through age (by the minute), and memorabilia including band uniforms, recordings, awards and trophies (much of which has been stored under the stage in the bandroom or in the back of the instrument store room).

This book marks the gathering of a century of collective experiences; elation, tragedy, electric performances, a whole lot of friendship and even ... romance.

The band history encompasses all this as well as Australia's military history, music history, significant events and celebrations, many family histories and the evolution of a particularly diverse and inclusive community group. As members age, this history has been in real danger of being lost, so with the generous support of the Public Records Office of Victoria, and the vision and drive of the committee and band members (past and present), these stories, images and records along with previously undocumented moments of Ballarat's music and social history have been preserved.

It is time to dust off the archives, sit back in a comfortable armchair and take a peek inside.

– George Williams and Bec Paton



## Beginnings

The Ballarat Soldiers' Band was first registered with the Victorian Band Association (VBA) in 1920.

It was before war's end that a small number of ex-servicemen, who had returned from active service, got together and decided to create a 'living memorial to honour those who had sacrificed their lives in the Great War'.

This quote is from William (Bill) Wilkinson, long-time president and member of the band, after whom the current band hall is named. He handwrote the history which was to become the basis of a 1971 *Australian Band Leader* article. The article encompassed much of Bill's handwritten history, but not all. Stored under the bandroom stage in an archive box were morsels of information and rare stories that have never before been published. For instance, what was not printed in the article were the names of the original members. He wrote:

The band was originally formed in 1918 by several servicemen who had returned before the conclusion of the first world war. Some of the early players of that time were:- Frank Galvin, Gomer Thomas, Norm McWilliam, Jack Holt, Harry Brew, Bill Wright.

- Bill Wilkinson

Some of these men are pictured in the photo published in a 1971 *Australian Band Leader* article.



1921, Photo of Ballarat Soldiers' Memorial Band, *Australian Band Leader*. Source: December 1971

Back: G Thomas, N Nankervis, ?, C Hewitt, G Morrell, R Jerram, A Leith, H Brew, R Nankervis.  
Centre: S Allen, R Lockett, H Casley, A Thane, F Galvin, G Allen, B Ackroyd, P Heinz.  
Front: C Cromwell, L Harrison, R Rutherford, A Rowell (BM), G Wilkinson, C Ellis,  
W Wilkinson. Seated in Front: G Bell, A Waight



When we track these soldiers' records through the Australian War Memorial and Discovering Anzacs records we find:

**Frank James Galvin** (2119): 8 Light Horse Regiment - 15 - 31 Reinforcements (July 1915 – Nov 1916)  
Joined age 19, listed trade or calling: Turner

**Gomer Stanley Thomas** (758) 22 Infantry Battalion (Feb 1915 – Feb 1919) Joined at the age of 18,  
listed trade or calling: Clerk

**Harry Brew (Junior)** born 13 February 1891, served in the RAN from 11 May 1908 until invalided out on 24 April 1918. Attempted to join the AIF, 14 June 1918, but was refused on medical grounds. On 22 November 1929, bricklayer Harry joined the Militia's 8th Battalion (City of Ballarat Regiment) and was posted to the Signallers. He rose through the ranks, being promoted to Lieutenant on 21 March 1933.

Harry went on to be the band's drum major for a time in the 30s and was also a lyricist of note.

Jack Holt and Bill Wright are not in the records and it is beyond the scope of this project to investigate further. In these initial searches however, what we do discover within this group of men is that not many were born in Ballarat but found their way to living in Ballarat when they returned during the war.

Totally unexpected was the series of discoveries about our last soldier:

**Norm McWilliam** (Hugh John Norman McWilliam) (1591) 3rd Reinforcements 5th Battalion (1915–1916) Joined at the age of 22, listed trade or calling: Fitter, senior cadet 18 months prior to enlistment.

Norm enlisted in December 1914 and joined the 5th Battalion as a reinforcement on Gallipoli on 5 May 1915. On 25 July he was evacuated from the peninsula suffering with Rheumatism. This service entitled him to wear the letter A (for ANZAC) on the Colour Patches on his sleeves.

Norm's mother, Catherine McWilliam, was secretary and highly active member of the Australian League of Womenfolk, auxiliary of the RSSAILA (now RSL). Catherine was awarded an RSL Certificate of Merit and awarded a Gold Medal in 1938 for her work which included ensuring that Anzac Day became a day of observance across Australia. This gives incredible significance to the Soldiers' Band involvement in the Anzac Day parade with Norm, who served at Gallipoli, the founder of the band. His war service contributing to his mother's work to keep the 25th April as a day of remembrance. Catherine is also reported to have set up canteens in Melbourne for the troops, arranged concert parties and worked to inaugurate the annual Poppy Day appeal.

Two years before he died, Norm travelled to Adelaide to join his South Australian 'cobbers' in the Anzac Day Parade. *The Advertiser* reporter caught a rare interview with him, published on 24 April 1953. His mother's contribution was reported:

Perhaps only a woman, and certainly only a woman of Mrs McWilliam's calibre, could have had the capacity, the tenacity of purpose, and the sympathetic feeling to carry out the great tasks she performed.

– *The Advertiser*



Norm was born in Melbourne, but how did he find himself in Ballarat prior to war's end as a returned soldier? A clue is given to us by his daughters, published in this interview by *The Courier*, 23 July 2016:

While recuperating in Melbourne, for exercise Norm would take his brother Alistair on bicycle rides – to Ballarat! It was there, while staying in the Leicester (sic) Boarding House opposite today's Myers [then Patterson Powell Pty Ltd] he and fellow servicemen would bring their instruments onto the balcony to play tunes for the public. On a Sunday afternoon passerby's would sit in the Sturt Street gardens and enjoy the music. On the basis of this interest and the enjoyment of playing together, Norm suggested they start a band, in honour of the servicemen of World War 1.

– The Courier

A snapshot of Norm's wartime experiences is glimpsed in the same article:

The little bit he told us about the war – they would actually drop their bayonets and have fistfights, on top of these bloated bodies. Dreadful. He had this one obsession, blowflies. You had to have the house empty of them. He said they had to scrape maggots off their food at Gallipoli. So you'd understand.

– 'An Anzac's Letter Returned to Ballarat', *The Courier*, 23 July 2016

Norm's story was only revealed because his mother Catherine had kept a letter that he had written to her from the first AIF camp at Broadmeadows 3 December 1914. But the letter had become lost after her death. Many years later, around the time of the World War I centenary a gentleman by the name of David McMahon, who had found the letter and kept it for its stamp, decided to track down Norm's surviving relatives to return it to them. The story was picked up by *The Courier* and published at the 100 year commemoration of Gallipoli.

During the same period that Norm was forming the returned soldiers' band in Ballarat, the proactive workers at the textile company E. Lucas & Co. (affectionately known as the 'Lucas Girls') initiated a tree planting project to honour those men and women who served in the war making Ballarat one of the earliest communities in Victoria to create an Avenue of Honour, now stretching twenty two kilometres.



1920, Lucas Girls load bricks for onto horse-drawn carriage for construction of Arch of Victory. Source: Max Harris Photography Collection

Both significant living memories were initiated during World War I and are still alive today. In 1920 when the band was being officially formalised through its Victorian Bands Association registration, the last bricks were being mortared on the Arch of Victory.



Beside the arch is a plaque that reads:

...in honour of the sailors, soldiers and nurses of Ballarat who took part in the Great War – June 1920

Another plaque reads:

This avenue extends for a distance of 14 miles and contains 3,900 trees which were individually planted by “The Lucas Girls” for every Ballarat citizen who served in the Great War and assisted in maintaining the liberty of Australia.

“All ye who tread this avenue of life,  
Remember those who bowed beneath the strife,  
Each leaf a laurel, crowns with deathless fame  
and every tree reveals a hero’s name.”

We can only imagine how devastating the war must have been for the Ballarat community with around 4000 young men leaving for war, 800 of those never to return. In a population of roughly 40,000, war left a grave mark on the community.

In what was supposed to be a short war and intended to be over by Christmas of 1914, the conditions were unprecedented and beyond comprehension. Instead of months, the war lasted a harrowing four years. Australia, only newly federated and very much wanting to prove itself in will and might as part of the Empire, recruited incredible support for the allies. They considered themselves ‘new Britons’. Australian-born young men were enlisted as ‘Natural Born British Subjects’ by the thousands, for what they thought was to be an opportunity of a lifetime for travel and adventure.

New to humanity, however, were the heinous weapons (machine guns, tanks, shell fire and poisonous gas) and accompanying diseases (trench foot, trench nephritis and trench fever contracted through days spent knee deep in trenches harbouring lice, rats and cold mud). The suffering was incalculable.

When the men and women who physically survived the war returned, they had to find a way back to some semblance of normality.

In the following 1917 article, in which the challenges to returned servicemen are reported rather too buoyantly and naively optimistic, we get an inkling of the difficulties faced and the reasons why – beyond a living memorial to those damaged by war – the returned servicemen must have found vital solace and support in the Ballarat Soldiers’ Memorial band. Even the tone of the article speaks to the denial of the true experience.

It is not hard to imagine how this cultural denial may have caused personal internal conflict for returned servicemen. They were declared heroes, but for many, they were literally or figuratively crippled.



**Monday 4 June 1917, *The Courier***

The difficulties connected with the repatriation of our soldiers are sometimes over-estimated. These men are not like immigrants who arrive amongst strangers to make a living in a country whose climatic and industrial conditions are entirely different from those of the land of their birth. Some of our men will return to their former occupations; many, perhaps the majority, will have no particular calling to follow; others will be incapacitated from following certain kinds of employment; but all will be amongst friends who will assist them in every way. Australia is capable of absorbing millions of workers, and the only difficulty is to place them in positions where they and the State will both be benefited. A man may be physically strong, intelligent, and energetic, and yet have no liking for a branch of industry which another would be delighted to follow. Many men would not accept a wheat field in the Mallee and reside on it, if it were offered to them; others again would not submit to an indoor city life, whatever the pecuniary inducement might be. We must, therefore take into consideration the habits acquired by our soldiers during the period of the war. Theirs has been a life of excitement and adventure, and of close and constant intercourse with myriads of their fellow men. It has been essentially an outdoor life, yet not one of loneliness or isolation. There is no parallel to it in civil life. Moreover, they have been constantly under the direction of their leaders; they have not been compelled to think and act on their own initiative; and everything they have required has been found for them. They have become habituated to a form of living that has no counterpart in time of peace, and these habits will cling to them until gradually replaced by others. Unity of action and the spirit of comradeship, engendered on the battlefield, will remain; and, if our repatriation schemes are to be successful these acquired characteristics must be taken into account ...

– *The Courier*

What better place to find ‘unity of action and the spirit of comradeship’ and an outlet for grief in regular civic life than in the band? A strong peace time group of support and friendship, a safe place to recover from the ‘excitement’ of war.

The article goes on to describe the soldier–farmer settlements provided for these men. Policy makers did not want the men to be isolated on large rural tracts but equally did not want them to settle in the major cities where they could potentially usurp the work of other willing and able men. Along with their allotments, the ex-servicemen were offered practical training in land and animal husbandry.

The forward-thinking citizens of Ballarat initiated something for returned servicemen nearly eighteen months earlier. A gentleman named Major Lazarus was to play a major role in bringing the men back from the dead of the battlefields.

**2 September 1916, *Ballarat Star***

Free Instructions for Soldiers - The Council of the Ballarat School of Mines in February last adopted a resolution to the effect that applications from returned soldiers for free instruction at the School would be favourably considered. This matter was further discussed at the Council meeting held last week, at Colonel Bolton's suggestion, Major Lazarus, secretary of the Ballarat branch of the returned Soldiers' Association, was asked to co-operate with a sub-committee of the council in carrying out the proposal. Major Lazarus has enthusiastically accepted the offer, and has written to the general committee in Melbourne, with a view to leading other technical institutions to follow the local school's lead.

– Federation University, *Ballarat and District Industrial Heritage Project* wiki  
([https://bih.federation.edu.au/index.php/World\\_War\\_One](https://bih.federation.edu.au/index.php/World_War_One))



The progressive program preceded assistance from the Repatriation Department and ran until 1922 to great success. Over 400 returned servicemen made use of this free education repatriation program. Training included woodwork, electric wiring, electroplate work, turning and fitting and commercial subjects.

It seems likely that some of the Soldiers' Memorial Band members were among those retrained in these popular trades, necessary for rebuilding an economically and socially beleaguered nation.

Major Lazarus became the first president of the Ballarat Soldiers' Memorial Band. Their first bandmaster was Mr Hector Jones with rehearsals in the RSL Clubrooms in Sturt Street Ballarat. The RSL resurrected the space after legendary Lester's Hotel (est. 1862) closed in late 1916 due to wartime depression.



30 December 1916, 'THE MIGHTY FALLEN',  
*The Daily News*, Perth, WA.



Lester's Hotel. Source: Max Harris Collection, Ballarat Mechanics' Institute



## Introducing Major Lazarus

Julius Samuel Lazarus (b. 1861) was a musician, certified civil and hydraulic engineer, a certified land and mining surveyor, a certified municipal clerk and a certified state school teacher. He worked for the Shire of Bungaree as engineer and secretary and enlisted in the Citizen Military Force in 1901 and when war broke out, he was Second-in-Command of Ballarat East's 70th Infantry (Ballarat Regiment).

At age fifty four he joined the battalion on the Gallipoli Peninsula, 13 November 1915. Only to be discharged less than one month later and transported to hospital at Alexandria four days before Christmas. By New Year's Eve the same year, Major Lazarus was discharged from duty. He returned to Australia early May 1916, to receive confirmation later that month that he was medically unfit for service. His role was then changed to 'an officer of the Citizens Forces'.



### DISCOVER MORE

Read in *The Courier* articles from 2016 about how Norm McWilliam's story was tracked down through the fortuitous discovery of the hidden letter.

[Do you know who Norman McWilliam was? A letter needs returning to his family.](#)

[An Anzac's letter returned to Ballarat.](#)

## What's in a name?

The band's name evolved with the band over the last century. It has played under names of varying lengths and, it seems, the longer it was, the more everyone shortened it.

Coming up are some variations that the brass band has been officially called or referred to over the years prior to its evolution into a concert band by 1987.

NAME	DATES	FREQUENCY
Ballarat Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Band	(from at least 1921–1955)	5
Ballarat and District Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Band	(from at least 1922–1949)	5
Ballarat Soldiers' Memorial Band	(from at least 1922–1975)	33
Ballarat Soldiers, Sailors and Airmen's Memorial Band	(from at least 1950–1975)	9

From this survey of official Royal South Street entries and bandroom band photos conducted by band member and President Tony Rowlands, 'Ballarat Soldiers' Memorial Band' was by far the most frequently used.





In talking to long-term past members, and reading the minutes and handwritten history, we learn that the band was most often referred to as 'The Soldiers' Band'.

The word 'Airmen's' was introduced after the mass use of air warcraft in World War II and we can track its use in '50, '57, '60, '64, '70, '72, '75. Interestingly, as with all the other names, 'Airmen's' was also used sporadically and interspersed with the other names.

Other names used included Ballarat Returned Soldiers and Ballarat RSL (1950 and 1951, <http://brassbandresults.co.uk>).

The minutes books from 1923, 1935 and 1940 are stamped with 'The Ballarat and District Soldiers' & Sailors' Memorial Band'.

In the minutes, Sunday 18 May 1946, it is recorded that a special meeting was held and it was passed that the name of the band be the 'Ballarat and District Sailors, Soldiers and Airmen's Memorial Band'. It seems the person taking the minutes either recorded the name in the wrong order, or this was briefly one idea of what the name should be. Throughout the minutes in the years following, however, the band is generally referred to as the Soldiers' Memorial Band.

So we can see that there were many variations on a theme.

For the purposes of this book, the 'Soldiers' Memorial Band', or more simply 'Soldiers' Band', are the versions of the name that we will use for the first sixty years of history.

The band changed its name to Ballarat Memorial Concert Band in 1987. But that is a story for later ...

## What does music have to do with war?

I'm glad you asked! As it turns out, quite a lot actually. To understand the experiences of the returned servicemen and why they would think to create a brass band in honour of their fallen comrades, we need to understand the context out of which the band was born.

First, music has been utilised in war for (at least) over 2000 years. We have the Roman historian Vegetius to look to for information about military tactics used during the height of the Roman Empire. His earliest surviving text of *De Re Militari* dates to the 5th Century CE and includes specific information about the critical use of music for battle in ancient Roman:

The music of the legion consists of trumpets, cornets and buccina. The trumpet sounds the charge and the retreat. The cornets are used only to regulate the motions of the colors; the trumpets serve when the soldiers are ordered out to any work without the colors; but in time of action, the trumpets and cornets sound together. The classicum, which is a particular sound of the buccina or horn, is appropriated to the commander-in-chief and is used in the presence of the general, or at the execution of a soldier, as a mark of its being done by his authority. The ordinary guards and outposts are always mounted and relieved by the sound of trumpet, which also directs the motions of the soldiers on working parties and on field days. The cornets sound whenever the colors are to be struck or planted. These rules must be punctually observed in all exercises and reviews so that



the soldiers may be ready to obey them in action without hesitation according to the general's orders either to charge or halt, to pursue the enemy or to retire. For reason will convince us that what is necessary to be performed in the heat of action should constantly be practiced in the leisure of peace.'

– De Re Militari (Military Institutions of the Romans) by Flavius Vegetius Renatus (died A.D. 450), written around A.D. 390. translated from the Latin by Lieutenant John Clarke Text British translation published in 1767. Etext version by Mads Brevik (2001) [digitalattic.org](http://digitalattic.org)

Interestingly, *De Re Militari* was used throughout the Middle Ages as a guide to war tactics and methods and remained in use into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with the book being traditionally gifted to generals. So what was recorded as a comprehensive history became a how-to reference for many centuries of war in Europe. Shakespeare explains the intrinsic relationship between music and war in *Othello*:

The spirit-stirring drum, the ear-piercing fife, The royal banner, and all quality, Pride, pomp, and circumstance of glorious war!

– William Shakespeare

By the time William was putting quill to paper, musicians may not have been required for the observance of sacrificial rites – as Pericles saw fit to do in Roman battle times – but brass bands and Scottish pipe bands were used in Europe to rouse the troops, intimidate the enemy and to coordinate communication and movement.

Apart from the sounds of natural disasters, what were the loudest sounds on pre-industrialised planet earth?

Pipes, drums and brass instruments were the loudest mobile instruments emanating an aural force with which to be reckoned (town bells and pipe organs were arguably louder but not so easily transportable!).

The bigger the band, the mightier the sound and the most organised band strongly indicated, the most life-threatening militia.

In Ballarat in the 1850s, music was employed to boost morale, coordinate movement and keep people focused and fighting for the cause in Australia's first democratic rebellion:

At Ballarat towards the end of 1854, rebellious diggers called upon the circus of John Jones. With guns and pistols levelled, the diggers ordered the German bandsmen of the circus to march to a site where a makeshift stockade was under construction. At gunpoint, the musicians serenaded the diggers all day until, at last, the crude fortress was completed and they were permitted to return to the circus. That evening, the fortress was overrun by several hundred soldiers and police sent from Melbourne – an incident that has gone down in Australia's history as the "Eureka Stockade".

– From the Australian Government's website [australia.gov.au](http://australia.gov.au) and quoted in *Songways Music Mapping, Ballarat* ([http://www.hulballarat.org.au/cb\\_pages/songways\\_art\\_gallery\\_of\\_ballarat.php](http://www.hulballarat.org.au/cb_pages/songways_art_gallery_of_ballarat.php))

Music in war also importantly brings dignity to the many events associated with war. Music certainly topped, tailed and middled the World War I experience.



Band about to board the HMAT Ballarat (<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1042820>)

Bands were desperately needed: on the home front for recruiting drives throughout the war; to play on the ships to entertain the men carried to war; in every battalion that could secure one and keep it; for concert parties, recreational activities, route marches and funerals; to sound *The Last Post* and *The Reveille*.

They were needed to accompany the men home at the end of war, and to welcome them when they finally arrived, with bands cobbled together from those too young, too old or infirm for active service.

Up to and including World War I, music transmitted orders across extensive distances in battle, just like in Roman times. Drums and brass instruments were still high-tech signal machines!

Perhaps unlike any other medium, music has power to lift people's spirits and enable and maintain a sense of unity. This is scarcely more needed than in wartime.

Music can bring a semblance of humanity back to an inhumane reality. In order for men to serve their country through war, they had to believe that sacrificing their life would not be in vain and that their lives would be remembered and honoured.

The ritual of bugle calls were designed to achieve this. *The Last Post* was played at the end of the day to cease fire during the war as well as honour those who had fallen during the day. *The Reveille* meaning 'to wake again' (French) was written for the waking of the troops, symbolising the awakening of the dead in the next and better world.



They shall grow not old, as we that are left grow old:  
Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.  
At the going down of the sun and in the morning  
We will remember them.

– Laurence Binyon (excerpt from *For the Fallen*, 1914)

War music written and published in 1914 was prolific. Music, a valuable muscle in the marketing arm for war propaganda, encouraging boys and men to enlist. And brass band composers wrote in war themes during the war, in their descriptive fantasias they told the stories that stirred nationalist fervour through music. As Jeremy de Korte archivist at the VBL said about composers of the time: ‘They felt as patriotic as the rest of us, so even if they didn’t go to war, they wrote for it.’



Listen to samples of World War I music in [Music and the First World War exhibition](#) from the Australian War Memorial.

In Robert Holden’s book *And the Band Played On* (p. 265), he includes a quote from 1918 by ‘Tenor Horn’ who succinctly says: ‘Music is to a city or nation’s spirit what ammunition is to their army.’

Rudyard Kipling’s, ‘The Soul of the Battalion’ speech details the importance of music to war:

#### **27 January 1915**

... a few drums and fifes in a battalion are worth five extra miles on a route-march — quite apart from the fact that they swing the battalion back to quarters composed and happy in its mind no matter how wet and tired its body may be. And even where there is no route-marching, the mere come-and-go, the roll and flourish of the drums and fifes round barracks is as warming and cheering as the sight of a fire in a room.

Or a band, not necessarily a full band, but a band of a few brasses and wood winds is immensely valuable in districts where troops are billeted. It revives memories; it quickens associations; it opens and unites the hearts of men more surely than any other appeal. In that respect it assists recruiting perhaps more than any other agency. The tunes that it employs and the words that go with them may seem very far removed from heroism or devotion; but the magic and the compelling power are there to make men’s souls realise certain truths which their minds might doubt.

More than that. No one — not even the Adjutant — can say for certain where the soul of a battalion lives; but the expression of that soul is most often found in the Band. It stands to reason that a body of twelve hundred men whose lives are pledged to each other’s keeping must have some common means of expressing their thoughts and moods to themselves and to their world. The Band can feel the mood and interpret the thought. A wise and sympathetic bandmaster — and most that I have known have been that — can lift a battalion out of depression, cheer its sickness, and steady and recall it to itself in times of almost unendurable strain ...

... A man who has had any experience of the Service can testify that a battalion is better for music at every turn — happier, easier to handle, and with greater zest for its daily routine if that routine is sweetened by melody and rhythm, melody for the mind and rhythm for the body ...



... The Army needs music — its own music, for, more than any calling, soldiers do not live on bread alone. From time immemorial the man who offers his life for his land has been compassed at every turn of his services by elaborate ceremonial and observance, of which music is no small part — carefully designed to prepare and uphold him. It is not expedient nor seemly that any portion of that ritual should be slurred or omitted now.

– Rudyard Kipling

## **The dual role of musicians at war**

By the time World War I was upon us, Australia had adopted the British model of assigning the task of medical field ambulance to a sector of the forces who were most literate, cohesive and easily trained: musicians. In previous wars this model had been a reasonably effective way of keeping their wounded alive.

However, the unforeseen problems encountered due to new weaponry including machine guns, rifles, mortars, artillery, air bombs and chemical warfare spilled out to the musicians who were close enough to the line of fire as to be regularly injured by shells, picked off by snipers and poisoned by gas as they provided this much-needed field ambulance.

The Field Ambulance Company was responsible for ‘Second Line’ casualty evacuation from ‘First Line’ Regimental Aid Posts (RAP) in each battalion.

The RAP belonged to the Battalion (or other units) and was manned by the Regimental Medical Officer (RMO), a qualified doctor generally of Captain rank supported by several non-commissioned officers (NCO) of Sergeant and Corporal rank, with a number of medical orderlies at the rank of Private.

They in turn were supported by unit stretcher bearers, generally drawn from the Battalion’s Band. These men would be trained to administer First Aid sufficient to clear airways, staunch bleeding and perhaps splint fractures so that casualties could be evacuated to the Battalion RAP. Casualties would be hand carried - requiring at least four men but more like eight over any distance for each casualty. Hand carts were also used but rough ground generally meant stretchers. When mass casualties occurred, such as through major shelling or an enemy attack, decisions would have to be made about the priority of evacuation. The RMO would assess the casualty and decide whether they were to be evacuated and with what priority. Grievous wounds with little chance of survival would generally not be evacuated.

When an attack or advance was undertaken, the RAP would follow up the units’ forward elements and were thus exposed to enemy direct fire (rifles and machine guns) and indirect fire (artillery mortar fire and even gas).

– Robyn Coates, Cornish Association of Victoria, Ballarat Branch.

By 1916, things were becoming dire and too many musicians were losing their lives, and it was agreed that this was not a tenable situation for the army. So measures were taken to change the roles to preserve the bands.

How many military roles are deemed so important that lieutenants would be willing to swap their men to replace them? This is indeed what happened in World War I.



Theresa Cronk, Senior Curator at the Australian War Memorial, explains the evolution of attitudes toward and necessity of musicians at war in World War I:

At the beginning of the war the attitude towards the bandsmen was that they were soldiers first and bandsmen second. About mid 1916 that attitude started to change at the same time that concert parties were becoming highly valued for their restorative values. Soldiers involved in concert parties started to be taken off the front line and given entertainment as their first duty. In the British army, they thought it would be over by Christmas, so they didn't want energy spent on frivolity but as the war dragged on morale became as much of a reinforcement as additional men to fight were.

– Theresa Cronk

World War I official war correspondent CEW Bean writes in his article 'The stretcher-bearer tradition':

Until the First Battle of the Somme many battalions had used their bandsmen as stretcher-bearers. After that battle this system generally was abandoned. For one thing, after such battles the band was too badly needed for cheering up the troops! A battle like Pozieres sometimes made a clean sweep of the regimental bearers.

– CEW Bean

*Military History and Heritage Victoria* documents that musicians were given the role as stretcher bearers until at least late 1918.

Jill Durance in her article 'The Band has Rendered Valuable Service - Victorian Brass Bands on the Home Front during the Great War' (p. 4) explains why young bandsmen would have been suited to army life as much as army life was suited to the services of a band:

Often bandsmen began their musical training at an early age and, by the time they enlisted, were quite accomplished on their instrument. Eighteen-year-old Ray Membrey, who enlisted in 1915, had already had six years of experience playing the trombone with the Stawell Brass Band. Les Vosti of the Essendon City Council Band had learned to play euphonium as a boy in the Guildford Band under the guidance of his uncle, while Stephen and William Haisman of Rochester were playing cornet from an early age. These bandsmen were also accustomed to wearing uniforms and had experience in playing while marching, particularly if they had participated in processions and band contests.

The training, discipline and experiences of the civilian bandsmen enabled them to adapt readily to camp life and to the battalion bands in which they commonly volunteered. The military origins of many aspects of brass banding meant that the bandsmen of the 1st AIF were in fact 'enfolded' back into a long British tradition where musicians aroused patriotic fervour, bolstered morale, and provided comfort to the troops for whom they played.

– Jill Durance

Band music's transportive quality cannot be underestimated: away from the horrors of war and the basic nature of life in the trenches, back home in their hearts and minds through familiarity and the nostalgia of good times with loved ones, uplifting their spirits through humour and joy and raising their physical prowess on route marches through rhythm and pride.



Next, we gain a rare insight into one Ballarat musician's war experiences. He's not just any musician, either..



#### DISCOVER MORE

Read about the war experiences of many Australian musicians in [Digger, #34, March 2011](#).

To read more about the role of musicians during World War I in [Musicians under fire](#) from the Australian War Memorial.

To see band repertoire from World War I, read [Bandsmen and stretcher-bearers: Why were bandsmen also stretcher-bearers?](#) from Military History & Heritage Victoria.

## Alf Rowell's wartime experience

Along with all the soldiers who returned to Australia before war's end and who started the Ballarat Memorial Soldiers' Band, there was one man who had grown up in Ballarat as an orphan and who was to become instrumental in the Soldiers' Band history. We will hear more about this extraordinary man's life in the upcoming 1920s chapter of the band's history.

In terms of his war experience we have his history written by Robyn Coates in *The Life And Times Of Alfred Rowell – Influential Musician*. (With kind permission, extensive excerpts are included here.) Robyn's grandfather served in the same battalion as Alf Rowell. Through her research we hear first-hand accounts from Alf about his duties and war experiences as a young musician growing up in an orphanage in Ballarat. It is worth noting that before Alf was appointed to band sergeant, it was Percy Code who lead the battalion band when it first formed in Ballarat.

Alfred Rowell enlisted on 9th March 1916 at Ballarat having once been rejected due to varicose veins. He was allocated to the 39th Battalion and was appointed Acting Band Sergeant for the Battalion on 16th April 1916 and Band Sergeant on 1st May 1916.

– Robyn Coates



23 January 1918, The 39th Battalion Band, Belgium: Flanders, West-Vlaanderen, Messines, Neuve Eglise (Alfred Rowell – front row, sixth from the left). Source: Australian War Memorial ([www.awm.gov.au/collection/C390328?image=1](http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C390328?image=1))

The band, before its departure, played at the funerals of several battalion members and at concerts to raise funds for the 39th Battalion's Comfort Fund. The Comfort Fund monies included an amount for purchasing music for the band. Prout's Band continued these concerts for the Comfort Fund of the 39th Battalion after the battalion had left for overseas.

Ballarat, like many country towns and cities, supported comfort funds with donations of non-perishable food, magazines and newspapers and knitwear being regularly sent.

These were often forwarded to the battalion's chaplain for distribution. In the case of the 39th Battalion, this was a local Anglican minister, Joseph Best, whose own church provided many comforts for the men of the 39th Battalion, including knitted socks, mittens, scarves and balaclava caps plus shirts, towels and face washers.

On the day of its departure, on 27 May 1916, the battalion led by its band, under the direction of its bandmaster, Sergeant Alfred Rowell, marched through the streets of Ballarat at 3.00 am to board the train to Port Melbourne for embarkation on board HMAT A11 Ascanius.

– Robyn Coates

Historian and former Soldiers' Band member, Amanda Bentley, writes more about the march:

A foggy, frosty Ballarat morning greeted the men of the 39th on 27 May, as they marched through the streets to the Ballarat West Railway Station. The band was apparently in fine form and played many popular selections along the way – Australia Will Be There, The Girl I Left Behind Me, "I'm 95", Will Ye No' Come Back Again, Le Marseillaise and Auld Lang Syne would undoubtedly have stirred hearts and brought tears to eyes in equal measure. The troops then entrained to Melbourne, where they boarded the troopship Ascanius, before embarking later the same day.

– Amanda Bentley





Robyn Coates' account continues:

The Band played on the pier prior to embarkation to endeavour to make the event a joyous occasion and continued playing as the ship sailed down Port Philip Bay.

During the voyage, on board the ship, the Band played for deck concerts which were greatly appreciated by the soldiers and for Church Parades each Sunday.

At each port the ship called, route marches were carried out to relieve some of the monotony of the voyage but also to supplement the soldiers' levels of fitness with them having been confined to the narrow spaces of the ship. The Band led the soldiers as they marched, and often, the local children accompanied them marching and dancing along to the music.

The Battalion disembarked at Devonport, England, on 18th July 1916 and entrained for Salisbury Plain, detraining at Amesbury before marching to their camp at Larkhill, close to Stonehenge.

Whilst at Salisbury Plain, a newspaper article concerning the Ballarat Orphanage reports that Sergeant Alf Rowell had distinguished himself through being the leader of twenty-five massed bands who played on the occasion of the visit of the King to Salisbury Plain.

– Robyn Coates

*The 39th Battalion Band Reputations* was a poem written by Bandsman Private John Cronin, sent home from the training camp at Salisbury Plain, England. It was received in October 1916 and published in Ballarat's, *The Courier*. In this snapshot an insight into the creativity, camaraderie and humour of the band is caught. Some of these men returned to form the Soldiers' Band; others never made it home.

Rowell he plays a cornet,  
Martin plays a trom,  
And when they play together  
It sounds just like a bomb.

Bonnie Illig plays a side-drum.  
Brother Stanley plays the horn,  
And if no one interferes  
They'll go from dark till dawn.

Griggs he plays a baritone,  
Cromwell plays a bass;  
And sure they are good players,  
You can see it in their face.

Ruby plays a cornet,  
Hopkins plays the same;  
And when the sergeant "roars" them  
They kid they're not to blame.

Harrison and Trekardo play E flats,  
Rutherford plays a "tone";  
And when they play a melody  
It's always "Home, Sweet Home."

Gazzard plays the "Tut, Tut, Tut,"  
Robinson beats the drum  
Gilbert puts in brilliant work,  
While Jones falls over a rum.

Cronin plays a eupho,  
Welsh, he plays one too;  
And on the second and seventeenth  
They're pleased to lift their screw.

Arthur Moy, he plays a trombone,  
Goodwin plays a horn;  
And when they cannot play their parts  
Their hopes are not forlorn.

Welsh and Smith are handy men,  
Billy Gray the same;  
And when old Toohey is not there  
The playing is very tame.

So we come to the "End of a Perfect  
Day,"  
After keeping the boys well alive;  
And when we wake up in the morn  
We'll strike up "Ninety Five." ...'

Source: Amanda Bentley  
([www.facebook.com/GreatWarBallarat](http://www.facebook.com/GreatWarBallarat))



*I'm 95* was the 39th Battalion's tune.

Robyn Coates' history continues:

After training for several months and with the Band accompanying many route marches and playing in many concerts at the Salisbury Plain Camp, the Battalion left for France on 23rd November 1916.

When deployed, each battalion had a detachment at its Base Depot, which did not take the field when the battalion was on active service.

The Base Detachment consisted of a Lieutenant, two Sergeants and 91 Privates to form a first reinforcement (to make good battalion casualties or other losses), four Storemen, the Band Sergeant, and the Sergeant Master Tailor.

Sergeant Alfred Rowell was not meant to have been amongst those fighting at the Front Line. However, in a letter written home to his future wife, Olive Jeffs, he gives a first-hand account of what was happening at the Front and the role of the Bandsmen.

Robyn Coates discovered Alfred's words to his future wife, published in *The Courier*:

#### **14 December 1916**

Here I am squatting in a dugout over which shells are flying for all they are worth, our side sending them over, the enemy replying. Our artillery is doing good work and we send over three shells to everyone of theirs.

Sometimes the shells fall very close to us but we are quite used to them now and go about happy and smiling and greeting each other with a, 'Good day, mate,' or if a shell comes too close, say to each other, 'Look out, Fritz is after us.' My boys are separated, four being with each company and they act as stretcher bearers. They are well and it is splendid to see the fine spirit they show in doing their work, and how they settle down to anything that is expected of them.

I doubt whether you would know us if you were to see us now, in our tin hats and clothes and boots covered in mud. We often joke about and say how we would like to parade in Sturt Street in them.

It is 11 pm and a heavy bombardment has just ceased so now for a few winks.

#### **17th December 1916**

Today is Sunday and one hardly knows it from Saturday. At present we are in billets, having come in last evening from the trenches after six days of it.

We have just been inspected by General Birdwood and other officers.

The Band played several items and General Birdwood spoke to me and thanked me for the 'splendid music' - (his own words). When he learned that the boys had been stretcher bearing all last week, he spoke of the grand work always done by the stretcher bearers and said, 'I am proud of every one of you, and you are brave men of the AIF,' and after a few more encouraging remarks, he continued his inspection. I tell you my boys felt very proud and flattered.

As I said before, we are in billets for a few days and then we expect to return to the trenches where we will spend Christmas.

We are in France, close to the fighting line, but when we were within some miles of it we could hear the guns roaring, reminding us that we were getting closer to it. We passed through many villages, and every one of them bore signs of the terrible havoc, which the guns have wrought. It is cruel to see the destruction. All the inhabitants have gone, goodness knows where.



After a day's march, we came to another very big place, which is also in ruins, and in which we are now billeted. We are able to make ourselves fairly comfortable here, because there are many household conveniences and we tax them to a large extent.

Things such as tables, chairs, cooking utensils, mirrors, carpets and a host of other articles. We lived like this for several days after our arrival in France, and overhead were flying shells, giving us a little idea of what we were to get later on. Our next move was to the trenches, where we have spent the last six days. We had to put our instruments away while there, but we have been playing again, now that we have a spell; and how the boys appreciate the music.

It is a funny sight to see us when we have overcoats on, Tin hats, a great pack on our back, two gas helmets, two blankets and a water proof sheet around our necks. We Bandsmen carrying our instruments, the others carrying rifles and a hundred and fifty rounds of ammunition; also a 24 hour supply of rations in a bag, a haversack jammed full of shaving gear, etc, a water bottle filled and every pocket filled with different articles.

Talk about pack horses, they are not it. This is the life that takes all vanity out of us.

We think now that if a man has got a knife, fork, spoon, a tin plate and pannikin, two blankets and a waterproof sheet he is set up. But I suppose, if we are spared to come back, we will alter our opinion; anyway, we will know how to appreciate anything, everything. We have learnt to take things as they come. It is a great experience for any man, this life here, and I feel proud to be associated with thousands of Australian boys, who are doing their share towards winning this war.

Although we are not in the trenches at present, we will never know what minute we will be called out. We have not had our clothes off for over a fortnight, and don't know when we will. In the trenches one doesn't have a wash for days.

I am so pleased to hear of the success of the Orphanage band at South Street Competitions, and on behalf of the 39th Battalion Band offer them our hearty congratulations.

We are all in splendid health, also G Watkins, R Edwards, A Ellis, G Trekardo., and R Rutherford ... (other Ballarat men connected with the Band) 13

The Battle of Messines, June 1917, was one of the first battles in which the 39th Battalion was engaged and the battalion suffered heavily from a German gas bombardment and fierce machine gun fire when less than a third of the troops earmarked to attack were able.

The initial assault was preceded by the detonation of 19 mines, under the German front line, which caused an estimated 10 000 German casualties.

Many instances of bravery for men of the 39th Battalion are recorded from the Messines Battle.

– Sergeant Alfred Rowell in the *Ballarat Courier*, sourced by Robyn Coates

Amanda Bentley writes about founding Soldiers' Band member Russ Rutherford's experiences:

For members of the band, the treacherous job of stretcher-bearing exposed them to terrible risks. They had formed a close-knit unit within the battalion, so it came as a great shock when the popular trombonist, Arthur Moy, was shot through the face and mortally wounded early in the fighting.



Many of them, including Russell Rutherford, were also caught in a German counterattack of gas shells on the same day. He was evacuated to hospital at St Omer, before being removed to a convalescent depot at Boulogne on the coast with the hope that the fresh sea air would help with his recovery.

After eight weeks out of the firing line, Russell finally returned to his unit at Neuve Eglise on 4 August. He was to serve throughout the 39th Battalion's campaign during the Battle of Passchendaele.

– Amanda Bentley

After serving in France and Belgium at Messines, Ypres, Broodseinde, Passchendaele, The Somme, Amiens, Mont St Quentin, the Hindenburg Line and the St Quentin Canal, the 39th Battalion, as part of the Third Division, commenced demobilisation in February 1919.

A total of 406 of its members had died on active service and the Battalion Band would have been responsible for playing at many funerals, when it was safe to do so.

One of the Band's final duties was to accompany the Battalion as they marched to the station at Blangy from Bouillancourt for their final train journey in France to Le Havre and then by ship back to England.

– Robyn Coates

Honouring their fellow servicemen and remembering those who were lost during the war was not the end of the story for World War I musician–soldiers who survived such as Norm McWilliam, Alf Rowell and Russ Rutherford.



#### DISCOVER MORE

[Read Russ Rutherford's story](#) written by historian and former Soldiers' Band member Amanda Bentley.

## Returned soldiers bands around the country

Soldiers' memorial bands are largely, in the first instance, a World War I phenomenon. Battle on the scale of the Great War had not occurred before in human history; the scale of trauma and mourning was unprecedented.

These memorial bands were set up by individuals or groups for different reasons, and as such did not always persist past their initial purpose. Sydney, Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne, Geelong and Bendigo all had memorial bands. These included the ANZAC Memorial Band (NSW), Lone Pine Anzac Brass Band (NSW), Returned Soldiers Gallipoli Band (WA), and Unley Returned Soldiers' Band (Adelaide, SA). Closer to home there was the Victorian Soldiers' Memorial Band (Melbourne).



The bands varied in their banding activities and had functions such as raising funds for housing for returned soldiers (ANZAC Memorial Band Sep 1916, NSW); recruiting for the war effort (August 1917 Soldiers' Memorial Band [Melbourne] conducted a two-month tour through the regions to try to encourage enlistment); contribution to numerous fundraising events for returned soldiers (Lone Pine Anzac Brass Band was active from 1916 to 1919. Formed from returned injured soldiers, it toured Australia raising money for wounded comrades in the Returned Soldiers' Association); playing to accompany returned injured soldiers (in Bendigo a band was formed from men who had volunteered for the war effort, but had been rejected because of physical impairment); fundraising for the band itself, including a masked ball held to raise funds for the WA Returned Soldiers Gallipoli band in June 1918.

As we can see, returned soldiers' bands were up and running through the war years and functioned according to the needs of their local community.

In Ballarat, by World War I there were already a good number of bands. These were representative of the sorts of bands found across the country as well as in the UK on which the Australian banding culture was modelled.

Ballarat became one of a select number of metropolitan and rural towns to support a soldiers' memorial band. It is hard to say how many other World War I memorial bands have survived as some have also changed their names, but the number is small.

Even fewer competed nationally. Out of 180 bands that competed in South Street between 1900 and 1951, only a handful were associated with the military (Garrison, Senior Cadets, Militia, Battalion or Regimental). Furthermore, only two were RSL bands: Geelong Exservicemen's Memorial Band and Ballarat Soldiers' Memorial Band. (*Mullen's Bandsmen of South Street 1900-1951* [pp63-64])

It was possibly because of the enthusiasm for banding in Ballarat – home of Royal South Street, band Mecca of Australia with a rich musical cultural heritage having asserted itself as a cultured city of the Empire en par with other European cities (during the gold rush) – that this unique rural city of the late 1910s had capacity to imagine sustaining a civic band to honour its servicemen.

Sustain it did, although there were countless trials and tribulations along the way – as there are for any band that lasts 100 years (and counting). But neither fire, nor dwindling member numbers due to war or lack of war have ever stopped this band from continuing the tradition.

Through commitment and discipline in the first half of the twentieth century and then adaptability and creativity, the band has evolved to become the band it is today. The candle lit for servicemen and women still burns brightly.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. When did Ballarat catch their very first official glimpse of the band?



## Honouring peace

In November 1918 planned and unplanned peace celebrations broke out across the nation. In Ballarat we get an idea of the patriotic fervour that underpinned the celebrations through the involvement of the bands whose ranks the Ballarat Soldiers' Memorial Band was yet to join.

[On 12 November 1918] the City Band assembled at the city hall and, with the traffic stopped and the Alfred (Town Hall) Bells pealing, the bandsmen played 'God Save the King' while the crowd sang. Later, a giant procession formed behind the City Band as it marched from Ballarat East with the fire brigade and then, joining with Prout's Band, led a large crowd of people in from the west. The bands played 'The Marseillaise' the stirring 'Rule Britannia', 'God Save the King' and the hymns 'Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow' and 'Peace Perfect Peace'.

– Jillian Durance, 'The Band has Rendered Valuable Service – Victorian Brass Bands on the Home Front during the Great War', pp. 133 - 134, with information from Bob Pattie

Although conceived during the war, it wasn't until the following year on 20 July 1919 in the Peace Day parades that Ballarat officially heard the full sound of the Soldiers' Memorial Band in their first public performance.

According to the Australian Band Leader December 1971 article, the march tune they played was *Our Hands Have Met*.

As you will see in the next articles, the band may not have decided upon its name at this point. With no minutes books from this period it is hard to say if this was the case, but we know from band documents that the band did not see itself as becoming inaugurated until 1920.

*The Age* Mon 21 July 1919 reported on the celebrations in both municipalities of Ballarat:

Peace celebrations were carried out with enthusiasm in Ballarat on Sunday. There was a large influx of visitors from outside districts. Bunting was freely displayed at the Government buildings, city and town halls, banks, warehouses and other establishments. The streets of both municipalities were crowded during the day. Peals were rung at the City Hall, while the bells at St. Peter's Anglican Church were also chimed. A feature of the celebration was a street procession, which included returned soldiers, sailors and nurses, fire brigades, about 100 decorated motor cars, Returned Soldiers' Band, Highland Pipe Band and Ballarat City Municipal Band. Nearly 6000 State school children and about 450 pupils of registered schools took part in the demonstration by lining the streets ... The City Hall was brilliantly illuminated in the evening. The Returned Soldiers' Band and Ballarat City Municipal Band gave performances in the Sturt Street rotundas in the evening, when the streets were again crowded.

– *The Age*

*The Weekly Times*, Melbourne, Saturday 23 Aug 1919, published a sixteen year old's letter to his uncle about the Ballarat Peace Day Celebrations, giving further details of the contribution of the newly formed Soldiers' Band:

On the 19th of July Ballarat celebrated the signing of peace. A fortnight ago an impressive, united thanksgiving service was held in the Coliseum which is Ballarat's biggest hall, and which, although it is estimated to be able to seat 10,000 people, was quite full. Peace Day was a day of rejoicing. In every direction were to be seen flags and bunting. Nearly



every business place was decorated or made a display of a patriotic character ... [The school children] were marched from their respective schools to Sturt Street, where they lined the street four deep, and awaited the coming of the procession, which was due to start at 2 o'clock. Soon after 1 o'clock little streams of people began to move city-wards and join the mighty river flowing down Sturt Street. I had a good view of all that passed. The returned soldiers, led by their newly-formed band, came first, and then followed in motors the hospital nurses, with two genuine patients from one of the wards, and the Red Cross workers. Various patriotic workers came next, some in motor cars and others in decorated drags and lorries. Many other bodies, too numerous to mention, made displays or marched ... After the procession the returned soldiers formed up in front of the City Hall, where the Proclamation of Peace was read ... I only hope that this peace will be permanent and a blessing to everyone.

– *Weekly Times*, Melbourne, Saturday 23 Aug 1919

Another highlight in the band's early history was playing for the laying of the foundation stone for the Arch of Victory by General Sir William Birdwood 7 February 1920.



E. Lucas and Company staff welcome back servicemen after World War 1 and lay the foundation stone for the Arch of Victory. Note the band playing. Source: *The Courier*, 8 Nov 2018.



Not only did the Soldiers' Band play for the foundation ceremony; they played for its opening by HRH Prince of Wales.

When Edward, Prince of Wales visited Ballarat to open the Arch on 2 June, the band formed at the Ballarat Railway Station and marched ahead of the guard of honour and returned servicemen as the Prince was escorted to the Ballarat RSL.

– Amanda Bentley's *Ballarat & District in the Great War* Facebook website



June 1920, Arch of Victory opening. Source: Royal South Street timeline

Alf Rowell was appointed bandmaster in 1920 and the band became registered with the ruling body Victorian Bands League the same year. After this strong start, it was time for the Soldiers' Memorial Band to begin preparations to compete in the illustrious South Street Competitions in 1921.





## Royal South Street competitions

Here is a timeline of the Royal South Street (RSS) competitions.  
(The main source of this information is the Royal South Street website,  
<https://results.royalsouthstreet.com.au/>)



Band Contest, City Oval, Ballarat. (Source: [www.ibew.org.uk/vbbp-oz.htm](http://www.ibew.org.uk/vbbp-oz.htm))

**1900:** First Bands competition. Brass band and brass solos.

**1901:** Brass Band Contests and Brass Solo and Party Contests.

VBA formed to cope with the number of entries due to the popularity of the competition.

Fred Sutton of Sutton's was the President.

**1903–1915:** Brass band and brass solos (except 1909 where there were no solos).  
In 1914 Drum and Bugle Band section of the competition was also held.

**1914–1919:** The Great War

**1916:** Only a Brass Band Marching Competition was held, no solos. First, second and third place went to Ballarat Orphanage Brass Band, Prout's Ballarat Brass Band and City of Ballarat Brass Band respectively.

**1917:** No band comps held

**1918:** Brass Solos only

**1919:** No Band comps or solos

As part of a worldwide pandemic killing millions of people, the Spanish flu hit Ballarat in 1919. The flu is believed to be spread by American troops in Europe and brought back to parts of Australia, including Ballarat, by soldiers returning from World War I. An estimated 12,000 died in Australia.

**1920–1924:** Brass band and solo comps

In 1921 Military bands entered RSS as a section. Choral and Brass band entries exploded with 20 choirs and 48 bands set to compete.



The same year Ballarat Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Band competed for the *first time* at South Street and placed 3rd in 'C' grade test piece (Ernani) and own choice; 4th in the Quickstep.

This was the year that Ballarat East and West amalgamated.

**1923:** Ballarat Soldiers' wins 'B' grade under Alf Rowell

**1925–1931:** No bands competed due to not enough entrants, contests suspended

(In lieu of South Street Comps, other competitions were held e.g. in the spring of 1926 Ballarat's £1000 Band Competition was put on by the Victorian Bands Association. With grade sections A, B, C and D like in RSS and prizes such as the Allan-Boosey Cup.)

**1929:** State School Brass bands were added and attracted considerable interest. Also Wall Street crash and start of the Great Depression.

**1930:** State Primary and Central School Brass comps were held at The Coliseum.

**1931:** State Primary and Central School Brass comps continued

**1932–1934:** RSS band competitions were held, but no solo comps.

In 1932 Ballarat and District Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Band competed in 'A' Grade with test piece *Honour and Glory* by Hubert Bath under Frank Wright, the last year before he departs for England.

The Ballarat and District Soldiers' and Sailors' Memorial Band did not compete in 1934 according to RSS records but were the Bickart Cup winners in 1933 for highest aggregate in selection and quickstep 'B' Grade. Contradictory with the program records which say Soldiers' won 'B' grade in 1932 (F Wright) and 1933 (J Watson).

**1935–1947:** Again RSS brass band comps suspended due to not enough entrants (encompasses pre, war and post WW II periods)

**1939– 1945: World War II**

**1948:** First competition back – Ballarat Soldiers' won the 'B' Grade section this year under H L Rasmussen. Adjudicators were R J Estall (NZ), F (Massa) Johnston, H Shugg

**1949:** Frank Wright received a hero's welcome back to Ballarat for his visit home after sixteen years abroad. He was the adjudicator of the Band Contest and conductor of massed bands. Frank Wright medal is awarded.

**1966:** Ballarat Soldiers' won the 'A' Grade Own Choice under Frank James

**1968:** Ballarat Soldiers' won the 'A' Grade Quickstep

**1978:** Last Quickstep competition

**2001:** Frank Wright Prize introduced

**2015:** BMCB placed 2nd in open 'C' Grade

**2018:** BMCB won the open 'C' Grade

**2019:** BMCB won Gold



## Band fever

This article from *The Argus* (Melbourne) October 1913 gives a picture of brass band culture in Ballarat just prior to World War I. We get a glimpse of band fever on a par with football mania at the present-day AFL Grand Final.

### **Champion Band Contest, 27 October 1913, *The Argus***

#### **Ballarat Results.**

#### **Geelong Harbour Trust Win.**

#### **(By Our Special Reporter)**

BALLARAT, Saturday. - From every point of view the brass band contests in connection with this year's annual demonstration of the South Street Society have proved eminently successful. The attendance of the public was larger than on any previous occasion, and the playing of the bands, which were representative of four States of the Commonwealth, was of a higher standard. The society was fortunate in having fine weather throughout. It has been favoured in this direction for several successive years, and the consequent financial results have enabled the committee to reduce the heavy debt on its extensive hall in Grenville street.

This afternoon the sun shone genially on a crowd of about 15,000 people, who witnessed the concluding contests of the bandsmen in the A and B grade quickstep events. It was an excellent holiday gathering, including people from many miles around Ballarat, who arrived early in the day by special trains. Animated and picturesque as was the scene in the afternoon, it was eclipsed by the demonstration in the evening. Sturt Street, through which the bands marched in procession at intervals, was literally swarming with people from 7 o'clock, all hurrying to the City Oval for the culminating event in the competitions - the announcement of the results. There were fully 20,000 people at the oval. While they waited for the decisions of the judge, Mr. Edward Sutton, of Glasgow, capital outdoor entertainment was provided. From four capacious platforms variety performances were given to the accompaniment of music from the bands. Biograph pictures were shown on four screens, while a display of fireworks was made.

According to the timetable, the results of the contests would be thrown on the main screen by means of a lantern at 10 minutes past 10 o'clock. And so they were. It was then seen that Geelong had again carried off the chief prize of £200 in the A grade contest, and the champion certificate of the Victorian Band Association. The Harbour Trust Band was the winner. Last year the prize was won by the Geelong Municipal Band, which did not compete on this occasion. The big double event of the musical competitions - first in the open choir contest and first in the band championship - went to Geelong. The performances of six out of the seven bands were remarkably even. The Rozelle Band, from New South Wales, tied for second in the A grade selection contest, and were first in the quick-step, winning £80. The Boosey Shield was won by this band, with the highest aggregate of points in A grade contests for the years 1911-12-13. St. Augustine's Orphanage Band, from Geelong, took second prize in the A grade quickstep.

In the B grade selection contest the City of Ballarat and Malvern Tramways bands were regarded as much superior to the other bands. The Ballarat Band won the first prize of £60, and Malvern Tramways came second. City of Ballarat also secured a special prize of an electro-plated cornet. Prout's Ballarat Band, by its splendid marching, for which it is famed, won the B grade quickstep and £20, with Warrnambool Citizens' second. City of Ballarat, with the highest aggregate of points in the B grade competitions, took first place in the contest for the Hawkes Shield, which goes finally to the band with the largest number of points at the end of three successive years. In the C grade selection contest, Wagga Wagga Citizens' and St. Kilda City were placed equal. A protest has been lodged by the Victorian Band Association against the Wagga Wagga Citizens' Band.



The quickstep was taken by Warrnambool Town, with only half a point in advance of the Ballarat Orphanage. St. Kilda City obtained the highest aggregate in the C grade, which gives them a commanding position to the ultimate possession of the Hutton Cup.

– *The Argus*

In *The British Brass Band* (Trevor Herbert), Duncan Blythell's footnote 51 p. 237 in his chapter 'The Brass Band in the Antipodes', sheds further light on the interruption to South Street banding competitions in the 20s and the rising tensions for South Street and the VBA:

The Ballarat contest went into abeyance after 1924 because of disputes between the management of the South Street Society (which organized the whole *eisteddfod*) and the Victorian Bands Association (under whose rules the all-important competition for bands was conducted). See *Australian Band News*, 20 (Jan–Feb 1925). Attempts by the Ballarat-based Victorian Bands Association to establish a contest independent of South Street in the later 1920s proved unsuccessful, and in the following decade the Association was replaced as the governing body of Victorian banding by the Melbourne-based Victorian Band League. See *Australian Band Leader*, 1/3 (1971), 10. The Ballarat contest was successfully revived after the Second World War.

– Duncan Blythell, 'The Brass Band in the Antipodes' in *The British Brass Band*



#### DISCOVER MORE

Read about the background to [The first South Street band contest in October, 1900](#) in Jeremy de Korte's online blog *Band Blasts from the Past*.



## BACK TO SOUTH STREET

Just let me go back to South Street  
For a week with the famous bands,  
And take with me others who would compete  
In Australia's Golden City of renown.

Just let me alight at the station  
With cornet, trombone and drum,  
And meet bandsmen from all over the Nation,  
To whom South Street once more come.

Just let me line up in the station yard  
And play through Handel's "Hallelujah  
Chorus,"  
Or "The Heavens Are Telling" by Haydn –  
just as hard,  
As bands played in the days before us.

Just let me march along Sturt Street  
With gay crowds lining the way,  
With step by step and beat by beat,  
Is South Street just the same to-day?

Just let me see who is judging again,  
Is it Stead or Bentley with ears for tune?  
Short, Beswick, Sutton or Morgan – men  
of fame,  
Or King of them all – J. Ord Hume.

Just let me go through Inspection  
As we did when we dressed with much care;  
With the gayest uniform in our section,  
That made all our rivals stare.

Just let me compete in the solos again  
From the grand old Coliseum stage,  
With "Adelaide" or "Gipsy's Warning" –  
or "Pretty Jane,"  
"Zelda" and "Miranda" of a later age.

Just let me mount the platform  
And play through "Beethoven's Works."  
Or any Alexander Owen's selections  
That South Street bands would not shirk.

Just let me play through the Test piece,  
Be it "Mercandante," "Mozart" or "Liszt,"  
"Wagner," "Chopin" or "Meyerbeer,"  
The tests that were tests on our lips.

Just let me march in the Quickstep  
With Ord Hume's "B.B. and C.F."  
"The Challenge," "Cossack" or "Ravenswood"  
Or was the "Twentieth Century" the best?

Just let me see the others swing past,  
Code's, Prout's, Rozelle and Boulder.  
Wanganui, Newcastle and Bathurst Brass,  
Great names that come dear to the older.

Just let me see those fine Geelong bands,  
St. Augustine's, Municipal and Harbour  
Trust.  
Also Collingwood, Malvern, Richmond,  
Prahran,  
Perth City – all great power among us.

Just let me see Geelong Town again  
With Sharpe Brearley at the head of affairs.  
They ranked with Prout's in quickstep fame,  
First in marching honours was often theirs.

Just let me see the giants of the baton,  
Riley, Code, Bulch and Prout,  
McMahon, Barkel, Jones and Hoffman.  
Many, alas, have gone out.

Just let me see others again,  
Partington, Shugg, Johnston, Bowden.  
Men who kept time in South Street's fame;  
Wade and Baile must be among them.

Just let me think if I missed any,  
Yes, there was Davison, Niven, Lewins –  
any more!  
Hopkins, Ryder, Billy May among many,  
Not forgetting Frank Wright and J. Booth  
Gore.

Just let me see the best of officials  
And critics like Davey, Gartrell and Hellings,  
Humphreys and Boyce – Kings of staff and  
whistle,  
May march us again – well, there's no telling.

So to-day just let me go back to South Street,  
Most famous contest in the land,  
Where many old timers I will heartily greet,  
And yarn over years that were so grand.

– Mullen, 1951, pp. 2–3  
Source: Jeremy de Korte Archive