



◀ Claudia Liebenberg (Ben's great granddaughter) wearing his war medals with Penny Ferguson (Ben's granddaughter and editor of *Ben and his Mates*).



UNCOVERING THE PAST

For North Shore resident Penny Ferguson, stumbling across her grandfather's World War I records was a chance to travel back into his past.

By Shahrin Shamim

When Penny Ferguson discovered a box of letters and journals that were written by her grandfather, Ben Champion, during his time as a Lieutenant in WWI, she was faced with a whole new outlook on her family's life during the war.

Her book, *Ben and His Mates*, compiles all of these once-lost documents together and sheds light on how the war affected so many young men.

"I discovered the documents at my mother's house," Penny tells *North Shore Living*.

"There were lots of letters that nobody had ever seen, so I thought I'd just write them up in a digital form. But then I realised there were so many soldiers mentioned, I had to write something for those soldiers as well. I thought every soldier that got a mention deserved to have his name remembered, even if it was only mentioned once."

The digital archiving process took Penny years to organise but all that time was an opportunity for her to discover family members she had never even known about.

"I didn't know my great grandparents so that's been a big surprise for me. They were very much part of the church life in Wahroonga and Ben's father was an Elder of the church," Penny reveals.

Despite the extensive historical records of WWI that already exist, Penny found that Ben's accounts provided a more personal perspective on the war.

"It's like having a conversation with Ben. He was 18 when he left and he talks like an 18-year-old boy - you can see how his attitudes change throughout the war," Penny says.

"The letters became really important because the diary is just a matter of facts - where they were, what they were doing. But the letters give a lot more emotion and expression."

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◀ Penny at the Wahroonga cenotaph, where Ben Champion's name is among those that returned.

Many of Ben's fellow platoon members were North Shore locals as well and, along with Ben, several of these men went onto distinguish themselves in other fields later in life.

"Ben was able to become a doctor of dentistry and was also a member of the International College of Dentistry," informs Penny.

"Of course, talking about so many of the men that my grandfather must have known, on the North Shore there's hundreds of them, and some of them also became quite prominent people."

Spending the last few years curating the book has been a life-changing experience for Penny and she encourages others to dive into the personal aspect of WWI the same way she has.

"I want people to read the book and appreciate how these young men all volunteered," she says.

"The loyalty and the support they gave to each other is incredible." **N**

For more information on Ben and His Mates, visit echobooks.com.au

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