

Enthusiasm for adventure and a sense of patriotic duty pulled on local men with equal force. Although none of the towns could meet Gilgandra's number (Gilgandra became celebrated throughout the British Empire for having the highest number of volunteers serving in WW1 per head of population) men and boys from Dubbo to Lithgow, Springwood to Parramatta downed their working tools, left their farms to join the Coo-ees.

Camaraderie and peer pressure would also have played their part in attracting recruits but equally the ability of the organisers to maintain military discipline and weed out undesirables also saw the Coo-ees gain increasing respect as the weeks passed.

Their achievement is even more remarkable when 1915 road conditions, the difficulties in feeding and transporting such a large number of men and other logistics are taken into account.

The seriousness of their quest was never lost on The Coo-ees. In Orange, one of their number, a young hefty lad named Bill Hunter received a letter from his mother with the sad news that his two brothers had been killed in action. (Both died on 27 August 1915 during their second day in battle at Gallipoli.)

By the time the Coo-ees arrived in Sydney five weeks and 320 miles later, their ranks had swelled to 263 recruits. In Sydney's Martin Place, not far from where the Cenotaph is today, Prime Minister Billy Hughes and an overwhelming crowd of perhaps 100,000 thousands of Sydneysiders gave the Coo-ees a rapturous welcome. The tired, dust-grimed and sweating men marched up Martin Place into Macquarie Street and finished in The Domain where they marched through 50 archways of blood red roses beneath and past the cheers of maimed and wounded Gallipoli veterans.

Many of the men who took part in the Coo-ee March joined the newly formed Second Division of the AIF as reinforcements and served on the Western Front and in the Middle East. Sadly many, including their leader, Bill Hitchen, would never return home.

However the first Coo-ees' success triggered further recruiting marches throughout NSW and Australia and the resulting boost in morale helped provide reinforcements for the ANZACS at a time when they were most badly needed.

- *The above was drawn from the book "The Coo-ee March" by John Meredith*

What happened to the Coo-ees?

Descendant of Bill Hitchen, Major John Gallagher, describes what happened to the Coo-ees after their memorable arrival in Sydney in 1915.

“Of the 263 Coo-ee marchers around 220 served overseas. We have been able to identify and trace the military service of around 100 of these men.

“Many were allocated to the 15th reinforcements of the 13th Battalion. Some, including Bill Hitchen, went as reinforcements to the 45th battalion. Others were allocated as reinforcements to the whole spectrum of Army units from Light Horse to Artillery units. At least five Coo-ees have been identified as going to 2nd Division units. This Division, currently the Army Reserve Division, also celebrates its 90th Anniversary this year.

“John Robert Lee, a Gilgandra Coo-ee and spokesman for the Coo-ees, served as a Lieutenant with the 2nd Division's 24th Battalion. Lee was later Minister of Justice in the New South Wales Parliament.

“Many of the Coo-ees did not return to the places they marched away from in 1915. I have identified at least 20 Coo-ees who paid the supreme sacrifice. These include the leader of the Coo-ees, Bill Hitchen, who died of illness in a military hospital in England in 1916. Another Coo-ee, William Emerton (Bill) Hunter, died at Poziers with the 45th Battalion in 1916. His two older brothers had lost their lives at Gallipoli on the 27th August, 1915, with the 18th Battalion.

“Possibly the youngest Coo-ee, Charles Alfred Hampson, enlisted at Lithgow, stating his age as 18 years. He was in fact 16 years old. His father Lightfoot Hampson, heard of his son's enlistment, followed the Coo-ees and joined them at Springwood, no doubt to keep an eye on his young son. Both the Hampsons were allocated to the 10th Brigade, Australian Field Artillery with the consecutive numbers 4789 and 4790, indicating they served together in that unit. Sadly young Charles was killed in action in France on the 28th of April, 1918. He was just 17 years of age.

“Complete records of the Coo-ees are difficult to trace however I have been able to identify one who was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal (DCM). This decoration is second only to the Victoria Cross for gallantry and was awarded to SGT James Cameron of the 13th Battalion for conspicuous bravery in leading an attack on, and capturing, an enemy post containing three 5.9 inch howitzer artillery guns and their crews. This action took place on the Western Front on 18th September 1918. SGT Cameron was a 24 year old farmer on enlistment and was an original Gilgandra Coo-ee.

“At least four other Coo-ees were awarded the Military Medal for " Bravery in the Field." One of these PTE Leslie Greenleaf was the youngest Gilgandra Coo-ee and the last, having passed away in 1980. Les was a 17 year old butcher when he joined the Coo-ees at Gilgandra in 1915 and marched the whole 324 miles to Sydney where he also joined the 13th Battalion. Les was awarded the Military Medal in 1918 at Villers Bretonneaux for rescuing a wounded officer from between the lines in broad daylight under enemy fire. Les was a primary source for John Meredith's excellent book on the Coo-ee March, published by Macquarie Press at Dubbo in 1981.

“Bill Hitchen also had trouble remembering his correct age, or perhaps the recruiting officer made a mistake. On enlistment Bill is recorded as being 44 years of age, just under the limit of 45. In fact he was 51 years of age when he set off from Gilgandra in 1915, leaving a wife and five children, never to return.

The Hitchen family and the link to Hyde Park Barracks

“Both Bill Hitchen's parents, spent time at the Hyde Park Barracks in the early colonial days. His father George, as a convict, transported to Sydney in 1840, and his mother Catherine Guare as a 14 year old Irish orphan who came to Sydney in 1849 following the Potato Famine.

“Catherine's name is recorded on the Irish Famine Memorial set into the wall of the Hyde Park Barracks. They married, went to the goldfields at Meroo between Hill End and Mudgee, had 11 children and later owned a number of bush hotels.

Carrying on a family tradition

“Coo-ee Bill Hitchen's epic march from Gilgandra in 1915 inspired a long tradition of military service by Hitchen family members. Coo-ee's son, young Bill had already enlisted when the Coo-ee's set off. He served in France with the 30th Battalion and the 5th Pioneer Battalion. Coo-ee Bill's youngest son, Charles or Cob as he was known rode his bike in the march as a 12 year old boy scout. Cob served in World War 2 with the 9th Division. Many of Bill Hitchen's grandsons and nephews also served in World War 2, including Trooper Guare Hitchen, who was killed at Sananada in New Guinea in 1942 while serving with the 7th Division Cavalry Regiment.

“A great nephew also served in Vietnam and as a great grandson, I served in East Timor where I met a cousin, Julie Brogan, a great grand daughter of Coo-ee Bill. Julie was doing nursing service in East Timor.

“Another descendant, Major John Hitchen, recently retired after more than 37 years Army Reserve Service.

“Currently serving as an Officer Cadet at the Australian Defence Force Academy is William Hitchen, who not only carries on Coo-ee Bill's name but also the strong tradition of military service started by Bill Hitchen and the Coo-ees in Gilgandra 90 years ago.”

- John Gallagher, 2005

The March of the Men of Gilgandra

This song first appeared in a column in The Sun by Sydney journalist Del. W. McCay in October 1915, two days after the start of the march. It proved very popular and was reprinted in several other newspapers which prompted several musical versions. One melody by a Josephine Mary Coen of Randwick is included in John Meredith's book "The Cooee March". and has been subsequently adopted by the 2005 Cooees.

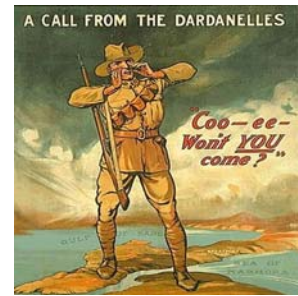
*They're coming from Gilgandra, our soldier-men to be,
They sing along the Western Tracks: "Who'll come and fight with me?"
On the country roads they're coming,
Can you hear the distant drumming,
Can you hear the message humming,
Over long, long miles of bushland from Gilgandra to the sea,*

*They are marching from Gilgandra, our soldier-men to be,
They sing along the Western Tracks: "Who'll come and fight with me?"
On the country roads they're coming,
Can you hear the distant drumming,
Can you hear the message humming,
Over long, long miles of bushland from Gilgandra to the sea.*

*The lone selector hears them and shades his straining eyes,
To watch the Great Adventurer go winding o'er the rise,
Who from every hill and valley,
From the mulga and the mallee,
To the call of England rally
From the dusty, distant corners where her Flag of Honour flies.*

*There are others who will join them as they make their way along,
And will help to swell the chorus of their mighty marching song,
For their ranks will keep on growing
More with every mile they're going,
And they'll make a gallant showing
When through the streets of Sydney town they pass a thousand strong.*

*A column from Gilgandra – it has answered to the call,
That rings from far Gallipoli, where brothers fight and fall,
When recruiting, sadly slumping,
Stood in need of hefty bumping,
More than all your country-stamping
Was the column from Gilgandra with its shoulder to the ball.*



The Sydney Celebration Sunday 3 July 05

Information for participants

The celebration on Sunday 3 July in Sydney parade provides a unique opportunity for volunteers from to take part in an event of national significance. We are looking for at least 263 people to form a contingent that will accurately represent the number of Coo-ee marchers when they arrived in Sydney in 1915.

Platoons have been formed in Gilgandra, Dubbo, Wellington, Orange and Bathurst as well as from community and service groups from the Sydney metropolitan area such as Rotaract, Rover Scouts, NSW Fire Brigades, World War 1 descendants group and Air League Australia.

On the parade day you will form up in College Street South near Oxford Street. In front of you will be a band and a Squadron of Light Horse in 1914 gear and you will be lead by re-enactment Officers and Non Commissioned Officers (NCOs) dressed in 1914 uniform.

A Vice Regal inspection by Her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir AC, Governor of New South Wales Governor as well as a review by Senior Military Officers will take place before the march begins.

The re-enactment contingents will march down between the ranks of about 5000 serving and former members of the three Reserve Forces to Macquarie Street.

The Governor of NSW will take the "salute" in front of Parliament House in Macquarie Street and then the Coo-ee contingents will form up as the 5000 serving and former members march past.

Following this the Re-enactment Battalion will march back to Parliament for a final farewell to the Governor and then proceed to the Domain as was done in 1915.

It will be a day of great pageantry and one that will give every participant great pride in having taken part in such an historic event.

COO-EE! STILL TIME TO 'ENLIST'!

Vacancies still exist for prospective marchers. (Note: All marchers will be required to attend a training day on Saturday 2 July 2005 at Malabar Rifle Range to ensure they feel comfortable about participating the following day.)

For details and an "Application To March" form please contact Bob Joseph on 0418 215 182 or bob.joseph@bigpond.com. **Closing date is 15th June 2005**

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