

STORY FROM "ITHACA", GRAFTON STREET, WOOLLAHRA

Following research done at the Land Titles Office of NSW into the history of my house, in Grafton Street, Woollahra I was led to information about the family who built the house in 1886. It was the first house erected on the top of the hill at the Western End of Grafton Street and formed part of a marriage settlement of John James Cramp and Penelope Esther Anne Cramp. They went on to have six children, the eldest, a son born in 1887 followed by two daughters, a son who died as an infant and then the two youngest sons Cedric born 1897 and Edwin born 1889. John J Cramp who was already 48 when he married, died in 1905.

It was by chance that I found a link to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission and then to the Australian War Memorial website where I found the digitised files for Cedric and Edwin who both enlisted to serve in WW1.

Cedric, aged 18, a young medical student at Sydney University, enlisted in April 1916. He underwent training at Liverpool NSW and embarked from Australia as a member of 34th Battalion AIF in April 1917 arriving in England and then sent to France in July 1917. From France his Battalion was sent to the Western Front where he fought in Passchendaele in the 3rd Battle of Ypres in Belgium. In October 1917 he was reported missing in action. The Australian War Memorial has digitised his whole file and the letters from his mother in trying to locate her missing son, first hope that he may have survived or held prisoner by the Germans and later news from other members of his Battalion from their hospital beds in Randwick that they had seen him fall in front of them and final confirmation from his Sergeant that he had been hit fatally in 'no mans' land, aged just 20 and his body never recovered. His tags, diary and effects were to be returned to his mother but the file indicates that for 5 years there were letters between her and AIF and that none of his possessions were ever found. His mother's final comment was that he had been asked to work as a translator but he had stated that "it is in the trenches that I belong". He is remembered at the Menin Gate, Belgium.

His younger brother Edwin enlisted as soon as he was able to in February 1917 when he would have been only 16 years of age – his enlistment application shows he put his age as 22½ - he also underwent training until he departed Australia in October 1917 arriving in England in December 1917. He was a member of the 54th Battalion AIF and went to the Somme at Villiers-Brettonneux in France on 1st April 1918. He was engaged with the British Expeditionary Force, but after just two weeks, on 17th April 1918 he fell victim to Mustard Gas and died as a result on 20th April 1918 aged 18. He is buried in Longpre-Les-Corps-Saints, France. A photo of his grave was sent to his mother together with his effects and her comment was that 'he wanted to be with his brother'.

This is not a story of heroism or gallantry but more a reflection of how many thousands of these brave young men left their homes and Country never to return. The letters from their mother went on for 5 years before the file was finally closed. The Australian War Memorial, Red Cross and Commonwealth Graves Commission have done a fantastic job in documenting all these files, personalising those involved to an extent that you almost feel that you know them.

It is an eerie feeling to think that this was the only house that these two young men would have called home and that they would have rumbled around here as children and that their mother Esther sat here and wrote all those letters so many years ago. I do not know whether there are any surviving descendants from the Cramp family.