

The West Obituaries

Edited by Torrance Mendez

Searching for an unknown father



KEITH MURRAY
Author, journalist

Born: Perth, 1917
Died: Esperance, aged 92

Keith Murray never knew the father after whom he was named.

In June 1917, after kissing his pregnant wife goodbye on the Fremantle docks, Private Keith Murray went to war to as a non-combatant signaller in A Company 11th Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, of the Australian Imperial Force. Pte Murray was killed in France just 54 days before World War I ended. A student of divinity, he was just 26.

Seventy-five years later in 1993, on a still, autumn day amid rich farmlands and luxuriant gardens, his son, helped by information from French locals and his research over five years, stood near the tiny village of Hesbecourt on the spot where Pte Murray was blown apart by a mortar bomb in the Somme and later buried.

Keith, who would earn his living with his pen, had gone to France with his wife Ailsa, son Kim and granddaughter Buffy. He recorded the emotional but ultimately fruitless search for Pte Murray's grave in an article in *The West Australian* in November 1993. The party had found where Pte Murray fell but by then



many bodies had been exhumed from shell holes that once served as makeshift graves and reburied in war cemeteries. No record was found of Pte Murray's resting place.

Stoically, Keith confronted his past in well-researched prose: "That morning about 5am, the 11th Battalion, after marching through rain, assembled about 1km east of Hesbecourt in darkness. It was the beginning of the decisive battle of Epehy in what was the Battalion's last action of the war."

Son Paul, a columnist in *The West Australian* which he also edited (1990 to 2000), said that when growing up, he had never grasped what the World War I loss of his grandfather had meant to his father. "Dad clearly felt the absence of a father very deeply but never said anything to us kids. But it became obvious how deeply he felt after the 1993 physical connection to the man he never knew."

Pte Murray's fate was determined in WA. During World War I, he and two priest colleagues were sent white feathers, accusing them of cowardice. The intimidation, cowardly in itself, galvanised the trio to enlist for war. All three, training for the Anglican clergy, were killed.

Pte Murray's loss was compensated for in WA by his widow Dorothy (Fox) who became the focus in their son's first published book, *Beloved Teacher* (1995), about his parents' life and the futility of his father's death.

Kim Murray said of his grandmother Dorothy: "She produced a young man, gentle of nature, who wrote poetry and prose — and, even in his late 80s, an unpublished romance novel — conservative in thought and somewhat demanding of respect he felt he was due."

Keith Owen Murray was born in Perth on November 7, 1917. At six, in accordance with his late father's wishes, he started at Guildford Grammar School. Some days were difficult owing to bullying and the loss of his father but the institution was effective. There were few male role



Hesbecourt revisited: Keith Murray stands over the grave of Capt. Wally Hallahan MC who was in charge of the unit in which his father, Private Keith Murray, was killed in France. The shell that killed Pte Murray also killed Capt. Hallahan and another soldier. Finding the graves of the two other men made the trip worthwhile, though Pte Murray's grave was not found. Above: Keith Murray in 1957.

models in his family and women dominated his formative years.

Keith began as a proof reader at *West Australian Newspapers*. Articles he submitted led to a journalism cadetship and a lifetime obsession with research. Like his redoubtable mother — one of the first to fly across the Nullarbor with aviator Jimmy Woods — Keith craved adventure.

With photographer mate Owen Williams they paddled and dragged a canoe up the chain of lakes from Bunbury to Perth to prove what a great tourist attraction it could be, linked by canals. He also learned to dive and the two explored subterranean caves below Blackwall Reach.

Keith was an RAAF flight-sergeant in Darwin during World War II and, in 1942, he wed Ailsa Paul. In 1957 he left *The West* for public relations and established a Perth office for the Timber Development Association which was promoting timber to builders.

"Dad threw himself at the task with great enthusiasm and he saw those years as the most successful and rewarding of his career," Kim said. "He created an awareness of timber with such things as the Timber Week

parade through Perth streets, where up to 50 floats circled the city block." He arranged for a karri log to be shipped from the South West for display in Kings Park. The decaying log was woodchipped in 2001.

Keith retired at 63 and, three years later, he and Ailsa moved to Albany. Soon, however, he had a job at the *Albany Advertiser*, then for six years worked with the *Town of Albany*.

His books include *Albany Walk Down Hill* (2001), a history of the buildings in the town's main street; *First There Came Ships* (2004), a history of shipwrecks on the south coast of WA; and *From Oar to Diesel on the Swan* (2004), a history of shipping on the Swan River. Keith also wrote a detailed memoir in three volumes for his family. He and his wife moved to Esperance in 2002 to be closer to daughter Dale Johnson and her family.

Keith Murray died on June 19, after a short illness. He was 92. His wife died in 2007. He leaves three children, seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.

Michael Zekulich

The author, a former journalist with The West Australian, knew Keith Murray.