

BLACK DIGGERS

Brisbane season

Tom Wright

ACT ONE

Unit 1 – Robert Grant finds baby Nigel. (1887 Bellenden Ker, QLD)

Darkness. The sound of Australia.

Gunfire. Confusion. Screaming, running, shouted orders.

Silhouettes.

SETTLER The rest have gone, bugger it.

BOUNDARY RIDER They won't be back. Someone else's problem now.

SETTLER What's that noise, one of 'em still alive?

STOCKMAN In that humpy. No, the other one.

SETTLER Oh hell, don't tell me it's a bloody picaninny.

Gestures, a man comes over with a lantern.

STOCKMAN 'Fraid so. Boy.

BOUNDARY RIDER Just...do something to shut its mouth and leave it, let the dogs worry about it.

STOCKMAN I'm not getting involved in this.

SETTLER You were happy enough to fill its mother's back with pellets.

STOCKMAN Now that's different and you know it.

BOUNDARY RIDER What do you do with an abandoned calf?

STOCKMAN Well that depends on the beast in question.

SETTLER I want to be back in Innisfail by noon, we don't have time to lug some itty around. Put it on the ground.

He takes out his shotgun. Enter two others.

TAXIDERMIST What in the name of heaven is going on?

The Settler leaves.

STOCKMAN Picaninny, Professor. His mother seems to have decamped.

TAXIDERMIST What are you going to do with it?

BOUNDARY RIDER That's just what we were debating.

The Taxidermist picks the child up.

TAXIDERMIST I don't think there's a debate. (*Looks at the child in his arms.*) Full-blood, too. Unusual. Perfect specimen. If I'd been only five minutes later...It's all chance, and fate. (*To the baby*) Look at you. Back from the dead, if only you knew it.

He sings, gently at first, a hymn, to soothe the baby. Joining the hymn, men move across the space and reassemble, sitting on the ground.

Unit 2 – Retired schoolmaster encourages young blokes. (1914 Somewhere on the Gwyndir)

Older white bloke with a stick walks past them, but can't help himself, decides to give them an earful

RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER I don't know how you fellows can just...sit there on your backsides. There are momentous events sweeping the world.

HARRY Like what sir?

RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER Surely you have-

HARRY'S MATE What events?

RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER We are at war.

Brief pause. Wind and birds.

HARRY I can't hear anything.

HARRY'S MATE It's a quiet war.

RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER A war that could easily threaten all that is right, and true, and valuable to us all.

HARRY Where?

RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER Oh, in far distant lands, many days over the horizon.

HARRY Toowoomba?

RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER Further, than that my friend.

HARRY Oh, Dalby.

RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER Europe. Belgium. And in the Ottoman Empire.

HARRY First we've heard about it.

RETIRED SCHOOLMASTER Well, you might think about it. You younger chaps might think about it. Where your duties might lie. What sort of men you want to be. Think about what it might mean, if swathes of Mahommedan Turks or creeping armies of sausage-breathed Huns over-ran our country, imposing their foreign ways, interfering with our women. Imagine the horrors of what it would be like if we were to lose, and you wake up one morning and find us all under occupation.

HARRY Yeah. Imagine.

They laugh. The old bloke moves on muttering under his breath. They join him, mimicking him at first, but one of them has a bass-drum, their parade of mimicry becomes a rallying march.

Unit 3 – Song – Sons Of The Southern Cross

They sing

There's eucalyptus in the air

And golden wattle in our hair

Join us, sons of Southern Cross

cooee and let our brothers hear

Australian boys don't shirk or fear

Sons of the Southern Cross

We'll be there!

The drum fades in the distance, they resume their positions.

Unit 4 – Harry and Mate watch recruitment Parade (1914)

BOB Where are they all goin’?

ERN Army. Fighting.

BOB Yeah, I know. But why?

NORM Buggered if I know.

ERN No-one knows what it’s all about.

HARRY’S MATE Actually, there has been a long build-up of tension across the continent of Europe, and a wide range of factors; industrial, mercantile, territorial, ethnic, have been leading to a sequence of diplomatic impasses for some time. Much of it can be traced back to the failure of Europe to reach a settlement after the war between Prussia and France about forty years ago. Inside the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires there have been independence movements from smaller nationalities that have destabilised vested interests and external nations have used these to try to leverage influence or simply to assist in colonial expansion. Some mad Balkan nationalist shot the Austrian Emperor’s nephew and Austria went in when Serbia started mobilising, having been given an ultimatum deliberately designed to inflame the situation. The Germans supported them because of a treaty going back thirty years. And the other nations all had reasons to go in to protect their interests and that of their allies. So in the end what we’re seeing is the culmination of structural problems in continental Europe that have been festering for over four decades.

Pause

ALL Yeah, no-one knows what it’s about.

They fall backwards, sleeping round their campfire.

Unit 6 – Norm, Bob and Ern in pub (1916 Boundary Hotel Brisbane)

leaving the other blokes as a pub. Three of them have empty glasses and even emptier pockets.

NORM So when was the last time it got sent down?

BOB Dunno. Drips and drabs.

NORM Bloody ridiculous.

ERN You know, army pay – straight to us.

BOB They wouldn't do that. Would still go to the protector.

ERN Not a Queensland thing. An Australian thing. A Melbourne thing. Federal thing. Pounds shilling and pence, in our pocket, he's none the wiser.

NORM So, who would check up?

ERN No-one. That's the point. Soldiers. If you can fire a gun and stand in the sun, they might pretend to forget you're...

NORM What??

(Major blows on a whistle)

Unit 7– Norm, Bob and Ern try to enlist (1915)

The publican shouts; suddenly they are in a recruiting hall.

RECRUITING SERGEANT Right, next!

ERN G'day.

RECRUITING SERGEANT What?

ERN I'm here.

RECRUITING SERGEANT Look, I'm a busy man and this is serious – oh. You're here here? I see. How old are you?

ERN I reckon nineteen.

RECRUITING SERGEANT You reckon nineteen. Speak to him. *(Major blows on a whistle)*

At a desk elsewhere in the space

RECRUITING CORPORAL *(Head over his papers)* Next! Name!

ERN Does it have to be my real name?

RECRUITING CORPORAL Yes, of course. But frankly how would I know what your real name is? So, name?

ERN Ernest Hopkins.

RECRUITING CORPORAL Age and place of birth?

ERN Nineteen, Barambah.

RECRUITING CORPORAL Barambah? *(looks up for the first time)* Jesus Christ! Pardon the profanity. You can't come in here.

ERN Why not?

RECRUITING CORPORAL Well, you're...you're not a citizen.

ERN Subject of His Majesty.

RECRUITING CORPORAL Smart alec eh? Here. Here's your form. It'll go down a treat at the protector's office.

ERN 'Deficient Physique'. What does that mean?

RECRUITING CORPORAL It's all there. Next! *(Major blows on a whistle)*

ERN 'Reason: 'Of Strongly Aboriginal Appearance''

Ern looking a bit bewildered. Out on the street.

Unit 9– Norm, Bob and Ern try to enlist a second time (1915)

RECRUITING SERGEANT I'm sorry son, I have no idea what to do with this. With you. Wait here.

(He goes and talks to a superior. There is a much consulting of books and disagreements until eight men are all scratching their heads and carrying on)

RECRUITING SERGEANT Anyone have the slightest idea what 'Substantially European' means?

CLERK Use your eyes.

CORPORAL What do you look for, their native blood or their British blood?

CLERK There must be some description somewhere?

SECRETARY We can't have darkies in the same battalions as white chaps.

CORPORAL But how dark?

RECRUITING SERGEANT Perhaps if we had a letter from the relevant Protector that would cover it?

CLERK If they're willing to get up off their backsides and show a bit of pluck then they're white enough for me.

RECRUITING SERGEANT So I just make a decision based on what's standing in front of me?

OFFICER Name?

ERN James Cook

BOB Albert Street

NORM Beau Desert

OFFICER Date of birth?

ERN September fourth eighteen ninety.

BOB September fourth eighteen ninety one.

NORM Same

OFFICER And the place?

ERN Baram-...Murgon.

BOB Same

NORM Same

OFFICER Are you, would you say, Substantially European?

ALL What?

RECRUITING SERGEANT Are you, would you say, Substantially European? Your father was white, wasn't he? Let's say 'yes'. Join that line. Right, nine more and I'm on track for a boomerang.

Unit 11– Voice from an old newsreel (1915)

VOICE FROM AN OLD NEWSREEL

It needed to be seen; these extraordinary specimens, these gallant figures, resolute as they were silhouetted against a foreign sky, they had the toughness, the ingenuity of the land of their birth. They had come to the other side of the globe to defend noble ideals; to protect motherhood, the safety of law, the sanctity of liberty, to fight for their King and all His Majesty carries...truly, from some confused, even shambolic frontier, the Australian has arrived. Fair, clear of eye, the finest of the British race cast anew under a southern sun. These boys are us, those that remain; those that returned. The greatness of the White Man, rendered greater still by peril, fighting not just for God and Empire, but to define what it is to be a man, an Australian man, in this our young Commonwealth...

Unit 12– Dear Auntie May #1

The darkness is suddenly illuminated by the striking of a match and a lamp being lit. A young soldier writes.

ARCHIE Dear Aunty May

I hope this finds you in top spirits and that everyone is beaut at home. If you see Dolly give her a pat from me and tell her I'll be home and will take her down the beach. I am good. I say my prayers like you told me and you were right, there are many Methodists here and we read scripture. I think about you all the time back there and the light on the lakes, and the pelicans coming in. Your Archie.

He puts the letter in an envelope

Unit 13– Norm, Bob and Ern pose for a photograph (1915)

Bob, Norm and Ern pose proudly.

ERN Hey, you've got to stay still.

NORM They are never going to believe this back home.

BOB Their boys in uniform, they'll think we're police!

ERN You noticed something? Once we started wearing this clobber, suddenly we're, dunno how you explain it –

BOB They look at you different, don't they?

ERN Yeah, can't put my finger on it. Like they've forgotten you're -

He is interrupted by the bright camera flash.

Unit 14– On the boat

The flashes keep going. Become shell explosions. They have become a boat, moving towards the beach. Sound of the shellfire gets louder as they approach.

FRIGHTENED PRIVATE (*Under his breath*)

Oh Jesus oh Jesus Oh Jesus...

MOUSTACHED SERGEANT

Heads down, don't dilly dally, look alive.

Bullets start fizzing. Laurie starts to laugh.

CORPORAL WITH GLASSES

What's so bloody funny?

LAURIE

Sorry sir!

ANOTHER SOLDIER

You're a strange cove.

MOUSTACHED SERGEANT

Look alive! Look alive!

LAURIE

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies... If you'd told me I'd be in a boat arriving uninvited on some one's beach I would never have believed it.

Unit 15– Aggressive Soldier gets beaten up (Gallipoli)

As he prays the dead rise up and prepare tables. Lights change and everyone is eating

AGGRESSIVE PRIVATE What d’you think you’re doing?

MICK Same as you. I’m sitting and I’m eating my grub and I’m staying out of trouble.

AGGRESSIVE PRIVATE I don’t know what the hell’s going on any more.

MICK The world’s turned upside down.

AGGRESSIVE PRIVATE You’ve said a mouthful there. Upside down when a coon thinks it’s alright to sit and look me in the eye and touch the same metal plate and finger the same spoon and drink the same bloody water as a white man. I don’t know who you are boy but you’ve got gumption. And you know what they say about boys with gumption don’t you? They get shown their place.

WHITE PRIVATE Ease up Jim. Leave it.

MICK I’ve done nothing to get your back up.

AGGRESSIVE PRIVATE You being here gets my back up. Now are you gonna back away boy?

MICK No. No, I’m not.

AGGRESSIVE PRIVATE FELLERS WE’VE GOT A BLOKE HERE WHO NEEDS TO BE SHOWN WHAT’S WHAT!

TALL PRIVATE Yeah. We have.

The soldiers pile on the AGGRESSIVE PRIVATE and beat him up. He comes out of it bloodied and bruised.

RED-HAIRED SERGEANT What’s he saying?

MICK “The world turned upside fucking down”

Unit 16–Song – The World’s Turned Upside Down

Listen to us and you shall hear, news that’s been coming for a hundred years:

Since Captain Cook, and many more, you’ve never seen the like before.

The white man needs us coloured boys now

Here in the shit every face is brown

You see the world’s turned upside down

See the world’s turned upside down.

Fellers - You see the world’s turned upside down

See the world’s turned upside down.

Unit 17–Scouting scene (1917 Passchendale)

A light sweeps through the dark, they all hit the deck

FIRST WHITE SOLDIER You see anything Laurie?

LAURIE Not a thing.

FIRST WHITE SOLDIER What did you think you were here for? Why d’you reckon he picked you?

SECOND WHITE SOLDIER I thought youse blokes could see in the dark?

LAURIE Nah, that’s rabbits.

FIRST WHITE SOLDIER Seriously, they put you here ‘cause you have tracking skills, you know, you can look at a blade of grass and say how many have gone past and all that sort of malarkey.

LAURIE What? You’re not fair dinkum.

SECOND WHITE SOLDIER You know, ‘cause you fellers all have a fifth sense or something.

FIRST WHITE SOLDIER Picked up special skills from your wise old blokes.

LAURIE I grew up in bloody Morningside!

FIRST WHITE SOLDIER Did you learn anything there?

LAURIE Plenty. Nothing that’s useful now.

SECOND WHITE SOLDIER Why did you think the captain kept sending you out on recky, then?

LAURIE Maybe he thought I had better camouflage in the dark.

Unit 18 – Nigel jumps in with the wrong battalion (1917 Bullecourt)

A passing soldier takes the lamp to his dugout where his mates huddle.

NIGEL (voice) Can I get in with you chaps? I'm meant to be with the ninth but I can't find 'em anywhere.

SQUINTING SOLDIER You one of the new chums, mate? Hop in, watch out for the chandelier.

Nigel climbs in. Surprised silence.

OLDER SOLDIER You're a long way from home!

SQUINTING SOLDIER Where're you from?

NIGEL Annandale, in Sydney. Spent a bit of time in Lithgow.

OLDER SOLDIER Wal Jeffries, everyone calls me 'Judge' on account of me being so wise.

SQUINTING SOLDIER Got nothing to do with him sitting on his arse all day.

OLDER SOLDIER That's 'Bunny', this here is Vic, that's 'Whacker' and this is 'Darky'.

NIGEL Darky, eh?

OLDER SOLDIER In the light of recent reinforcements we may have to reconsider his name.

They laugh.

Unit 19 – Song – Sandy Maranoa (1918 Villers-Bretonneux)

Someone is singing in the darkness. A passing soldier takes the lamp. Soldiers, exhausted, injured. One sings.

The night is dark and stormy and the sky is clouded o'er
Our horses we will mount and ride away
To watch the squatters' cattle through the darkness of the night
And we'll keep them on the camp till break of day

MAJOR Fix Bayonets!

They join in.

For we're going going going to Gunnedah so far
And we'll soon be into sunny New South Wales
We shall bid farewell to Queensland with its swampy coolibah
Happy drovers from the sandy Maranoa.

Unit 20 – (White Soldier realises Ern is Aboriginal 1918)

VOICE IN THE DARK Love that song. I'm from that way.

ERN Me too. Just outside Mitchell.

VOICE IN THE DARK Bigger me, that's where I'm from. Perce Hourigan.

ERN Yeah, I know. The Hourigans. From the pub, the *Antrim Arms*.

VOICE IN THE DARK Have we ever met?

ERN Passed in the road. Your old man took his belt to mine a few times,
when he went for a drink.

VOICE IN THE DARK Why would he do that? (*The soldier lights his pipe, briefly illuminates
his face, lets the other man see.*) Strewth. Righto. (*Pause. The sound of distant artillery*) If we both
get home, you'll be walking into the front bar, mate. Don't worry about that.

ERN Yeah, right.

Ern passes his pipe to another soldier.

Unit 22 – (Nigel is taken POW 1917-Bullecourt)

MAJOR Who's shortest? You!

NIGEL Sir!

MAJOR See if you can crawl in and get that field set back.

NIGEL What does he mean?

SQUINTING SOLDIER The telephone, Snowy.

MAJOR You, you and you. Follow me.

Nigel crawls into the dark. Germans sweep through, masses of gunfire. When the smoke clears, he emerges with a shot-up telephone.

NIGEL Judge? Rabbit? Vic? Chaps? It's Nigel..

Everyone is dead. Germans emerge. He puts his hands in the air. The Germans are too astonished to say anything at first.

GERMAN SOLDIER Was auf der Erde bist du?

NIGEL Oh bugger..

GRANDAD Australia. Never heard of it. You, Dor?

MUM Think the coppers like to talk about it. Must be a magic fairy land somewhere with oak trees and shepherds pie. Don't see much Australia round here.

BERTIE Will yer write the letter or won't you?

GRANDAD Don't look at me, you know I can't write nothing.

BERTIE Mum?

MUM You know what, I will write it. I'll say you were born in eighteen ninety eight out at Walter's Run. I'll do what you want. But I'll tell you something right now. You know when the Narrandera Show's on? And for a week the whole racecourse down there feels like every story book has come to life? And you and your sister would go and hang around, lounging on the barbed wire like a pair of skinned rats, looking in? How'd you feel? Like a big fancy circus, a big show of light and excitement, eh, and you could never get in? Would never get in? That's what the world's like, son. You can go to the Tower of London or the Pyramids or wherever, it's still the world. And you won't be allowed through the wire.

BERTIE They need me. They need lads. For the first time, they need us. Changed the rules, make it easier for aborigines they reckon.

GRANDAD Think about why that might be.

MUM And you know when the Show's over each year, when you go down the grounds the next week, what's there?

BERTIE Nothing. Nobody.

MUM That's what this war will be like for you. There's no fancy land at the end.

BERTIE So you'll write it anyway.

MUM Imagine if I don't. You'll only run away to god knows where. I'm lookin' in your eyes Bertie. I've already lost you. Maybe this way there might be someone decent who'll look out for you. What're you laughing at Dad?

GRANDAD Someone decent. All these blokes, you're going off to lick their boots. Same blokes, same boots that have kicked us for years. And you can't wait.

BERTIE Sorry Pop. I really am. (*Granddad exits speaking in language*) I'll stay standing mum! I'll stay standing.

Unit 24 – (Soldiers talk about going back home 1917 – Polygon Wood)

Whistle of an approaching shell, and an explosion. Bertie and his mum have vanished. Barbed wire.

SECOND WHITE SOLDIER	What are you gonna do when you get home, Stan?
STAN	Back to my dad's timber yard I suppose.
SECOND WHITE SOLDIER	If I had to spend the rest of my life being a clerk I wouldn't whinge. Mick?
MICK	I can't even imagine what it will look like. All I hope is that it's changed.
FIRST WHITE SOLDIER	What sort of changed?
MICK	If you blokes have a beer with me then that's a start.
STAN	What are you on about? We'd always have a beer with you.
FIRST WHITE SOLDIER	You're as good as a white man, Mick.

Unit 25 – (Soldiers play I Spy 1917 – A trench)

In a trench. Occasional bullet whizzes. Distant explosions. But otherwise languid.

ERN Moon?

ARCHIE It's not up. And no.

MICK Munition case?

ARCHIE No.

ERN Mud?

ARCHIE You've already said that. And no.

HARRY Metal.

ARCHIE Nup.

STAN Mortar?

ARCHIE No.

ERN We've moved seven feet since April.

STAN A triumph.

ERN 'Bout as exciting as the Valley on Good Friday.

MICK We could go old and grey sitting here.

HARRY Rather grow old than never grow old.

ARCHIE Amen.

ERN Seriously, this has gone for years and it could go for years. We lose a few mates, they lose a few, the whistle blows, we gain another cricket pitch worth of Belgium, the horn blows, they chase us out. But most of the time we sit here and we sing our songs. And they sit over there and sing theirs. And everyone, everyone hates the whole bloody stunt.

MICK Shh don't let the Captain hear you carry on like that.

ARCHIE It's stalemate, innit? Stale, mate. We're stuck with it. We're here because we're here, and now we're here, that's what it is. And the world's gonna have to organise itself around us.

ERN Can't put history back in the bottle, mate.

STAN Matchbox!

ARCHIE Bullseye.

STAN I spy with my....

Unit 26– (Frank’s Death)

Big explosion. Dirt showers on them. Loud bombs and gunfire. Frank on a stretcher.

BERTIE Bring him here! Quick!

TOMMY What’s he saying?

BERTIE Can’t make it out. Hold on. *(Frank’s dead.)* We have to find a way to get him home.

TOMMY What are you saying? Listen to yourself mate.

BERTIE He can’t be buried here. *(Pause)* We should...do something.

TOMMY Like what? I don’t know any of that old people stuff.

BERTIE We’re the only ones. Your folks do something, over in the West? *(Bertie shrugs)* I wouldn’t know where to begin. His you know, his soul will be stuck here. With all these trees. All these elms and oaks and all that. And all these hedges and the flowers and we don’t know the names of any of them. And when they burn the smoke is different and it will lead him a different way.

STRETCHER-BEARER What’s this aborigine mumbo-jumbo?

BERTIE The first dead one I seen.

STRETCHER-BEARER Whaddya mean?

BERTIE Seen hundreds of bodies. This is the first one who looks like me. No, he can’t get buried in this dirt. Or if he is we need to make sure he knows how to follow me, to get back, follow me on the ship, follow me on the train, back to the river.

TOMMY I wouldn’t know where to start. We’re the only blackfellas for a million miles. Here, take this. *(He gives Bertie a handful of soil).* Hold on to it. It will have to do. Now what do we say?

BERTIE *Bertie sings a song in traditional language over the body while the other soldiers put ochre on it. Bertie exits singing.*

were splattered over that damp soil and specks of me dribbled back through the wood into the river. I didn't get a nice long last look at life. I wasn't heading home. The boys who did, who found their way back, they could tell folks what their black mate had done. But me, I'm moving. Moving in my own way across rivers, even if they aren't my own. And I'll be here til everyone's forgotten everything that happened and the dirt can go back to being just dirt.

Unit 28– (Mick kills five Germans 1916-Poziers)

Five Germans, hands in the air. Mick approaches tentatively.

MICK That's it you bastards. That's it. Keep it calm and everyone sees Christmas. Keep them in the air, you too fritz. Right come on, yeah, come on, move this way. What are you waiting for? *(One of the Germans ducks to pick something up. Mick shoots all five.)* Dopey bugger what would you want to do that for?

ONE SOLDIER Looks like he was going for a bomb.

MICK All dead?

SOLDIER Very.

They rifle through the bodies

MICK That's ten now. Ten I've got. Ten little sauerkrauts all in a row. Good haul for one man.

SOLDIER Remind me to never pick a quarrel with you back home.

MICK Warrior blood in my veins.

SOLDIER You're shaking.

MICK Just the excitement. Long line of fighters. My ancestors.

SOLDIER Oh yeah, what war did they win?

Unit 29– (Bertie watches Tommy get buried alive 1916-Poziers)

Loud explosion. Two young blokes in a hole somewhere.

BERTIE I shouldn't be here! I'm fifteen. I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be here.

TOMMY Bertie! Calm down. Pull yourself together.

BERTIE We missed the call! We're caught, Tom, this is it, we're not getting back.
We should've left him!

TOMMY Don't lose your bottle.

BERTIE I'm fifteen, Tom.

TOMMY Well I'm not much older.

Massive explosion. Tons of soil rain down on him.

TOMMY Hey! HEY!

All we can hear is the dull thud of explosions. He is trapped in a pocket of air. Just enough space for him to move a little. A boot is sticking out of the mud.

BERTIE Tommy? Oh sweet Jesus. I can't see you, where are you? Tommy? Christ, he's gone. He's gone.

Then runs.

TOMMY Can you hear me? get me out, get me out! HEY! HEY! HEY! Anyone? HEY!

Unit 30– (Song – Our God, Our Help in Ages Past)

Archie closes his eyelids. Field burial. Men sing.

The busy tribes of flesh and blood,
With all their lives and cares,
Are carried downwards by the flood,
And lost in following years.

Time, like an ever rolling stream,
Bears all its sons away;
They fly, forgotten, as a dream
Dies at the opening day.

Our God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home.

Unit 31– (Auntie May letter # 2)

Dear Aunty May

You remember Ollie Thomas, Freda Thomas' boy? He was sitting on a bench a chatting to some fellows and he took out some revolver he'd managed to get his hands on and he shot himself in the face. The blood sprayed like that fountains on North Terrace and Jack Ware (you remember who went up to Tailern Bend after that business with Millie McPherson) just sort of grabbed his knees and fell in the mud and he wasn't screaming he was just making these sounds like a kitten. And the worst of it is that Ollie is still alive, he's in the hospital and he hasn't got a face but he's still alive Aunty May. But he hasn't got a face Aunty May, he hasn't got a face.

Unit 32– (Laurie talks to British Captain 1917 – Beersheba Palestine)

Warm light fills the stage; we are in the Holy Land, the day before the attack of Beersheba. Laurie staring out in the distance.

- BRITISH CAPTAIN A view eh? (*the Australian salutes.*) At ease. A view...
- LAURIE ‘And he was afraid and arose and ran for his life, and came to Beersheba’.
- BRITISH CAPTAIN ‘...But he himself sat down under a juniper tree; and said, "It is enough; now, O Lord, take my life, for I am not better than my fathers.”
- LAURIE I have heard about these places all my life. Sacred places. How far is Bethlehem from here?
- BRITISH CAPTAIN About forty miles. That way.
- LAURIE So He might have walked on these stones?
- BRITISH CAPTAIN He might.
- LAURIE And those stars are the same stars He would have looked at?
- BRITISH CAPTAIN They’re the same stars that shine over Dorset.
- LAURIE And the same that shine over Gympie too eh?
- BRITISH CAPTAIN India, is it?
- LAURIE No, Gympie, sir. On the road to Tin Can Bay.
- BRITISH CAPTAIN Ah, you’re Australian. Between you and me, the eyesight’s gone. Desert squints and all that. Forgive me. You’re a good chap. Best of luck to you.
- LAURIE Maybe we’ll see each other in Jerusalem, sir?
- BRITISH CAPTAIN ‘As for these things which ye behold, the days will come, in the which there shall not be left one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down.’
- LAURIE ‘And when ye shall see Jerusalem compassed with armies, then know that the desolation thereof is nigh.’

Unit 33– (Nigel talks to Indian POW. 1917 – Zossen POW camp)

They are interrupted by a voice coming from a loud-hailer. Nigel is in a POW camp.

GERMAN PRISON GUARD You must all see now, having been captured, that you have been used and abused. You are victims of your oppressive masters, who brutally seized your lands and took from you your birthrights. You are little more than slaves until you rise up and throw off the shackles of your British masters. The time for being **shwarzklarven** has ended, this war and the inevitable defeat of Great Britain has washed it all away. The question is, who will acknowledge they have been made fools, have been kept children, have accepted their own slavery? It is time to fight, to fight against your oppressors, for a free India, for free Africa...

NIGEL Does this happen all day?

INDIAN (P.O.W.) Yes, more or less. They want us to take up arms and foment rebellion. But we are all British, are we not? We are sons of the Magna Carta? They might as well speak to the wind.

NIGEL You speak English well.

INDIAN The same might be said of you sir. Pardon me, but what are you doing here?

NIGEL They didn't believe me when I said I was Australian. They said I must be Indian and sent me here.

INDIAN This camp is for all non-white prisoners.

NIGEL No-one mentioned the colour of my skin from the day I enlisted. I copped more for going to a private school!

INDIAN But, you are a hottentot?

NIGEL Do you mind, sir! I'm from Australia.

SECOND INDIAN They have Africans in Australia?

NIGEL I haven't seen an Aussie since I was captured.

INDIAN When they look at you, they cannot see the Australian. Just as when they look at us, they cannot see we are British.

THIRD INDIAN But one day we shall not be British. This Private will always be Australian, he has nothing else to be.

INDIAN You sound perilously close to our sausage-eating friend!

SECOND INDIAN Do not remind me!

INDIAN These guards eat pig-meat all day and breathe it in our faces.

THIRD INDIAN There is little respect for our diet or our prayers.

They start talking over each other.

NIGEL No...there's been a mistake, I should be with my mates.

INDIAN We are your comrades now.

Unit 34– (Bertie writes to his mother 1917)

Field hospital. Bertie, strangely stiff and unemotional. Writing.

BERTIE Dear Mum, You have to write to get in touch with the protector's office, tell them what my real age is - (*Starts again*) Tell them the truth about what you wrote last time. I am in the pit of Gehenna I am being chased by the dogs of hell -

MEDICAL ORDERLY You need to cover it.

BERTIE Sorry?

MEDICAL ORDERLY Dictation: "We are in good spirits here, all is well. Your loving son".

BERTIE Lies.

MEDICAL ORDERLY You tell your mum not to worry. She'll know to start worrying then.

BERTIE (*Starts again*) Remember you talked about when the Show is in town? I am in the Show. I have got through the fence, I have seen what the grown-up world is like. Your boy. Bert.

ERN

Cripes, where's this come from?

NORM

Change, brother. Lots of change.

BOB

For those who are there to see it.

NORM

What?

Unit 37– (Tommy is excavated from his living grave)

Tommy, still in his living grave. They find his boot, scrape away the soil, and pull him out.

TOMMY (*weakly*) Hey.

He cries, like a little boy. He is covered in mud. They scrape it off him.

SECOND SAPPER Hey, mate. You should be thankful. Three days since the bombardment stopped. You're like Lazarus, in your hole. You've got a chance. Another life, mate.

All sing, repeat under the next scene

FIRST SAPPER Don't think you need to scrape any more.

SECOND SAPPER Why?

FIRST SAPPER This one's not getting any cleaner.

They laugh. Give him a cigarette. He is shaking and crying so much he can't hold it or light it.

Unit 38– (Auntie May letter # 3)

Dear Aunty May

In John's Gospel it says 'And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.'
What does that mean?

Unit 40– (Song - Lazarus)

Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!

The Lord is calling you! Lazarus!

Rise Up, Lazarus

The Lord says you're sleeping but if that is true.

(Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!)

Why did they put you in to that tomb?

(The Lord is calling you! Lazarus! Rise up, Lazarus)

I hear my lord weeping, but don't be ashamed,

(Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!)

When Jesus calls your name

(Lazarus! Rise up, Lazarus)

Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!

The Lord is calling you! Lazarus!

Rise Up, Lazarus

The Lord says you're sleeping but if that is true.

(Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!)

Why did they put you in to that tomb?

(The Lord is calling you! Lazarus! Rise up, Lazarus)

I hear my Lord weeping, but don't be ashamed,

(Lazarus! Come forth! Lazarus!)

When Jesus calls your name

(Lazarus! Rise up, Lazarus)

Unit 41– (Bertie kills Austrian soldier in a fight 1917 - Messines)

Bertie, fighting an enemy soldier hand to hand with bayonets. He is stabbed in the side, but kicks the other and overpowers him. It is desperate, bestial stuff. He stabs his opponent who falls back. He gets a look at Bertie, who squats and watches him die. It takes a long time

AUSTRIAN Schwarzer teufel. Schwarzer teufel mit weiße Augen. Schwarzer teufel.
Schwarzer...letzte, was ich sehe.

Unit 39– (Bertie is discharged)

Bertie, standing dumbly to attention.

DISCHARGING OFFICER You're going home. Correspondence has been received and your true date of birth has been ascertained. For you, Private, the war is over. Have your things ready for the dawn transport.

Well?

You don't seem pleased, soldier. You've been snatched from the jaws of death, don't you see? Have you nothing to say?

Unit 42– (Bloke with a glass of wine. 1952 – Glebe Town Hall)

ACT TWO

Everyone assembled, cane chairs, as if at an old folks' home.

BLOKE WITH A GLASS OF WINE Thanks very much, it's a pleasure to be with you tonight. I haven't got anything prepared because I wasn't expecting to have to speak. You don't need me to tell you, this country's just been through the wringer, and we've had a narrow squeak. Herr Hitler is gone and Tojo dangled on a rope so there's some justice in the world. But I feel there's a certain, shall we say weariness? Creeping in to the press and the chat in our tea rooms and pubs. It's fashionable among some folk, I mean younger lads and their mates, to talk about imperialism and foreign wars and about being lied to. And do you know, gentlemen, it kills me. It sticks in here inside me and it burns. The ingrates, if only I could talk to them, and say all the stuff they wouldn't listen to anyway. What do we say? How many different ways is there to say 'you wouldn't know, you weren't there?'. How do you get across what it was like to wake up with mud and human waste in your nose in your eyes in your hair in your mouth, to wrench open your eyes caked with dried tears and pus from the infections and for one brief fleeting second you thought –in that space between sleep and wake – you thought you were back home, back in a place where you understood what was what and who was who – but, no, you're in a living hell. A living hell where men scream the truth from every hole in their sad wrecked bodies? (*Drinks*) It might have passed some of the less observant of you, but I happen to be aboriginal. My ancestors came from up Macleay river way. And I'm proud of it. But I have to say, thank God for the Army. Thank God for the uniform and the chance to serve. Because when I was a whippersnapper and first joined up I was just another woebegone failure. And in the army, you earn your way. You take on dignity. A dignity perhaps that no-one was going to let you have back home. But in the service, you are forged into something...not white, you're not erased of your past, but it's... it's...incorporated into who you are, and you realise - maybe in those hideous moments in hell on earth, maybe on parade, maybe with mates, I don't know – you realise, "I belong". And I came back, and like you gentlemen I found myself identifying with Australia. It wasn't for *them* or about *them*. It was for me too. And when Dave Sands put that Turpin on his behind didn't my heart swell! Not because Dave Sands was aboriginal. Because he was Australian. I had moved over. I loved him for being an aussie as much as I loved him for being one of my mob. So for me, yes, sir, the war was on one hand the worst thing on earth, wouldn't wish it on the lowest dog. But on the other hand, it made me, and it made us, for better or worse. It brought us together and grew us up. Curse war, but bless it for it brought me into the fold. So, in that spirit, I say, join me with full glasses; to Dave Sands, to those who have gone, and those who we will always remember.

Everyone toasts and drinks.

Unit 43– (Song – Tattooed Lady)

They are interrupted by a rambunctious group of soldiers from the second AIF, singing.

I paid two bob to see a fair tattooed lady
She was a sight to see, tattooed from head to knee
A map of New Guinea was where I'd never been
And up and down her thighs was a flock of magpies
And on her jaw were the words "Great ANZAC corps"
And on her tits was an emu and a fucking kangaroo
All up and down her spine marched the Queen's own guards in line
And all around her hips sailed a fleet of battle ships
And over her left kidney was a birds eye view of Sydney
But what we liked best was across her chest, my home in Wolloomooloo.

Unit 44– (Mick and Archie get off the boat)

Behind them Mick and Archie on the gangway. They look around, no-one there.

MICK Well they really rolled out the red carpet didn't they?

ARCHIE That's when you arrive.

MICK Eh?

ARCHIE Red carpet. When you arrive somewhere, not when you come back. And look, there's plenty of people about.

MICK Not my people.

ARCHIE Time to go. All that stuff is the past, time for the future.

MICK Hey, before we step back on the land. Shake my hand.

ARCHIE No worries.

MICK And promise ourselves, this wasn't for nothing. Congratulations, mate, for getting through it all. And now let's make sure things don't go back to the way they were eh?

ARCHIE Amen.

Unit 45– (Laurie gets off the boat)

Laurie comes down, looks around. Sees Laurie's Mate.

LAURIE It's been a while, brother.

LAURIE'S MATE What?

LAURIE I'm back.

LAURIE'S MATE Well I'll be buggered! Laurie? I wouldn't recognise you. What've they done to you? First decent willy-willy would blow you over.

LAURIE Not the best grub. And I've been pretty wretched.

LAURIE'S MATE Eh?

LAURIE Wretched. Sick, flu.

LAURIE'S MATE Laurie. Back from the dead. So, what was it like?

LAURIE Jesus, where to begin...

Unit 46– (Bertie gets off the boat)

A gangplank. Or a portal of some description. Bertie, expressionless, walks stiffly down.

MUM

Bertie!

She rushes to him and hugs him but he doesn't respond.

You daft boy I can't tell you how glad I am to see you, why haven't you written, I thought you'd got caught up in the flu or weren't on the boat or something. I can't tell you how long it took me to get there, I had to get to Junee and Alf and Cissy... and grandad's a bit 'butcher's' and there's problems with the land and look how thin you are my boy you're like one of your bantams! What's that you've got in your hand there? Dirt? Bertie, why aren't you sayin' nothing?

Bertie just stands there, almost at attention. His eyes are aware but his body is still. They move away, her talking gently, him stiffly, almost marching.

ARCHIE

Archie. Archie Gallagher.

Unit 48– (Farmer scene)

A meeting. Public Servant from the Soldier Settlement Commission.

PUBLIC SERVANT Please, please, may I be heard? Please, understand this decision has been taken with the overall welfare of our returned men in mind who need land –

FARMER But this is our land. It was a mission and then our community.

PUBLIC SERVANT Yes, but under the Discharged Soldiers' Settlement Act of 1917 we have the authority to acquire land to be divided as soldier settlement plots.

SECOND FARMER This is the first we've heard of it!

FARMER You can't just take the land from us! It's barely returning us anything as it is!

THIRD FARMER If we can't make anything from it, how are blokes from the city going to make a go of it?

PUBLIC SERVANT Well, opportunities for new techniques, fertilisers and so on...

FARMER Can we get a hold of these new techniques as well?

PUBLIC SERVANT That's a different department.

MICK This is ridiculous.

POLICE CONSTABLE I'd suggest you watch your tone of voice, Dempsey.

SECOND FARMER How can we appeal this?

PUBLIC SERVANT Er. Well, you can't. The decision has been made. It's a compulsory acquisition. The land will be pegged and allocated to returned servicemen and any interference will –

POLICE CONSTABLE Attract our attention. Does he make himself clear?

MICK May I ask a question sir? Mick Dempsey, sir. Will I be able to apply for land? My dad farmed here, and my grandad was here at the mission and his dad before him.

PUBLIC SERVANT As I understand it you are entitled to apply but land is delegated at the discretion of the committee-

SECOND FARMER Do you know who this is? This a serious war hero, this is Mick Dempsey, he killed two dozen jerries with his bare hands!

MICK Ease up, Joe. Just as a matter of interest, how many aboriginal ex-servicemen have been given a settlement?

PUBLIC SERVANT Again, not my department I'm afraid. I'm only here to outline the plans for the land division.

SECOND FARMER This and this and this are all in the rocky outcrops! Not even rabbits live there!

FARMER And that's in the swamp! What are they gonna grow, yabbies?

PUBLIC SERVANT Er...as I said, new techniques –

MICK Excuse me, I don't think I've been heard. I spent four years abroad and left half a lung and my youth there. And all that kept me going some days some nights, in the frost, in the heat, shutting the eyelids of all my mates after they'd breathed their last, all that kept me going sometimes was tellin' myself 'You're fighting to protect your country. You're finally fighting to protect what's yours.' It might have escaped your notice, sir, but this is an Aboriginal community. Our grandparents were moved here because they were in the way, and probably their parents before them going back to the first cursed moment white men wandered into our lands. But I could put all that aside because I believed this would be different. This time I'd be the good coon and do as I was told and instead of a sack of flour I might just earn some dignity. Come back to what remained of my land and farm it and try to heal this massive wound.

PUBLIC SERVANT Wound? I'm not following?

MICK This country. And now you are taking that away? Four years I spent in uniform, all of us ready to make the sacrifice. And now I get back and you say a stroke of the pen has just swept aboriginal land of the map?

PUBLIC SERVANT Look, this isn't the same country as before the war.

FARMER No. No it's not.

MICK For you the war's over. What's starting to dawn on me is that, for us, it's never going to end.

Unit 49– (Archie asks Station Manager for better conditions)

The Anzac ceremony transforms into station hands waiting by the steps to a verandah at a cattle station. Archie stands in the rain, sheltering under his coat. The overseer is under cover.

ARCHIE Mr. Griffen, you had time to think about that issue we discussed?

MANAGER Not here, Arch, not now.

ARCHIE Well when, then?

MANAGER When I say so. What's got into you?

ARCHIE I won't be put off, Mr. Griffen. And while we're at it, there's more that needs to be talked about. The old blokes who can't work on the station any more, they're under blankets and corrugated iron out the back of Moilong. And all that linen work the girls do at the house?

MANAGER You listen to me and you listen to me nice and close. I don't give a rat's arse where you've been and what you've done. I don't give a fuck what happened on the other side of the world. I don't care for your airs and graces. As far as I'm concerned you're still the boy who used to shut his lip and do as he was told. Ever since you came home you've been the worst kind of black, an uppity one. I suggest you get on with the job at hand and stop being a troublemaker. Or things might get tough for people you care about. Jesus, now you've gone and got me angry. Who put these bloody ideas in your head?

He leaves.

ARCHIE No-one. Just thinking for myself. Can you believe this bloke? We know how to run this show better than him but he won't be told.

MATE Don't bring me into it.

ARCHIE You fellas all turn your tails. Work, at camp, things need fixing.

MATE What's happened to you Arch? Not one of us anymore. You're different.

OLD HAND You think you're better than us, do you?

MATE Not the Archie we knew.

OLD HAND Might be time for you to spend a bit off the property, Arch. You're stirrin' things up. Let 'em be.

ARCHIE I thought things would change after the War.

OLD HAND Why? Why would things change? The only thing that's changed round here is you.

Unit 50– (Ern talks about Nightmares)

Blokes by a fire, seen better days. Ern has one arm.

ERN Started to shake in the last few years. See...right hand. Can't stop it.

NORM Into me good ear Ern.

ERN Hand's got the shakes.

NORM That'd be the grog.

ERN Piss off.

NORM The war.

ERN The nightmares and everything else. But I'm always back there. Little things. Tried to talk to pastor about it but I just clam up. Little things. Like the way you see a raven dragging out the guts of a lamb in a paddock, and that night you're back at the state school but the yard's full of wire and Pat Daffy is squirming in the mud trying to hold his intestines in and he's throwing up all that purple stuff and all he says is "Don't tell Auntie". Then later he comes to me, he's covered in ochre. He comes to me, in my dream I say Pat? And he can't speak, he just points. But I can't see what he's pointing at, and he walks away, he's frustrated, you know? I wake up and my hand is twitching like a dying budgie.

NORM Restless spirit.

ERN He's buried there, Flanders somewhere, in that dirt that never dries out, birds whose songs he doesn't know, trees whose leaves he doesn't know, long way from anywhere.

COLIN *(singing in background)* On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wistful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.

NORM I remember a sergeant saying to me "no-one cares what bloody colour you are you useless bastard, get on with it". And it was true. For three years no-one said a bloody word about my skin. And when I spoke I was heard. And when they called me mate they meant it. And nothing has felt as good since the day I was demobbed. I came back and Pastor Isaac said I could be a leader of people. A bridge. I was silly then, still full of meself, I said we don't need a bridge, the world's changed. They painted my colour back on the day I got off that boat. I still don't have the faintest bloody idea what we were fighting for. But I thought I won something over there. And then I lost it back here.

Unit 51– (Song – Bound For The Promised Land)

On Jordan's Stormy Banks I Stand is sung, with each member of the cast disabled in some way; blind, one leg, one arm, wheelchair....

On Jordan's stormy banks I stand,
And cast a wistful eye
To Canaan's fair and happy land,
Where my possessions lie.

I am bound for the promised land,
I am bound for the promised land;
Oh, who will come and go with me?
I am bound for the promised land.

Unit 54– (Letters)

Pages of letters fall from the sky. Men stand in pools of light reciting their missives.

FIRST LETTER There were three of us went to war out for our family, one of us killed. I always thought that fighting for our King and country would make me a naturalised British subject and a man with freedom but they place me under the act and forced me onto a settlement like a dog. It seems as if the Chief Protector thinks that returned soldier doesn't want justice...

SECOND LETTER ...we come from Mount Eccles in Victoria's Western District. Our family name is Higgins. Five of us served in the war and we now find ourselves unable to claim what our white colleagues expect as matter of course....

THIRD LETTER ...I have decided to stay in Katherine as the treatment on the station has grown worse since before the war. I have found it easier to call myself a Maori as no-one knows otherwise here, probably thanks to our Chinese grandad! Hope all's well. Let's both hope the back pay issue gets sorted as I am just about skint here...

FOURTH LETTER ...the problem is that my name on the Protector's record is Ernest Hopkins but I enlisted under the name James Cook, which might explain the confusion. In any event I am at a loss to understand why I have to prove what my former comrades do not...

FIFTH LETTER ...I am the schoolmaster and write on behalf of Mr. Prudden who has been treated most shamefully in Adelaide. Mr Prudden's nervous state is a direct result of his experiences at the front yet there is no acknowledgement or support....

SIXTH LETTER ...I wish to point out the gross injustice intended to us by depriving us of our food. Some died fighting in France, some prisoners of war, others, again, returned to us without a limb or gassed. But we know our boys went with our white Australian brothers to give their blood to protect our freedom and privileges from German oppression. We are shocked indeed to think any person should wish to take our few poor privileges away...

SEVENTH LETTER ...I must exhort you to grant full citizen privileges to every one of us coloured soldiers, who voluntarily wore His Majesty's uniform in active service. We fought for freedom and our much cherished British Justice. We appeal to the RSL to approach the State Government to aid us in this request. We do not wish to remain humble and servile to the Aborigines' Protection Board. Therefore, why not offer to every faithful ex-service aborigine the hand of friendship and goodwill, and tender to him equal rights with the white community?

Unit 55– (Grandpa with Bertie)

They leave him. Grandad and Mum, sitting watching the rain. Bertie, now a twenty-five year old, stands to attention next to them.

GRANDAD I remember when all that was scrub. Good country. Would have different colours when the fires went through. I would walk with my grandfather, he would take me by the hand and we would walk across that ground you know? Smoky, everything charred and burnt. The scrub the grass all skeletons in the sky, yeah? The charcoal glint like jewels and in your nose a hundred different smells of ash. Now look. Holes, and trenches everywhere, and all the earth churned up. What's the name for it again?

MUM Irrigation.

GRANDAD Irrigation. Water run down those trenches, grow all kinds of stuff. Not like it was. Not like when you played in it.

He looks his grandson, who just stares into space.

MUM He's still there. Not coming back. Not coming back from the world of the grown ups.

GRANDAD (*nods*) Why does he hold that bottle of dirt all day long?

MUM Never got to the bottom of it. Some stuff just stays back there I suppose.

GRANDAD You know, even when the fires had been through, the little green shoots came up everywhere. Little tiny tender shoots, up from the bones. But all that's lost now. (*Grandpa sings the Traditional Language song to Bertie*)

Unit 57– (Laurie is recognised by Churchgoer)

The crowd becomes worshippers leaving a church service. Laurie collecting hymn books.

CHURCHGOER You were in the Light Horse, weren't you?

LAURIE Excuse me?

CHURCHGOER Palestine. Yes? The charge. (*Holds out his hand*) Jim Glasson, I was in the fourth. You were in the twelfth weren't you?

LAURIE Must have me mixed up with someone else.

CHURCHGOER No, you'd hardly forget a face like yours. No offense. You *were*, you were in the twelfth, everyone spoke about how well you handled your animals.

LAURIE I, um, pardon me, must be someone who looks like me.

CHURCHGOER Oh. Right. Just put it behind you, yes? No-one here knows? Have no fear, I won't say anything, you have your own reasons.

LAURIE Mr. Glasson? What you're talking about? It's of this world. This broken, weak, sad world. I like to think of another world. A better one. I like to stay in the light, don't want to wander back into the dark. I walked in the Holy Land. That's enough for me.

Just an usher on the Sabbath, doing my duty. I'm sorry I'm not the man you thought I was.

CHURCHGOER Seems to me you probably are. The man I thought you were.

Unit 56– (Nigel begs for money on the street)

Derro asking for money. Man in a suit goes past.

NIGEL Tarzan. At the Empire. Tarzan, man of the apes.

STAN Sorry mate. *(He moves on, stops, then comes back.)* Nigel?

NIGEL *(ashamed)* G'day Stan. Been a while.

STAN What are you doing with yourself? Staying out of trouble?

NIGEL Wish I could say yes.

STAN We don't see you at Anzac Day.

NIGEL Yeah, well, I was up country for a while, out of action for a few years.

STAN Did you call Alf Minson like I suggested back then? Fix you up for some work?

NIGEL Oh, Nah. Things changed, you know?

STAN Right. It would be good to catch up, talk about the old days.

NIGEL You still at the wood yard?

STAN No, I'm at the Department of Lands. Suit and all.

NIGEL Right. Right. *(Pause)* They were great days.

STAN Yeah. Long ago now.

NIGEL Feels like yesterday. *(Pause)* Listen, Stan you wouldn't –

STAN *(embarrassed)* Of course. Get you on your feet.

Gives him a wad of notes. Nigel goes to say something but just gestures and shuffles off. Stan watches him join the crowd.

NIGEL Tarzan. Ape. Man

STAN We that are left, grow old.

NIGEL Lowland Gorilla. From Zanzibar. Ape. Man.

He stops, has a surreptitious swig from a bottle. Stands still, watching people rush past him. Throws his flyers into the air.

Unit 61– (Ern’s Old Soldier monologue)

An Old Soldier, in a chair, downstage.

OLD SOLDIER I was a kid. We all were. But I mean, I knew nothing. You know, when you’re young and you can’t get a handle on the big things, things that are bigger than you? Like when you’re really small, you know the grown-ups are talking about important stuff but you don’t really get the full picture? It’s just grown-up business. And when you’re a young bloke you know there’s big stuff going on but it’s too hard to see when you’re in the middle of it. But I was a real kid, I knew nothing about the way the world worked. Nothing about men. About how men work. You know when I came back I showed people my scars down my side, showed them where they’d stitched me back up, showed them the railway tracks up and down me? And they whistled and said poor bugger you and we all got on with things. With just the rough and tumble. With making a living, staying out of trouble. I remember sometimes I thought “Did I just, you know, imagine it all? Did all that stuff really happen?” And I’d snap out of it and get on with things. And by the time I was in my thirties I barely gave the whole bloody experience a second thought. I’d made a few mistakes with my life by then so perhaps I didn’t want to look back. Just keep going you know? I was pretty pleased with myself, I thought “You’ve come through OK you could have copped a shell back there at Ploegsteert Wood and it could have blown your head off’. And apart from that I didn’t think about much at all. But when I hit forty, well, it was during the war, the next one I mean, so there was a fair bit of uniform floating round and talk of war and things, I was at work one day and this bloke says “Hey Ern jeez you look like you’ve been shot” and I said “Don’t be bloody ridiculous” and he said “Look at you, you’ve been shot’ and I just laughed and went back to work and he said “You’re bleeding you stupid bugger” and I reached round and felt just here under that scar and yep it was oozing that lovely rich black blood you know not the fairy light stuff close to the surface skin blood no this was that dark dark blood that comes from deep and has been there for ages, you know? And I went to the sick bay and some of the blokes had a look at it and it wasn’t done at work, I mean I hadn’t been hurt there. Once that was decided the foreman lost interest. That night I took off the bandages and smelt that mixture of KAG (you remember, ‘kills all germs’?) and dried blood and it brought me right back, that stench of black body fluids and the dark, that dark you couldn’t see through. And I reached and felt that place on my side where I was seeping this stuff and blow me do you know what I felt? Something cold and hard, hard as a stone, and I got my fingernail under it and I screamed like a baby as I pulled that hard dark little knot out of me. Bit of a shell casing. It had been there, floating round me since Messines. And I held that little bit of truth in my palm and I just bled there on the tiles. Over the next three years seventeen bits of metal worked their way to the skin and pierced their way out of me. You see, when there’s been a war there’s metal everywhere, just tons of it and it gets buried in the mud and the dirt and it gets forgotten. But every year it inches its way up, because that’s what a leftover bit of war does, it inches up until it comes to the surface and some farmer picks it up if he isn’t blown to smithereens by it. The Iron Harvest, they call it over there. But I had my own iron harvest. Those little black scraps wanted out of me just like they want out of the Flanders soil. That’s the thing, the bits left behind, they’ll come out, they must. They have to. Eventually. I gave each one of my grandkids a bit of my iron harvest. Dunno what they did with ‘em. Probably lost em, doesn’t matter. Because they were out of me. And do you know, the next Anzac Day, the first one after that day at the factory? That Anzac day, do you know what I did? I took the train into town and I hauled myself across Ann Street, and I stood in the rain among all the yanks and the busted up old blokes like me and I just felt about as lonely as a black bastard can feel. Thank God it was pouring because no-one could see me cry and I just bawled, mainly because I had no idea why I was there. And I went to the Spring Hill, the pub I mean, that’s where all the blokes were, and I swung my carcass in there. And do you know what they said? “Coony! Coony! We thought you was dead!”

Which was funny.
Because for a long time, I was.

Unit 62– (Song – Lest We Forget)

A hymn is sung.

God of our fathers known of old
Lord of our far flung battle line
Beneath whose awful hand we hold
Dominion over palm and pine -
Lord God of hosts be with us yet
Lest we forget - lest we forget.

The tumult and the shouting dies
The captains and the kings depart
Still stands Thine ancient sacrifice
A humble and a contrite heart
Lord God of hosts be with us yet
Lest we forget - lest we forget.

Amen

Unit 63– (Keating)Afterword

'We do not know this Australian's name and we never will. We do not know his rank or his battalion. We do not know where he was born, nor precisely how and when he died. We do not know where in Australia he had made his home or when he left it for the battlefields of Europe. We do not know his age or his circumstances – whether he was from the city or the bush; what occupation he left to become a soldier; what religion, if he had a religion; if he was married or single. We do not know who loved him or whom he loved. If he had children we do not know who they are. His family is lost to us as he was lost to them. We will never know who this Australian was.

Paul Keating, Dedication of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, 1993

Unit 64– (Nigel in wheelchair)

Nigel sitting on the other side of the stage from the sleeping old bloke. A nurse, wheeling a sleeping patient, comes past.

PSYCHIATRIC NURSE

Enjoying the sun, Nigel?

NIGEL

I wouldn't've said enjoying, exactly.

PSYCHIATRIC NURSE
guts for garters.

Don't stay out too long, will you? They'll have my

NIGEL

Representative in this camp, I'll intervene on your behalf with the Red Cross.

Have no fear, son, I'm the British Forces

PSYCHIATRIC NURSE

They're rowing on Iron Cove, can you see that far?

NIGEL

Further than that. I can see the big world.

PSYCHIATRIC NURSE (*not comprehending*)

We'll have the Service at nine tomorrow. The Rozelle RSL is sending a bugler this year. Will be quite an affair, make sure you're in a good state to take part.

He moves on.

NIGEL

I don't want to join in. I don't belong.

Light fades until he is silhouetted against the dusk.

END