


DEFENDERS OF THE QUEEN
IMPERIAL AND COLONIAL DEFENCE
1850 - 1901
KEYNOTE - DR CRAIG WILCOX
 ONE-DAY CONFERENCE SUNDAY 5 NOVEMBER 2023
 WAVERLEY RSL
 161 COLEMAN PARADE, GLEN WAVERLEY, MELBOURNE.



The Easter Submarine Mine Disaster, Sydney, 1891.

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William Borland's Medals

In April 2018, Nobles auction house in Sydney sold a rare set of six medals for twice the estimated price, the gavel eventually going down at \$44,000. Comprising of three Great War medals, the group also included a Colonial Auxiliary Forces Long Service Medal, a Royal Humane Society of Australasia (RHSA) Bronze Medal and the Albert Medal for Saving Life at Sea, Second Class.

The medals had belonged to William Borland who was born in 1869 at Braidwood, NSW. Borland's RHSA Bronze Medal was awarded in November 1891.¹ Perhaps more significantly his Albert Medal conferred in November 1892, was only the second of three such medals issued in Australia before Federation.² Presented to civilians for outstanding acts of bravery on land or sea, Borland's medal was the first award under the saving life at sea provisions of the decoration. Rare indeed - and it

¹ 'Royal Humane Society of Australia', *The Argus*, 21 November 1891, p 5.

² Borland's citation was printed in the *London Gazette* on 18 November 1892, p 6475. He received his medal from the Governor of NSW in January 1893. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/235953874?searchTerm=Borland%20medal>

was a tragic military accident on Sydney Harbour in April 1891 and his subsequent gallant bravery which led to the extraordinary award.

On leaving school, William Borland worked on the railways in Sydney and in his spare time he was a volunteer Sapper in the partially paid Submarine Miners. Originally part of the Torpedo and Signalling Corps raised in 1873 as a special company of the New South Wales Naval Brigade, the Corps were transferred to the military branch in October 1877. By 1885 it was an establishment of 245 and was commanded by the talented electrical engineer, superintendent of telegraphs and torpedo expert Major Edward Charles Cracknell.³ In August 1888 the designation of the Torpedo and Signalling Corps was changed to Submarine Miners and a permanent section was established.⁴ In 1893 following the reorganisation of the Corps of Engineers, both partially paid and permanent sections were incorporated into the Engineers, with the whole styled as the New South Wales Corps of Engineers. The Miners were initially based at Berry's Bay, on the north side of Port Jackson.⁵ The depot here consisted of ill-maintained buildings on land which was difficult to access.⁶ They later relocated to Chowder Bay further east along Sydney Harbour.⁷

Chowder Bay



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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³ Cracknell was placed in charge of the Torpedo and Signalling Corps in September 1877. For Cracknell's rather illustrious military career, see <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/cracknell-edward-charles-3283>; R.R. McNicoll, *The Royal Australian Engineers, 1835 to 1902; The Colonial Engineers*, Canberra, 1977, p 147.

⁴ Ibid, p 148.

⁵ According to McNicoll, 'Of the Torpedo and Signalling Corps, established at Berry's Bay in Port Jackson, half the men were concerned with minefields in Sydney Harbour, one fourth with Botany Bay and one fourth with the Hunter River. Most of the soldiers, as well as the officers, worked for the Electric Telegraph Department.' McNicoll, 1977, p 73.

⁶ McNicoll, 1977, pp 148-49.

⁷ Today their former depot at Chowder Bay houses a restaurant and it is the only remaining mine laboratory in Australia. See http://www.environment.gov.au/cgi-bin/ahdb/search.pl?mode=place_detail;place_id=105254

In 1889 Chowder Bay was selected as a new site for a Submarine Mining Depot largely because of the nearby battery at Georges Head.⁸ The new base provided accommodation, workshops, boatsheds, a laboratory for the chemicals required for charging and detonating the mines as well as school rooms for training the crews. The mines were metal spheres or oblong shaped cases packed with explosives. In open water they were usually attached to an anchor via a cable and secured to the ocean floor in a known location. They floated beneath the surface and were therefore invisible to a potential enemy.

The explosive could be triggered using a chemical fuse, usually inside a bulb or a horn or spike protruding from the body of the mine. When the bulb or horn was crushed by contact with the hull of a vessel chemicals were released leading to a chain reaction that detonated the main charge thereby blowing a hole in the vessel beneath the waterline. An alternative naval mine could be deployed in a similar manner or dropped as part of a string of mines but detonated using an electrical current run through a cable to the mine. The cable ran from a charge box located in a nearby shore station or from a boat moored a safe distance away. These command-detonated mines were preferred for use in a closely controlled sea-lane like Sydney Harbour.

The task of the submarine miner was to learn about the new weapons and design appropriate minefields for the Harbour. In the event of an attack, teams from the Corps would deploy the mines, connect the charge cables then monitor the approach of the enemy fleet from observation posts ashore or afloat then detonate the weapons as the enemy vessels passed through the minefield.⁹ In the late nineteenth century, submarine mining was an advanced form of military technology and it was the earliest use of electricity for defence purposes. The Submarine Miners were skilled and trained specialists and the work was dangerous.¹⁰ They built, managed and maintained not only the electrically triggered Harbour minefield but also the electrically powered searchlights for the gun batteries. Later, the development of submarines would make the underwater mines and cables obsolete and in 1922 the Submarine Mining Corps was disbanded.¹¹

The Volunteer Movement

In 1853 strained relations (and later war) between Britain and Russia led to the first volunteer movement in NSW.¹² In 1854 a battery of artillery, a troop of cavalry and six companies of rifles were raised. The end of the Crimean War in 1856 saw the demise of the volunteer movement although momentum picked up again in 1860.¹³ In 1870 the British infantry regiments were withdrawn from the garrisons of each of the Australian colonies. The people of Sydney felt exposed

⁸ The new submarine mining depot at Chowder Bay was built under the supervision of the coastal defence expert Lieutenant-Colonel Edmund Tudor Boddam. McNicoll, 1977, p 154.

⁹ Bob Nicholls, *The Colonial Volunteers; The defence forces of the Australian colonies, 1836-1901*, Allen & Unwin, 1988, p 188.

¹⁰ It was for both of these reasons that the paid section was paid more than the rest of the militia. R.R. McNicoll, 1977, p 170.

¹¹ After this date Chowder Bay became a depot and barracks for Army engineers and in the 1980s it was the site of the Army Maritime School until 1997. In 2000 the precinct was opened to the public and today the Sydney Harbour Federation Trust maintains the site as a place of public enjoyment.

¹² Craig Wilcox, *For Hearths and Homes; Citizen Soldiering in Australia 1854-1945*, Allen & Unwin, 1998, pp 8-10.

¹³ McNicoll, 1977, p 66.

and in 1871 New South Wales became the first colony to set about raising a permanent paid defence force which resulted in the formation of a battery of artillery and two companies of infantry.¹⁴ Colonists increasingly joined the local volunteer military units and new formations were created. Infantry companies of part-time soldiers grew to battalion size, squadrons of light cavalry were raised and cannons were purchased, harbourside batteries were built and volunteer gunners were trained by the small cadre of British Royal Artillery instructors remaining in the colony.¹⁵

Easter Encampments



By [T Hewett](#) Contributed By [Graham Trevena](#) [Page 3d]

(from the album 'Works by Members of the Amateur Photographic Society of N.S.W presented by the Society to His Excellency Lord Carrington August 1886')

¹⁴ This was in addition to the by now twenty-eight companies of the Volunteer Rifles and the nine batteries of artillery volunteers which existed across NSW. Jeffrey Grey, *A Military History of Australia*, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p 40.

¹⁵ In the final three decades of the nineteenth century, the volunteer movement in NSW waxed and waned, largely depending on perceived potential threats from overseas and the colonial revenue. It also oscillated according to public opinion. Some colonists sneered at what they disparagingly deemed to be grown men dressing up in inadequate uniforms with outdated weapons and playing war. Some employers resented the time off their workers required to train and practise drill, whilst many others, including the colonial newspapers and government, held the volunteers in the highest esteem. See Peter Oppenheim, *The Fragile Forts; The Fixed Defences of Sydney Harbour 1788-1963*, Army History Unit, Canberra, 2004, p 108. In the 1880s the requirements for efficiency for the Torpedo and Signalling Corps were attendance at nine days of continuous training, at two detached day drills out of three, and at fifteen half-days out of twenty-two. McNicoll, 1977, p 148.

By the 1880s and 1890s, the tradition of the annual training camp at Easter had become an important date in the volunteer movement's calendar across the Australian colonies. At Easter in 1891 more than 5,000 men from across NSW donned a uniform and spent a week practising military manoeuvres, drill and parade, eating from camp fires in the open air and sleeping under canvas. William Borland's Submarine Mining Corps together with the Artillery underwent the week's military training at a camp at Middle Head. Yet in many ways the week was also a rather civilian affair because the annual encampments by the Harbour had by now become something of a public extravaganza. The showcasing of military skills was an incredibly popular spectacle and it attracted large crowds in their thousands to watch the impressive goings-on from vantage points along the foreshore and from ferries, tugs and sailing skiffs upon the water. Military parades and sham battles had long been popular public performances in Britain. The military establishment was also hopeful that they might encourage further recruits to their volunteer ranks. 1891 was no exception.¹⁶

The Torpedo Disaster

Friday 3 April 1891 was the final day of the encampment on Sydney Harbour. There was a set piece sham fight followed by a ceremonial parade, official inspection and a luncheon.¹⁷ Governor Lord Jersey and his wife Lady Jersey were in attendance.¹⁸ The day concluded with a demonstration off Cobblers Beach to the north of Middle Head of the manual detonation of two submarine mines of 100 pounds each of condemned guncotton, simulating submarine mines. The first mine was a single package, the second comprised two fifty-pound packs. It was hoped by all involved that the shambles of 1884 and 1885 - when the planned torpedo explosion on the last day of the encampments failed to go off and the teeming crowds departed deeply disappointed would not be repeated.¹⁹

At 3.30pm, a cutter with a detachment of fourteen men of the Submarine Corps under the command of First Lieutenant Thomas Hammond and including William Borland set out from Cobblers Beach to lay and detonate two mines, one suspended from each quarter of the boat. At the allotted part of the Harbour, a distance from the shore but positioned for perfect viewing by the huge crowds of military and civilian spectators, one of the mines was lowered to the sea bed and marked with a buoy. The boat then withdrew to a safe distance, paying out the firing cable. When all was ready, Corporal John McKee RE depressed the handle on the dynamo exploder to detonate the submerged mine. Nothing happened. The sappers had forgotten to put a dynamo earth-plate into the water to complete the firing circuit. With the error corrected, on Hammond's signal, McKee put his hand to the dynamo and, in an instant, there was an almighty explosion - unfortunately, not of the submerged charge but rather of the one which was still attached to the starboard side of the boat.²⁰

According to the *Sydney Mail's* rather colourful report,

'Fragments of wood and other debris rose in the air, and the mass of water which was at the same time thrown skywards instead of being clear, was tinged with crimson. Nothing more was needed to convince the spectators that a disaster had befallen the men in the cutter, and the conviction

¹⁶ Dean Boyce, *Invasion; Colonial Sydney's fears of attack*, One-Off Press, NSW, 2012, p 126.

¹⁷ Craig Wilcox, 1998, p 29.

¹⁸ Victor Albert George Child-Villiers, 7th Earl of Jersey and Margaret Elizabeth Leigh married in 1872. Jersey served as the Governor of NSW between 1891 and 1893.

¹⁹ <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/13577441?searchTerm=torpedo>

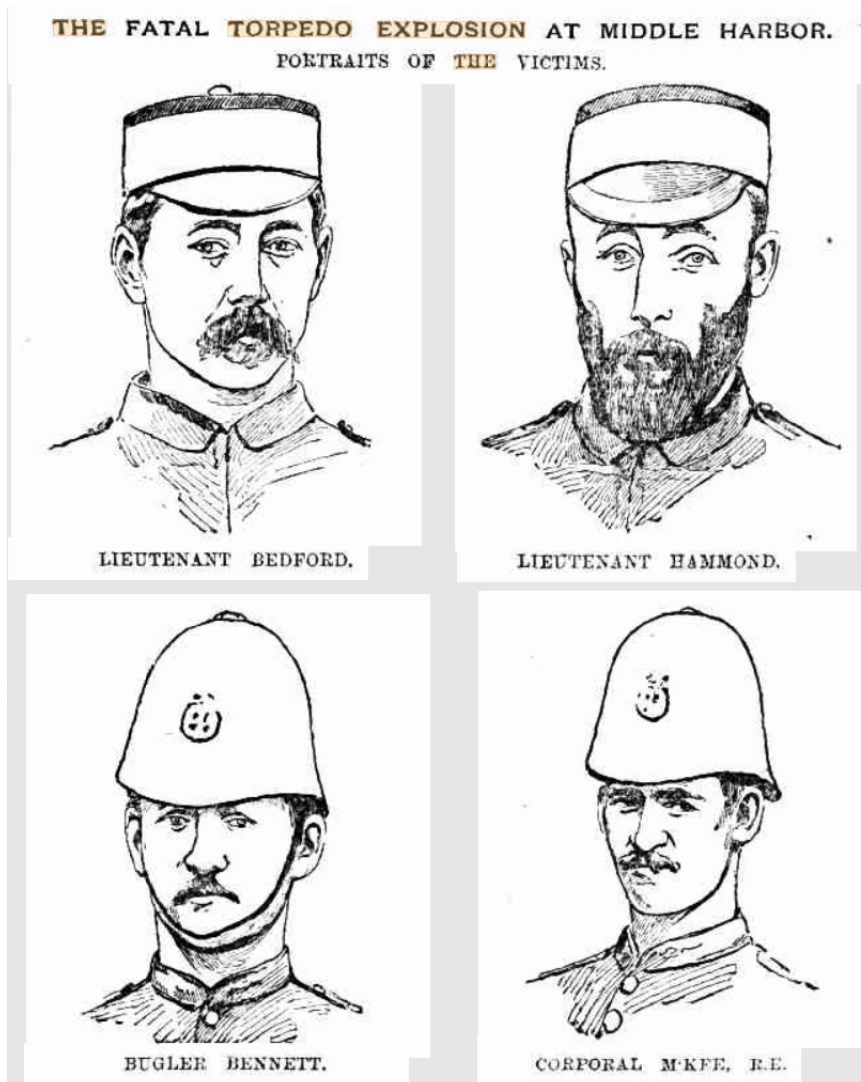
²⁰ Bob Nicholls, 1977, p 139.

brought with it a feeling of horror. When ... the dense volume of smoke had cleared away it was realised that a terrible calamity had happened ...'²¹

Indeed. All the spectators in the surrounding vicinity were horrified. What had promised to be a delightful and reassuring military spectacle had suddenly turned into an appalling tragedy.

With its stern ripped out, the cutter began to sink and the injured men still on board jumped into the water. Sapper Borland was seriously injured and bleeding copiously with wounds to his face, arms, abdomen, legs and ears - yet despite this, he went to the aid of his comrade Sapper Brentnall who was semi-conscious and supported him by hanging him on to the gunwale thereby preventing his drowning. On hearing cries of help, he took hold of Sapper Adams, a twenty-one-year-old stonemason who was unable to swim and held onto him until a rescue boat arrived some considerable time later. By this action Borland had saved his life. And it was for these acts of supreme gallantry that his two bravery medals would later be awarded.²² Four men however were now dead.

The Deceased



[Evening News \(Sydney, NSW : 1869 - 1931\)](#) / [Mon 6 Apr 1891](#) / [Page 6](#) / [The Torpedo Explosion](#)

²¹ 'Terrible and Fatal Torpedo Explosion', *Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, Saturday 11 April 1891, p 814.

²² Christopher Fagg, 'William Borland, AM', *Sabretache*, Vol 27, April/June 1986, pp 40-41.

The search for the deceased men was a rather grim affair. Having been blown to bits, only severed body parts, headless and limbless torsos and the maudlin sight of the last vestiges of blasted off blue uniforms greeted the recovery parties.²³ Three of the dead left behind wives and children. First Lieutenant Thomas Hammond was thirty-eight years old and worked as a superintendent in the electric telegraph department. He had had an impeccable public service career for almost two decades and had served as a volunteer since 1878. Second Lieutenant Rupert Bedford aged thirty-six was the manager of the Joint Stock Bank in Lane Cove and had been a volunteer for five years. Corporal John Aloysius McKee, R.E., aged twenty-five years had arrived in the colony from the British Royal Engineers in 1889 under special engagement to the Permanent Submarine Mining Corps. And Bugler Charles Bennett at just twenty-three years of age was the unmarried son of Quarter Master Sergeant Bennett of the Volunteer Staff.

The Funeral

The accident was sensationally reported in newspapers across the Australian colonies. Headlines shrieked about a 'Terrible Calamity' at Middle Head and a 'Frightful Disaster' in the Harbour. In the days that followed, flags at the various forts around Sydney, at Government House, on ships in the Harbour and atop private buildings all flew at half-mast. With only a few unidentified body parts eventually recovered it was decided that the four victims remains would be buried in a single coffin. A large brass shield with the deceased's names and the date of the explosion at Middle Head was attached to it. On Sunday 5 April thousands of Sydneysiders lined the streets to watch the funeral procession including over 3,000 troops march from Victoria Barracks in Paddington to Waverley Cemetery in Bronte where the interment was to take place. The proceedings were marked by a quiet mournful reverence. The gun carriage on which the coffin lay was drawn by a team of 'splendid black horses' and was manned by a detachment of the NSW Artillery. The coffin was shrouded in a Union Jack, above which were placed the helmets and accoutrements of the unfortunate officers and men. A huge collection of floral crosses and wreaths accompanied the cortege to the cemetery. It was a fitting testimony to both the high regard in which the deceased had been held and also demonstrated the deep regret for their tragic loss. After the service, three volleys were fired over the simple single grave and the troops returned to town.²⁴

Inquiry

Naturally, there was a Military Court of Inquiry held into the disaster. After interviewing various members of the Mining Corps, the Inquiry concluded that after being laid, the first mine would not detonate. Whilst endeavouring to rectify the problem, the lines to the other mines still in the cutter were accidentally connected up and fired, causing them to explode.²⁵ Corporal McKee and First Lieutenant Hammond were singled out for causing 'this sad calamity' because McKee had connected the wrong cable to the exploder and Hammond had transmitted the current without

²³ The Submarine Miners were known as the 'Blue Camp' whereas other volunteers still wore the traditional scarlet red while the Engineer Corps went into khaki with felt hats in May 1890, retaining their scarlet only for review order. See R.R. McNicoll, 1977, p 151.

²⁴ 'Terrible and Fatal Torpedo Explosion', *Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, Saturday 11 April 1891, p 814; 'The Torpedo Disaster at Middle Head; The Funeral', *Kiama Independent and Shoalhaven Advertiser*, Tuesday 7 April 1891, p 2.

²⁵ Bob Nicholls, 1988, p 139.

making perfectly certain that the cables and earth plates were without doubt in their proper positions.²⁶

Memorialisation

Three years after the disaster at Middle Head, a handsome memorial to commemorate the men who lost their lives was erected over their grave at Waverley Cemetery. It had been generously paid for by public subscription and on Sunday 6 May 1894, thousands of Sydneysiders once again assembled to watch the momentous occasion of its dedication. A guard of honour consisted of detachments from the Submarine Miners, Engineers and Artillery and the band of the Permanent Artillery provided the accompanying music for the fitting hymn *Brief Life is Here Our Portion*. Prior to the unveiling of the memorial, which was draped in a Royal Standard and Union Jack, the decorated veteran, Major-General Edward 'Curly' Hutton delivered a rather grandiloquent address to the large crowd.²⁷ It is worth repeating here for the insight it provides into how the volunteer forces were valued in the colony and also into attitudes towards accidental military deaths in the late nineteenth century.²⁸ In his speech Hutton drew heavily on his own Imperial military experiences when he proclaimed that honour and duty,

'... are the same, whether to us soldiers by profession or to you citizen soldiers ... It is not necessarily on the field of battle that the sacrifice of our lives may be demanded. It may equally be in the discharge of our ordinary routine duties as soldiers that the demand may come. Yet who shall say that the soldier's honour ... is less whether they lose their lives on the green slopes of the Alma, in the fiery struggles of the Indian Mutiny, in the wild rush that carried at the point of the bayonet the lines of Tel-EI-Kebir, in the squares that withstood the Arab charge in the deserts of the Soudan, or whether they lose their lives in the simple discharge of the routine duties of their profession? Duty, the ennobling word duty, is the same to all...' ²⁹

²⁶ 'The Fatal Torpedo Explosion, Report of the Board of Enquiry', *Evening Journal*, Adelaide, Friday 24 April 1891, p 3. A very similar disaster had occurred a decade earlier at Queenscliff, Victoria in March 1881 when five men of the Naval Torpedo Corps (as they were called in Victoria) were blown to smithereens by a mine composed of 70 pounds of powder, guncotton and dynamite exploding very near to their boat rather than from the intended safe distance of eighty yards. See

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/64974201?searchTerm=Queenscliff>;
<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/238301750?searchTerm=Queenscliff>

²⁷ For Hutton's rather impressive and long military career see <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hutton-sir-edward-thomas-henry-6779>

²⁸ This is something our Defence Force still has to deal with from time to time, most recently the tragic MRH90 helicopter crash off Hamilton Island in July 2023 with the loss of four aircrew.

²⁹ 'The Middle Head Disaster, Unveiling the Memorial', *Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, Saturday 12 May 1894, p 961; 'The Middle Head Disaster, The Memorial Unveiled by Major-General Hutton', *Evening News* (Sydney), Monday 7 May 1894, p 6.

Stirring stuff indeed! And with that, the flags were gently lowered to unveil the impressive twenty-three-foot marble and bluestone edifice, the band struck up *God Save the Queen*, wreaths were laid by friends and family of the deceased and the ceremony concluded.³⁰



³⁰ 'The Middle Head Disaster, Unveiling the Memorial', *Sydney Mail and NSW Advertiser*, Saturday 12 May 1894, p 961; See also <https://monumentaustralia.org.au/display/93116-middle-heads-submarine-mine-explosion>



The Memorial at Waverly Cemetery. Photos by Dr Catie Gilchrist.

We do not know if William Borland attended the unveiling of the memorial to his former comrades. It is quite possible that he did. Following the accident of 1891 and his subsequent awards for bravery, he remained with the Submarine Mining Corps, completed 26 years service and rose to the rank of Company Sergeant Major. He was awarded the Colonial Auxiliary Forces Long Service Medal in 1906.³¹ On the outbreak of the Great War, Borland was still serving with the Mining Corps (37th Engineers) when he enlisted as 2553 Staff Sergeant in the Australian Army Service Corps on 23 September 1914. He was now 44 years and 10 months of age and gave his occupation as a Railway Guard. He embarked for overseas service on 19 December 1914 and saw action at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. In July 1917 his age and the exertions of the Gallipoli and Somme campaigns caught up with him. Borland was repatriated to Australia for discharge at the height of the bloody summer offensive in the Ypres salient.³²

After the war, William Borland went back to work on the railways in Sydney. By the time of his death in February 1941 he was living in Thirroul north of Wollongong. He had been married twice and left behind a widow and six surviving children.³³

Today on 'The Rock', the nickname for the memorial to those who have died while serving at Campbell Barracks, the home of the Australian Special Air Service Regiment, the longest list of names are not those who died in the war in Vietnam or more recently in Afghanistan but of those soldiers who died in the collision of two Black Hawk helicopters in Queensland in 1996. The loss of another Black Hawk helicopter, its crew and complement of SAS soldiers, that crashed on the stern of HMAS *Kanimbla* and plunged into the sea, leaving no survivors in November 2006, and led to a two-year inquiry is also commemorated.

Every year on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day the nation stops to remember and mourn those who have died in war. Yet it has only been these recent accidents that have led to any serious discussion of how we should appropriately honour those who gave their lives while training for war. The memorial at Waverly Cemetery, dedicated to the four men who died on Sydney Harbour in April 1891 however, reminds us that in the nineteenth century, lives lost in military accidents were indeed remembered and commemorated.

Lest We Forget.

³¹<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/14778172?searchTerm=Borland%20medal>

³² Shortly after Borland's return to Sydney, his 21-year-old son David who had served seven years as a volunteer with the Engineer Corps enlisted in November 1917. Sapper David Borland was attached to the 3rd Australian Divisional Signal Company and he embarked for England in May 1918 and from here to France. Tragically he was taken seriously ill and died of Bronchial Pneumonia 'due to exposure' on 6 November 1918, less than a week before the guns finally fell silent. He was buried at Abbeville Communal Cemetery on the Somme.

³³ His son Kenneth David Boland, born in 1922 enlisted with the RAAF in August 1943 and served as a Leading Aircraftman with Eastern Area HQ until his discharge in April 1948.