

LONG-DISTANCE PARENTING – FROM THE WESTERN FRONT
by Ross McMullin

For soldier-fathers at the Western Front, influencing their children's upbringing back in Australia was hardly feasible. One commander, however, felt differently.

"Don't you let any boy be an old Kaiser Bill ... if he is acting like an old Kaiser Bill then he will be a coward, and if you punch him good and hard he will start to squeal for mercy like the old Kaiser Bills we are fighting here. The horrid old Kaiser Bill ... burns down all [the] pretty houses so those poor people who are not killed have to sleep out in the wet with the chooky hens."

So wrote Pompey Elliott to his four-year-old son Neil 10 September 1916.

Harold Elliott, the tempestuous, controversial and acclaimed commander universally known as Pompey, was Australia's most famous fighting general in the First World War.

Four of his men were awarded the Victoria Cross for exceptional deeds at the Gallipoli inferno known as Lone Pine. No-one was more instrumental than Pompey in transforming looming defeat into stunning victory at such iconic Australian battles as Polygon Wood and Villers-Bretonneux.

But the volatile brigadier had a softer, sensitive side. After his brigade was slaughtered at Fromelles, a disaster he had predicted and had tried to prevent, survivors saw him inconsolably tearful.

Pompey Elliott's sentimental streak was especially evident in his letters home, which are featured in the ABC TV series *The War That Changed Us*. A devoted family man, he had married Kate Campbell in 1909, and their two children, Violet and Neil, were born in 1911 and 1912. They were still toddlers, then, when their father departed with the first contingent in 1914.

He and Kate agreed to adopt a no-secrets pact in their correspondence while he was away. This suited Pompey, who was by nature direct and forthright; he was no good at pretence or artifice. He certainly kept his side of the bargain — his letters were very frank.

They were also very frequent. He not only wrote regularly to Kate; he also wrote to her sister Belle and his mother-in-law, who both resided at the family home in Melbourne during the war. Including his letters to Violet and Neil, he was maintaining a separate flow of correspondence with five different loved ones in the same household while commanding a brigade in France.

The letters he sent his children underlined his rare flair for communicating with youngsters at their level. He even managed to shape Western Front events into something like a bedtime story. Surely no commander in any combatant nation in this war regularly described military developments as he did. Here he is writing to Neil about the 1916 Somme offensive and the advent of the tank, while referring to himself as Dida:

"Since I wrote to you before we got a lot of big waggons like traction engines and put guns in them and ran them 'bumpety bump' up against the old Kaiser's wall and knocked a great big hole in it, and caught thousands and thousands of the Kaiser's naughty soldier men, and we killed a lot of them, and more we put in jail so they couldn't be naughty any more, but then it started to rain and rain and snow and hail, and the ground got all boggy, and the waggons got stuck in the mud, and the old Kaiser has such heaps and heaps of soldiers that he sent up a lot more and thinned them out where the wall wasn't broken, and started to build another big wall to stop us going any further ... And the naughty old Kaiser burnt down every little house all round here, and Dida's soldiers have to sleep out in the mud or dig holes in the ground like rabbits to sleep in. And all the trees are blown to pieces by the big guns, and there is no wood to make fires, and Dida's soldiers have to make fires of coal, and the waggons are all stuck in the mud so Dida's soldiers have to carry it through all the mud, and everything they eat and wear has to be carried too. And Dida's soldiers get so dreadfully tired they can hardly work or walk at all. Isn't that old Kaiser a naughty old man to cause all this trouble."

Pompey Elliott was acutely aware that he was missing irreplaceable years of his children's upbringing, and deeply regretted this. When Kate sometimes aired misgivings

about the content of her letters, he always reassured her, and kept reiterating that a description of whatever Violet and Neil were up to would enthral him. His hunger for news and photos of them was insatiable: "tell me everything about their hair and cheeks and chins and everything, I can never hear enough of them", he declared.

Was there a more engaged long-distance parent in the Australian Imperial Force? It's hard to imagine that there could have been. Other soldier-fathers understandably accepted that their parenting role had to be minimal while they were in the trenches — they were so far away, in such an alien environment, and their main means of communication, letters, took around six weeks to reach Australia.

Pompey, however, had a different view. He felt that his remoteness did not preclude him from shaping his children's development. In a way, he sensed, it might even help. Because Violet and Neil had placed him on a higher pedestal than they would have done at home — "while I am so far away they cannot see all the holes and faults in me" — they were perhaps more receptive to his influence, he conjectured, than they might otherwise have been.

He had traditional views and values, and like most men of his era had different expectations of his son and daughter. It was not that he gave less encouragement to Violet than Neil — he was urging her to strive to become top of her class before she even started school — but it tended to be in different spheres. Whereas he gave Neil pep-talks about how to deal with bullies (see above) and encouraged him to develop sturdy soldierly attributes, Pompey congratulated Violet for her piano-playing, knitting and helpfulness around the house.

Transforming a bleak situation into victory at Polygon Wood was a remarkable exploit that confirmed Pompey's prowess as a battlefield commander. But it was a bitter-sweet success for him. Once again his brigade's losses were severe. And another casualty was especially distressing — a shell had fatally wounded his brother George: "*They brought the news to me when I was tied to my office directing the fight, and I could not go to him though they said he was dying. I hope never to have such an experience again.*" Furthermore, he had received a startling letter during the battle notifying him that his legal partner had accumulated significant losses after involving their solicitors firm in dubious speculations, with the result that Elliott had become liable for substantial debts. He felt shattered by this devastating news.

Pompey was wrung out after Polygon Wood. He told Kate he didn't feel like writing, even to her. However, something she had mentioned in a recent letter had so perturbed him that despite his despondency he felt impelled to scrawl an urgent note to Neil, who was now five:

"My dear little laddie, Mum has been telling me that you were so sorry for being naughty that you wished you were a little girl like [Violet]. But if you ever changed to a little girl Dida and Mum would not have any little boy at all. And Mum and Dida would be dreadfully sad if they had no dear wee mischiefy thing like our laddie. Dear little chap, Mum and Dida love you so much that they don't mind very much when you are naughty. Of course Mum has to [scold] you because if she didn't you wouldn't know what was naughty and wrong to do ... Dida was sad when he heard that the little lad wanted to be changed to a girl. He loves his little laddie so much that he was sorry the poor little chap was not happy. So don't you worry a bit old chap. You just try your best to be good, and if you forget sometimes and Mum has to spank you, just be a soldier and try not to cry very much, and you will know that Mum and Dida love you just the same even when they spank you. Spanking isn't so bad if you feel quite sure that dear old Mum loves you just the same. Dear little laddie, I wish I was with you now to take you up on my knee and comfort you and tell you Mum and Dida will always love you."

Meanwhile, Pompey was thrilled by Violet's progress. In September 1916, after she sent him a letter in her own handwriting for the first time — "Dear Dida, I love you, Violet" — he noted this special milestone in his diary amid all the military vicissitudes. In March 1918, with the climax of the war imminent, he received a very different epistle from her that was arresting confirmation of her development:

"My word, you did astonish your old Dida this time. I never knew my little pet could write such a big fat grown up letter as that. It delighted me but I was a little bit sad too

because I realized that my little pet girlie ... is growing up to be a big girlie who will soon write better letters than her Dida ... I am sorry ... to have missed all the lovely fun we could have had together."

In April, shortly before the battle of Villers-Bretonneux, with the sense of crisis still acute, Elliott learned that Violet had come top of her class:

"Now wasn't that just the loveliest bit of news in all the world to give your weary old Dida. If you gave your Dida all the money in the world and all the medals and decorations and pretty things as well, he wouldn't have been nearly as pleased as with that bit of news."

It was hardly surprising that Violet and Neil, in their own ways, became absorbed in the war. Instead of a customary bedtime tale from a book, they often clamoured for a "story about Dida", which usually had a military flavour.

Neil's imaginary play often featured shells and "Kaiser Bill" characters. As the man of the house, he sometimes pretended to be practising his shooting in order to be ready to protect his mother, sister, aunt and grandmother. But in his prayers he asked God to stop the war.

Violet wanted to become a nurse so she could look after Dida's wounded soldiers. She told him she would have some special flowers with her when at last she met him again. "It is very nice of you to promise to bring me flowers when you come to meet me", he replied, "but you will be the only flower I want ... best little fairy lady in all the world".

Ross McMullin's biography *Pompey Elliott* and his latest book *Farewell, Dear People: Biographies of Australia's Lost Generation* have won multiple awards. Pompey Elliott's correspondence with his family is prominent in the four-part ABC TV docudrama *The War That Changed Us*, which starts tonight.