Private Arthur Oldring

No place to hide

As the brown, swirling waters of the flooded Goulburn River rushed by, a terrified woman watched transfixed as the blunt end of a tomahawk was swung towards her head. As it crashed into her skull, the victim's 13-year-old daughter looked on, stunned and helpless. The axe-wielding soldier turned to the girl who now realised that she was to be his next victim. She struggled, but the khaki-clad killer was too strong. The man threw her to the ground and placed his hand firmly over her mouth.

On 27 December 1916, a 44-year-old man with ferret-like features walked into the Adelaide recruiting centre to enlist in the AIF. Giving his name as Arthur Geoffrey Oldring, the man was allocated as a reinforcement to the 8th Machine Gun Company and was sent to the Victorian town of Seymour for basic training.[1] He stayed out of trouble, performed his duties in a soldierly manner, and was regarded as a fairly genuine sort of a fellow.[2]

While on local leave, Oldring met 50-year-old divorcee Margaret Taylor and her pretty young daughter Rose.[3] On weekends, the trio were often seen strolling along the streets of Seymour and Bendigo.[4]

In early November 1917, word was received that Oldring was soon to embark for France. Margaret Taylor did not want him to go and desperately tried to convince him to desert so the two could marry.[3] But unbeknown to her, Oldring had good reason to want to leave Australia for overseas—the sooner the better. They agreed to meet the following weekend to discuss the matter further.

On Saturday, as prearranged, Margaret and Rose caught a horse-drawn cab to the bridge at Trawool. While the cabman was unloading their trunk, hatbox and two suitcases, he felt that he was being watched. As he glanced down towards the riverbank, Margaret sensed he was suspicious and quickly said, 'Thank you for your help. My sister is coming to pick us up. She lives on a farm near here.' The cabman thought nothing more of it and drove back to town.[5]

As soon as the cab was out of sight, Oldring left his hiding place behind some nearby bushes and joined Margaret and Rose. He carried the luggage to the campsite he had prepared nearby. An argument developed and an enraged Oldring seized a nearby tomahawk and clubbed the woman to death.

Next he turned on the young girl, who had been so traumatised by the attack on her mother that she lacked the presence of mind to attempt escape. Oldring weighted down the bodies and threw them into the flood-swollen river—followed by their luggage. He then washed the blood from his hands and clothes and returned to camp.

Over the next few days, many at the camp noticed that Oldring seemed edgy, giving rise to speculation that perhaps their impending embarkation was the cause. He carried out his duties as normal and was rostered on fatigue duty on the morning of 12 November. At the routine 2 pm roll-call, Oldring was absent. A search of the camp was conducted but he could not be found.

Days later, a group of soldiers was taking a shortcut back to camp from the local pub. As they skirted the riverbank, they noticed what appeared to be a bundle of rags snagged on the branches of a partly submerged fallen tree. Curiosity got the better of one of them who shinnied out on the trunk and reached down and grabbed a handful of cloth. As he attempted to pull his find from the water, he was confronted by the face of a young girl. The shocked soldier yelled to his mates who helped him drag the body back to the bank. Two soldiers stayed with the corpse while the others ran back to camp to raise the alarm.[5]

When the local police arrived, they observed injuries that suggested the girl had been a victim of foul play. Detectives from Melbourne were summoned to assist. Help was sought from the army camp to provide soldiers to search the riverbanks for further clues.[5] As the detectives were discussing the search area with Major Smith, the acting commanding officer of the camp, one jokingly asked, 'You haven't got anyone missing, have you?'

'Yes', came the reply. 'As a matter of fact we have. A chap named Oldring.'

Inquires were made among Oldring's mates. Yes, he had been seen with a young girl and he had been keeping company with her mother, they informed the authorities. While the soldiers scoured the riverbanks on foot, mounted troops combed the nearby paddocks. A local farmer offered the use of his boat to enable them to drag the river, a move which recovered the tin trunk and hatbox.

The floodwaters were now receding and the troops moved their search downstream—where they found the body of Margaret Taylor wedged in the limbs of a partly submerged tree.

Meanwhile, Oldring was on the run. He entered a pub at nearby Mangalore and purchased a beer. As the barmaid was pouring the ale, she noticed Oldring's military issue boots. 'It's alright lady, I have a ticket of leave', he reassured her. He continued his explanation, telling her that he had been found to have miners' disease and was now on his way to New South Wales to re-enlist.

As he finished his beer and ordered another, he took a piece of newspaper from his pocket. 'Nasty business this murder, isn't it? I used to spend weekends there. Last Saturday I saw two soldiers fishing just where the little girl's body was found', he said. During his two-day stay at the hotel he produced the same piece of newspaper—as an opening to discuss the murders—on four or five separate occasions.[6]

News that the police were hunting a missing soldier in connection with the homicides spread throughout the local community. The barmaid told police that a soldier fitting the wanted man's description had visited the pub. Then a local farmer reported that the man they wanted was working in a nearby orchard.

Acting on this tip, the police moved in. As two constables were creeping towards a grove of fruit trees where they believed their suspect to be working, Oldring chanced to glance up and see the uniformed men skulking behind the trees. The wanted man tried to run, but it was too late. The police were on top of him within seconds. The handcuffs were locked securely round his wrists and Oldring was marched off to the local police station for questioning. It was thought prudent to move Oldring to Seymour lock-up and, as he was escorted to the train, he was jeered and heckled by the townsfolk who had turned out to catch a glimpse of the accused man.

Oldring subsequently was charged with two counts of murder. During the investigations, it was ascertained that his real name was George Harrop Blunderfield and that he came from Western Australia. It was also discovered that this was not Blunderfield/Oldring's first criminal offence.

In 1899, he had been sentenced to six months in prison for illegal possession of a pushbike. Soon after his release, he was convicted of criminally assaulting an eight-year-old girl and served six of a twelve-year sentence. In 1909, he was boarding with the local postmaster Charles Ellford and his wife, who had welcomed him into their home and treated him as one of the family.

One night, Blunderfield broke into the post office, which adjoined the home. On hearing a noise, the postmaster went to investigate. Blunderfield clubbed the man till he lost consciousness, and when Mrs Ellford went to her husband's aid, she was seized, sexually assaulted and severely beaten. Blunderfield was sentenced to nine years' jail. He was also sentenced to serve the balance of his previous prison term.[3]

On 5 April 1915, Blunderfield planned his escape. Just prior to the prisoners being locked into their cells for the night, he started a fire in the rear of the building. In the ensuing confusion, Blunderfield scaled the walls and made his way to freedom.

He desperately needed a place to hide. Constant news of the war in Europe planted the seed of an idea—to join the military and be posted overseas. He progressively made his way to Adelaide and joined the AIF, a move that put into effect a chain of events that ultimately sealed the fate of Margaret and Rose Taylor.

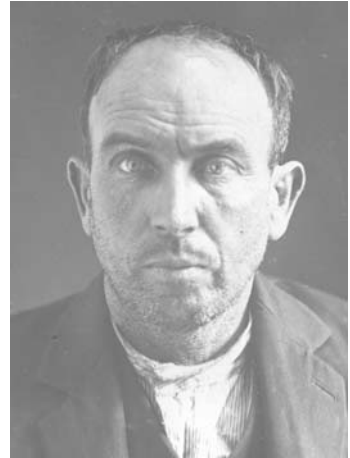He stood in the dock as his sentence was handed down. He was to be hanged by the neck until dead.

On the morning of 15 April 1918, George Blunderfield, alias Private Arthur Oldring, 8th Machine Gun Company AIF, sat in the stark cell adjacent to the

gallows of Old Melbourne Gaol. Just before 10 am, the door was unlocked and he heard the two words he had been dreading—'It's time'.

He was taken on his final journey, a mere nine metres. As the noose was placed around his neck, the sheriff of the gaol, Mr JWK Freeman, asked if he had anything to say. In a voice that was barely audible, he asked that his possessions be given to the Baptist minister with whom he had spent his final hours. It was during this visit that he admitted to murdering the Taylors, but not to raping young Rose.[7]

Arthur Geoffrey Oldring, February 1918. (State Archives of Victoria)

On the stroke of ten, the lever was thrust forward and the sound of the trapdoor dropping open reverberated through the bluestone corridors.

Justice had been served.

Author's note: As this story goes to print, another chapter in the Blunderfield/Oldring saga has unfolded. It appears that following his execution, Oldring's body was buried in the hospital section of the prison, located directly opposite on land that later was to become the site for Russell Street Police Headquarters.

During recent demolition of the now derelict headquarters, a lime-encrusted grave was discovered. The contractors contacted the Archaeology Department of La Trobe University. Closer expert examination determined that the corpse had died at the end of the hangman's noose.

By sifting through records, the archaeologists narrowed the search to one of three individuals, all ex-soldiers. It is almost certain that the body found in the grave is that of Oldring.

The remains have since been re-interred in an unmarked grave in Melbourne's Faulkner Cemetery.

Notes

1   National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 767 Private AG Oldring

2   *The Melbourne Age*, 23 February 1918

3   *The Melbourne Age*, 22 February 1918

4   *The Melbourne Age*, 23 November 1917

5   *The Melbourne Age*, 21 November 1917

6   *The Melbourne Age*, 26 November 1918

7   *The Melbourne Age*, 16 April 1918