

# Be a Sport and Enlist: Leslie Seaborn and the Sportsmens' Unit in the First World War

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By the beginning of 1917 any gloss had well and truly been removed from the war. Enlistments were down to a troubling level and the No Vote meant that Conscription would not be the solution to the low numbers. There were an increasing number of strategies designed to induce young men to join the armed forces. One well-used venue was Martin Place (then also known as Moore Street between Pitt and Castlereagh Streets) in the centre of Sydney – within a short walk of the majority of city based legal firms, courts and chambers. Many civic-minded lawyers and their relatives spoke passionately at these meetings. At one rally at the time, Miss Gladys Owen, the energetically patriotic daughter of Langer Owen KC, snatched up a .303 Lee Enfield rifle and flourished it above her head challenging young men to take it up themselves while exclaiming her regret that she could not go herself.

Looking out from his windows in Bull Chambers at 14 Moore Street onto the succession of activities in Martin Place was the Sydney solicitor, Leslie Watson Saunderson Seaborn, of the successful firm, Seaborn Garland and Abbott<sup>i</sup>. The firm had started in Sydney barely ten years earlier and was the Sydney agent for solicitors from across New South Wales as well as New Zealand and Japan. Seaborn was a Renaissance man: he was involved in acting and had been, despite his diminutive size, a successful rugby player where he acquired the nickname *dodger*, playing club rugby on the wing with Sydney and the Eastern Suburbs. He also played at the interstate level in 1907.<sup>ii</sup> He had been a teammate of such legendary players as 'Snowy' Baker and had maintained his connection with rugby through his participation in committee work. He also had a strong military connection and had served with the Australian Rifles in 1899. In 1914 he had been a member of the New South Wales Rugby Union Rifle Club, which drilled in the grounds of Sydney's Government House. He remained a member of the militia until he joined the AIF. In 1916 he had attempted to enter Duntroon Military College.<sup>iii</sup>

Seaborn had been closely associated with many men from the legal profession and the Rugby Union who had gone to war. Edward Garland, the son of the founding partner of the firm had gone overseas in 1915, but returned medically unfit for duty – much to his disappointment. The other founder of the firm, Arthur Abbott, had a cousin who served on Gallipoli, and Seaborn was kept informed of his career through letters from men at the front. Many rugby-playing friends had served on Gallipoli and then in France. Seaborn had corresponded with them regularly<sup>iv</sup>. Seaborn's brother-in-law, Dr Norman Broughton had been killed action while serving as a medical officer with the Royal Artillery in France on 8 September 1916 after a distinguished career, which saw him recommended for the DSO<sup>v</sup>. Despite his settled career, one son, Rodney and daughter, Mollie<sup>vi</sup> and being forty years of age Leslie Seaborn felt he should give an example to others by enlisting for overseas service himself – and trying to encourage as many men as possible to join him.

Seaborn and a successful cricketer, Austin Diamond<sup>vii</sup> were part of a committee which promulgated the particularly romantic idea of recruiting a 'Sportsmen's One

Thousand' – a battalion of members of the sporting clubs and associations who would join together, train together and fight together. This enlistment tactic had been previously tried in Australia in both Melbourne and in Sydney. The League of Wheelmen had appealed for Sydney bike riders to join up earlier in the war and the idea had been popular in England. The whole program was under the direction of the Melbourne barrister and Commonwealth Director-General of Recruiting, Donald MacKinnon.

'The Sportsmen's Battalion' was launched at a large meeting at Sydney Town Hall on 3 April 1917 chaired by a prominent leader of the Comforts Fund, Henry Yule Braddon of Turramurra – whose sons, including the Sydney barrister, Henry Russell Braddon, were already in the army. Another speaker at the meeting was the Sydney Lord Mayor, Richard Meagher who had been struck off as a solicitor as a result of his conduct in the celebrated Dean case in the 1890s.<sup>viii</sup> Meagher's colourful political career went on despite that and subsequent scandals. His long-running efforts to be readmitted as a solicitor of the Supreme Court saw him appear before a variety of courts and involved a much-publicised battle with the Chief Justice, Sir William Cullen. The Meagher matter provided much compelling copy for the Sydney press, some of which occurred at the same time as Seaborn's campaign.<sup>ix</sup>

Also on the Sportsmen's' committee was the Sydney solicitor Rupert McCoy<sup>x</sup> of the firm McCoy and McCoy of Castlereagh Street. The aim of the committee was to recruit 150 men initially for the unit with Seaborn and Diamond leading them overseas thence into battle. These two men were constantly featured as being the ones who would lead the men into battle. The distinctive character of the unit was emphasised by the fact that each man had his Attestation Papers marked 'Sportsmen's Unit' to set him apart from others. The unit had its own letterhead on notepads. For the most part the men in the unit had consecutive serial numbers. A range of people assisted the recruiting process.<sup>xi</sup>

Solicitors were in the news in April 1917. Ronald Osborne, who had been a solicitor with the firm Windeyer and Williams at the time of his enlistment, provided a leading example to others. He was originally from Orange and was awarded the Military Cross for volunteering to operate an artillery observation post within 50 metres of the enemy. He survived the operation by pretending to be dead during the day, then crawling back through the frozen mud. His exploits were well reported in April 1917.

Leslie Seaborn appeared repeatedly at public meetings in Martin Place and around Sydney's outskirts throughout April 1917. He often shared the platform with other lawyers. Ralston KC spoke eloquently about his sons in action. Norman McGhie another barrister also spoke of his service. McGhie had been wounded and lost a leg in action in France. It's a moot point as to whether or not a limbless soldier would inspire others to enlist or be counterproductive to the process.<sup>xii</sup> Seaborn threw himself into organising as many different activities to encourage recruits as he could. By the end of April the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported that the city was 'absolutely plastered' with appeals to "Be a sport and enlist."

One rally, held on 4 May at the Sydney Stadium in Rushcutters Bay, had the usual patriotic speeches by Seaborn, Lord Mayor Richard Meagher and others, along with free entertainment 'boxing exhibitions, wrestling displays, jiu-jitsu, blindfold boxing,

fancy and speed skipping by ladies, bugle blowing competition for soldiers and sailors, singing by well known vocalists, and several high class vaudeville artistes (along with) massed bands from all over the city.<sup>xiii</sup> Seaborn travelled about the state urging recruits, and trying to get a second unit together, visiting Armidale then Northern Rivers towns in the second half of May before returning to his unit in camp. Rupert McCoy also toured the country and organised a successful recruiting meeting in Goulburn. Seaborn was well connect to Goulburn through his family and school, Kings' College and number of local men enlisted in the Sportsmen's unit.

The appeal to join the Sportsmen's unit was distinctively masculine and heroic and challenged young men to think of themselves as being at the end of the conflict and asking: 'are you going to march through the streets or sit back in one of the motor cars with your honourable scars, a man amongst men?' The offer was to go on some kind of extended football tour. Seaborn and the committee wrote: 'You can go with your own kind, the crowd of boys that love a good horse, the boys who like a good rugged scrap, the boys who delight in rough and tumble game of footer, or who will go through blazes to do a thing for which they will gain little but the experience. These are the men Lieutenants Les Seaborn and Austin Diamond are looking for – the real dinkum oil, 24 carat-all-the-way-through "sports"<sup>xiv</sup>

It was hard work and put enormous strain on both Leslie Seaborn and his family<sup>xv</sup>. One particular meeting in Martin Place, just down the road from the offices of Garland, Seaborn and Abbott had a long list of speakers. It attracted only six recruits, two of whom were over age. Seaborn also made appearances at the wharves where in his own words he 'struck a lot of old football chums among the wharfies' and several 'brawny men on the wharfs' enlisted to be in the unit with him so they could be with Seaborn personally 'in camp, on the voyage and at the front.'<sup>xvi</sup> Occasionally men were virtually signed up for the army by the same recruiting personnel who had made the speeches. The army had learnt that it was best to get the processing done as soon as possible. Men were signed up in William Street Darlinghurst then first taken into camp at the Sydney Sports Ground before taking the trip to Liverpool Camp in preparation for the departure overseas. They did not have to wait long. On 16 July 1917 Lieutenants Seaborn and Diamond, and the 150 men of the Sportsmen's Unit were designated the 20<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements for the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion<sup>xvii</sup> and boarded the transport *Port Melbourne* and sailed out of Sydney Harbour to war. Seaborn felt achingly homesick for his family and aware that he was 'going on a long, long trek' and that the ship was full of men just the same as him.<sup>xviii</sup>

The unit arrived in Liverpool England on 9 September 1917 and proceeded to the Training Battalion at Rolleston. Then something happened to ruin the cohesion of the Sportsmen's Unit<sup>xix</sup>. On 10 October Seaborn broke his arm severely playing sport and later in that month was transferred to Wandsworth Hospital in London. His men had to complete their training without him and in late January they were transferred to France and placed as reinforcements into the 35<sup>th</sup> Battalion, another New South Wales unit. It is not clear why Lieutenant Austin Diamond stayed with the behind with the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion. Seaborn was left behind nursing his broken arm and still officially part of the Training Brigade until late April 1918. A medical report on him dated 23 April 1918 stated that movement of his left arm was still impaired and he was unable to lift heavy weights despite two months of massage and remedial exercises. The report stated that he was 'anxious to proceed to the Front.' He must have felt wretched.

While he was being treated for his injury his men had gone into their first major battle without him and had suffered serious casualties.

At least the men had been kept together in the 35<sup>th</sup> Battalion. On 4 April 1918 that unit went into battle at the village of Villers Bretonneau in France. As a result of that day or so of action the Sportsmen's Unit put together by Seaborn and Diamond lost 10 men killed and an unknown number of Wounded out of the 150 men who had boarded the transport *Port Melbourne* on 16 July 1917. True to their ideals they were together at the time. The records of John Jeffs show that two witnesses to it were men from the Sportsmen's unit. Others died in more lonely circumstances, their bodies never located or one died when he was a Prisoner of War a few days after the battle. Jeffs left a wife and three young children. Even if their officers were not. In direct command of them they were not far away. On 8 April Lieutenant Austin Diamond was gassed near Hangard Wood, barely two kilometres to the south of where his men in the Sportsmen's Battalion had been cut up in battle<sup>xx</sup>. Although military records show that Seaborn did not serve in the same unit as the bulk of the Sportsmen who enlisted during 1917 a letter from John MacFarlane, who had gone away with the unit asking 'how is all the boys keeping' (sic) amongst other gossip, indicates the continuing interest Seaborn had in the men.<sup>xxi</sup>

Seaborn was still recovering from his broken arm suffered on Salisbury Plain in England and did not go to France and join the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion until 28 July 1918. Within a month he was involved in fierce fighting at Mont St Quentin. The battle for Mont St Quentin was a classic brawl, starting with a great artillery barrage then an open attack across open ground. Eventually blood covered officers were urging the men to prop their guns on top of the dense barbed wire and blaze away at the enemy on the slopes of a fortified town. It was exactly the kind of heroic stand that Seaborn had been so eloquent in evoking in the meetings in Martin Place in Sydney and Armidale Town Hall a little over a year earlier. It was the sort of idyllic countryside, which would have provided a pleasant walk peacetime walk across the grass to a picturesque French village. Instead, on this day, the Germans had set up their machineguns to the side of the advancing Australians and could shoot from the ramparts of the walled and moated suburb of Peronne onto the line as the men raced across 250 metres of open ground.

Seaborn went into battle with the 19<sup>th</sup> battalion and fellow New South Welshmen in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Battalion at Mt St Quentin on 31 August. Seaborn displayed exactly the kind of heroic gallantry he had been promulgating in Sydney. During the famous charge at Mt St Quentin, he reached the objective and had only six men left out of the group he was leading. Using the Lewis machinegun and these few troops he attacked the German troops who had surrounded them and cleared the situation. He was awarded the Military Cross for this gallant deed. He had remained true to his early promise. Writing to his wife he mentioned how proud he was of the award but also that it really a matter of luck depending on the way such things were 'written up.'<sup>xxii</sup> It was subdued celebration as the attack had taken the life his close friend in the army, Lieutenant Cecil Healy, a champion swimmer. Seaborn was presented the Military Cross at Buckingham Palace on 5 April 1919.

Seaborn survived the battle unscathed but was soon the victim of a gas attack on 10 October 1918, barely one month before the end of the war. He suffered chronic lung problems for the next year or so, spending three months in hospital as part of his recovery.

Not surprisingly the patriotic example of the partner Leslie Seaborn and the lure of battle was too powerful for the 19-year-old clerk in the office of Garland Seaborn and Abbott John Stenhouse Beneke. He too wanted to join up in April 1918, but faced an obstacle in that his father had been born in Germany. The entire family were therefore under suspicion of disloyalty. References from a number of people associated with the family, including the law firm for which he worked overcame the difficulty and he sailed in September 1918. He reached England, but the war ended before he could see action.

When the conflict ended there was the unique problem of thousands of bored, potentially violent soldiers waiting around for the scarce transport home. Seaborn gained the position of manager and team selector, along with Major F W Matthews, of the successful AIF rugby team but ill health appears to have cut short his availability for duty. Seaborn returned to Australia and his law practice with the firm. He remained committed to his old comrades in the military and in 1926 was part of the inaugural committee of New South Wales Legacy Club<sup>xxiii</sup>. He died in 1931, aged 52, reportedly struggling with alcohol related problems.<sup>xxiv</sup> The then Governor of New South Wales, His Excellency Sir Phillip Game wrote to the president of Legacy and said:

‘I was so shocked and deeply sorry to hear . . . this morning of Captain Seaborn’s death. When I sat next to him at lunch last week he told me he wasn’t very well and he had to diet strictly, but I had no idea that he was seriously ill, and his sudden death came as a great shock. May I offer my brother Legatees my sincere condolences in the loss the club has suffered.’

There were funeral services in Sydney at St James Church, King Street and in Goulburn where he had attended school. Ex-servicemen carried the casket from St Saviours Cathedral then a cortege of 50 cars accompanied the hearse to the Church of England Cemetery and his interment in the family vault. The services and eulogies were reported in *The Weekly Bulletin* of the Legacy Club, and newspapers throughout the state. The large crowds of mourners at both the Sydney and the Goulburn services testified to his military, sporting, business, charitable and legal pursuits. Austin Diamond and other veterans of the Sportsmen’s unit attended the Sydney service for his old comrade, as did scores of military officers, business people, barristers and solicitors. The two surviving partners, Arthur Abbott and John Benecke, represented Seaborn’s old law firm. Leslie Seaborn was ‘admired and respected’ by many people.<sup>xxv</sup>

Perhaps he was haunted by the fate of the unit he had so enthusiastically formed. Unlike the promises of fighting together made in the many public meetings neither Seaborn nor Diamond were with the men when ten percent of those who had enlisted to be with those two officers died in just one day on the battlefield at Villers-Brettonneux in 1918.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Now known as Garland, Hawthorne, Brahe.

<sup>ii</sup> According to the Archives of the New South Wales Rugby Union, Seaborn was not a full Waratah but played in a special invitational side against a touring Western Australian XV.

<sup>iii</sup> Biographical details are taken from assorted press clippings and club memorabilia contained in the *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

<sup>iv</sup> I am indebted to the many letters on file in the *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

<sup>v</sup> Letters to Edith Walford Broughton in Xiaoming Zheng *Rodney Seaborn: The Man and His Foundations* Research Publishing House. 1998. 8 – 11, *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

<sup>vi</sup> Rodney Seaborn (1912-2008) went on to have a long and successful career as a psychiatrist and was a great patron of the theatre in Sydney.

<sup>vii</sup> Austin Diamond had captained New South Wales in 1909/10 and been Captain of the Australian tour of the USA and Canada in 1913.

<sup>viii</sup> Details of this case can be found on the Website for the Forbes Society for Legal History Website. Background papers by Geoff Lindsay SC.

<sup>ix</sup> See the *Sydney Morning Herald* 29 May 1917 for a detailed account of his appearance before the full bench of the New South Wales Supreme Court as an example.

<sup>x</sup> Rupert McCoy did not join the AIF but appears to have had some involvement in the military as he is listed in National Archives and The State Library as having been co-author of *The Anzac Drill Movement and Demonstrator* – which was an instruction kit for simulating the movement of military units on a board for the purpose of training officers.

<sup>xi</sup> One of the key concerns preventing men from enlisting was their insurance. A public subscription by wealthy individuals ensured that any men killed in action were properly covered. The families of those men in the unit who were killed could at least be compensated in some way for their loss.

<sup>xii</sup> McGhie went onto become a District Court Judge.

<sup>xiii</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 25 April 1917.

<sup>xiv</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 27 April 1917

<sup>xv</sup> Subsequent letters from Leslie Seaborn to his wife Edith contain a number of references to his distracted and stressed nature during this period. They are continued in the. *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

<sup>xvi</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 18 April 1917

<sup>xvii</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion had contained many ex-rugby players and had been referred to as ‘the Un ion battalion’ within Union circles as indicated by an undated, but probably originating in 1914, news clipping in the *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

<sup>xviii</sup> Leslie Watson Seaborn to his wife Edith Ruby Seaborn, postmarked Sunday July 1917. Probably written on board ship to South Africa. *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

<sup>xix</sup> The following account of the movements of Seaborn and Diamond and the men of the Sportsmen’s unit is taken from their individual record in the National Archives and the Australian War Memorial.

<sup>xx</sup> Hangard Wood was the same engagement where Lieutenant Storkey, later Judge Storkey won the Victoria Cross.

<sup>xxi</sup> John Ross MacFarlane to Leslie Watson Seaborn, 13 January 1918, *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.

<sup>xxii</sup> Leslie Watson Seaborn to his wife Edith Ruby Seaborn, 3 September 1918, *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection

<sup>xxiii</sup> MH Ellis *The Torch* 1957 Angus & Robertson, 30

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<sup>xxiv</sup> Tony Stephens 'Curtain goes down on a generous supporter of Sydney theatre: Rodney Seaborn' *Sydney Morning Herald* 26 May 2008.

<sup>xxv</sup> Details of the funeral service are taken from the numerous press clippings, many undated, among the *Rodney Seaborn Papers*, SBW Foundation Performing Arts Collection.