

NO MERCY HERE

The head lay in a red velvet display case. The eyes had rotted away, as had the lips, but the ears remained and tufts of moustache clung to the black, leathery skin. A 3-centimetre impact hole gaped in the crown, with a matching perforation punched roughly through the bone on the other side.

The head was in the possession of the police in Echuca, a country town in Victoria. Not surprisingly, they wanted rid of it. They telephoned the Turkish sub-branch of the Returned Services League.

‘We’ve got one Turkish head’, a policeman told Ramazan Altintas, the sub-branch president. ‘What do we do?’ He explained how a local resident, tidying up after a death in the family, came across the grisly artefact, a souvenir, supposedly, from his grandfather’s service at Gallipoli. The man brought it to the station. Would Altintas collect it?

The police probably hoped Altintas would make the problem disappear. Severed heads in display cases were not a normal responsibility of country policing, and Altintas seemed an appropriate solution. He was a Turkish community leader in an organisation that commemorated the war. He would know what to do. With luck, he’d take the horrible thing far, far away.

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Altintas, however, had other plans. He brought the case back to his office in South Melbourne and he issued a press release. The headline read, 'SCANDAL!' The next day, pictures of the head from Gallipoli featured on the front pages of newspapers across the country. I read the articles over breakfast, without, initially, any interest beyond a certain grisly curiosity. It was May 2002. The invasion of Afghanistan was underway, and speculation was already mounting about an attack on Iraq. The twenty-first century promised so many wars of its own that worrying about the human debris of a battle waged nearly a century ago seemed almost indulgent.

Three years passed. In late 2005, a minor controversy erupted about nowthatsfuckedup.com, a porn website specialising in user-generated content. Specifically, it relied on images provided by readers, allegedly of their girlfriends or wives. Many of nowthatsfuckedup.com's patrons served in the US military, and some complained about difficulties using credit cards from the countries in which they were posted. To encourage their custom, the site owner, one Chris Wilson, offered a special deal: soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan could access porn freely on the condition they contributed photos from their tours of duty.

Wilson didn't specify any particular kind of photos, and plenty of soldiers simply emailed innocuous snaps of burly young men clowning for the camera or in mock-heroic poses with rifles and helmets. Others sent something quite different. Pictures of corpses arrived by email: horrific photographs of eviscerated torsos, cadavers charred beyond recognition. Sometimes, the dead seemed to be Iraqi soldiers or insurgents. Sometimes, they were civilians. Sometimes, they were just pieces of raw, red meat, sitting wetly in ruined cars or amid the bricks of toppled buildings. Indeed, nowthatsfuckedup.com accumulated so many grisly images that Wilson developed a specific section for his horror show, pages at which digital rubbernecks could scroll past example after example

of the dreadful fragility of the human form: a severed head floating in a bowl of blood; an arm; a child with its face torn off.

Some soldiers captioned their work. The labels were often pragmatic, offering ‘some pictures in exchange for access’ or, more bluntly, ‘dead men for entry’. Others made jokes. ‘Name the body part’, invited one soldier, underneath an image of a glistening lump. Another listed his photo as showing ‘an Iraqi driver and passenger that tried to run a checkpoint’ and complained ‘the bad thing about shooting them is that we have to clean it up’. The viewers, by and large, responded with enthusiasm. ‘Awesome’, said one. ‘Hey, soldier buds’, wrote another, ‘post some fresh kills for us!’

Eventually, the media learnt of the site and, with the corpses-for-porn deal in the news, the site’s URL flashed around the net. Yes, I logged on, too. With the mangled corpses scrolling across my screen, I found myself, quite unexpectedly, remembering the head from Gallipoli.

The scarifying experience of the trenches introduced a new vocabulary for remembrance into English. Prior to the Great War, one spoke of ‘keepsakes’. Soldiers posted in France came back with the word ‘souvenir’ to describe the talismans they collected. In Iraq in 2005, US troops felt less obliged to hoard physical objects. They enjoyed state-of-the-art Internet access, even at the front line. Digital cameras and video recorders were everywhere in Iraq, far smaller and more portable than in previous wars. These soldiers could capture a scene (a desert landscape, the aftermath of a car bombing, a lacerated corpse) on a tiny electronic device and instantly transmit the digital souvenir anywhere around the world. Back in 1915, soldiers at Gallipoli lacked broadband and digicams. But the impulse was the same. Unable to take a photo, someone kept a head: a permanent representation of experienced violence.

At the time of the *nowthatsfuckedup.com* controversy, I was working on a PhD. Whatever the story of the Echuca head, it definitely constituted a distraction of the kind you were supposed to

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avoid, and I successfully kept it at bay for several months. But that didn't mean I'd forgotten. In early 2006, with the thesis temporarily stalled, I phoned the Returned Services League Turkish sub-branch and asked to see Ramazan Altintas.

It was still curiosity as much as anything else. The War on Terror, Dick Cheney had said, would run for a generation—fifty years, Peter Costello suggested. Battles would rage all over the world, not just in Iraq and Afghanistan, but on fronts yet to be determined. There was, it seemed, plenty of violence still to come. In 2006 we were already at war. Yet Iraq and Afghanistan were thousands of kilometres away and directly involved only a handful of Australians, most of whom were soldiers in elite units. The wars played like scratchy old horror movies projected onto a screen: disturbing, yes, but ultimately just shadows flickering on the surface of reality. Each fresh atrocity came and each fresh atrocity went, and there was no trace of its passage. That Friday, the day I phoned Altintas's office, six off-duty Iraqi soldiers had been massacred outside a restaurant in northern Iraq. A few days earlier, unidentified fighters had slit the throats of two teachers in front of their Shiite students, and a car bomb killed seven bystanders in Suleikh in eastern Baghdad. And so on and so on and so on. We became acclimatised so easily.

I'd first been a university student in the late eighties, a time in which you could imagine the planet growing steadily more civilised. Violence, like sexism or racial prejudice, persisted, but in a cosy environment like Melbourne, Australia, it seemed increasingly anomalous, a legacy from an era of darkness, to be slowly but definitively banished by enlightenment's inevitable spread.

The outbreak of a real war in 1990 was akin to finding, somewhere in the outer suburbs, a diplodocus—or, better, a tyrannosaurus. The first Gulf War was a huge, impossible creature rearing up from nowhere, challenging, by its mere existence, the assumptions upon which your life had been based. If something as prehistorically cruel as war could stalk through daylight without the

modern world batting an eyelid, then reality was fundamentally other than it had seemed.

Wyndham Lewis's reaction to the Great War described the sentiment exactly: 'Life was good and easy, and I called Life "friend". I'd never hidden anything from him, and he'd never hidden anything from me. Or so I thought. I knew everything. He was an awfully intelligent companion; we had the same tastes (apparently) and he was awfully fond of me. And all the time he was plotting up a mass murder.' In some respects, it wasn't surprising. His war—the Great War—seemed a kind of yardstick, the war against which all others were measured. As the poet Vernon Scannell explained:

*Whenever war is spoken of
I find
The war that was called Great invades the mind.*

It was particularly so for Australians. The lanky ghosts of the Anzacs had haunted our collective imagination for so long that, in some respects, their battles seemed more real than the sputtering hostilities of our time. The head from Gallipoli might, I thought, make war palpable in a way that the hundreds of thousands dead in Iraq hadn't. Retelling its story might re-create some of the shock Lewis had felt in 1914 and that had gripped me in 1990; it could perhaps puncture through the canopy of indifference spread over the conflicts around us now. A human head collected on a legendary battlefield transformed empty abstraction into the reality of sudden, fatal violence: a bullet thumping into a young man's brain, in a vignette repeated over and over and over again until millions of soldiers lay dead.

But the head was more than simply a reminder of war's toll. The case and its cushion belonged, by definition, to a survivor, so the display was an emblem not just of the dead but of the living, not merely of those killed but of the men who took their lives: perpetrators as well as victims. Because of that, it promised, I thought, insight into

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the heart of war, into what happened when the fundamental commandment ‘Thou shalt not kill’ transformed into its opposite. In normal society, only sociopaths hoarded body parts, and if police found a severed head in a display case, it was because they’d raided the apartment of some mumbling serial killer to uncover his makeshift shrine. Yet whoever had carefully detached a head from a neck and then placed it upon red velvet for later contemplation was not a murderer on a secret spree but a man in a time and a place in which killing was not just permissible but obligatory, the highest duty one could perform for one’s country.

In that way, the head seemed a cipher: an authentic text waiting for decoding, a message written by bullets on flesh. It pointed to the meaning of war—or more specifically, the meaning of killing, the reason why someone who, as far as anyone knew, lived and died a respected member of the community had felt, some time in 1915, that appropriating a piece of someone else’s body was allowed, even appropriate. I wanted to know what had happened—and what, if anything, the story explained about killing and its consequences, of which *nowthatsfuckedup.com* seemed a particularly ugly contemporary manifestation. That was why I went to see Altintas.

He was a solid, slow-speaking man, middle-aged, with thick eyebrows and salt-and-pepper hair. He clasped my hand and he thanked me for coming. Then he pushed a press release across the table, something about the Anzac Day ceremony and the ceremonial role the Returned Services League Turkish sub-branch would play in it. I looked at it stupidly, not sure what to do.

‘The *Herald Sun*? You’re the reporter?’

I wasn’t.

‘One minute, one minute.’ He ushered me back into the featureless waiting room while the real journalist arrived and did a real interview.

With exquisitely bad timing, I’d come only two days before the 2006 Anzac Day celebrations. That year, Turks had been, for the first time, invited to join the march. The Victorian Returned Services

League president, Major General David McLachlan, explained that the invitation didn't extend to Germans, Italians, North Vietnamese—and especially not to the Japanese. But descendants of Turkish soldiers were welcome because, according to the major general, they were 'a very honourable' enemy. Altintas's grandfather, Veli Cevirgen, had fought at Gallipoli, and Altintas planned to march in his memory. Hence the *Herald Sun* journalist; hence the confusion.

I sat there, with the sharp anxiety of a patient waiting for surgery. This was hardly the time to be confronting him about severed heads and display boxes. But it was too late: I was here now and he'd agreed to see me, so I'd have to tough it out.

Half an hour later, after the journalist had gone, I was called back in. Altintas apologised for the mix-up and asked how he could help. Reminded of the appointment, he nodded. The timing didn't seem to bother him in the slightest. He remembered the head well; he'd always hoped, he said, that someone would investigate it further. Was that what I was going to do? The memory of the thesis, abandoned at home, twinged uncomfortably, but I nodded anyway.

What had it been like to be presented with the box? I'd seen the photo, of course, but what was his reaction to the head? Was it a shocking thing to open the lid and find something like that?

'Shocking, yes. But not frightening. My children saw it and they were not frightened at all. No, it was more ...' He groped for a word. 'It was sad. Not horrible, just very sad.' He'd recognised at once that it wasn't simply a footnote to the Anzac narrative but a story in its own right. Here was a part of a young man: a person who had possessed his own hopes and fears and loved ones; an ancestor, quite possibly, of people living today. That was why Altintas had issued the press release. 'He was only very young. You could see from here.' He moved his finger along under his nose, indicating the first growth of an imaginary moustache. 'Very young. A boy, really, maybe sixteen or seventeen.'

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I asked him what he thought had happened.

‘Prisoner’, he answered softly. He gestured to his forehead. ‘Not shot here. But kneel down, like that.’ He made a gun shape with his fingers. ‘Executed! Yes, I think so. I think that was what happened.’

The bullet hole was, after all, located right in the top of the skull. A trench soldier might take fire in the face or in the neck, but how would he receive a bullet in the crown of his head? At Gallipoli, the Turks occupied the higher positions, with the Australians below them. That was why, at the end of hostilities, the War Graves Commission had identified the bodies of Anzacs by the bullet holes in their skulls. Yet this man was a Turk, not an Australian. How had he been shot from above? The suggestion of a kneeling prisoner, killed by his captor, was ballistically plausible, so when the head became news in 2002, the location of the wound—and the questions Altintas had raised then about a battlefield execution—caused a ripple of shock.

It shouldn’t have. Despite Major General McLachlan’s rhetoric about the ‘honourable enemies’ of 1915, the Great War unleashed just as much brutality as in Baghdad today. All the belligerents executed prisoners, not as a systematic policy but with a certain regularity nonetheless. Reading the letters and the diaries of soldiers, the casual references to the disposal of unwanted captives jumped out at me again and again. For instance, after the Gallipoli landing, Private Keith Wadsworth wrote a long letter home narrating his exploits. He talks of wounding a man himself and then explains that, as he ran on, he expected his comrades to bayonet the fellow to death. The Turkish snipers who tried to surrender, he says, ‘didn’t last as long as a snowflake in hell’. Similarly, from the trenches of France, Captain Lewis Nott sent a letter to his wife describing how the Germans cried out for mercy when cornered. ‘My sweet’, Nott says, ‘there is no mercy here’.

Even Charles Bean, the official historian and a relentless booster of the Anzac legend, explained how he’d come to accept that such executions took place simply because he’d heard officers and men boast so often about them. In his own description of Pozières and its

aftermath, Bean describes how the men lit cigarettes while waiting for terrified Germans to emerge from the rubble to be shot or bayoneted. One of the Australians, about to stab a prisoner, discovered that his bayonet wasn't fixed. According to Bean, the soldier calmly secured it and then killed the German, who had been begging for his life the whole time.

Vile deeds were performed on the other side of No Man's Land, too. The behaviour of the German militarists in Belgium prefigured the strategies perfected by the fascists in the next war; the Turks were committing genocide against the Armenians even while the Gallipoli invasion was underway. But the crimes of one army didn't negate the cruelties of the other. Australians had, on occasion, murdered their captives—in *Goodbye to All That*, Robert Graves suggests that 'the troops [with] the worst reputation for acts of violence against prisoners were the Canadians (and later the Australians)'—so Altintas's scenario certainly was not impossible.

The best way to find out would be to track the head's history. Who had kept it all that time? What did they say about its origins?

Altintas laughed. 'We don't know that. No one will say. Even up to now, no one will say. The next day, after all the newspapers came, they changed the story. Suddenly they said there was no young man.' That was one of the more bizarre aspects of the whole episode. The initial news reports were explicit: the head came from a local man who had known about his grandfather's secret but was so shocked when he actually opened the box that he contacted the police. But later the narrative changed entirely. According to subsequent accounts, the head had not been uncovered by a relative at all. Instead, a local painter had taken the box to the police station. He'd borrowed it, many years earlier, from a fellow artist, hoping the grisly item might inspire some grotesque themes in the artwork he was working on. The original painter was now dead; no one in Echuca (or anywhere else) could recall how or where he'd originally come by the head.

It all seemed very strange. How had this tale of the frightened family, so clear and so definite, dissolved into an entirely different

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story of artists and their work? Altintas offered one explanation. ‘They are ashamed.’ He shrugged. ‘They don’t want to talk about what happened. They think we will blame them.’

Would he?

‘No. We don’t want to blame them. That young man, he did the right thing. When he found it, he could have just thrown it in the rubbish. Instead, he gives it back. I would like to shake his hand, to thank him. He did the right thing. But we would still like to know what happened.’ He told me to wait and he went into his files and then came back with a manila folder. It was all the clippings he’d kept about the severed head story. ‘Take these. Maybe you will find else something out. If so, please let me know.’

I stood up to leave. But there was one more thing. OK, I understood that he didn’t blame the family. But what about the man who took the head in the first place, the soldier responsible for desecrating a corpse? What did he think of him?

‘The grandfather?’ Altintas paused at the doorway and then shook his head slowly. ‘War makes people crazy. I don’t blame him. It was not his fault. It’s the fault of the people who send young men to invade other people’s countries.’ He lowered his voice to a confidential whisper. ‘Like now, with Iraq. You see, it’s just like with Iraq.’

Outside in the sunshine, I still didn’t know what to do, but Altintas’s comparison, entirely unprompted, reinforced my instinct that there was something in the story that was worth pursuing. There was a contemporary resonance, even if I didn’t quite understand how it worked. I might as well keep looking. I was in the library most days anyway. All it would require was fossicking in some different archives.

And there did seem something fascinating about the reaction the head had sparked. The day after the press conference, Detective Sergeant Adrian Kennedy, the police officer who’d handed over the head, told a newspaper that the family involved had been shocked by the media attention: ‘They did not want this made public. They thought they were doing the right thing in handing the head over for

it to be passed back to the Turkish government. All this publicity means they will probably stay anonymous and we will never know about its origins.’ The *Riverine Herald*, the local Echuca paper, headlined its coverage ‘A Sad Turn’, referring not to the decapitation but to the interest that had been shown in the discovery. ‘Never has a respectful gesture by an Echuca family soured as much as one this week. The family who discovered the head of a Turkish soldier among the belongings of a World War One digger have remained in hiding for the fear of what the wider community would do’, the paper reported.

Yet looking over the cuttings, I couldn’t see any anyone condemning, let alone threatening, the family of the soldier. Altintas was widely reported offering his thanks. He’d said he didn’t blame anyone, explained repeatedly that he simply wanted more information about the souvenir. What, then, was the source of the family’s fear?

Perhaps it was to do with changes in how the Anzac experience was remembered. Twenty years ago, Anzac Day ceremonies seemed to be in terminal decline. The prolonged brutality of the Vietnam War chilled enthusiasm for military parades, and through the late seventies and early eighties, attendances at marches dwindled. By 1984, feminists protesting against rape in wartime attracted nearly as much media attention as the veterans themselves. But in 2005, Anzac Day basked in a renewed popularity. Tens of thousands of Australians, many of them tousle-haired backpackers, slept out on Gallipoli beach, while thousands more attended the dawn ceremony at Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance. It was a change in more than just numbers. The events had become boisterous rather than subdued: as part of a festival that seemed less a commemoration than an unapologetic celebration, a huge screen on Gallipoli beach showed Eric Clapton and the Bee Gees. Somehow, the occasion had become detached not only from the violence of war but also from history itself. Each year, school children explained to nodding reporters that the diggers kept Australia free, almost as though the Anzac contingent had repelled Turks invading Sydney Harbour.

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Perhaps that was why the family feared that they'd be blamed: not so much for their ancestor's deed but because they themselves had, by drawing attention to the reality of war, marred the increasingly obligatory veneration of Anzac. A severed head did not, after all, lend itself to jingoism.

Then, somewhere else in the library, I came across some research on trophy skulls, and was stunned by how common the souveniring of body parts had been, especially during the Second World War. In June 2003, roughly a year or so after the Echuca head came to light, US police conducting a drug raid in Colorado uncovered a trunk engraved with the words 'Guadalcanal' and the date 'November 11 1942'. Inside they found a human skull. It had been lacquered and engraved with the words 'This is a good Jap. Guadalcanal S. I. 11 Nov 42. Oscar MG J. Papas USMC'. The skull had been autographed by two or three dozen other soldiers. Their willingness to record their identity suggests that it didn't even cross their minds that using a human head in that way might be inappropriate. The aviator Charles Lindbergh, returning from a visit to the Pacific Front in 1944, recorded the customs officer in Hawaii asking whether he was carrying any bones, a question made necessary by the quantity of human souvenirs coming through. In 1984, the team excavating and repatriating wartime Japanese corpses from the Mariana Islands estimated that an astonishing 60 per cent of the bodies lacked skulls.

The Japanese also committed hideous atrocities: the rape of Nanking, the abuse of prisoners of war, the forced prostitution of women. But the souveniring of corpses seemed to have been more prevalent among Allied soldiers—Australians as well as Americans. Private Jake Kovco, the Australian soldier killed in Iraq, belonged, for instance, to a battalion that possessed, in its officers' mess, a pen stand made from a human femur.

In my research, one particular story about a skull struck me as uncannily similar to the scenario Altintas had imagined. In 1993, a veteran, ageing and remorseful, asked a relative for help in returning a trophy skull to Japan. The relative contacted a journalist and told

him the story. The soldier's platoon had captured a Japanese sniper at Guadalcanal. They had no facilities to hold a prisoner, so later that night they shot him. They cut his head off, boiled away the flesh and placed the skull on a pole. Then they all signed it and inscribed the bone with 'One Dead Jap' and 'Shot at Guadalcanal'.

Most of the stories of souvenired body parts come from the Second World War or Vietnam, rather than the Great War. The explanation for this was possibly a practical one. Conditions for soldiers in the Second World War were better than they had been twenty years earlier. With the primitive accommodation and transport provided to soldiers of the Great War, it might simply not have been possible to smuggle an object as bulky as a skull without being caught.

This was another point Altintas had raised. He'd wondered how an object as bulky as a skull could have been brought back on a Great War troopship. Perhaps, he'd suggested, it had been carried by an officer, someone of importance and standing in the community. Perhaps that explained the family's reaction to the publicity. Perhaps the reputation of a historical figure was at stake. He hadn't thought that uncovering the truth would be difficult though: 'You see, at the police station, they were definite. They told me that the young man who found the head had just gone, walked out of the station just before I arrived. They must know who it was.' He'd suggested looking at obituaries. The skull, it was said, had been found by a family cleaning up after a relative's death. If I found a death notice of someone the right age, a week or two earlier, that would be a good place to start.

I tried to put the plan into operation, absently noting, when the Echuca papers flashed up on the catalogue, how I seemed to have committed myself to the search without ever making a conscious decision. But when the staff brought out the bound editions of the *Riverine Herald* from the stacks, the problems became evident. Echuca wasn't a huge town, but people died there with sufficient regularity to keep the obituary pages full. I assumed I was looking for a deceased who had children, since it sounded like someone from a younger generation handed the head in. But that didn't narrow

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things down much. How far back did I need to scrutinise? It could have been months before the house was tidied up, and even more months before the family came to a decision about what to do with the head.

I tried to cross-reference with a list of Echuca soldiers who'd served at Gallipoli. But that was hopeless, too, since so many of the names were extremely common Anglo-Celtic ones. The war seemed to have been largely fought by men named 'Jones' and 'Smith' and 'Roberts', surnames too prosaic to match against obituaries. In any case, just because a man enlisted from a certain area, it didn't follow that his son would die there seventy years later. If the Gallipoli veteran had moved to Echuca after the war, the place of recruitment was entirely irrelevant.

Seeing my desultory scratchings of names and dates, one of the librarians asked directly what I was searching for. I explained. She looked at me and made the obvious suggestion. Had I tried the coroner's report? I hadn't. Who knew that you could telephone the coronial staff and ask directly about records pertaining to mummified human heads? I'd half expected to be asked the reason for the enquiry ('What are you: some kind of monster?'), but the polite woman taking the call, entirely unruffled, asked me to hold while she went off to rummage through whatever diabolical cabinet contained details of the myriad ways people in Victoria hurt themselves and each other. Minutes later, a PDF of the coroner's report arrived by email.

It was a fascinating document. On 15 November 2002, Deputy State Coroner Iain West conducted an investigation into 'the death of an unknown adult male' at Echuca. West could not identify the deceased, but he attributed the cause of death to a 'gunshot injury to the head' received at an 'unknown date at the Gallipoli Peninsula, Turkey'.

The identification of the head as a genuine relic rested in part on an investigation conducted by the forensic pathologist Malcolm Dodd and the forensic anthropologist Christopher Briggs. Briggs provided an 'osteological report' that concluded ('from the size of

the mastoid processes, the shape of the chin and the overall robusticity of the skull') that the head was definitely male. It was Caucasian and possessed characteristics (such as high cheekbones) which, he said, were 'noted in individuals of Central European descent'. The fusion of the plates in one part of the skull indicated that the head belonged to a teenager. Other evidence, including the wear of the teeth, suggested an age between the late twenties and the early thirties, and it was this second age band that he eventually settled on. Dodd's report concluded that the two holes in the skull were an entry and exit wound, consistent with a .303 bullet used by Australian troops during the Gallipoli invasion. 'The single gunshot wound described would', he said, 'be sufficient to cause death'.

Coroner West also asked Dodd whether, in his opinion, it was possible to exclude 'suicide or any other mode by which [the deceased] may have been shot'. The euphemistic 'any other mode' seemed a reference to Altintas's speculation about cold-blooded murder. In response, Dodd first ruled out suicide. He discussed 'the usual sites of election' for people bent on self-harm, a phrase in which you glimpsed the daily tragedies to which a coroner necessarily habituated himself. People shot themselves, he explained, in the temple, the forehead or the roof of the mouth; no one deliberately fired a gun at the top of their own head. He also rejected the execution scenario. Had the bullet been fired from close range, he said,

it would be highly likely that the back of the head would have been blown away by the severity of the blast given the proposed calibre of the projectile. In this case, both entry and exit sites of the skull comprise well-defined circular areas of bone deficiency with radiating fractures, indicating a 'distant range' shot. A contact shot from a heavy calibre handgun or indeed a combat rifle would ... literally have blown the head apart.

The coroner pressed further, and Dodd acknowledged that 'the entry wound through the upper left frontoparietal area and accompanying

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exit near the mid of the occiput is an odd angle' but suggested 'a sniper may have shot at the deceased while his head was peering out of a trench'.

It still didn't make sense. The trenches of the Great War were constructed so that soldiers stepped up onto a duckboard to fire at the enemy. Peering out of a trench exposed your head, but not the *top* of your head. Nevertheless, Dodd's reference to a sniper made me think. What if the dead man were a sniper too? In that case, he could well have been lying down when he died, since the Turkish sharpshooters often left the trenches to hide in the shrub. If the victim were prone, the bullet angle became more logical. Say he was stretched out behind cover and, while loading his rifle, looked down for an instant—just as an Australian sniper fired. In that case, a wound in the top of the head became perfectly logical.

The scenario of a sniper duel seemed especially plausible, since the marksmen of the Great War did, indeed, take keepsakes from men they killed. The New South Wales farmer Archie Barwick wrote from Gallipoli in April 1915, 'I shot 3 snipers dead today, they were picking off our poor fellows who were hobbling down to the dressing stations, the first one I killed I took his belt off to keep as a souvenir of my first kill with the rifle, the other two I laid out beautifully'.

Was that what happened with the Turkish head? Did a rifleman seek a trophy of a piece of smart shooting? Dodd made clear that the heavy-calibre bullet would have killed the Turkish soldier instantly as it crashed through his brain. If, like many of the snipers at Gallipoli, he was hiding in No Man's Land, his body may have lain unattended for some time. Dodd couldn't identify any chemical agent on the remaining flesh and suggested the mummification was probably natural, the result of a corpse drying in the sun. Perhaps the Australian sniper couldn't—or didn't—reach the body of his victim for months. Perhaps he stood over the remains of the man he'd killed after they'd become desiccated and only then decided to take a reminder of how beautifully the man had been 'laid out'.

Under those circumstances, the removal of a preserved head would not necessarily have been a gory business. It was possible that the successful mummification of the skull might itself have spurred the idea of a souvenir, in the way recorded by Australian soldier John Adlard in his diary of Ypres. ‘Picked up a skull today’, he wrote, ‘with strips of dangling skin and hair. It looks very comic.’ It was certainly possible, but still only speculation.

When it came to the head’s origin, West recorded only that Sergeant Kennedy of the Echuca Criminal Investigation Unit had taken ‘possession of a lidded wooden box containing a mummified human head, after he had received a report of its existence from a local resident’. According to West, Kennedy then explained how ‘further inquiries’ had revealed that ‘for approximately thirty years, the head had been in the possession of Mr Noel Tunks, a retired art teacher who had obtained it on loan from Mr Joel Elenberg, a Melbourne painter and sculptor’. When Noel Tunks was duly called to the inquest, he said that Elenberg had told him that the head was that of a Turkish soldier killed at Gallipoli, but hadn’t given any more information about how it had come to Australia or where he’d originally obtained it.

The repetition of the second narrative before the coroner quelled some of the suspicions I’d inherited from Altintas. One could easily imagine a local community hiding the truth from a prying big city media, especially given the feelings of betrayal that Kennedy and the *Riverine Herald* had voiced. But would it be worth lying to a coroner—a reasonably serious business—over events that happened so long ago? I doubted it. Still, I needed to speak to this Noel Tunks. If anyone could shed more light on the two stories and how they’d come to change, he would be the man.

The unusual name made finding an address easy enough. Composing the letter was the difficult part. Asking a stranger about his relationship to a piece of a mummified corpse was a delicate business. It was hard to find the right words. And how could I

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politely ask him to clarify the difference between two flatly contradictory stories without accusing him of lying? I did my best, tearing up one draft after another, until I had something that could be sent. The letter explained that I was interested primarily in the origins of the head and had wondered if Noel Tunks could suggest anyone who could tell me more than had appeared in the newspapers or the coroner's report. Did Joel Elenberg have any relatives, for instance? If so, would they speak with me? My interest was in the past, I said: I did not seek to embarrass the living and would be happy to preserve the anonymity of anyone involved.

Weeks passed with no reply, and in a last rush to finish the thesis, I'd given up on the head when the mail eventually brought a response. The letter politely but firmly reiterated the story from the coroner's report. Noel Tunks had received the head from Joel Elenberg. Elenberg collected unusual objects for his art. Elenberg died without disclosing how he originally came across the head. No one else knew anything about it. What's more, it quashed, in a way that seemed quite conscious, any hopes of further investigations via Elenberg's relatives. 'Some enquiries have been made regarding some input from his wife and family', it said, 'and I am told that the wife does not want to be involved in any discussions regarding the skull or other matters regarding Joel. So it would be a waste of time contemplating such a move.' As to the discrepancies in the stories, the email explained that Noel had given the head 'to a friend to deliver to Melbourne University for safe keeping. This friend gave it to a friend who gave it to a friend. This person concocted a story that his grandfather brought it back from the war etc. etc., all of which was not the truth.'

The letter fanned the embers of my suspicion to a new heat. Aside from the tone of the correspondence, which clearly implied a desire that I desist, the narrative just seemed too neat: a story diverting attention from anyone living and sealing off all avenues of investigation into the dead. Was it credible that the police had initially been taken in by the inventions of an unnamed fantasist, the friend of

a friend of Noel Tunks? Would so many different people really have passed a mummified human head around so casually, handing it from acquaintance to acquaintance like an unwanted holiday souvenir?

The letter was signed N Tunks but directed any future correspondence to an email address under a different name. After further hesitations and equivocations, I sent a message asking more directly about the details Altintas had provided. He'd told me, I explained, that, when he arrived at the station, the police had told him that the relative of the Gallipoli veteran had only just left. They'd spoken of the man as someone they knew, not a random prankster. How did Tunks explain that?

This time the reply came almost immediately. The writer took no offence at my implied disbelief; instead, he politely offered to do anything he could to help with my research:

I think I told you at the time it was given to the police in Echuca there were many lies and cover-ups associated with the event. The skull really played no part in the city of Echuca. It was taken there by Noel's friend unbeknown to Noel. Noel's instructions to his friend were to drop it off at a university but the friend had other ideas. The person to whom the skull was delivered lied about its origin. Prior to the skull being taken to Echuca it was stored in Noel's home both in Maryborough and Avoca.

Then there was a final detail, one that left me feeling both guilty and embarrassed. My correspondence, the email explained, hadn't been with Noel Tunks himself but with his legal guardian. Tunks suffered from dementia. He could not tell anything else. That, presumably, explained the cease-and-desist tone. The letter hadn't been meant to suppress a historical investigation so much as to dissuade, quite reasonably, a stranger bothering an old and sick man.

Perhaps Altintas was wrong. Perhaps there'd been no attempt to shield the head's owner; perhaps the 'lies and cover-ups' had simply

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stemmed from a silly prank. I didn't know, and I didn't think I'd be able to find out—certainly not by plaguing any further the carers and relatives of a dementia sufferer. I looked at the folder of clippings, those scribbles from the library. The research created its own momentum. You took one step, which then led to another, and before you knew it, you'd embarked on a journey without ever really knowing where it would lead you.

The Turkish soldier had been a human being. He deserved the dignity of having his name recorded, to be remembered as something other than the shrunken object in that box. Realistically, however, the prospects of so definite an outcome had never been good. In none of the cases of souveniring from the Second World War had the identity of the trophy victim been determined. Acts of desecration invariably targeted anonymous bodies, since, almost by definition, a corpse with a name was far harder to treat as an object. Even if the research had proved successful, what exactly would I have found: the name of the killer? the unit in which he served? a particular engagement—perhaps even a date he saw action? And then what? What would any of that have actually told me?

The head had emerged from wartime violence. But that in itself didn't guarantee insight into the heart of things, into the sudden fury of a wartime killing. No, violence had flared for an instant, back in 1915, and someone had died with a bullet in the head. That was true; that was what we knew. But the moment had passed. The head was a husk, its eye sockets empty and sightless. It was as real—or as unreal—as another headline from Baghdad.

When the site nowthatsfuckedup.com was eventually closed down, Chris Wilson was arrested on the grounds of obscenity. But the charges against him pertained exclusively to sexual images, not to his death photos. Sex was a familiar taboo, and the anxieties about it could be more easily assuaged. Killing was different, especially in an epoch of permanent war. The authorities could not deem Wilson's war porn legally obscene without making a judgement about the

soldiers who'd sent them—and ultimately about the wars that produce such men.

I looked again at the email from Tunks's guardian. It didn't matter, I decided. I'd been approaching the whole business from entirely the wrong direction. The head from Gallipoli couldn't explain killing. I needed to understand killing to appreciate the head, and that meant trying something very different.