Ceramic artwork a tribute to Australians who fell at Gallipoli

By Ben Westcott

Over the next six months, artist Michael Keighery will mould 8709 ceramic figurines in the palm of his hand – one for each Australian soldier killed on the shores of Gallipoli almost 100 years ago.

Keighery's great uncle, Frank Keighery, was 21 when he was shot dead in the trenches of Gallipoli, while writing a letter home to his mother and father.

All he managed to write before he was killed was, "Dear Mum and Dad, here …"

As planning for the Gallipoli centenary continues across Australia, Keighery plans to commemorate his great-uncle and the 8708 other Australians who died during the Gallipoli campaign by handcrafting a ceramic model for each soldier killed.

"I make them by getting a piece of clay and simply squeezing it in my fist, in my hand, as an act of frustration, grief, anger, fear – all of those kinds of reactions, which are much more human than is often portrayed when people look at a tragedy like Gallipoli."

Keighery said he had also invited friends and acquaintances to sit and discuss their own family experience of war, whether that be a world war, Vietnam or Afghanistan, while he moulds the ceramic figures.

He said it was important for Australians to see both sides of the nation-defining event.

"While the men were incredibly brave … it was, in fact, a disastrous operation badly executed mainly by British upper-class officers," he said.

"That's the kind of reality of it and that's the story of the First World War. I think that we run the risk of losing the perspective in simply looking at the so-called glory of it."

Keighery said his journey to creating the artwork began 15 years ago when he first discovered his great-uncle had been shot dead at Gallipoli. It was holding his great-uncle's diary, written in Pitman shorthand, in the Australian War Memorial that first triggered his desire to create the artwork.

"[Gallipoli] is not a simplistic thing … it was a very complex [event], a scene of both incredible bravery but incredible waste," he said.

The Wollongong-based artist has been living at the Canberra Studio Potters while he puts together the artwork, which will be displayed in both Sydney and Canberra in 2015.

"My thumbs are getting sore, but I'm probably up to about close to the halfway mark," he said.
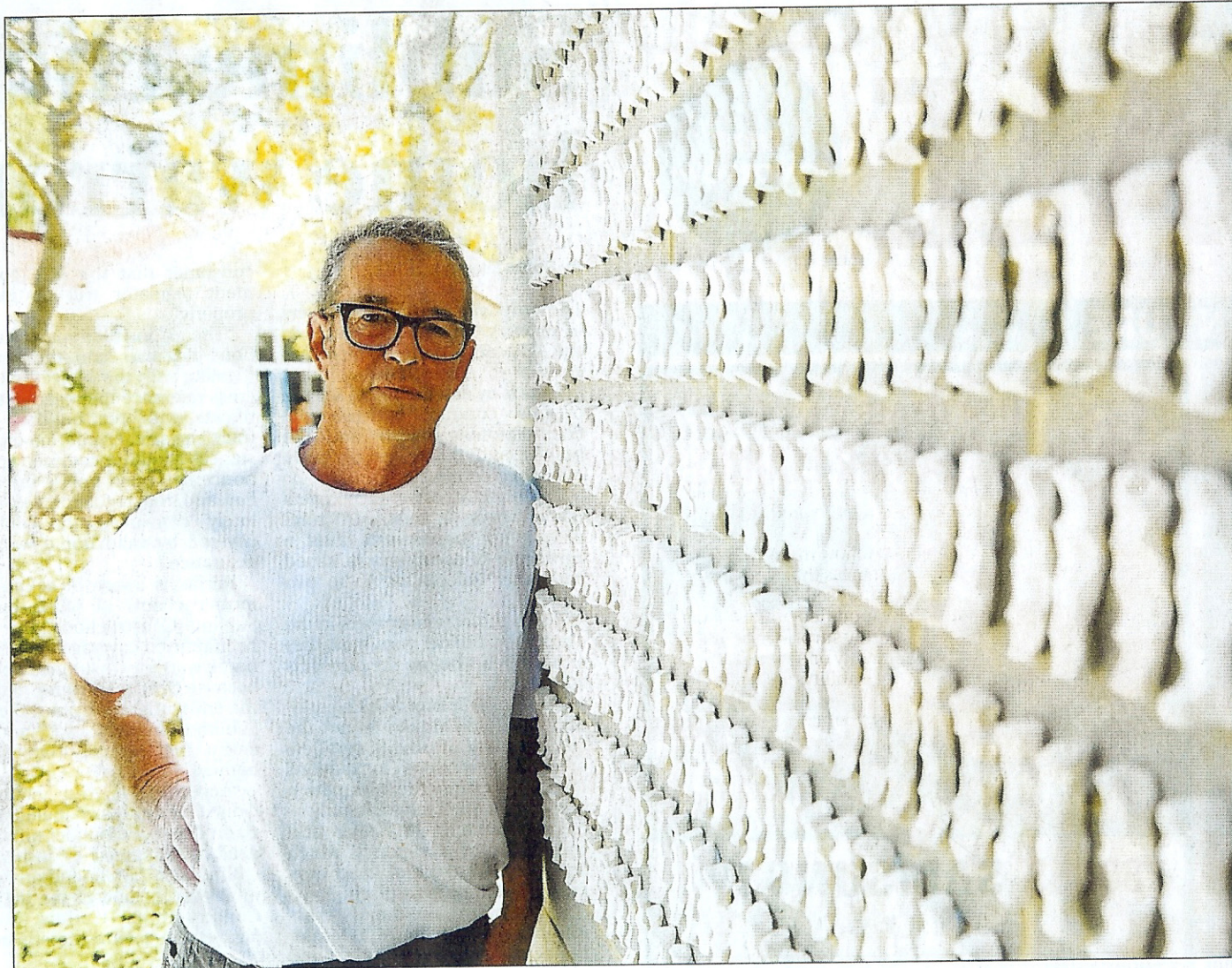
PERSPECTIVE: Michael Keighery is creating a work of art representing the Australian soldiers who died at Gallipoli nearly 100 years ago. Photo: JAY