



David Roach

Australian tunnellers at the entrance to the Catacombs, Belgium, 1917

Captain Oliver Woodward

“Bowen has had their movie with *Australia*, will Townsville have its go with a full-length feature film on the tunnellers?”

Silence not golden

Ross Thomas is amazed at the silence from mining companies to his quest for making a movie about the inspiring story of the Australian Mining Corps in World War I. IAN FRAZER reports

ROSS Thomas, mines inspector turned movie-maker, concedes a cooler man might by now have found the \$2.5 million needed for his feature film, *The Silence*.

He says silence best describes the response from mining companies he wants to invest in the movie about a North Queensland miner's life on the Western Front in World War I. “My passion can sometimes be my foe, but I can't believe the mining industry has not picked up the ball,” he said this week.

Mr Thomas estimates he has spent nearly \$100,000 on two projects to honour the 5000 Australian miners who served as tunnellers in World War I.

The first of these ventures – a permanent monument to the Australian Mining Corps – will be incorporated in the new North Queensland Military Museum, scheduled to open at Kissing Point in early 2009.

Mr Thomas is raising \$250,000 towards this state-of-the-art audio-visual memorial by selling 5000 half-gallon stone jars of rum, each tagged with a tunneller's name.

The Silence, his other project, has grown during the past three years from an idea for a documentary on Charters Towers-trained tunneller Oliver Woodward to a proposed \$2.5 million feature film.

He has formed a production company, The Silence Productions Pty Ltd, with producer Bill Leimbach, of Sydney, and is presently seeking backers prepared to sink a

minimum of \$100,000 each into the movie.

They need to raise \$1.25 million, which they hope will be matched dollar for dollar by Film Finance Corporation Australia and the Pacific Film and Television Commission.

To date, he is the sole investor, having initially hired Mr Leimbach, whom in turn has commissioned writer David Roach to come up with a shooting draft to pitch for Federal and State Government backing.

This draft is due early next month.

Mr Thomas and Mr Leimbach aim to begin shooting by the middle of this year, at locations around the North and in Papua New Guinea. They want its release to coincide with the 90th anniversary of the end of the Great War, on Armistice Day, November 11.

“My money is not important in that it's got the project going,” Mr Thomas said in a telephone interview from Mount Isa, where he is working as a mining consultant.

“Every man and his dog is going to be making movies and documentaries about the Great War in coming years, with the centenary approaching,” he said.

“We want to get there first.

Telling this story is 90 years late. “Bowen has had their movie with *Australia*, will Townsville have its go with a full-length feature film on the tunnellers?”

Mr Leimbach, who in 2005 made a pay-TV documentary on the 90th anniversary of the Gallipoli landing, said this week the movie

could be made cost-effectively in North Queensland using a combination of stock footage, computer graphics imagery and locations such as old mine portals and the Charters Towers school of mining.

Based on Oliver Woodward's unpublished autobiography, *The Silence* would also be filmed in Papua New Guinea, where Woodward was based when the war started.

Mr Leimbach says Woodward's recollections have given David Roach material for a movie which will appeal to general audiences around the world as well as war history buffs.

“I've read lots and lots of diaries of war,” he said.

“They are either very distant or full of boring detail.

“Oliver Woodward's has descriptions of the emotions he felt, which has helped us to get a handle on what things were like.

“He wrote his autobiography well after the war, in 1932 – that was the same time as *All Quiet on the Western Front* – they are very similar, on opposite sides of the trenches.”

All Quiet On The Western Front, by Eric Maria Remarque, is a German soldier's reflection on the Great War, first published in 1929.

While *The Silence* would focus on Woodward's role in leading Australian miners-turned-tunnellers on a mission to destroy part of Messines Ridge, it would also give the perspective of young German coal miners thrust into this underground war.

“We have to look at them as people who were doing their job,” he said.

“I want to be able to show this to Germans, I don't want to make a movie about winners and losers.”

Beyond the drama of the tunnellers' silent, deadly war, *The Silence* would also explore Woodward's decision to enlist soon after his engagement to his 17-year-old sweetheart Marjorie Waddell.

Mr Leimbach says he hopes to sign Australian actor Brendan Cowell to play Woodward and Matilda Brown to play Marjorie.

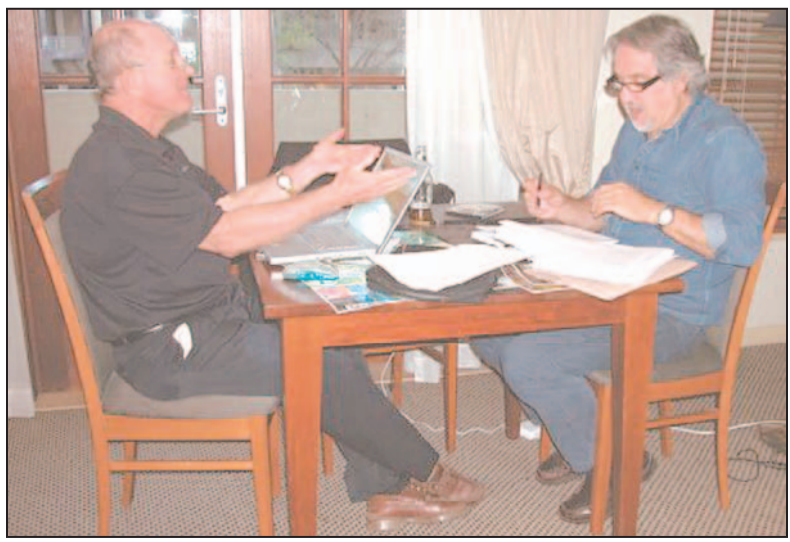
He says Jeremy Sims will direct the movie.

Sims, a Sydney actor and director, is probably best known for his feature film *Last Train to Freo*, a movie with a claustrophobic atmosphere similar to that envisaged for *The Silence*.

Mr Leimbach, who grew up in



Ross Thomas with one of the replica stoneware rum jars he is selling to raise funds for a memorial to the World War I Australian Mining Corps



Ross Thomas, executive producer of *The Silence*, left, with writer David Roach

California and studied film and television in Britain before moving to Australia 25 years ago, said he met Mr Thomas last September through a mutual friend.

“I got involved because a mutual friend introduced me to Ross and said he had a passion to make a movie and was prepared to put his money where his mouth was,” he said.

“He has a passion for bringing the Australian miners of World War I to international attention “There is no one who knows more about those 4840 miners – he has a name and place for each of them.

“He has a passion for military history that puts us streets ahead.”

Mr Leimbach said he had known nothing about the tunnellers before meeting Mr Thomas.

“So many people know about the Western Front, but no one knows the story of the miners who went across to become tunnellers.

“Ross is a ferret, he's dogged in his dedication, everywhere I go people have a good word for him.

“With him behind you, you know you'll cross the finishing line.”

See www.thesilence.com.au for more details on *The Silence*, including investment guidelines.