

## **“A Mob in Uniform” – How the Rowdy Australians Outraged the Brass in WW1 (And Terrified the Enemy)**



Despite their reputation as hard-drinking, ill-disciplined rabble-rousers, the men of the Australian Imperial Force were also famous for their unflagging morale and bravery under fire. (Image source: WikiCommons and the Australian War Memorial)

*“I have never seen a body of men in uniform with less idea of discipline.”*

*– General Sir Archibald Murray*

*By Craig Deayton*

**LIKE ALL** nations that fought in the First World War, Australia paid a heavy price.

From 1915 until their exhausted divisions were withdrawn in October of 1918, [the Australian Imperial Force \(AIF\)](#) lost over 60,000 killed and almost three times that number wounded. In a nation of just five million, the war cut a swathe through society; few families were untouched by tragedy in some way.

Barely 14 years after Britain's Australian colonies [federated to form a new nation](#), the AIF was plunged into the greatest conflict in human history. One of the few all-volunteer forces in World War One, Australia had two divisions in the field in 1915. These were grouped in [the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps](#), an organization which produced the acronym ANZAC to forever describe the men from 'down under.'

Australian troops were easily recognized by their distinctive slouch hats and pea-soup coloured uniforms. They quickly won a reputation for reckless bravery at [Gallipoli](#) and although [the campaign in the Dardanelles](#) was an unmitigated disaster, the fawning British press reports that praised the Australians as 'the finest soldiers on earth' produced a surge in recruiting back home. When it later embarked for [the Western Front](#), the AIF had swelled from two to five divisions.



Volunteers join up in Melbourne. Australians were unaccustomed to military discipline and seemed to delight in undermining it at every turn. (Image source: WikiCommons)

From the outset, Australian soldiers chafed at the restrictions of military life. Many of the rank-and-file regarded saluting as a courtesy to be extended only to officers they admired and commonly addressed their commissioned superiors by first name. Soldiers saw army service as a natural extension of the workplace and would on occasion go on strike in response to grievances. The long and tedious sea voyage from Australia to the Europe did little to strengthen discipline among the unruly volunteers. Mutinies on board troop ships over food or sanitation made ships captains' lives a misery.

Banning shore leave for the Australians resulted in more than one troopship mutiny, where the officers had little choice but to cave in to the demands and allow the men to disembark and visit the bars and brothels of [Colombo](#) and [Cape Town](#). Exasperated local police resorted to delivering Australian trouble-makers back to their ships in chains. The miscreants may have been in the minority, but their impact made Australian visits to those ports notorious.

Once assigned to their units in Egypt and later in France and Belgium, officers had more success imposing discipline, particularly after the experience of battle. But the prospect of death in battle made many only more determined to enjoy life while it lasted. The Australians' over-generous pay rate (six times that of British soldiers), although a great incentive for enlistment, fuelled much mischief during leaves.



Australian troops encamped near the Great Pyramids before shipping out for the Dardanelles. The men from 'down under' earned a reputation for drunkenness while in Egypt. (Image source: WikiCommons)

With the Anzacs back in Egypt after the failed Gallipoli campaign, the British commander in Cairo, [Sir Archibald Murray](#), wrote an incendiary letter to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff in London complaining about the Australians.

“I have never seen a body of men in uniform with less idea of discipline,” Murray wrote. “The streets of Cairo, Ismailia and Port Said are difficult to keep clear of drunken Australians. Many of the men seem to have no idea of ordinary decency or self-control.”

The general's assertion was backed up by some astonishing facts.

Of the 8,858 venereal disease cases treated in Egypt since the beginning of military operations, 1,979 involved British troops, 955 were attributed to New Zealanders, but a whopping 5,924 were Australians.

“[These] magnificent men... the finest by far that I have ever seen... have been nearly spoilt by the neglect on the part of their commanders to instil into them even the rudiments of soldierly instinct,” Murray lamented.

While praising their “magnificent bravery,” he damned the inefficiency of their officers and mentioned their “enormous conceit in themselves” thanks to a fawning press. Murray's fear was that the combination of reckless bravery, overconfidence, indiscipline and ineffectual leadership would lead to needlessly heavy losses in France, a prediction that would tragically prove all too often accurate.

[Major-General Alexander Godley](#), in command of the New Zealanders, agreed with Murray, but reminded him that he was seeing the Australians “at their very worst,” reminding the general that the soldiers were back from an arduous campaign and that discipline was improving daily.

British general [William Birdwood](#), in command of the Australians, also agreed with Murray, but was also quick to defend them.

“They belong to the strongest of socialistic communities in the world,” he reported. “[These are] men, who a few weeks before had looked upon it as an absolute degradation to humanity that they should salute any other man or call any man ‘sir.’”

Birdwood pointed to problems with Australian officers.

“In the vast majority of cases came from exactly the same class as the men,” he wrote. “It was therefore very difficult for them to exercise proper command, or to command respect from their men until perhaps they have the opportunity of proving their superiority in the field.”



Australians charge into Turkish machine gun fire at Gallipoli. Casualties during the disastrous campaign in Turkey were staggering. (Image source: Imperial War Museums)

Birdwood also defended the Australians' bravery under fire. He praised the absolute silence maintained by the Anzacs at [the Gallipoli landing](#) and the later evacuation, as well as their attention to sanitation in the trenches. Nevertheless, back in Cairo, a city awash with cheap alcohol and brothels, any sense of military discipline often evaporated.

Having been sold poisonous liquor, harassed by street merchants and angry about venereal diseases, the Australians rioted and burned down the red-light district of Wassa. The Anzacs ransacked the brothels, cut the fire brigade's hoses and brawled with the military police. The fighting died away only when the unruly soldiers tired and returned to their camps to sleep it off.

While the New Zealanders shaped up after 1915, thanks to a combination of a highly competent general in [Andrew Russell](#) and the threat of the death penalty for the most serious offences, discipline continued to be a serious problem among the Australians. Despite continuing pressure from senior Australian officers and the British High Command, the home government refused to allow military courts to impose the death penalty, even for serious infractions – a standard in all other British and Commonwealth forces.

The official Australian historian, [Charles Bean](#), downplayed the problems, describing the Australian attitude to military discipline like “a colt from a large paddock,” which “at first resented all restraint.” An angry bull in a china shop would have been closer to the mark. Privately, Bean admitted that Murray was right, writing in his diary that:

“The streets of Cairo were anything but pleasant for an Australian who had any regard to the good name of Australia. There was a great deal of drunkenness and I could not help noticing that

what people in Cairo said was true – the Australians were responsible for most of it ... I think we have to admit that our force contains more bad hats than the others, and I think also that the average Australian is certainly a harder liver. He does do bad things – at least things that the rest of the world considers as really bad.”



An Australian soldier tries to break a horse in an Egyptian camp. Yet few, it seemed, could tame the men from the Outback. (Image source: Australian National Archives)

Of course, Murray and others in senior command were right to be concerned about the men taken from the lines by venereal diseases, as well as the poor quality of Australian officers and the general indiscipline. But their British commander, General Birdwood saw other qualities. Desertions and drunken rampages aside, the Australians' discipline on the front lines was unwavering. This pattern would continue throughout the war and, as the Australian contribution to victory in 1918 would show, they remained a highly effective fighting force, despite their higher crime and desertion rates, despite the lack of a death penalty and despite the heavy casualties they suffered.

Bean, although despairing at times of his countrymen's insubordination, contempt for military norms and their habit of finding trouble, believed they would not fail where it mattered — in combat.

“I think the sum will come out on the right side when all is totted up,” he wrote. “That is my great comfort when I wonder how I shall ever manage to write up an honest history of this campaign. I fully expect the men of this force will do things when the real day comes which will make the true history of this war possible to be written.”

Ultimately, he would be proven right, but it made the task of command extraordinarily difficult for officers. While Australian officers were often on the receiving end of their men's insubordination and flagrant disobedience, British officers were a special target.

Staff Sergeant Alfred Perriman, wounded at [Mametz Wood](#) in 1916, was a British drill instructor who was assigned to train the Australians. He had come across men from down under before and although he liked and admired them, he admitted that his new trainees showed a lack of discipline and that commanding them was a tricky business.

“Apart from a few exceptions the Aussie soldier was a hard-drinking gambler and sports enthusiast,” he recalled. “A wrong word or action on the part of anyone would have sparked off a war, consequently a lot of breaches of discipline were overlooked.”

Having completed their training, the Australians celebrated and as a result the passing out parade was a very memorable one for Perriman.

“The majority of the lads were well sozzled and didn't give a damn for anyone,” he remembered. “Many fell and as they approached the officer in command, staggering towards him, taking him by the hand and shouting ‘you're a bonzer [a good man], see you again soon.’”

Perriman also witnessed the “counting out” of unpopular officers, a thoroughly intimidating form of mass insubordination that left its unfortunate victim powerless and humiliated. If they were unhappy with an officer's manner or, in the case of [the Prince of Wales](#), one who failed to acknowledge them as he rode past, someone in the crowd would shout “ONE!” in the manner of a referee counting over the body of an unconscious boxer. Others would shout “TWO!” Then the crowd would join in, steadily roaring out the count up to ten. This would usually be followed by a final bellowed insult like: “Out, you Tommy Woodbine bastard!”



Australian troops in the front lines in France, 1917. (Image source: WikiCommons)

With money in their pockets and a reputation for hard drinking, the bars and estaminets in the lines behind [Ypres](#) were overflowing with drunken, brawling Australians.

The area commandant for Ypres, [Brigadier-General Ludlow](#), had to personally defend a café under siege from Australians demanding more liquor.

“I went in with my man Bradshaw and stood behind the bar with my revolver and I threatened to shoot the first man who came inside,” he later recalled. “They howled and swore and refused to clear out.”

Ludlow wrote that it took “half an hour of intense excitement” to clear the place. “The Anzacs are very brave men,” Ludlow wrote, “but they are simply a mob in uniform.”

Drunkenness, flagrant disobedience and insubordination were serious enough, but more serious still was the desertion rate which, already substantially above the average for the British Army, soared in 1917 in the aftermath of the fighting in Flanders.





Despite their flagrant disregard for military authority, the government of Australia refused to allow its soldiers to face firing squads. (Image source: WikiCommons)

The five Australian divisions had been employed in the battles of [Messines](#), [Menin Road](#), [Polygon Wood](#), [Broodseinde](#) and the disastrous [Oct. 12 attack at Passchendaele](#). In five months, 38,000 casualties were reported. Deserters slipped away and sometimes formed armed gangs that lived rough in forests and rear areas. Confident they were beyond the reach of justice and immune from the death penalty, one large group of smiling Australian deserters posed for a photograph that they sent to the chief of British Military Police along with their best wishes and hopes that they never meet again. The photograph found its way to the British commander-in-chief, [Douglas Haig](#), who kept it in his files as a reminder of outrageous Australian indiscipline. Haig, along with most of the brass, privately fumed that while British troops had been executed for far less, Australians were free to desert, send taunting messages to superiors and yet remain safe from the firing squads he believed they richly deserved.

Although the AIF grappled with these problems throughout the war and cracked down with harsher sentences for military crimes, there was no measurable improvement in discipline. This was partly due to the entrenched culture that was dismissive of traditional military custom, proudly egalitarian and hostile to displays of authority.



Two war-

weary men of the Australian 32nd Battalion in France. (Image source: WikiCommons)

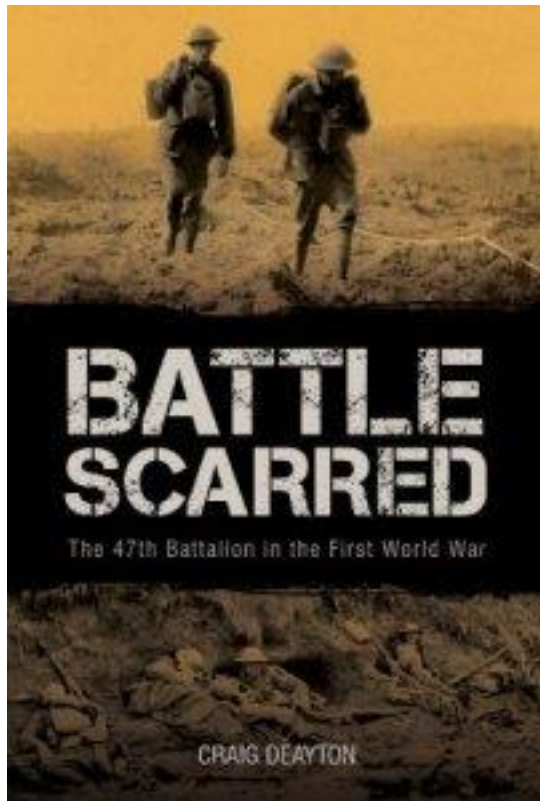
Some British observers attributed the AIF's unruliness to the country's history as a convict colony and the notion that delinquency was in Australians' blood.

And yet, the observation made by General Birdwood in 1915 somehow managed to hold true. The performance of the AIF in 1918 was ‘beyond all praise’ according to one British senior commander and they had a pivotal role both in turning back the [German’s 1918 spring offensive](#) and spearheading attacks as the Allies went on the offensive in June. Haig turned to his Australians again and again as he pressed forward toward victory.

Now formed in their own army corps and under the command of the [General John Monash](#), who proved to be one of the most effective and skilled commanders of the war, the Australian divisions led major attacks during the climactic [Hundred Days Offensive](#), which sent the German army reeling. The casualty rates of those divisions were appalling – proof, if any more was needed, that the Australian *esprit de corps* was superb, but evidence also that such losses could not be sustained indefinitely.

Faced in the summer of 1918 with dwindling numbers of, Monash was forced to disband numerically weaker battalions to reinforce the others. Having given their all in the crucial and costly victories of August and September, some battalions were down to less than a third of their strength.

Diminished though they were, the Australians had one more kick to deliver to the high command. The battalions slated for disbandment simply refused to stand down, saying that they would continue to fight and obey every order except any that broke them up. One such unit, [the 37<sup>th</sup> Battalion](#), insisted they be allowed to fight together under their colours in the upcoming battle for [St. Quentin Canal](#). They argued that either they would be victorious in the battle or there would be no 37<sup>th</sup> left to disband at its end. Despite such open insubordination, it was hard for Monash to condemn the mutineers.



Exhausted, the five Australian divisions were finally withdrawn from combat on Oct. 6 following their last action at [Montbrehain](#). By war's end over 400,000 men from Australia had enlisted and the 'butcher's bill' for the young nation was 62,000 killed and 156,000 wounded.

A mob in uniform perhaps, but 'their name liveth for evermore' regardless.

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