

Recovery in the trenches: the Australian Corps and the Flanders winter, November 1917–March 1918

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The old elasticity of the “Diggers” might never quite be regained.

- C. E. W. Bean.

The period of rest and recovery on the Western Front after the horrors of 1917 is underrepresented in the literature on the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during the First World War. From the formation of the Australian Corps in November 1917 to the German Spring Offensive in March 1918, the AIF are generally understood to be resting at Messines in Belgium. Since this period is perceived as one of inactivity, it is often passed over in accounts of Australia in the First World War. Historical accounts tend to use this juncture in the narrative to switch to the Light Horse and the fighting in Palestine. An examination of the operational war diaries from AIF battalions, brigades, and divisions, as well as private accounts from the men who endured the 1917–18 winter in Flanders, challenges these assumptions about the fighting on the Western Front: the AIF did much more during this time than simply hold parts of the front line.

Introduction

In the time between November 1917 and the German Spring Offensive in late March 1918, the AIF were said to be resting at Messines on a relatively quiet front. Lieutenant George Mitchell of the 48th Battalion described this period of his wartime experiences as “uneventful”: sleet and snow followed him back to his billets near the town of Meteren where the friendly peasantry might have been their own. He described those glorious weeks of training and sports going smoothly, with the sun shining more brightly every day.¹ Mitchell’s fond memories during this time of the war characterise a prevailing and simplified view of how Australian troops spent the

¹ G.D. Mitchell, *Backs to the wall: A larrikin on the Western Front*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2007, p. 206.

Flanders winter of 1917–18. Through such simplification, details are often misunderstood and confused. The Australian official war historian Charles Bean barely mentions this period in *Anzac to Amiens*. Some mention of it is found within a preamble to the chapter dealing with the start of the German Spring Offensive on 21 March 1918.² Les Carlyon's *The Great War*, dedicates a little more time to discussing this period, but it is not comprehensive and is mainly covering issues relating to the AIF's manpower shortages, declining voluntary enlistments and the formation of the Australian Corps.³

What was this period like for the Australians who remained in Flanders during the winter of 1917–18? Was it bleak and miserable like the Somme winter of 1916–17, or did it offer a new host of problems for the AIF? In light of the exceptionally heavy casualties suffered by the Australians during the Third Battle of Ypres a few weeks earlier, how did the Australians recover and prepare for what would be the final year of the Great War? This period of the Australian wartime experience should not be dismissed as a period of inactivity. In looking at how the AIF spent this quiet period in its campaigns on the Western Front, we see a more nuanced account of life in the trenches. Set against the background of declining enlistment and dwindling manpower, how did the AIF use this period of relative inactivity to prepare for the fighting in 1918?

The Australian Corps

In 1917, the AIF had been engaged in the major battles of Bullecourt, Messines, and the Third Battle of Ypres at Passchendaele, suffering a total 165,920 casualties, of which 15,162 were killed in action. This accounted for 45 per cent of the total killed in action on the Western Front.⁴ During the Third Battle of Ypres at Passchendaele in

² See C. E. W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens: A shorter history of the Australian fighting services in the First World War*, 4th ed., Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1961.

³ See Les Carlyon, *The Great War*, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2006.

⁴ A. G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914-1918, vol. ii The Western Front*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, p. 856.

1917, the AIF had lost 38,000 men in eight weeks.⁵ As a result, the Australian divisions were short by 18,000 in October 1917.⁶

More men were needed for the front, but voluntary enlistment was on a downward trajectory and showed no signs of increasing. Enlistment numbers were down to 5,000 men a month, when the minimum needed to keep battalions at full strength was 7,000.⁷ In an effort to increase these figures, previous restrictions on eligibility requirements were relaxed, opening service to older and less healthy men, although this made little impact on the figures.⁸ Campaigning for the second conscription plebiscite was in full swing on the Australian home front, bitterly dividing the nation between the “Yes” and “No” votes, the AIF’s manpower shortage in France and Belgium highlighted the desperate need for reinforcements. The collapse of the Eastern Front in late 1917 and Russia’s withdraw from the war lead to an anticipated German offensive in the west. Germany would soon be in a position to transfer over a million troops to the Western Front in an effort to achieve a decisive breakthrough.

On the 17th December 1917, a mere three days before the nation would cast their votes (but eight weeks after it was written), the *Age* newspaper published a statement from Australian Corps commander, General Sir William Birdwood, entitled “The Need For Men. General Birdwood Testifies. Utter Inability to Bring Divisions Up to Strength”. The article stated that Australians should vote with the urgency of the reinforcement situation utmost in their minds, and should therefore vote in favour of conscription.⁹ Despite the seriousness of the situation for the AIF, on the 20 December 1917 the plebiscite was rejected for a second time. While the proportion of “No” vote had increased since the first vote on 29 October 1916, it was still rejected by a very narrow margin. Irrespective of the arguments for and against conscription that were communicated on the home front, and by the men in the line,

⁵ C. E. W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens: A shorter history of the Australian fighting services in the First World War*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1961 4th ed., p. 376.

⁶ Bean, vol. v., p. 3.

⁷ Bean, vol. v., p. 3.

⁸ Such restrictions include the July 1917 Half Caste Amendment, permitting indigenous Australians with one parent of European origin to enlist.

⁹ “The Need for Men”, *The Age*, 17 December 1917.

the fact was Australia remained one of the few countries within the British Empire that did not introduce conscription.¹⁰

While the Australian population remained divided over the issue of conscription, the AIF did its best to reorganise under the new structure of the Australian Corps. After discussions in June 1916 over the formation of an Australian Army, a more modest proposal suggested grouping the Australian combat formations as a corps to remedy the issue of manpower fatigue and shortages. The decision to separate from the New Zealanders was not made lightly given the shared experiences of the I and II ANZAC Corps on Gallipoli and throughout the fighting of 1916 and 1917. However, the men felt they were sent to “where [they] always wanted to be, with the rest of the Australians”.¹¹ A corps of four divisions would allow for a rotation of two on the line and two in reserve. The Australian Corps was therefore formed on 1 November 1917, comprising of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, and 5th Divisions, under the command of British General Sir William Birdwood.¹² The 4th Division was the most battle-worn, and was flagged as a depot formation for drafts and reinforcements, but re-joined the Australia Corps in January 1918.

The Australians were posted to a quiet sector during this period with the intention of bringing units up to strength and allowing for the sick and wounded to return to their units.¹³ As Peter Pedersen writes, the AIF spent “Four months recuperating, refitting and training at Messines ... the steady flow of returning wounded temporarily eased the manpower shortage”.¹⁴

The Australians first spent time in the area around Messines in the fighting before the Third Battle of Ypres. The Australian 3rd and 4th Divisions had participated in the spectacular attack on 7 June 1917 that saw the British capture Messines Ridge, and were involved in the fighting that raged in the weeks

¹⁰ A. D. Ellis, *The story of the Fifth Australian Division: being an authoritative account of the Divisions doings in Egypt, France and Belgium*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1920, p. 267.

¹¹ Green, *The Fortieth: a record of the 40th Battalion, AIF*, Government Printer, Hobart, 1922, p. 97.

¹² Until General Sir John Monash took this position in June 1918.

¹³ Bean, vol. v; Pederson, *The Anzacs*, p.276.

¹⁴ Peter Pedersen, *The Anzacs: Gallipoli to the Western Front*, The Penguin Group, Camberwell, 2007, p. 277.

afterwards. After they were relieved from the fighting at Ypres in November 1917, the Australians returned to this now quiet part of the line for a period of rest and recovery. Major General John Monash, then commanding the 3rd Australian Division, wrote home saying, "I find myself once again in command of the same sector of front which I captured in June and July."¹⁵ The front line held by the Australian Corps was extensive, extending from the Belgian town of Hollebeke in the north to Armentières in France to the south. This front equated to approximately 16km in length, with a trench length of some 12km.¹⁶ The line was grouped into two distinct sectors: the northern sector, or Messines-Wytschaete Sector, ran from Hollebeke to the town of Warneton; the southern Sector, or Plogstreet-Messines Sector, from Warneton to Armentières.¹⁷ This front was much longer than the front the Australians had held the previous winter and defended with three divisions in the forward area. But rather than holding the area with a continuous trench system, forward units occupied mutually supporting strong points and outposts containing German pill boxes and trenches captured during the fighting in June 1917.¹⁸

The period the AIF spent holding this position did give units an opportunity to rest and recover, but they did so amid plenty of work in preparation for the expected German offensive. The experiences of Australian soldiers show that the terms "quiet sector" and "rest" were something of a misnomer. Peter Pedersen acknowledges that the period was not without activity: Raids were routinely launched against the German positions and patrols were actively stalking no man's land and taking prisoners. Despite conducting twice as many patrols as the Australians, only 10 out of 54 German raids succeeded in taking prisoners, compared to 14 out of 25 successful Australian raids.¹⁹

The period also provided an opportunity for training, and development of defensive measures. The nature of trench warfare meant that though the period was used to relieve the manpower shortage, men continued to die, become casualties

¹⁵ Monash War Letters, 14 Nov 1917.

¹⁶ W.H. Downing, *To the last ridge*, p. 89.

¹⁷ Flanders Winter, Australian Corps Defence Scheme, Dec. 1917 - March 1918, AWM26, 288/3.

¹⁸ Flanders Winter, Australian Corps Defence Scheme, Dec. 1917 - March 1918, AWM26, 288/3.

¹⁹ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 277.

through enemy action, or be taken prisoners of war. A tendency towards indiscipline continued to follow the Australians, and as men were returning from convalescence, others were leaving the front for a variety of reasons.

Offensives

While the Australians in the Messines sector were holding the line in a purely defensive role, it was far from a benign existence. Anticipating an attack by German troops on his front, Lieutenant Frank Bethune of the 3rd Machine Gun Company issued orders that stressed his men were to hold their position at all costs until relieved: "If the section cannot remain alive, it will remain here dead, but in any case it will remain here. Should any man, through shell shock or other cause, attempt to surrender, he will remain here dead."²⁰ The sentiment in letters and diaries from the front are varied. Sergeant Archibald Barwick of the 1st Battalion believed that the sector was the most important on the Western Front, sharing Bethune's sentiment.²¹ Others would describe it as largely uneventful.

The role at the Australian Corps was to defend the Messines-Wytschaete area, and by doing so, defend the gains British and dominion forces had achieved in the fighting at Messines and Ypres.²² As well as manning the existing positions, the Australian Corps deepened defences around the vital railway at Hazebrouck which supplied British forces engaged in holding the line at Ypres.²³ Although familiar with the area, they were unaccustomed to the system of defence, described as somewhat a "radical alteration."²⁴

The corps front was split into two sectors, with three divisional areas. From south to north, A, B, and C. "A" Divisional Area was 6.4 kilometres in length occupying the low-lying area of Plogsteert, Hill 63, and the River Lys. "B" Divisional Area was 5.5 kilometres in length, in the area of the former Messines battlefield. "C"

²⁰ Bean, vol v., p. 110.

²¹ Archie Barwick, *In Great Spirits: The WWI Diary of Archie Barwick*, Harper Collins Publishers, Sydney South, 2013, p. 308.

²² Ellis, *The Story of the fifth*, p. 260.

²³ David Cameron, *Australians on the Western Front 1918. Volume one, resisting the Great German Offensive*, Viking Australia, Hawthorne, p. 1.

²⁴ Ellis, *The Story of the fifth*, p. 271.

Divisional Area, described as temporary in the defence scheme, although in reality it was not, was 2.7km in length. Each forward area was organised so that the division had two brigades in the line and one brigade in reserve. Each brigade held a two-battalion frontage, except the right front of "B" division, which required four battalions to man the forward area.²⁵ The right brigade held two-thirds of the sector with all four battalions in the line and the left brigade held one third with two battalions in the line.²⁶ "C" divisional area was also on a four battalion front.²⁷ Walter Downing described this system of defence in his memoir, *To the last ridge*:

*The Australian divisions waited on the vital ridge of Messines. Night and day the men dug defences, toiling like galley slaves, but nothing happened. The 1st Division was relieved and after a brief spell returned to the line; the third and fourth moved into their rest area and still we strained our eyes in the faint lights of dusk and dawn, tensely awaiting the hurricane that did not come.*²⁸

When in the line, work during the day was carried out in areas out of enemy observation, primarily in low sheltered places such as trenches and dugouts. Nocturnal activity allowed the men to work in open areas and included, as Tim Cook writes, "wiring, digging, laying duckboards and patrolling. During the day men would rest, snipe and take their turn on sentry duty."²⁹ Rifle companies rotated through the forward area every five to seven days, between the front, support and reserve lines.³⁰ In the sector held by the 5th Division, trenches were drained and revetted; strong points were constructed and wired; over 3.7 kilometres of duckboards were laid; forward accommodation was improved; splinter proof dugouts were constructed for the purpose of unit headquarters and medical uses; the forward roads were screened; and communication cables to battalion headquarters were buried.³¹ Eventually it was believed that "the defences built by the Australian Corps

²⁵ Flanders Winter, Australian Corps Defence Scheme, Dec. 1917 – March 1918, AWM26, 288/3.

²⁶ Ellis, *The Story of the fifth*, p. 271.

²⁷ Flanders Winter, Australian Corps Defence Scheme, Dec. 1917 – March 1918, AWM26, 288/3.

²⁸ W. H. Downing, *To the last ridge: the WWI experiences of W. H. Downing*, Duffy and Snellgrove, Sydney, 1998, p. 101.

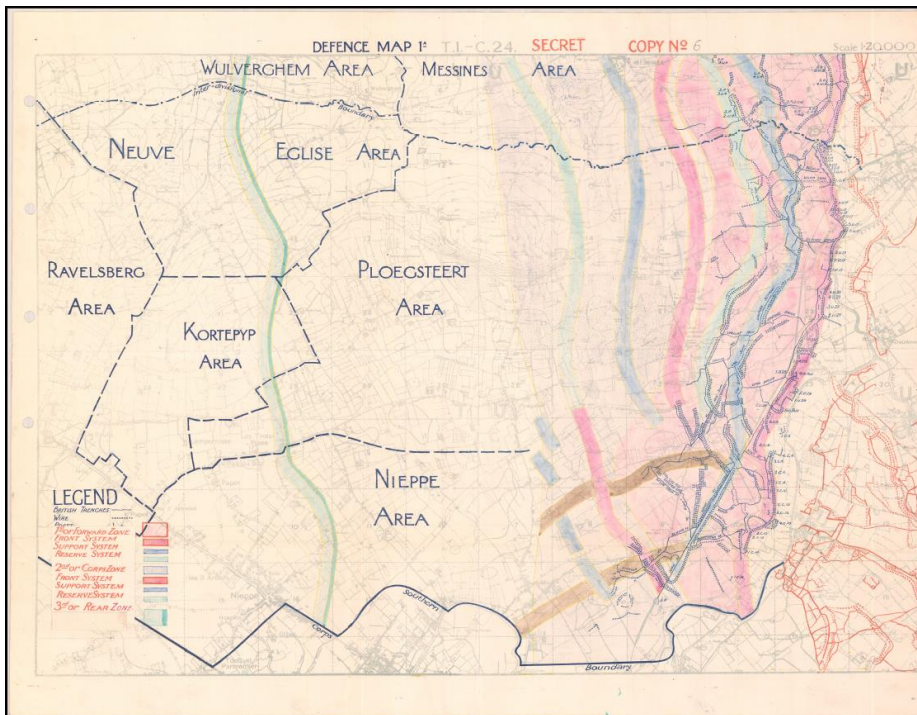
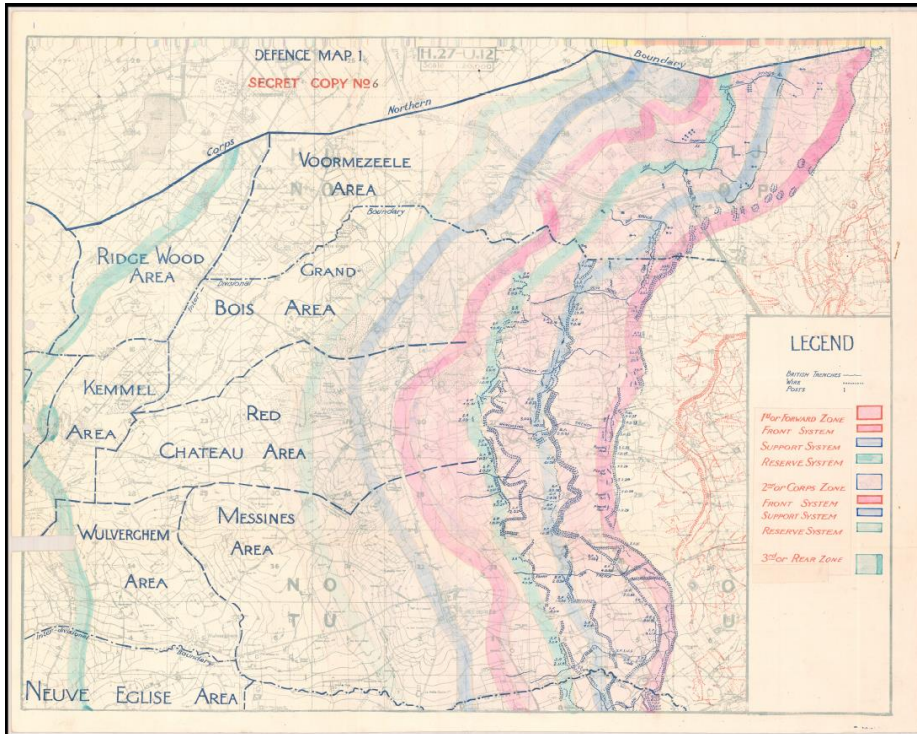
²⁹ Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 191.

³⁰ Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 191.

³¹ Ellis, *The Story of the Fifth*, p. 264.

in the Ploegteert-Messines Sector were enormously strong, and it was then thought impossible for the enemy to break through them.”³²

Maps 1 and 2: The Australian Corps Front, Northern and Southern Sectors.
AWM26 288/3



³² Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 107.

Image 1: A party of the 22nd Battalion constructs apron wire entanglements, Ploegsteert Wood, Belgium, 26 December 1917.



Image 2: Australians clear the main drain from the trenches, Armentières France, c. 1917.



While in reserve around Hill 63 in the low-lying area at Warneton, all reserve men worked in trench systems behind the front line. The dugouts in Warneton were all flooded due to the area's high water table.³³ The trenches were most recently inherited from the British and were in poor condition; a lot of work was done early on to make them liveable as it was not unusual for dugouts to be flooded.³⁴ Working parties consisted of wiring, digging, laying duckboards and generally strengthening the defences, and took place at all hours of the day.

The 13th Battalion at Spoil Bank and White Chateau in the northern sector of the Australian Corps front spent their days building dugouts, strong points and bombproofs around transport lines. The men also saw "many interesting air fights, our planes generally being the more offensive and successful."³⁵

Raiding and patrolling

The Australian Corps defence scheme from this period identified three forms of possible attack: German raids with the intention of snatching prisoners and documents to obtain identification; attacks to regain ground lost in 1917, separated into those with and those without preliminary bombardment.³⁶ As such, this so-called quiet sector did not remain quiet for too long: at night there were clashing patrols, raids, heavy shelling, and long tours of the line lasting anywhere up to a week in the front line.³⁷ Downing writes that "the German line was crammed with minenwerfers [trench mortars]. Ours was crammed with men."³⁸

Trench raids were common during this period. Conducted by both the Germans and Australians, their intention was to collect information on the enemy by breaking into its positions, taking prisoners, and collecting documents that might yield unit identification or intelligence on the enemy's morale. A "regular supply" of prisoners would also ensure the command kept on top of German movements up

³³ Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 107.

³⁴ Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 185.

³⁵ T.A. White, *The Fighting Thirteenth: the history of the Thirteenth Battalion, AIF*, 13th Battalion, AIF Committee, Sydney, 1924, p. 117.

³⁶ Flanders Winter, Australian Corps Defence Scheme, Dec. 1917 - March 1918, AWM26, 288/3.

³⁷ Downing, *To the last ridge*, p. 90.

³⁸ Downing, *To the last ridge*, p. 90.

and down the length of the Western Front.³⁹ Short, sharp, and violent, a trench raid was considered successful if the number of casualties in the raiding party was less than the numbers it inflicted.⁴⁰ According to General Sir Douglas Haig, the commander in chief of the British Expeditionary Force, trench raids sought to “wear down the enemy both materially and morally”, and to “increase [the enemy’s] rate of wastage compared to our own.”⁴¹ Raids were an ever-present risk and effective in their unpredictability.⁴² Tony Ashworth argues that the success of raids was reliant on this inability to “ritualise” them, and stimulated men during periods of inactivity in what was otherwise a live and let live system.⁴³

One such raid carried out by the Australians during this period demonstrates their importance in the daily routine of trench life on the Western Front. On the night of 30 November–1 December, elements of the 10th Brigade (3rd Division) carried out their most successful raid during the war, with their objective being “the enemy trenches immediately north of the railway from Warneton to La Basse Ville.” A raiding party from the 39th Battalion began their assault at 5:15pm with another party from the 40th Battalion following seven and a half hours later, with the intention of finding the Germans in disarray, “disorganised and repairing his trenches”.⁴⁴ From a combined assault group of four officers and 72 other ranks, they lost just two casualties, and inflicted an estimated 100 German casualties.⁴⁵ Intelligence was obtained from five prisoners, three of whom were taken unwounded.⁴⁶ The resounding success of this raid saw two military crosses, one distinguished conduct medal and six military medals awarded.⁴⁷

In turn, the 10th Battalion withstood a German raid in March when they were in the process of relieving the 13th Battalion from the forward area. On the night of

³⁹ Ellis, *The Story of the Fifth*, p. 272.

⁴⁰ Aaron Pegram, “‘Nightly Suicide Operations’: Trench Raids and the development of the AIF, 1916-1918” in ed. Jean Bou, *The AIF in Battle: How the Australian Imperial Force fought 1914-1918*, 2016, p. 191.

⁴¹ Tony Ashworth, *Trench Warfare, 1916-1918: The Live and Let Live System*, Melbourne University Publishing, Carlton, 2000, pp. 181-182.

⁴² Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, p. 177.

⁴³ Ashworth, *Trench Warfare*, p. 177, 182.

⁴⁴ Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 101.

⁴⁵ Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 103.

⁴⁶ War Diary, 39th Battalion, November 1917; War Diary, 40th Battalion, December 1917.

⁴⁷ War Diary 40th Battalion, December 1917.

1-2 March 1918, the 13th Battalion informed the relieving 10th Battalion they were aware of a planned German raid. As a result, the groups were in a hurry to complete the changeover. The German bombardment crashed down upon them at 9:40pm before a German raiding party of nine officers and 200 other ranks infiltrated the Australian positions.⁴⁸ The 10th Battalion alone lost seven men as prisoners, 16 wounded, and four men killed. Major Horace Henwood was reported to have been taken prisoner while crossing no man's land and subsequently died from a gunshot wound, aged just 28.⁴⁹

Accounts of the experience in the line vary greatly. Captain Robert Henderson of the 13th Battalion wrote home describing how he had "some great excitement in the line this time."⁵⁰ George Mitchell claims that "There were many bad five minutes from whizz-bangs", but all in all it was a rather uneventful tour of duty at Meteren.⁵¹ During his period in the line in January 1918, Archie Barwick worked to build strong points, was subjected to German gas and shelling, and received a concussion while in a dug out with stretcher bearers.⁵² As Captain Frank Green of the 40th Battalion said during his stint in the line "we had a bad time and sometimes wished that the enemy knew we were there for a rest."⁵³

Gas

March 1918 saw "the quickening of the military pulse" as the German Spring Offensive loomed, bringing with it an ever-present threat of poisonous gas, amongst other dangers.⁵⁴ Les Carlyon writes that during February a battalion near Warneton endured multiple bombardment of artillery-delivered gas shells. Over 260 men became casualties, a number that impacted the battalion heavily, removing more than one-third of their numbers.⁵⁵

⁴⁸ Berwick, *In Great Spirits*, p. 308.

⁴⁹ War Diary, Red Cross files, bean, vol v.

⁵⁰ Letter from Robert James Henderson to his mother, France, 4 March 1918.

⁵¹ Mitchell, *Backs to the Wall*, p. 206.

⁵² Barwick, *In Great Spirits*, p. 287-289.

⁵³ Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 98.

⁵⁴ Ellis, *The Story of the Fifth*, p. 273.

⁵⁵ Les Carlyon, *The Great War*, Pan Macmillan Australia, Sydney, 2006, p. 548.

By March 1918, Captain Robert Henderson wrote home that he was “teaching the boys how to do wiring in the dark with gas masks on.”⁵⁶ Lieutenant Thomas Richards similarly wrote in his diary that when working in a gas prone area travelling along duckboards with 40 men, “The gas helmet hanging on ones neck gets frightfully heavy.”⁵⁷ He later noted “An awful night of shelling and suspense ... Gas shells of all kinds mixed with high explosive rained down.”⁵⁸ Lieutenant Thomas Richard would develop “a hacking cough for 10 days from phosgene gas”, believing that “there is no doubt that my trouble like dozens of others in the Battalion is caused by gas, delayed action.”⁵⁹

In the northern sector the 9th Battalion were subject to multiple gas attacks, lasting for hours that resulted in heavy casualties. One such casualty was Private John Leak, VC. His career in the AIF came to an end on 6 of March 1918 when the Germans bombarded the battalion’s positions with gas which rendered him unfit for active service. A medical report by Major Leonard May evaluated the 3rd Brigade afterwards, stating:

*Fatigues have been heavy and the men have had little chance for sleep; and after the inter-company reliefs have been completed the men from the outposts, instead of resting, have to start carrying and working on wire and the like ... The numbers increase; they cannot sleep for coughing and get worse, despite treatment by inhalation, the air is found diluted and its sounds are poor in quality and the man complains that he feels all done in.*⁶⁰

Major May believed that a combination of gas, lack of sleep, military strain, and fatigue was contributing to the large number of casualties and affecting morale. He concluded that it was his duty to lay down the fact and state that the men “should not be left in until the men are seriously affected and require a very long rest to recover.”⁶¹ The great irony was that the men had already moved to this area for that

⁵⁶ Letter from Robert James Henderson to his sister "Jane", France, 19 March 1918, AWM 1DRL/0345.

⁵⁷ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 14 March 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

⁵⁸ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 14 March 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

⁵⁹ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 14 March 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

⁶⁰ War Diary, 3rd Brigade, March 1918, Part 1.

⁶¹ Major Leonard May, War Diary, 3rd Brigade, March 1918, Part 1.

very purpose, highlighting the reality that this so-called quiet part of the line was not very quiet at all.

Rest

When not in the front line or support positions, rest was obtained through a range of activities. According to Charles Bean, the Australian official historian of the first World War, rest activities at Messines consisted of cinema, concerts, canteens, football and other sports, as well as the drying and changing of socks.⁶² More concisely, rest was access to basic comforts that had been lacking in previous months, opportunity for entertainment to alleviate the monotony of trench life, while sports and training aimed to maintain fitness, boost morale and create healthy competition. Accounts of these activities are not isolated to Messines, but the rear-area towns of Meteren, Neauve Eglise, and Bailleul.

Basic comforts

The Somme winter of 1916–17 had been an ordeal for the men of the AIF. Fighting on the Somme had resulted in over 26,000 casualties in less than six weeks; plunging morale and endemic depression was exacerbated by the bleak and miserable conditions in the sector they held near Flers and Gueudecourt. Mud and other discomforts lead to men becoming casualties from weather-inflicted injuries such as frostbite, trench foot, and exhaustion.⁶³ Fresh water and ration deliveries were delayed, as was the transport of sick and wounded troops, with some facing a 12-hour waiting period.⁶⁴ While the Somme winter of 1916–17 had been characterised by mud, the Flanders winter 1917–18 did not face the same problems: the extremes of 1916–17 were an anomaly. The conditions were typical of the Ypres salient, boggy and extremely cold.⁶⁵ But weather features less within personal accounts of the war during the Flanders winter. Sergeant Archie Barwick of the 1st Battalion likened the

⁶² Bean, vol. v, p. 20.

⁶³ Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, 1982, p. 174.

⁶⁴ Gammage, *The Broken Years*, p. 174, 177.

⁶⁵ Wanliss, *The History of the Fourteenth*, p.259; Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 187.

Flanders winter to an average Tasmanian winter, with only half the amount of rain.⁶⁶ This dismissive sentiment was shared by Captain Robert Henderson, who wrote, "It is very cold and of course plenty of snow and cold winds yet it does not affect me one simply growls and swears."⁶⁷

The winter of 1916–17 on the Somme had been a learning opportunity for the AIF which had developed ways to minimise the likelihood of illness among men fighting in the trenches. On the Somme, attention was given to the condition of men's feet, with officers responsible for examining their platoons daily.⁶⁸ In Flanders, there was not a single case of trench foot.⁶⁹ Fatigue was similarly combatted by frequently rotating companies through the forward area and providing men with at least one hot meal a day under careful rationing.⁷⁰

Access to basic comforts when resting also alleviated the effects of winter. The accounts of some men show they had the relative freedom to travel to the rear area towns for rest and recuperation. Doing so gave the men a sense of putting the war behind them and celebrating occasions more familiar to them in civilian life. They celebrated Christmas and New Year supported by the Australian Comforts Fund and YMCA, who provided additional food and gifts.⁷¹ The 40th Battalion were provided with a Christmas dinner paid for with both regimental funds and benefit from the Australian Comforts Fund, and celebrated the New Year in recreation trying to stay warm.⁷² The 14th Battalion saw in the New Year playing sport.⁷³ The most enthusiastic description of the festivities is provided by Archie Barwick who describes food, whiskey, and rum, with an evening nap to sleep it off, and a night sat around a brazier ending in a snowball fight.⁷⁴

⁶⁶ Barwick, *In great spirits*, 28 January 1918, p. 303.

⁶⁷ Letter from Robert James Henderson to his mother, France, 6 January 1918.

⁶⁸ White, *The Fighting Thirteen*, p. 117.

⁶⁹ Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 187.

⁷⁰ Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 187.

⁷¹ Bean, vol v., p. 20.

⁷² Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 106.

⁷³ Wanliss, *The History of the Fourteenth*, p. 258.

⁷⁴ Barwick, *In great spirits*, p. 291-2.

*What a Xmas we have had. I enjoyed it the best of any ever since I can remember. We had fowls, roast potatoes and green peas, and for sweets stewed figs and custard and plenty of canned fruit and a few little trifles; altogether a nice little dinner.*⁷⁵

Entertainment

When formal activities behind the line were over for the day, the Australian soldiers were left to their own devices.⁷⁶ Concerts organised by companies were a crowd favourite, and Lieutenant Richards writes of walking 10 kilometres in February to go to a concert given by the 4th Ammunition Motor Company, noting the two men dressed as women were “very good indeed”.⁷⁷ Captain Henderson attended a show that was put on by the 4th Division on 6 February 1918, recalling that “it was really excellent and very clever in parts”.⁷⁸

Parties and dinners were also well attended. Captain Henderson used this period of rest to go out for dinner and drink champagne with French women.⁷⁹ An officers’ fancy dress party that ran until 2am saw many a good costume, with 18 out of 23 officers in attendance wearing “some sort of dress”.⁸⁰ Cross-dressing as a form of entertainment was not isolated to parties. In a letter home, Captain Henderson recounts the time he was comfortable in bed when an officer walked in wearing woman’s clothes in the company of a French or Belgian woman in the officer’s uniform: “Of course they dragged me out of bed” and they proceeded to visit all the officers until 1:30am, having “splendid fun”.⁸¹

Sports and training

Organised training and sports programs featured prominently throughout the Flanders winter. Training was carried out wherever possible, and with the support

⁷⁵ Barwick, *In great spirits*, p. 291.

⁷⁶ Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 183.

⁷⁷ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 24 February 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

⁷⁸ Letter from Robert James Henderson to his mother, France, 7 February 1918.

⁷⁹ Letter from Robert James Henderson to his mother, France, 4 March 1918.

⁸⁰ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 12 February 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

⁸¹ Letter from Robert James Henderson to his sister "Jane", France, 19 March 1918.

divisions in reserve positions.⁸² The intent was not only to hone the skills of servicemen but also to develop defensive skills.⁸³ The training program undertaken by the 13th Battalion from 4 -10 March and 11-17 March 1918 at Neuve Eglise offers an example. Week one saw the inclusion of kit inspections on Monday, in addition to the mending of clothes, haircuts, baths, and cleaning of equipment. Having come off the front line around Hollebeke on 2 March, every member of the battalion was subject to these measures. Mornings from 9.30am to 11.30am were dedicated to training and drills. This included saluting drills, gas helmet drills, platoon drills and muscle exercises, as well as bayonet fighting, musketry, rapid loading and marching. Both long and short-range rifle practice took place in the following week.⁸⁴

Afternoons from 1.30pm to 3.30pm were occupied in much the same way, with ample time scheduled for sports. It was the opinion of many that sports were a valuable activity for improving morale. As Green writes, "The weather combined with athletics and training, put new life into everybody, and within a fortnight the change was remarkable."⁸⁵ The only remedy for weary soldiers was "to be in reserve with fine weather and plenty of sport and amusement."⁸⁶ Thus, within the 13th Battalion's training program, boxing competitions were introduced in the second week, while football matches were taking place at least three times a week, every week.⁸⁷ Rugby Union and Australian Rules Football were played, depending on the origin of the division, and size of the playing ground.

Matches provided troops with morale, entertainment, increased fitness and helped men keep in contact with a normal life away from the war.⁸⁸ Private Edmund Harrington Street of the 55th Battalion claimed "football did more to rejuvenate a

⁸² Flanders Winter, Australian Corps Defence Scheme, Dec. 1917 - March 1918, AWM26, 288/3.

⁸³ Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 190.

⁸⁴ War Diary 13th Battalion March 1918.

⁸⁵ Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 110.

⁸⁶ Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 111.

⁸⁷ War Diary, 13th Battalion, March 1918.

⁸⁸ Wanliss, *The History of the Fourteenth*, p. 263; Blair, "Beyond the metaphor," *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*.

Battalion than anything else. Food kept us alive but footer [sic] made us enjoy living and forget death.”⁸⁹

Image 3: The 15th Australian Army Service Corps in Méteren, France, March 1918.



The popularity of football on the front is therefore not so unexpected. Not only were games well attended but they became a topic of conversation between troops and featured frequently in the diaries of individuals.⁹⁰ Upon visiting the 1st Field Ambulance, with whom he was formerly affiliated, Lieutenant Richards remarks that he was told of a “most remarkable game of rugby”.⁹¹ His account illustrates how committed men were to the game. Given his personal success as a professional rugby player before the war, Richards kept a meticulous record of the football games played by his battalion during their period off the front line when resting at Meteren in France. When playing the 13th Battalion on 10 February, he

⁸⁹ Cook, *Snowy to the Somme*, p. 187.

⁹⁰ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 16 February 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

⁹¹ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 11 February 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

even notes that this was a game played by Rugby Union rules, though league was preferred among the AIF.⁹² On every account his team won.

The sports program of the 13th Battalion at Neuve Eglise on Friday 22 March 1918 demonstrates that football was not the only organised form of physical activity and recreation. From 1.15pm until 4.32pm, 13 events were held near the YMCA facilities, with men required to congregate ten minutes before the event start time. Multiple heats of athletics events such as the 100 yards championship, hurdles, and high jump were run. Men competed in teamwork events such as tug of war and three-legged races, as well as non-athletic events based on skills learned and refined during training, including rapid loading and Lewis gun competitions.⁹³

The sports events were conducted on both a small and large scale. In March 1918, an inter-divisional platoon competition was held to determine the best platoon within the Australian Corps. Participants would be measured against attack practices using musketry skills, grenade throwing, bayonet fighting, and general skills of advance. The Army Rifle Association provided medals for this event with finals scheduled for 23 March but rescheduled to May when the German offensive began in the south.⁹⁴

Discipline

The final component of rest in this period was the allocation of leave to London and Paris. Long awaited by men, leave was a mixed blessing, as was any sort of free time. Desertion and absenteeism were common during this period and considered an endemic problem, but it is evident that relations with the locals while on leave were also an issue. Regular pay, periods of inactivity, and relative freedom in rear areas often culminated in breaches of military discipline. These included outbreaks of venereal disease, drunkenness, and lawlessness.

⁹² Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 10 February 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

⁹³ War Diary, 13th Battalion, March 1918.

⁹⁴ Green, *The Fortieth*, p. 111.

Absence and Desertion

By the end of 1917, the number of Australians in prison was six times that of other dominion troops, and eight times that of the British Army.⁹⁵ During the course of the war the British Courts Martial sentenced 266 men to death for desertion and 80 for other offences like cowardice and murder. Dominion troops on the Western Front faced a similar fate: 22 Canadians and one New Zealander were shot for desertion.⁹⁶ Richard Glenister suggests that the total number of desertion cases from the AIF was 4,101: of these, 266 men deserted twice and 16 deserted three times. Therefore, approximately 3,803 members of the AIF were found guilty of desertion by court martial. While 17 per cent of these occurred within Australia before embarkation, once soldiers were abroad, the statistics reflected a reality that one Australian in one hundred soldiers was likely to desert.⁹⁷ Unlike other dominion forces, desertion within the AIF did not result in the application of the death penalty owing to a clause within the *Australian Defence Act 1903*. This policy of desertion without execution upheld by the act is regarded as the reason for such high figures.

*No member of the Defence Force shall be sentenced to death by a court-martial except for mutiny, desertion to the enemy, or traitorously delivering up to the enemy any garrison, fortress, post, guard, or ship, vessel, or boat, or traitorous correspondence with the enemy, and no sentence of death passed by a court-martial shall be carried into effect until confirmed by the Governor-General.*⁹⁸

Australia was pressured three times from 1916–17 to change this clause and fall in line with other dominion countries. However, Australia's unwillingness to change the clause was rooted in public opinion. There was never a good time to raise the issue given the failure of the conscription plebiscites and was thought to never succeed.⁹⁹ As the war progressed, and the AIF suffered greater numbers of casualties, they experienced increasing numbers of desertion (See Graph 1). In 1918,

⁹⁵ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 271.

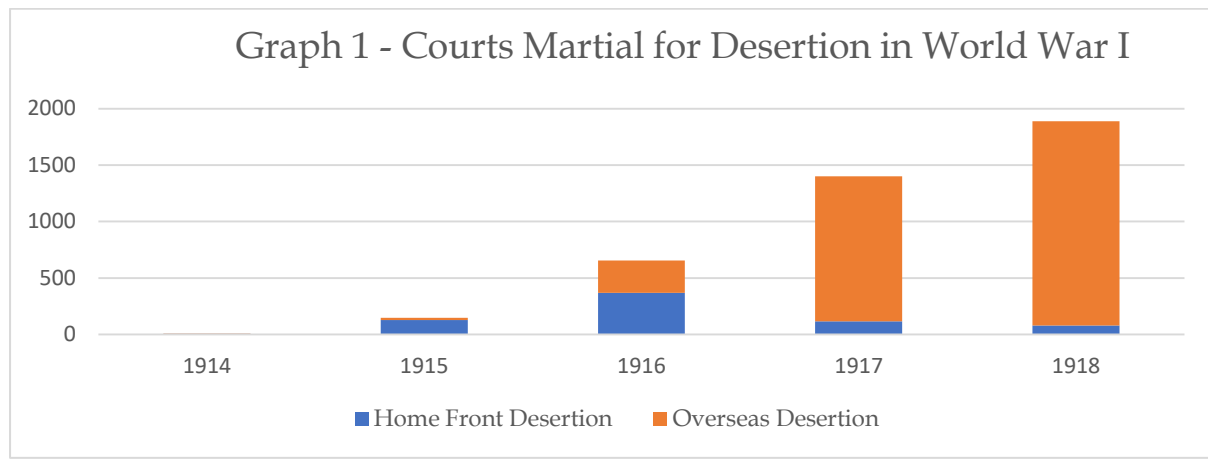
⁹⁶ Richard Glenister, *Desertion without execution: decisions that saved Australian Imperial Force deserters from the firing squad in World War I*, Honours Thesis, Latrobe University 1984 p. 3.

⁹⁷ Richard Glenister, *Desertion without execution*, p. 25.

⁹⁸ Richard Glenister, *Desertion without execution*, p. 4.

⁹⁹ Richard Glenister, *Desertion without execution*, p. 5.

the practice of naming and shaming offenders was introduced in the hope of deterring men from absconding. General Sir William Birdwood suggested having the names of deserters published in newspapers at home, with the first notices from the period under examination appearing in the Australian press in March 1918.¹⁰⁰



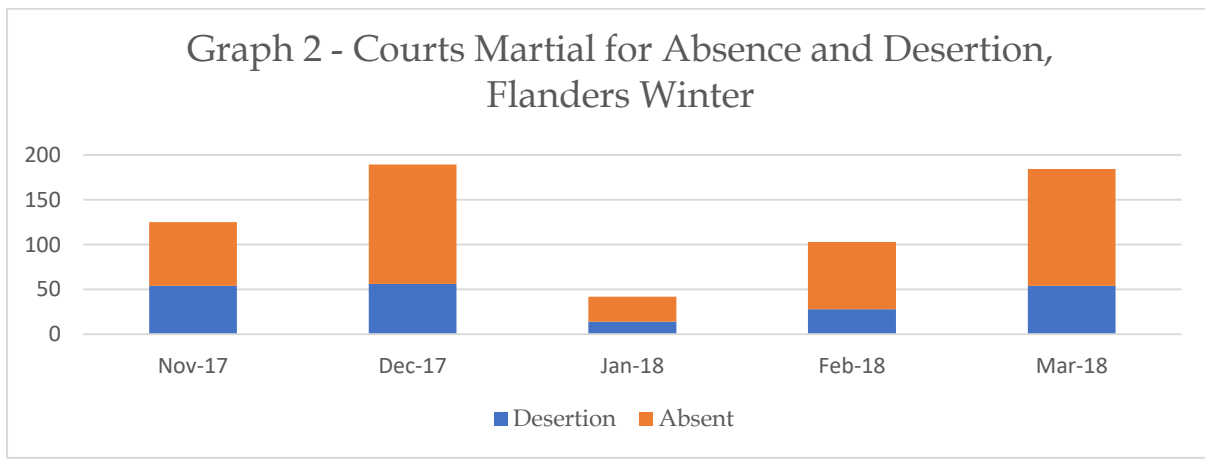
Graph 1: Reproduced from Glenister, *Desertion without execution: decisions that saved Australian Imperial Force deserters from the firing squad in World War I*.

Given the figures compiled by Glenister, this had little effect. Absconding has two forms: absenting without leave or overstaying leave, and outright deserting without the intention of returning. The number of men who absconded seemed to rise when units re-entered the line, even in relatively quiet sectors such as that at Messines. The last six months of 1917 saw more than double the number of courts martial being held than the first half of the year: October, November, and December were especially heavy when the AIF units were withdrawn from the fighting after the Third Battle of Ypres.¹⁰¹ According to figures cited in the Provost Corps war diaries in the final months of 1917 and throughout the Flanders winter into 1918, absenteeism without leave was a greater cause for court-marshalled offences within the AIF. The statistics suggest that numbers were higher at the beginning of this period after Third Battle of Ypres (and remained high possibly due to a backlog of cases) but also rose in March, as enemy activity increased ahead of the German Spring Offensive. The rate of absenteeism did not stop throughout January and

¹⁰⁰ Pedersen, *The Anzacs*, p. 305.

¹⁰¹ Glenister, *Desertion Without Execution*, p. 26.

February during this period of rest (See Graph 2). As Ashley Ekins states, absenting and deserting were signs that men were weary.¹⁰²



Graph 2: Figures from Assistant Provost Marshal War Diary.¹⁰³

By comparison, absent without leave charges were dealt with by the Field General Court Martials.¹⁰⁴ At Meteren, Lieutenant Richards noted that the volume of charges was “most remarkable”, with three or four courts sitting every day on absent without leave charges.¹⁰⁵ In his experience attending court sittings, he was often present for six hours at a time without break, seeing as many as 12 cases.¹⁰⁶ Noting that the sentences served were at times heavy, he believed overstaying leave had to be stopped.¹⁰⁷

One of those charges for being absent without leave was Private Richard Brett of the 2nd Division Signalling Company, who left France on leave to London on 12 January 1918 but failed to return to the front and report to the RTO Victorian Station on 26 January 1918. Some weeks later a court of enquiry was held on the field and it was determined that as of 12 March 1918 he was still absent; he remained so until apprehended in London on 24 June 1918. Pleading not guilty for the charge of

¹⁰² Ashley Ekins, “Fighting to exhaustion: morale, discipline and combat effectiveness in the armies of 1918,” in ed. Ashley Ekins, *1918 Year of Victory: the end of the Great War and the shaping of history*, Exisle Publishing, Wollombi, 2010, p. 114.

¹⁰³ War Diary, Assistant Provost Marshal, Australian Corp, November 1917-March 1918.

¹⁰⁴ AWM25, 807/1

¹⁰⁵ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 27 January 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

¹⁰⁶ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 22 February 1918, 8 March 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

¹⁰⁷ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 8 March 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

desertion, but found guilty, Brett was sentenced to a years' imprisonment with hard labour. 2nd Division Signalling Company was posted to the southern sector around Ploegsteert at the time of his absenteeism. Brett's story provides a clear example of an individual who had overstayed his leave; when found in London in plain clothing five months later there was little question about his intention of returning.¹⁰⁸

Given the five-month hiatus in Brett's case, the sentencing was not as severe as others who were found to have absented themselves from the front line. If an act of absenting without leave was committed after the offender was notified of upcoming duty in the front line, it became a charge of desertion.¹⁰⁹ Three men of the 4th Division who were posted to the northern sector of the line near Hollebeke absented themselves in late January of 1918. Private Arthur Herbert Lovering of the 49th Battalion deserted on 28 January 1918 and remained absent until surrendering himself at Bailieul on 4 February 1918. Private Leslie Griffin of the 14th Battalion and Private John Joesph Foran of the 49th Battalion, who possibly deserted together on 25 January 1918, were apprehended at Saint Omer – some 63 km away – on 31 January 1918. The 14th Battalion had been undertaking training per the syllabus and were suppling working parties to the line. On 29 January they were to move into the front line. The 49th Battalion were situated at Spoil Bank from 21 to 28 January working in salvaging parties in support to the 50th Battalion and were to move into the front line on 30 January. Each man would have had warning that their division were to move into the front line, influencing their decision to abscond, and therefore received a sentence of 10 or 15 years penal servitude.

Each individual service records reveal multiple charges for absence and insubordination before and after the Flanders winters, with both Griffin and Lovering escaping prison. Their personal histories prior to the war show no previous convictions. Lovering was 21 when he enlisted; Griffin signed up the moment he turned 18; Foran was 23. Foran's defence claims that he was not aware that his battalion was due to move into the line but did know Spoil Bank was in the forward

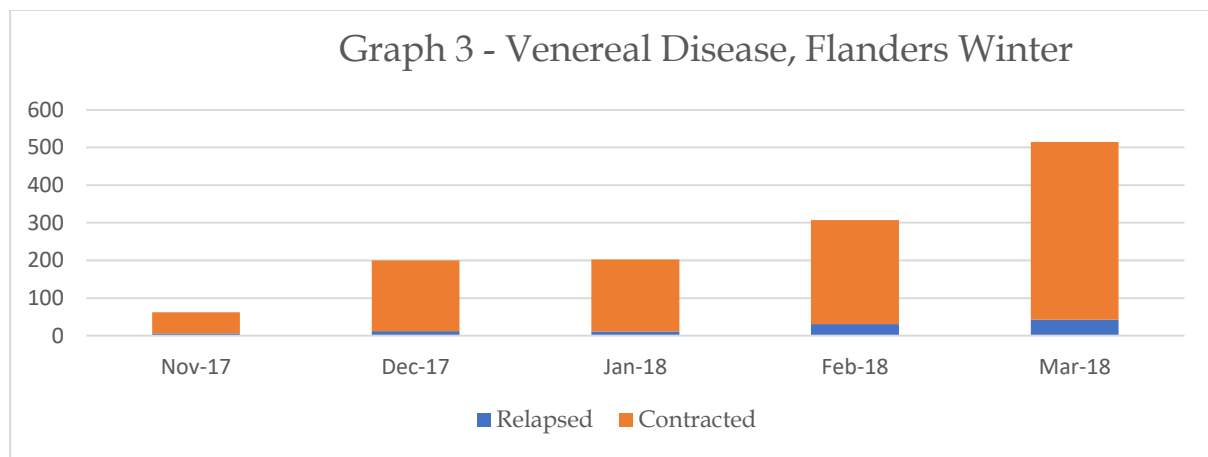
¹⁰⁸ AWM25, 807/1

¹⁰⁹ AWM25, 807/1

area. He stated that with persistent rheumatism and problems at home, “I was getting fed up ... so I quitte.”¹¹⁰

Venereal disease

Despite leave being an important aspect of rest and recuperation, it soon became associated with risks other than men overstaying their allotted time. Then Major General Sir John Monash described it as a mixed blessing in which soldiers “get into all sorts of mischief, get robbed, and often come seriously to grief”.¹¹¹ One such grief was the contraction of venereal disease. As stated in the *Official history of the Australian Army Medical Services*, venereal disease was “one of the most important medical problems of reconditioning, as it was of every phase of medical work in the war”.¹¹² During the Flanders winter, there were twice as many men taken out of the line suffering from venereal disease than were absenting or deserting. Evidently, as men took leave to London and Paris, they returned to the front with an unwanted souvenir.



Graph 3: Figures from Assistant Provost Marshal War Diary.¹¹³

By 1918 the AIF had adopted a “reasonably coherent” strategy against venereal diseases that included Ettie Rout’s common sense approach that men should not be expected to abstain from sexual desires. Instead of discouraging sex

¹¹⁰ NAA A417, 1855.

¹¹¹ Monash, *War Letter*, p. 214.

¹¹² Butler, *Medical* vol. II, p. 464.

¹¹³ War Diary, Assistant Provost Marshal, Australian Corp, November 1917–March 1918.

practices, Rout, a social reformer from New Zealand, promoted safe sex and distributed prophylaxis to the men on leave in London and Paris.¹¹⁴ If this failed, the soldier would be brought up on a charge, resulting in the forfeiture of pay for the duration of his treatment. This was a form of punishment applicable to both officers and other ranks.¹¹⁵

Treatment was an inconvenience that removed men from the front for five to ten weeks.¹¹⁶ This wastage was a bane, particularly given that the idea of rest was to return men from hospitals to the front, not to send men away from the front with venereal disease. It was so much of an inconvenience that monitoring and preventing interaction between soldiers and undesirables was one of the duties of the military police.¹¹⁷ However, it was near impossible to discern who these undesirables may have been. At Meteren, Lieutenant Richards remarked in his diary there were several girls about and officers would “gather around each night to play with them”.¹¹⁸ Likewise, he and some companions sought the company of allied nurses with whom they drank, writing, “I drew a very fine woman ... I didn’t know the name of mine.”¹¹⁹

Permitted leave from hospital in London while recovering from a gunshot wound to the arm, Lieutenant Richards spent most of his waking moments either dining, motoring around, or at the theatre. His diary reveals a lot of time spent with a woman named Helen.¹²⁰ Despite his apparent loyalty to her at his time, upon returning to the front he notes, “I have written to several of my girlfriends telling

¹¹⁴ Peter Stanley, *Bad Characters: Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder and the Australian Imperial Force*, Pier 9, Millers Point, 2010, p. 194-5.

¹¹⁵ Stanley, *Bad Characters*, p. 85.

¹¹⁶ Stanley, *Bad Characters*, p. 85.

¹¹⁷ Glenn Wahlert, *The Other Enemy? Australian Soldiers and the Military Police*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 1999, p. 53.

¹¹⁸ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 9 February 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

¹¹⁹ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 30 January 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

¹²⁰ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 12 November 1917, 15 November 1917, 18 December 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

them of my war weariness and home sickness.”¹²¹ He later remarked that he had received six letters, all from girls.¹²²

None of this explicitly suggests behaviour that could lead to the transmission of disease. However, it is undeniable that during leave in Paris and London, or time spent in rear towns behind the lines, women and soldiers would interact, making contraction of venereal disease likely. Criminalising disease did not work, neither did the suspension of pay.

Conclusion

The final year of the fighting on the Western Front began with the Australian Corps relatively rested: their combat techniques were honed, general fitness improved, and held the Messines-Wytschaete ridge against German attack, maintaining the British hold on the Ypres salient. For all the defensive measures that were put in place by the Australians, their effectiveness would not be known. By late March and early April, the German Spring Offensive began on the Somme and at Arras and the AIF found itself rushed south to help defend the strategically important city of Amiens.

Time spent in rest should not be misunderstood as inactivity; it consisted of more than football, clean socks, and comforts. It also involved trench raids, gas attacks and breaches of military law, active elements of warfare that challenged the task at hand to remedy the AIF’s manpower crisis. The AIF had entered the fierce fighting of 1918 with the divisions having taken on 14,042 men by reinforcements and wounded men returning to their units. Despite this, there were 1,287 reported cases of venereal disease and a further 643 men court martialled for absenting or deserting. Approximately 9,900 became casualties of the fighting during this period, which in the end, far exceeded the strength of the 3rd or 4th divisions after the Third Battle of Ypres.¹²³ As explained by Les Carlyon: “What the corps needed was fresh

¹²¹ Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 17 January 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

¹²² Diary, Lt. Thomas James Richards, 17 January 1918, Australian War Memorial, 2DRL/0786, No. 22.

¹²³ Bean and Butler

men, not just those whose nerves has been undone by years of fighting. As Bean put it, the Australian Corps was feeding upon itself.”¹²⁴

¹²⁴ Carlyon, *The Great War*, p. 533.