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978-1-107-02868-5 - To Win the Battle: The 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division in the Great War, 1914-18

Robert C Stevenson

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

‘The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there,’ thus LP Hartley, as a traveller from a far-off shore, viewed his vanished world before 1914 and so eloquently described the relationship between those trying to understand people and events of the past.<sup>1</sup> The Great War – or, as it came to be known, World War I – is indeed a foreign land to those living in the twenty-first century. On the one hand most would claim to know something of that cataclysmic event: the naïve enthusiasm for war, the unprecedented slaughter in the trenches, the unforgivable incompetence of the chateau generals and their callous staffs. At the same time nearly a century has passed since the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand lit the fuse to war, all of the active participants are dead, and the reasons why millions of men and women willingly went to war (and, more importantly, stayed there) is quite incomprehensible to a present-day generation. It is not that war has not been experienced since; indeed the Great War set the tone for what followed, giving rise to so much that is truly modern, albeit in the process becoming a foreign land in spite of its familiar landscape.

The Great War continues to cast a long shadow over Australian culture. Despite, and in part because of, Charles Bean’s monumental study of Australia’s role in that conflict, myths and legends continue to prevail over reality.<sup>2</sup> To many this war constitutes the epitome of war as horror, futility and stupidity. Paradoxically, alongside this revulsion lays a fascination with the achievements of the fledgling nation and the birth of the Anzac tradition, which has given rise to an industry of literature

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## 2 TO WIN THE BATTLE

and cinema eulogising the common Australian soldier. Nearly 332 000 Australian Imperial Force (AIF) ‘diggers’ served overseas during the war, and they are one of the paramount Australian archetypes. To the average Australian these superb fighters were as remarkable as they are unique. This study explores the collective experience of some 80 000 diggers, although it does so by focusing less on them as individuals and more on the organisation in which they served.<sup>3</sup>

From the Napoleonic wars the ‘division’ became a standard feature of military forces. By the eve of the Great War all European armies had adopted the division as their basic building block, and they were measured by the number of divisions they could field. In 1914 the nations of western Europe mobilised their vast ranks: France with seventy divisions, Germany with eighty-eight divisions, tiny Belgium with seven divisions and Britain’s ‘contemptibly little’ continental contribution of another seven divisions.<sup>4</sup> These organisations were what historian Cyril Falls called the real ‘unit’ of the war.<sup>5</sup>

The ‘division’ is the largest formation in Western armies to have a fixed organisation. The higher organisations of the ‘corps’ and then ‘army’ have flexible structures that can be tailored to meet particular tasks. Below the division, brigades and units have fixed organisations comprising one predominant military speciality, such as infantry or artillery, with defined roles and limited capacity. In contrast the division combines a full range of fighting arms and support services allowing it to undertake a variety of missions and imbuing it with substantial staying power. In industrial-age armies it was the division that fought battles, and in 1914 there were two types: infantry and cavalry. The cavalry was still regarded as the arm of decision; it was the ‘eyes’ of the army protecting its front and flanks, and after the enemy’s defeat the cavalry pursued to complete victory. The task of actually defeating the enemy belonged to the ‘poor bloody infantry’.

The 1914-era British infantry division was a large, composite organisation. It consisted of around 18 000 men, more than 5000 horses and nearly 1000 vehicles. Its combat units harnessed the lethal new technologies of the bolt-action, smokeless-powder rifle; the machine-gun; and quick-firing, rifled artillery. It had its own construction engineers and internal communications. The division maintained an administrative tail of supply and transport, ordnance, police, medical and veterinary elements. It was a complex organisation, a system of systems. The size of a small town, it contained all it needed to administer itself, train and

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fight. As the peak level of homogenous command, a virtual microcosm of an army and its principal tool of battle, the division is an ideal vehicle for examining how armies adapted to the challenges of industrial warfare.<sup>6</sup>

Britain began the war with a modest expeditionary force of just seven divisions drawn from its all-volunteer, regular army of 245 000.<sup>7</sup> By war's end the British Expeditionary Force (BEF) on the Western Front had grown into a conscript army of more than a million men and sixty divisions. This expansion was imitated by the larger self-governing dominions of the British Empire. The Canadian Expeditionary Force (CEF) grew from a single division to a four-division corps; the New Zealand Expeditionary Force (NZEF) expanded from two brigades to a full division; and Australia's first contingent of a single division eventually grew to a corps of five infantry divisions.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary observers of the British Army during the Great War assessed that the empire's divisions fell within three broad categories. There were those that were nearly always reliable and were called upon for important tasks; there were those that were more variable in performance but could usually be trusted; and finally there were those that were more or less untrustworthy and were expected only to hold the line. Those divisions that proved reliable tended to be called upon again and again, qualifying them for repeated use, and some historians have claimed that, at least by 1917, these became the spearhead of the BEF. Just which were the lead divisions is still a matter of debate, however. Anecdotal evidence from members of the BEF and its opponents suggests that there was a recognised hierarchy of divisions, although who made the Western Front 'top twenty' depends on who was asked and when the survey was taken. More recently British historians are attempting to quantify the relative merits of various divisions, although the results and validity of this research remain to be tested. To date a rough tally of the assorted divisions for which claims have been advanced provides a list of about thirty, a full half of the BEF's infantry. Although this might be an accurate reflection of the standard of divisional performance across the BEF, the problem is that some affirmations are staked on the basis of a single action late in the last year of the war while others are rooted in consistent achievement over several years. At this time the only point that can be made with certainty is that divisional status was and is a matter of interpretation and in large measure subjective. It was also a fickle mistress that could and did change.<sup>9</sup>

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For various reasons the five Australian divisions that fought with the BEF are usually included among the top-ranked, reliable British divisions.<sup>10</sup> While each Australian division established a separate and distinctive record, the 1st Australian Division stood out. Raised in 1914, it was the first division the fledgling Commonwealth had ever raised, and for this reason it was known in its infancy as *the* Australian Division. Its special status was also assisted by the close relationship that grew between the division's first commander Major General Sir William Throsby Bridges, his chief of staff Lieutenant Colonel (later General Sir) Cyril Brudenell White, and war correspondent and later official historian Charles Bean. It was Bean who actively nurtured the Anzac legend through his many publications and by championing the creation of the Australian War Memorial. The 1st Division always retained a special place in Bean's eyes because of its central role in the foundation of the legend that grew from the Gallipoli campaign.<sup>11</sup>

Following mobilisation in August and September 1914 the 1st Division left Australia bound for Britain. Although destined for the Western Front, the division disembarked in Egypt where it was indelibly linked with the New Zealand contingent to form the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). It was this force that was flung ashore on the Gallipoli peninsula in the early hours of 25 April 1915. The effusive media accounts that followed the landings soon elevated the 1st Division's reputation well beyond its actual achievement on the day. Be that as it may, events on the peninsula soon added further to its aura. Clinging to its tiny enclave, the division withstood everything the enemy defenders could throw at it. In May the 2nd Infantry Brigade earned the sobriquet the 'white Ghurkhas' for their gallant, failed attack at Krithia.<sup>12</sup> Then in August the 1st Infantry Brigade captured Lone Pine, and the division's success in this seemingly suicidal endeavour led to it being showered with seven Victoria Crosses (VCs). The award of decorations is a complex, emotive issue, and comparisons between organisations are odious; however, in discussing the matter of reputation it is worth acknowledging that the seven VCs awarded to members of the division for this one action was the largest number earned by any Australian division in a single battle and as many as the 5th Australian Division received during its two and a half years of service on the Western Front.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Gallipoli campaign ended in defeat, even vanquished the 1st Division gained lustre. In December the ANZAC was spirited off that fatal shore in an operation based on the masterly staff work of the division's old chief of staff Brudenell White and executed with remarkable

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discipline by its soldiers, leading some to claim a type of moral victory from the otherwise wasted effort. As the Australian media trumpeted at the time: ‘... the name of Gallipoli will never spell failure in Australian ears.’<sup>14</sup> The brilliant success of the ANZAC withdrawal, despite the fact that it was replicated at the other two British enclaves at Suvla and Helles, only added to the mystique that surrounded the division’s veterans.

Following the withdrawal the 1st Division returned to Egypt and became the core of a bigger AIF. Expanding from a force of two divisions to one with five infantry divisions, the division shifted from cradle to nursery. Having already provided staff for the 2nd Australian Division, in splitting its veteran battalions the 1st Division provided the nucleus to grow another two divisions, while many of its officers seeded key appointments in the others.<sup>15</sup>

After a brief period reorganising and defending the Suez Canal, and with a reputation the later formed divisions could only try to emulate, the 1st Division led the way to France in March 1916. On the Western Front the division achieved the AIF’s first and signal success of that year when it seized Pozzières in July. Under its stalwart commander, British regular army Major General (later Lieutenant General Sir) Harold ‘Hooky’ Walker and his chief of staff Lieutenant Colonel (later Field Marshall Sir) Thomas Blamey, the division earned a reputation for solid staff work in a rapidly expanded army where competent staff work was in woefully short supply. According to the division’s last commander Sir Thomas Glasgow, the success of Pozzières was second only to Gallipoli in importance. That the AIF’s senior division achieved both only enhanced its status.<sup>16</sup>

Then in the penultimate year of the war the 1st Division hit its peak. Beginning in April 1917, in the wake of the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, the division cleared the outpost villages of Hermies, Boursies and Demicourt just forward of the new German line. It followed this achievement with its desperate defence at Lagnicourt and then a further heroic battering in the Second Battle of Bullecourt in May. By mid-1917 senior German commanders on the Arras front were identifying the Australians and Canadians as the BEF’s toughest troops.<sup>17</sup> In September the division was thrust into the Third Battle of Ypres, where it participated in the successes of Menin Road and Broodseinde and the failures at Poelcappelle and Passchendaele. In these battles for the first time the Australian divisions were involved in a major offensive attacking side by side. By the end of the year the 1st Division could claim further laurels, although it was hardly unique in that. From this point on the Australians, along with a number of other British and dominion formations, came to

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be regarded as assault or storm divisions.<sup>18</sup> The 1st Division, however, was just one among equals since these other divisions had equally earned a reputation for hard and skilful fighting.

It was probably in the last year of the war that the 1st Division's reputation waxed brightest. Between April and July the division was separated from the other Australian divisions, now united under Lieutenant General (later Sir) John Monash in an Australian corps. Defending the vital hub of Hazebrouck the 1st Division helped stem the German spring offensives. The division found itself holding a wide new front and facing German formations that had passed their peak. Over four months in operations that were colloquially known as 'peaceful penetration', junior Australian commanders led an unceasing cycle of patrols, raids and small-unit offensive actions of a type that had seldom been possible during their earlier service. One attack at Merris in July was described as 'the best show ever done by a battalion in France'.<sup>19</sup> Possibly the ultimate compliment was paid to the division when a neighbouring British corps requested Australian patrol leaders as instructors for its divisions.<sup>20</sup>

Although recurring disciplinary problems threatened the division's reputation, its fighting performance remained intact and its ranking second to none. When it came time for the 1st Division to leave the Lys and return to the Somme all observers showered it with praise.<sup>21</sup> On the other side of the hill the Germans could only agree and, along with the other Australian divisions, the 1st Division was rated among the BEF's best.<sup>22</sup>

The division's final performance in the Hundred Days campaign was perhaps its finest. Beginning on 8 August with the Amiens counter-attack, the Australian Corps swept forward alongside the Canadians, the British III Corps and the French First Army, with the 1st Division subsequently playing a leading role at Lihons, Chuignes and Epéhy. Employing a dexterous mix of combined arms tactics, from August through to the end of September the division ground forward against stubborn German resistance and secured every set objective. Its last attack in France was described as 'one of the hardest blows ever struck by Australian troops'.<sup>23</sup> Finally it had to be relieved, like a punch-drunk boxer. Although the 1st Division's reputation was sullied in its final months when one of its battalions mutinied, it still stood out among its peers.

As the longest serving AIF division it was the only one able to lay claim to having served throughout the war from the beginning until the very end. In the process more men passed through its ranks than any other Australian division (nearly a quarter of the AIF who served overseas), it suffered more casualties than any of the others (including a quarter of

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Australia's war dead), and its members were awarded a total of twenty VCs (a third of the AIF's total), including seven of the nine awarded to Australians on Gallipoli. The division's units were also awarded more battle and campaign honours. In many respects the 1st Division's history is the history of the AIF and, as abhorrent and ultimately unfair as comparisons might be to other divisions, they indicate why the 1st Australian Division was so highly regarded, by both friend and foe.<sup>24</sup>

Given the importance of Australia's infantry divisions and their generally high reputation, it is surprising that only one of these has a history devoted to its Great War service. Even in the 1930s this phenomenon caused one ex-digger to note that the 'most remarkable feature of the dearth of AIF unit histories is that of the divisions; the 5th has been the only one heard of so far'<sup>25</sup> – and the 5th Australian Division's history was published ninety-two years ago.<sup>26</sup>

In contrast the British divisions of the Great War are better served, at least with regard to quantity. The British Army raised ninety divisions during the war, and more than half its infantry divisions have been the subject of a published history. Some of these works are excellent studies, having been written by historians of the calibre of Cyril Falls, although many are little more than sketchy and usually glowing anecdotal accounts of the doings of their particular organisation. This is not surprising since most were published in the decades immediately following the war and their intended market was surviving veterans.

It is a mixed story for the other British Empire contingents. The New Zealanders lead the field, and their single division can lay claim to at least four histories. The first of these is a lengthy official study published in 1921; the second, despite its title (*The Silent Division*), is strictly speaking not a divisional history since its narrative covers the NZEF's service on Gallipoli and the Western Front; the third is a general account published in 2005; and the most recent is a 2010 publication that comprehensively covers the history of the division in the form of a guide to its dark journey along the Western Front.<sup>27</sup> Other studies, especially those by Glyn Harper, Christopher Pugsley and Jock Vennell, have added considerable texture to the story of Major General Sir Andrew Russell's fine division, although most explore aspects of the NZEF story rather than the division as an organisation. The Canadians, on the other hand, have been lightly served. Until 2006, when Kenneth Radley's history of the 1st Canadian Division was published, none of the four Canadian divisions that saw active service had a published history.<sup>28</sup> Like the New Zealanders, however, a steady stream of other studies have been produced by such historians as Tim

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Cook, Desmond Morten and Bill Rawling, although these too concentrate on the CEF as a whole rather than its constituent divisions.

What most of the existing, published divisional histories share is that they are narrative in style, generally strong on description and weak on analysis. Radley's study is one of the exceptions as he explores the maturation of the 1st Canadians, focusing on the development of its command system, the divisional staff and its training. Peter Simkins' brief examination of the 18th (Eastern) Division is another and, although he was writing more than fifteen years ago, his observation that there is 'the need for a more systematic examination of divisional organisation, composition and performance in the BEF' remains just as valid today.<sup>29</sup> Although other recent unpublished studies have investigated the performance of particular British divisions, most of these spotlight training and operations as part of the ongoing 'learning curve' debate.

Discussion of a BEF 'learning curve' has continued for several decades. Its proponents argue that the British Army's expansion from imperial gendarmerie to continental army during the war hinged on the acquisition of the technological means and collective skills necessary to wage complex, industrial-scale operations against a first-class European opponent. The aphorism 'learning curve' was coined to suggest a process of improvement based on battlefield experience, which was slow, steady and coherent, at least for the BEF in the latter half of the war.<sup>30</sup> Whatever the validity of the thesis, the combination of the division's historical significance, its neglected historiography and Australian indifference demanded a new approach.

To explore the neglected story of the 1st Australian Division this study sets out to answer two questions: why did this particular formation earn such a formidable reputation, and how did it become one of the British Empire's reliable divisions? To answer this query a strictly narrative account was deemed inadequate because this traditional path tends to revolve around climactic battles, with limited discussion of the periods in between. Conversely, many battles are decided even before the first shot is fired, so it is necessary to take a deeper look at this multifarious organisation on and off the battlefield. At its core is an assessment of what the 1st Division did over its four and a half years of service. This is based on an analysis of how it was raised, organised and equipped, how it functioned, and what activities it performed (see Divisional Activities at Appendix 1). Such an approach lends itself to a thematic style so that each facet may be treated in a more balanced and holistic manner. Because of its scope, however, the study is not comparative, although I will occasionally refer

to other formations for illustrative purposes. Although juxtaposing the 1st Australian Division's experience with other British divisions would be illuminating (and needs to be done), to make meaningful comparisons would require a completely different study. This challenge awaits another author.

Structurally the book is divided into eight chapters. Although each chapter deals with a specific theme, they are broadly aligned with the six main periods of the division's history (see 1st Division Period Data and Period Activity Data at Appendix 2). The first chapter investigates the genesis of the division by reviewing the process of mobilisation and how this brought the division into existence. Chapter 2 examines the division's internal organisation, describing the units that comprised it, what part each played in its functioning and how they changed over the course of the war. Chapter 3 focuses on the first of three key activities: administration, maybe the most neglected subject in military history and paradoxically one of the most important for any large military organisation. Chapter 4 explores the second key activity: training, although digger mythology holds that the Aussie soldier was a superb natural fighter and required little in the way of preparation. Chapters 5 to 8 examine the 1st Division's third and most important activity: operations. The division's first campaign on Gallipoli is covered in chapter 5. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 explore chronologically the division's three years on the Western Front.

Finally, a note of caution. The study draws on an analysis of the daily activities of the 1st Division as recorded in its war diaries. The division maintained two divisional war diaries: one by the general staff focusing on operations and the other maintained by the administrative staff, which focused on personnel management and logistics.<sup>31</sup> In examining these it was possible to assess what activity the division was undertaking on any given day, with some qualifications. The division, with its thousands of men organised in some twenty different units, could and did undertake myriad activities at the same time. Allocating one specific activity to a particular day required a judgement to be made, and such a judgement was based on what appeared to be the division's main focus. Conversely, a day allocated to battle does not mean that administration or training was not taking place; indeed, often different units were engaged in every type of activity simultaneously. In the end a decision was required, and by concentrating on what the infantry was doing – it being the largest and most important element of the division – and applying a consistent methodology I hope that any errors or biases have been minimised (see 1st Division Activity Summary and Location Data at Appendix 2).

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## 10 TO WIN THE BATTLE

Throughout the book a number of terms appear, and it is necessary to explain these to ensure common understanding. The terms ‘strategy’, ‘operations’ and ‘tactics’ refer to the various levels of war. The strategic level embraces the ‘big picture’: the deployment of a nation’s power to fight wars. This level of war is the concern of politicians and senior commanders at the highest echelons, where the objectives of the war are set, national power is harnessed to achieve those objectives, and decisions are made on how the military is to be deployed. In the Great War the British Government directed the empire’s strategy, with Australia and the dominions playing only a peripheral role. The operational level of war is a relatively recent addition to the lexicon of military terminology. This concept evolved with the growth of armies and the expansion of warfare, both physically and intellectually, and, although it was not in use at the time (at least with this meaning), it is a useful term for explaining how the war was waged because it refers to the conduct of campaigns and serves as the link between strategy and lower-level tactics. In the Great War many operations that are customarily designated as battles were actually campaigns since they comprised a series of separate battles sequenced to achieve a particular strategic goal. So the Battle of the Somme in 1916, the Third Battle of Ypres in 1917 and the Second Battle of the Somme in 1918 were actually campaigns, whereas the actions in which the 1st Division participated (such as Pozzières, Menin Road and Epéhy) are battles. It is the conduct of these battles that is the tactical level of war, and it is here that the focus belongs in examining the 1st Australian Division.<sup>32</sup>

Other conventions have been applied for simplicity. Technically, until the *Citizenship Act 1948* all Australian-born persons were British subjects; however, this study identifies persons who were born in or migrated to Australia as Australians. All persons born in Great Britain, which in 1914 included Ireland, are termed British. The pre-1914 ‘Triple Entente’ powers of Britain, France and Russia were joined by Italy in 1915 becoming the ‘Allies’ with the signing of the Treaty of London. Similarly the ‘Central Powers’ of Germany and Austria–Hungary were abandoned by Italy only to be joined by the Ottoman Empire. Although Turkey did not gain independence until 1922, the defenders of Gallipoli are designated Turks. ‘ANZAC’ refers to the multi-divisional formation, whereas ‘Anzac’ refers to the sector on Gallipoli where the ANZAC operated. Abbreviations have been kept to a minimum in the text for ease of reading, although they are used in diagrams and endnotes for simplicity and space. For weight, distances and area, metric measurements have been cited for the most part, despite the fact that at the time Australia was still employing the