

## INTRODUCTION

‘Good old 6th Divvy.’<sup>1</sup> Thus wrote a 9th Division private in his diary in Palestine on hearing news of the first Australian land battle of the war, at Bardia in Libya. That battle, in January 1941, was a great victory for the 6th Division and set the tone for the Second AIF’s entire war. In short, the 6th’s role was pivotal in Australian military history, for its men fulfilled the awesome responsibility of proving that a new generation of Australians could emulate the high achievements of the First AIF. Not surprisingly, then, the 6th Division was a formation that was a household name in Australia throughout World War II.

Yet today the 6th Division is arguably the least known of the four infantry divisions of the Second AIF: 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th. In wartime its members claimed primacy, for theirs was not only the first to fight, but also the first division formed – in 1939, no less. It was a badge of great pride to be a ‘Thirty-Niner’, and it was a badge often waved in front of men of the later divisions: a 9th Division veteran recalled for me his discomfort when the warmth he showed the first 6th Division men he saw in Libya was met with disdain and accusations of being too slow to join up. Reinforcements to the 6th Division itself often met much the same attitude, at least in the Middle East. Men who joined in 1940 and saw every campaign of the division still smart in the 21st century at the recollection of their treatment at the hands of the originals. Though irksome to outsiders, this pride and sense of superiority helped to ensure that the 6th Division’s men continued to fight superbly and risk their lives even when the war was all but won.

Many thousands of the originals did not see out the war with the division, for more than 5000 were captured in Greece and Crete. Their subsequent story, as prisoners of war, is an important one, but falls beyond the scope of this divisional history. After Greece the 6th had to be largely rebuilt, but was able to contribute substantially to victory in the Pacific, especially in New Guinea. The commander of the AIF, General Blamey, could still call it the ‘the good old Sixth’ in November 1943.

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Blamey had been the original commander of the 6th and was one of many illustrious officers in the division. Sufficient leaders passed through its ranks to officer a force five times larger than the almost 20 000 originally raised for it. The 6th needed strong leaders, for of all the divisions, its men contained most of the larrikin type that made Australians infamous wherever they went on overseas leave. Yet if a sizeable minority misbehaved off the battlefield, with few exceptions they fought well in some of the most demanding terrain of the war: from desert plains to snow- and jungle-clad mountains. They fought four of the ‘King’s enemies’ – Italians, Germans, Vichy French and Japanese – and won the grudging respect of all.

The format of this book will be familiar to readers of my earlier histories of the 7th and 9th Divisions, in that photographs provide the stimulus for much of the discussion. I have included as many unofficial photographs as I could, and all readers will find here some photographs previously unknown to them.

Inevitably most of the photographs are official. I have sought wherever possible, and especially with well-known shots, to provide new information about them and the story of the 6th Division. Wonderful though these photographs are, the official captions are often scanty or even inaccurate.

As in my earlier divisional histories, tables showing the division’s senior officers, casualty totals and decorations supplement the narrative and photographs.

For readers who would like an explanation of what the 6th Division comprised, the next section of this introduction describes its composition briefly. In the subsequent chapters, the discussion of the photographs is in the body of the text.

## WHAT WAS THE 6TH DIVISION?

The 6th Australian Infantry Division, like all army divisions, was part of a hierarchy of formations and units. The following table shows the place of the division in that hierarchy, as well as the approximate numbers of men and the rank of commander usually associated with that unit:

**Table 1 The Division and the military hierarchy**

<i>Component</i>	<i>No. of men</i>	<i>Commanded by</i>
Army	60 000–100 000	General
Corps	30 000–50 000	Lieutenant-General
<b>Division</b>	<b>16 000–18 800</b>	<b>Major-General</b>
Brigade	3000–4000	Brigadier
Battalion	700–860	Lieutenant-Colonel
Company	120–185	Captain
Platoon	32–40	Lieutenant
Section	8–11	Corporal

For most of its six years of wartime existence, the 6th Division comprised between 12 480 and 18 800 men. Every volunteer accepted into the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was allotted to one of the military branches, such as infantry, artillery, engineers or signals. If assigned to certain units within those branches, he would be a member of the 6th Division. Approximately 40 000 men were at some stage members of the division during its existence.

Divisions were the main tactical organisation of World War II armies. Although infantry divisions like the 6th also included various ‘arms’ and ‘services’, the division’s infantry units were its heart. The 6th contained three infantry brigades, numbered 16th, 17th and 19th. Within each brigade were three battalions.

The battalions were numbered too, and given the rather confusing prefix ‘Second’. For example, one battalion was the Second Third, written ‘2/3rd’. There was another Australian infantry battalion, not of the AIF, called the 3rd, and the term ‘Second’ was used to distinguish the two. The 2/3rd Battalion was composed initially of men from New South Wales, who were identified by an ‘NX’ prefix to their army numbers. The 2/3rd’s first commanding officer, for example, had the number NX6. Many of its reinforcements were from other states (and thus had X numbers like ‘VX’ or ‘QX’). The numbers, brigade groupings and states of origin of the nine infantry battalions of the 6th Division are shown in the table below:

**Table 2 6th Division brigades, battalions and states of origin**

<i>Brigade</i>	<i>Battalion</i>	<i>State of origin</i>
16th Infantry Brigade	2/1st Infantry Battalion	Sydney/New South Wales
	2/2nd Infantry Battalion	Sydney/Northern Rivers, NSW
	2/3rd Infantry Battalion	West and south-west NSW
17th Infantry Brigade	2/5th Infantry Battalion	Melbourne/Victoria
	2/6th Infantry Battalion	Melbourne/Victoria
	2/7th Infantry Battalion	Melbourne/Northern Victoria
19th Infantry Brigade	2/4th Infantry Battalion	Sydney/NSW
	2/8th Infantry Battalion	Melbourne/Victoria
	2/11th Infantry Battalion	Perth/WA

Each battalion contained four rifle companies designated A, B, C and D, and a Headquarters Company, which included signals, transport, pioneer and mortar platoons. On campaign, each brigade was supported by a ‘field regiment’ of artillery, a ‘field company’ of engineers, a ‘field ambulance’ and several smaller units. With these units it could operate semi-independently as a ‘brigade group’.

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Units not in or supporting brigades were ‘divisional troops’, including the 6th Division Cavalry Regiment (an armoured unit, originally called 6th Division Reconnaissance Regiment) and the 2/1st Anti-Tank Regiment. In official order of military precedence the main components of the division apart from the infantry brigades were:

Headquarters 6th Division  
 6th Division Cavalry Regiment  
 2/1st Field Regiment  
 2/2nd Field Regiment  
 2/3rd Field Regiment  
 1st (later renamed 2/1st) Anti-Tank Regiment  
 2/1st Field Company  
 2/2nd Field Company  
 2/8th Field Company  
 2/2nd (later renamed 2/22nd) Field Park Company  
 6th Division Signals  
 6th Division Australian Army Service Corps  
 2/1st Field Ambulance  
 2/2nd Field Ambulance  
 2/7th Field Ambulance  
 2/1st Army Field Workshops  
 Light Aid Detachments  
 6th Division Provost Company  
 6th Division Postal Unit  
 6th Division Salvage Unit  
 6th Division Field Cash Office

The battalions and regiments were of great importance to their members. Ask a veteran of the 6th what unit he belonged to during the war and he will probably name his battalion or its equivalent. Men’s personal friendships tended to be from smaller units: companies, platoons and sections in the infantry; batteries, troops and sections in the artillery.

The men who led the division and its sub-units were extremely important to its atmosphere and its success on the battlefield. The commanders of the division’s main combat units at formation and in its various campaigns are listed in the following table.

**Table 3 Senior 6th Division commanders**

	Origin	Libya	Greece, Crete and Syria	Papua (Kokoda to the sea)	Wau–Salamaua	Aitape–Wewak
<b>6th Division</b>	<b>TA Blamey</b>	<b>I Mackay</b>	<b>I Mackay</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>JES Stevens, HCH Robertson, R King</b>
<b>16th Brigade</b>	<b>AS Allen</b>	<b>AS Allen</b>	<b>AS Allen</b>	<b>JE Lloyd</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>R King</b>
2/1st Battalion	KW Eather	KW Eather	IR Campbell	PA Cullen	NA	PA Cullen
2/2nd Battalion	GF Wootten	FO Chilton	FO Chilton	CRV Edgar	NA	AG Cameron
2/3rd Battalion	VT England	VT England	DJ Lamb, JR Stevenson	JR Stevenson, I Hutchison, JR Stevenson	NA	I Hutchison
<b>17th Brigade</b>	<b>SG Savage</b>	<b>SG Savage</b>	<b>SG Savage</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>MJ Moten</b>	<b>MJ Moten</b>
2/5th Battalion	TP Cook	H Wrigley, GE Sell, IR Campbell, R King	R King	NA	PDS Starr, NL Goble, TM Conroy	AW Buttrose, JS Maclean, GC Darling, AW Buttrose
2/6th Battalion	AHL Godfrey	AHL Godfrey, SHWC Porter	H Wrigley	NA	FG Wood	FG Wood
2/7th Battalion	TG Walker	TG Walker	TG Walker	NA	HG Guinn	PK Parbury
<b>19th Brigade</b>	<b>JW Mitchell, HCH Robertson</b>	<b>HCH Robertson</b>	<b>GA Vasey</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>NA</b>	<b>JEG Martin, JA Bishop, JEG Martin</b>
2/4th Battalion	PA Parsons	IN Dougherty	IN Dougherty	NA	NA	NWVP Farrell, GS Cox
2/8th Battalion	JW Mitchell	JW Mitchell	JW Mitchell	NA	NA	WS Howden, CL Simpson, WS Howden

(cont.)

Table 3 (cont.)

	Origin	Libya	Greece, Crete and Syria	Papua (Kokoda to the sea)	Wau–Salamaua	Aitape–Wewak
2/11th Battalion	TS Louch	TS Louch	TS Louch, RL Sandover	NA	NA	HM Binks, DAC Jackson, CH Green
2/1st AT Regt	FM St John	NA	FM St John	NA	NA	AL Rickard
2/1st Field Regt	LC Kelly	LES Barker	HGF Harlock	KE O'Connell	NA	KE O'Connell, AG Hanson
2/2nd Field Regt	AH Ramsay	WE Cremor	WE Cremor	NA	NA	RF Jaboor
2/3rd Field Regt	AJ Hobbs	HW Strutt	HW Strutt, VC Burstson	NA	NA	GEH Bleby, CE Chapman
6th Div Cav Regt	MA Fergusson	MA Fergusson, JE Abbott, SA Morrison	NA	NA	NA	EC Hennessy
GSO I	SF Rowell	FH Berryman, GA Vasey	RB Sutherland	NA	NA	JA Bishop
AA&QMG	GA Vasey	GA Vasey, CE Prior	CE Prior	NA	NA	WC Murphy
CRA	EF Herring	EF Herring	EF Herring	NA	NA	J Reddish
CRE	CS Steele	LC Lucas	LC Lucas	NA	NA	CE Baird, BH Buddle, JC Hay
CO Div Sigs	JES Stevens	JJ Eather	LJ Wellman	NA	NA	LN Tribolet
CASC	NB Loveridge	NB Loveridge	NB Loveridge	NA	NA	J Talbot
ADMS	SR Burstson	HC Disher	HC Disher	NA	NA	HM Fisher

Notes: Italics means temporary or acting command. NA means not applicable

## CHAPTER

## ORIGINS AND EARLY DAYS

The story of the 6th Division's origins is the story of the founding of the Second Australian Imperial Force, for the division was the first raised for World War II.

Twelve days after Australia followed Britain into war against Germany on 3 September 1939 the government decided to raise a division for overseas service. Lack of equipment, hesitation about the value of land forces in modern warfare, Labor party opposition, fear of Japanese intentions and uncertainty about the length of the coming European war all delayed the decision. However, on 15 September 1939, Prime Minister Robert Menzies announced in a radio broadcast that a new Australian infantry division would be created to serve at home or abroad. The division would be the nucleus of a 20 000-man special force, to be called the Second Australian Imperial Force, or AIF. Australia already had a militia of 80 000 men who had volunteered for home defence and a regular force of about 2800. Half of the 20 000 vacancies in the new special force were allotted to the militia, but only about 5000 volunteers came forward from that source. Most of the remaining volunteers had no military experience.

Because five militia infantry divisions already existed in Australia, the new division was named the 6th Division. It was, however, the first division of its kind raised for World War II. Inevitably, World War I and especially the First AIF loomed large in the minds of politicians and soldiers of all ranks as the new force was organised. For example, the first entry in the war diary of one of the division's three infantry brigades says:

Today the years between the demobilisation of the famous 1st. A.I.F. and the formation of the 2nd were bridged when Bde Cmdrs and Bde Majors attended a Divisional conference at Army H.Q., Victoria Barracks, St. Kilda Rd.<sup>1</sup>

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Mark Johnston

Excerpt

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## 8 ORIGINS &amp; EARLY DAYS

The brigade was the 16th, which, like the 1st Brigade of the 1st Division in the First AIF, was to be raised in New South Wales. The 17th Brigade would, like the 2nd Brigade, be raised in Victoria, and the third brigade to be raised for the new division, the 18th, would be raised in the smaller states, as was its earlier counterpart. Shoulder patches for the units were identical to those of their equivalent in the First AIF, except that a narrow grey border was introduced. That grey line distinguished the unit from its numerical counterpart in the militia, as did the prefix 'Second' or '2<sup>d</sup>'. Thus, the AIF's 'Second Third' or '2/3rd' Battalion was not to be confused with the Third Battalion of the militia.



1.1

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The Great War experience was also a major consideration in the appointment of the new division's senior officers. Thomas Blamey, at left in **Photograph 1.1**, was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-general on 13 October and appointed to command the division. A regular soldier in 1914, he had landed as a major with the 1st Division at Gallipoli and by war's end was a brigadier-general and chief of staff in the headquarters of General Monash, who greatly appreciated Blamey's organisational skill. Although his inter-war years had been turbulent,

culminating in being sacked as Commissioner of the Victoria Police in 1936, at the outbreak of war he was chairman of the Commonwealth's Manpower Committee, Director of Recruiting and well placed to lead the wartime army.

Blamey may have been the 6th Division's first commander, but he would never lead the 6th Division into action. In February 1940 the War Cabinet decided to raise the 7th Division, which with the 6th would form the nucleus of a new corps. Blamey was appointed corps commander and took four senior 6th Division officers with him. Major-General Iven Mackay, previously commanding the 2nd Division of the militia, was appointed to replace Blamey. Mackay, at right in the photograph, taken as he prepared to leave Melbourne with a convoy in April 1940, was a citizen soldier. The official historian considered him 'shy, bleak, sometimes fussy and pedantic', but acknowledged too that he had 'great qualities of mind and



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1.2

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character'.<sup>2</sup> He had been twice wounded at Gallipoli, commanded a battalion at Pozieres and the 1st Brigade in 1918.

Blamey, Mackay and other senior 6th Division commanders were impeccably qualified, but the regular soldiers of the Staff Corps were greatly disappointed that, in accordance with government policy, no one from their ranks was initially appointed to brigade or unit commands in the 6th Division. However, by the time **Photograph 1.2** was taken, in December 1940, a regular had been appointed to a senior position in the division. He was Brigadier HCH Robertson, known to his men as 'Red Robbie' (far right, front row). He commanded the 19th Brigade, which on being created in Palestine in May 1940 had become part of the 6th Division, replacing the 18th Brigade. The components of the brigade were determined partly by Australia's decision to remodel its divisions in accordance with British practice, so that each brigade would comprise three rather than four battalions. Each existing brigade would contribute one battalion to the 19th Brigade. The 2/4th, 2/8th and 2/12th were slated to go, but because the 2/12th's convoy to the Middle East was diverted to England, the 2/11th took its place in Palestine. The latter, formed in Western Australia, would be the division's only battalion not raised in New South Wales or Victoria.

Next to Robertson in the photograph is General Mackay and at far left is Brigadier AS ‘Tubby’ Allen, the popular, brave but difficult commander of the 16th Brigade. Behind Allen is Colonel Frank Berryman, the division’s GSO1, the chief planning officer. At centre rear is Brigadier Stan Savige, commanding the 17th Brigade, and at top right Colonel George Vasey, Assistant Adjutant and Quartermaster General. These men, like the 6th Division’s other early commanders, would figure prominently in the Second AIF as it expanded. Mackay would eventually command an army, Savige and Berryman a corps, and Allen, Vasey and Robertson would be divisional commanders. Berryman would become chief of staff at Advanced Land Headquarters.

By the time this photograph was taken, well over a year after the division was raised, the 6th was at last about to be sent into action.

Before looking at that period, we will examine briefly how the first year of the division affected the common soldiers who were its main component. Men who enlisted with the AIF did so for the period of the war and 12 months thereafter. None could have suspected that the war would last nearly six years.

Government and press expected an initial rush to enlist, but this did not eventuate, largely because of the government’s publicly expressed uncertainty about how the new force would be employed and anxiety about the potential impact on the militia. Nevertheless, by 30 November, apart from officers and NCOs and from some medical and ordnance units, the division had reached ‘war establishment’. The officers would mostly be promoted from the ranks in February and March 1940.

**Photograph 1.3** depicts new recruits at the Melbourne Showgrounds in November 1939. Keith Carroll, a lieutenant allocated to look after 120 men there in October, described them thus:

All sorts of men from every possible calling and trade, good and bad but on a casual glance an excellent type of chap showing great enthusiasm and will eventually become good soldiers.

Carroll, who would ultimately be a captain in the 2/6th Battalion, enthused even at this early stage: ‘I think they will become the finest fighting force to leave these shores’.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the smiles for the camera, many were initially bewildered by their treatment on enlistment. ‘Chaos reigned there’, said one concerning the Showgrounds.

‘Everywhere you went there seemed to be people shouting at you. You were in crowds for this and queues for that. Straw palliasses on the floor, and in general it was disorderly. As you came in there were people shouting at you “You’ll be sorry”, and to tell the truth, we were sorry . . .’<sup>4</sup>