

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION

On the day that Great Britain declared war on Nazi Germany, Australia dutifully followed. In October and November 1939 Australia raised a 'special force' of 20 000 volunteers. There was debate about whether this force, based on the 6th Australian Infantry Division, should remain in Australia until Japan's intentions became clearer or should be sent overseas. On 28 November the government decided to send it abroad early in 1940. We need to remember that all the Australian soldiers who are discussed in this book volunteered to serve in the Australian Imperial Force of World War II (which became known as the Second AIF). The contrast between their status and that of the typical British conscript is well illustrated by an anecdote from an Australian book that tells of veteran Australian soldiers in the Middle East meeting new arrivals from Britain. According to an Australian gunner, 'a nostalgic little new-arrival' among the Tommies asked: 'Is it true all you Aussies are volunteers?' When told that it was, '... he hesitated a moment. Then he blurted out: "Blime, choom, y' must 've 'ad a fair --- of a 'ome-life!"'¹

The uncertainty about the new Second AIF's role in the war ahead ensured that only the most eager came forward to enlist. One powerful motive was a desire to be part of the tradition established by the first Australian Imperial Force, in 1914–18. The desire to escape domestic unhappiness and the urge to obtain employment were also factors, but two reasons dominate in the soldiers' own accounts. One was the desire for adventure: to test themselves as men, and to explore the world abroad. The second was a sense of duty, to Australia and to the British Empire.

The Australian official historian, Gavin Long, defines the desire for adventure largely in terms of an urge to break away from boring or unhappy civilian lives.² This is not the whole story, as the 'adventure' opened by enlistment could be less an escape from an old world than an entry into an unknown and exciting one. For the young, inexperienced, largely uneducated men that most soldiers were, overseas travel and war were not just one adventure but 'the great adventure'.³

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - *Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II*

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2 ANZACS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The lure of a quest was never greater than to the war's first volunteers, but it continued to be important to those who joined the remaining three AIF infantry divisions. Thus Tim Fearnside, who joined the 9th Division, argues that 'Perhaps the call to adventure was the greatest motivation' for volunteers.⁴ However, by the time he joined, in mid-1940, attitudes towards enlistment seem to have changed. The heaviest recruiting to the AIF occurred in the three months following the German invasion of France in May 1940. The 'Phoney War' was now clearly over, and men could be certain of their 'great adventure'. Enlistments rose on other occasions with reports of fighting.

Yet opportunity was not the whole explanation: too many observers noted the seriousness and unusual maturity of the fighting soldiers among these later reinforcements. They found the cause in the recruits' sense of duty, which had supposedly been activated by wartime crises.⁵

It is hard to pin down the object of that sense of duty. Australian front-line soldiers in World War II were rarely as willing as their Great War predecessors to talk openly of patriotic duty. Hardened Australian soldiers preferred to offer trivial and fabricated reasons, or none at all, than to confess to patriotic motivation. Clearly the main object of 'patriotic duty' was Australia. However, the British Empire and Britain itself were very important, too. Australians shared a common culture with Britain. From childhood, the Australian male heard English rhymes, legends and songs. He learnt the dates of the Norman Conquest, Magna Carta, Trafalgar and Waterloo in school, and celebrated the King's birthday and a traditional English Christmas Day. The sports he played were primarily British, as were leading lights in his intellectual and spiritual life. As members of the British Empire and subjects of King George VI, Australians were consciously 'British' as well as Australian. As one perceptive analyst put it, 'even under the testing circumstances of the Second World War, [Australians] could not think of themselves as other than a British people'.⁶ Australians were officially 'British subjects' rather than 'Australian citizens'. Hence there were many points of contact for the Australian soldier when he met his British counterpart in the years ahead. There were points of difference, too, for Australian troops were conscious that differences had developed between their culture and that of the 'mother country', and they were proud of Australia.

In a large post-war survey of motivation for readiness to go to war, 'duty' emerged as the single most important factor, with the related concepts of 'Australian nationalism' and 'Empire loyalty' second and third.⁷ Soldiers rarely talked in their letters and diaries about patriotism, but an

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Australian who wrote in Palestine of ‘that patriotic urge that made us all depart’ clearly felt that he was expressing a common thought. Yet later in the poem in which he said this, he imagined the unit’s eventual return to Australia and the pub where they would ‘tell of thier [*sic*] adventures to a very eager crowd’.⁸ This combination of duty and adventure meant that the British and their Commonwealth were bound to be topics of interest to the men who went to help Britain in its war in Europe. One Digger asserted in a letter home: ‘Britain is the backbone of the world today and if she goes under the whole lot goes under.’⁹ Ironically, he said this just after Japan entered the war, an event that changed the focus of most Australians in the Middle East from the war with Germany to that conflict closer to home.

The Second AIF’s ties to Britain were not merely emotional. The force was modelled on the British Army, with its weapons, equipment and uniforms all either identical to or very closely based on British examples. The structure of the Australian formations and units was also derived from the British Army. Hence for example, although initially the 6th Division’s brigades included four battalions each, when the division went overseas it adapted to the British establishment of three battalions per brigade. Installations for provisioning Australian troops in the Middle East with rations, ammunition, petrol, oil and lubricants were British rather than Australian.

Nevertheless, by 1939 Australians also had an influential military tradition of their own. Fearnside argues persuasively that the Australians who set out for the Middle East were inspired by the stories they had heard from veterans of the First Australian Imperial Force, who had made Australia’s fledgling military tradition. Those veterans reminisced as fondly of the ‘battle’ of the Wazzir (in Cairo’s brothel area) as of battles on Gallipoli or the Western Front. They were as keen to talk of fights with military police as with Germans or Turks, ‘of harlots as affectionately as they did of their regimental heroes’. The Digger of World War II, he argued, was not steeped in long tradition like the British Tommy, but took with him an image of being as good as any enemy, better than most, and ‘that if he had a duty to history at all it was to preserve the Digger image – a devil-may-care soldier friendly to all excepting his country’s enemies’.¹⁰

Just as the Second AIF would soon make its own new traditions on the battlefield, so it would develop a distinctive character off it. However, an expectation that they would continue a tradition of misbehaviour would persist among Australians, their allies and other people.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER

TRAVELLING TO THE
'GREAT ADVENTURE'

There's no doubt we have some blasted good fun when we go out on a sightseeing tour and some of the things these wild sojers [*sic*] do would make you split your ribs laughing and wonder how they think of such mad doings. I wish I could tell some of them now.

Pte A.J. Ulrick, 2/2nd Battalion, letter, 7 February 1940

The typical Australian soldier who embarked for overseas service had a humble educational and occupational background. A census taken in 1942–43 indicated that about two-thirds of all Australian soldiers had left school at or before age 14. Only 7 per cent had completed a full secondary course and 1.4 per cent a degree or diploma.¹ Labourers and clerical workers predominated in the AIF in its early years. Before enlisting, nearly nine out of ten had been employees or without paid work.² There was probably a higher proportion of manual labourers than usual in the other ranks of combat units, although their officers generally came from non-manual, 'inspectional', 'managerial' and 'high administrative' occupations.³

Consequently, the men who sailed off to meet their adventure and do their duty from 1940 onwards generally knew little about the places and people they were about to visit. Few had enjoyed an opportunity to learn much about these locations. Even fewer could have afforded to travel overseas before the war, although an undefinable but small number had been overseas in the First AIF. For most, the journey overseas was a personal, existential voyage into uncharted waters. In this sense they were

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

'innocents abroad' and, like children on tour, they often gave headaches to those in charge of them and to the inhabitants of their ancient destinations. One must not push this analogy too far, as much of the misbehaviour was very adult in orientation.

Naivety or stupidity about sex in foreign lands was of concern to senior officers as Australians prepared to sail away. When Brigadier Tovell spoke to assembled men of his brigade before their departure overseas in November 1940 he warned them chiefly about 'the women they were likely to meet'.⁴ As a veteran of World War I, he knew of a great longing that threatened the troops' morale and the force's effectiveness.

Many British soldiers who were veterans of that war, or who communicated with veterans, also felt certain that Australians were no innocents. They harboured preconceptions about Australian discipline, and had they seen the first convoy as it left Australia, they might have considered their dire expectations confirmed. That convoy, carrying 6th Division troops to the Middle East, stopped briefly in Fremantle, Western Australia, in January 1940. Among the crew of one of the troopships, the former passenger liner *Strathnaver*, was a 16-year-old Welshman, K.J. Tyler. He had been moved to tears when the ship left Sydney among sad songs of farewell, and he became good friends with a Victorian soldier with Welsh heritage. Yet he was shocked when in Fremantle the troops 'went on the rampage', which included overturning tramcars.⁵ The historian of one of the Australian artillery regiments also admits that the troops tested to the limit the tolerance of the people of Fremantle and Perth during their two days there. He acknowledged some incidents that were 'boisterous to a degree where they ceased to be funny'.⁶ In Perth, the regiment discharged seven of its men as no longer required, while five others absented themselves before the convoy departed. The regiment still had 617 men who had behaved.

If the soldiers enjoyed what the Australian official historian called an 'uproarious' time in Perth, the local population did not hold it against them: instead they gave a rousing farewell as the convoy sailed towards its first foreign port.⁷ The second convoy of 6th Division troops, in April, also received a heart-warming Perth welcome. The men reportedly behaved exceptionally well. The only sign of primitive instincts, wrote Major Selwyn Porter, were long but orderly queues outside the brothels of Rose Street.⁸ Six days later, an infantry officer recorded angrily at sea that a 'short arm inspection' had shown three 'stupid fools' to have contracted VD.⁹ Although the 'stupid fools' were in a minority, their boisterousness typified Australians to many outsiders.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CEYLON

Until February 1941, when 8th Division troops were sent to Malaya, all of the major convoys of AIF troops travelled to the Middle East. Their first port of call was usually Colombo, in Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka). It provided the vast majority of soldiers with their first experience of a foreign city. They responded in very diverse ways. The most critical outlook was exemplified by the comment of an officer in the advance party, who wrote in December 1939 that the native quarters of Colombo were ‘the most stinken [*sic*] place I have ever been in during my life, the people are no more than beasts’.¹⁰ His comment on the odour would be echoed in many foreign places. A gunner on the first convoy commented that even before arriving there, ‘you can get the smell of Colombo two miles out at sea’.¹¹ Yet arrival excited most men.

One of the first impressions was the harbour’s bright colours, which some likened to those of technicolour movies. The ships were usually greeted by ‘bumboats’ of natives, who dived for coins or tried to sell goods. A reinforcement officer who had previously been a primary school teacher described the initial meeting in mid-1941: ‘The niggers on the lighters remind me of the monkeys cadging for peanuts, or the bears sitting up on their behinds and gesturing for buns, at the zoo. The boys are tossing them money, cigarettes, biscuits and clothing. One got a roll of toilet paper, and the boys tried hard to explain its use, but it is rather difficult seeing that they are about 80 feet below us.’¹² Private Jack Craig saw Australians throw slouch hats, money belts, knives, shirts, singlets and even a ‘blue light outfit’, or contraceptive kit, to bemused natives.¹³

Soldiers were always given a day or two ashore. Private Keith MacArthur of the 2/15th Battalion had his opportunity on 15 January 1941, and described in his diary a day that was probably typical. On a parade ground, the sight of ‘spick and span’ native soldiers made him and his mates conscious that their own unpressed shirts and shorts ‘looked fearful in comparison’. As the unit dispersed into the town, they were continually ‘bitten [pestered] by street urchins for pennies’. MacArthur mentioned beggars five times in his account. Before that, however, he noted approvingly that beer could be had at 1 rupee per bottle. He discovered that the native quarter ‘had about 500 different smells, each a bit worse than the other’. A highlight of the day was a rickshaw ride, although MacArthur felt that his group ‘had it put over us’, despite their attempts to bargain a fair price. For all the frustrations, MacArthur concluded, ‘I enjoyed my day.’¹⁴

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - *Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II*

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Clearly MacArthur's behaviour had been exemplary but, according to the official historian, the prospect of Australians going into Colombo had from the outset 'caused some anxiety to both the local authorities and their own officers'.¹⁵ Those local authorities, who were British, could have pointed to evidence that substantiated their apprehension. Private Jack Ulrick of the 2/2nd Battalion recalled that the curio shops he visited were 'all filled with soldiers buying and when the opportunity came a spot of pinching or, to use a better term, souveniring'.¹⁶ According to the 2/4th Battalion historian, a group of drunken soldiers caused a traffic jam by insisting that they ride on top of rather than in a tram, then caused uproar by kicking a sacred bull, which was also holding up traffic.¹⁷ This was in the first convoy, about which hair-raising stories were told to members of the second convoy in April 1940. In all convoys, rickshaw races seem to have been a favourite Australian pastime. Ulrick 'saw some coves with the nigs inside, galloping full steam up the streets the nig waving his arms and shouting like mad'.¹⁸ An Australian said of another race, of people as well as a competition: '... it was a pity what we called the poor natives, trying to urge them along, to say nothing of what we said, when they tried to charge us three times as much as they should.'¹⁹

Much more serious misdemeanours formed the basis of two compensation cases settled by the Australian Government for damage its soldiers caused in Colombo. It paid more than £15 for damage to the Fleet Club in May 1941. Here a fight between a New Zealand seaman and an Australian soldier concerning a chair developed into a brawl in which the party smashed up the restaurant. More than eighty glasses were broken, and a fine assortment of dinnerware stolen, including forty-four glasses, fourteen cruet sets, twenty-five knives and three watches. According to a New Zealand report on the incident, two Ceylonese waiters at the club were hospitalised as a result of injuries that two Australians inflicted. Compensation was paid, too, after a drunken Australian stabbed a local in the back in January 1941.²⁰

Alcohol was involved in all or most of the reported cases of disgraceful behaviour. Apparently few Australians were interested in the recommendation on the huge sign across the skyline that met the first convoy: 'Ceylon for good tea'.

Yet among the tens of thousands of Australian troops who passed through Ceylon, the troublemakers seem to have been few, especially after the first convoy. Men like Keith MacArthur did enjoy their beer, or the more potent local arak, but they did not then go crazy. Their

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 ANZACS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

comments on Colombo are most representative of Australian attitudes and behaviour there.

One response was shock at the extreme poverty. These soldiers had lived through the greatest economic downturn in Australia's history, and most came from the class that had been hardest hit, but 'even to our young and not very sensitive perceptions', wrote working-class Private Allan Jones, 'the cruel degradation of these people was starkly apparent'. He could not bear to look at some of the mutilated beggars, and 'the sight of skinny little women, with babies on their backs, carrying bricks and building materials stirred such feelings of pity within me as I'd never felt before'.²¹ Although the Australians found the constant pressure of beggars annoying, more than one Australian distributed much of their ready cash or food to children. A bombardier told how Australians were giving 'outrageous tips for the slightest little service', behaviour to which he attributed the beggars' tendency to badger the Australian soldiers as if each was a millionaire.²²

Many Australians seem to have offered kindness and respect to the locals. The soldier who wrote of plaguing natives with rickshaw races also praised what he considered the 'very good belief' apparent at the Buddhist temple.²³ A signalman, Ivan Mawson, noted that the narrow streets of the native quarters were 'choc-a-block' with natives and oxen-drawn carts, but that nobody seemed in a hurry. 'This was our first realization', he noted 'of the habits of other countries where nobody hurries because why should they. Great philosophy.'²⁴ Allan Jones and a group of mates stopped to talk to the personal rickshaw boy of a British lady. The 'boy', who was in his thirties, wore livery and a starched turban, and carefully flicked dust off the polished fittings of the rickshaw as he waited for his employer to emerge from a shop. When she did so, the 'boy' excused himself, and his manners impressed the Australians more than hers, for 'she walked past with her eyes rigidly fixed on a spot to our rear'. A mere flick of her fly switch and the boy was driving her out of sight.²⁵

The contrast between the Australian soldiers' attitude and the lady's neatly illustrates the point, made by the official historian, that Australian troops never adopted the autocratic and remote manner of Europeans towards native peoples in the East, as it was foreign to their conditioning.²⁶ One soldier later recalled visiting a tea plantation with his company sergeant-major, who expounded to their uncomfortable hosts his feeling that the whites were exploiting the local people.²⁷ A gunner wrote later that the 'English population' treated the natives, whom he

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

found 'rather a good type', as servants. He felt that the term 'Sahibs', used for the British, 'should be translated as "snobs"'.²⁸

Allan Jones and a British-born mate befriended a young local, a Ceylonese Boy Scout who 'adopted' them as a guide for the afternoon. Speaking fluent English, this lad of 12 or 13 showed and informed them about Ceylon, not avoiding the topic of homelessness and desperate poverty. Jones, himself a former Boy Scout, was impressed by the youngster's ability to develop and maintain ideals amid the material deprivations of Colombo.²⁹

Young local women caught some Australian eyes, and ears. Corporal Alan Hackshaw noted that everyone longed to hear female voices after being cooped up in the ship, and that 'the young girls in Colombo shops had the most cultured voices I had ever heard, very quiet, expressive and precise'.³⁰

Yet if the Australians' attitudes were less remote than those of the British, there was usually a sense of superiority in their pronouncements. Perhaps this was inevitable given the natives' poverty, and their consequent grime: as one man put it, the natives all seemed to consider water 'only a commodity with which to quench thirst'.³¹ Their habit of chewing betel nuts, which stained their lips, also drew adverse comment. Another visible difference struck the private who wrote, 'They are a small race in comparison with the Aussies and their [*sic*] is a vast difference to see the Australians walking erect in the street and the Natives running about in a stooping sort of position.' He added an afterthought that says much about how Australians tended to evaluate foreigners: 'They remind one of a lot of monkeys.'³²

In some cases, Australians made criticisms based on unpleasant experiences, and not just smell. An officer travelling with 6th Division reinforcements noted that the men had far fewer boastful stories to tell after their Colombo leave than after visiting Perth. The reason was 'that the native can far outdo the Australian "cadger" [beggar] and, in one or two instances, there was an apparent feeling of rancour at this finding'. For another officer, the only noteworthy features of Colombo were that the visitors slid around in bullock dung and sweated more than ever.³³

The most unpleasant experience for many, and one that confirmed their carping about the dirt, was the diarrhoea, which struck nearly a third of men in the first convoy as they sailed away from Colombo. If they weren't doubled over with gastroenteritis, many in the second convoy were laid low by 'alcoholic remorse' as they left the port.³⁴ The visit left a metaphorically sour taste for some, including the artilleryman

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03096-1 - Anzacs in the Middle East: Australian Soldiers, their Allies and the Local People in World War II

Mark Johnston

Excerpt

[More information](#)

who declared: 'I don't like Colombo, there is too much dirt, and too many natives.' He added an interesting third reason: 'the white people look washed out'.³⁵

Most soldiers probably did not change their preconceptions about dark-skinned people on the basis of their fleeting visit to Ceylon. However, some had found it an extraordinary time, which put their own recent experience of hardship in a new light. Still others had no interest in the locals, feeling that 'to see anything nice you had to forget the niggers who where [*sic*] everywhere in hundreds'.³⁶ Like tourists everywhere, the Australians took from the visit what their inclination dictated: they either made the most of the colour and exotic lifestyle, or were frustrated by features that did not reach the standards of home. A lieutenant probably summed up the feeling of most when he said: 'All not sorry to leave Colombo although most had a good time.'³⁷

The experience of Colombo prefigured much of the Australian experience with foreigners: relative kindness, enjoyment, disgust and drunkenness.

INDIA

Many of the 7th Division's units went to Bombay, rather than Ceylon. Before disembarkation, the troops were warned about disease, snakes and 'knives in the dark' so, as one of them put it, they expected India to be 'a bit "on the nose"'.³⁸ Trains took the men more than 200 kilometres to Deolali, a huge British camp. Among the many impressions that crowded in on them was the contrast between opulence and squalor. Travelling through the city and its outskirts 'opened our eyes concerning poverty', wrote one corporal.³⁹ At the many stops on this six-hour trip, Australians responded generously to the desperately poor children who begged for money.

Despite the dire warnings, the Australians led a comfortable life in camp. For the only time in the war, many of the rank and file had native servants: 'We weren't allowed to do our own washing', wrote one private, 'but paid a "dobie wallah" an anna per piece to do it. Natives came round two or three times a day cleaning boots or shaving us for an anna, so you can see that for a few annas a week a man can live quite like a gentleman.'⁴⁰ 'The life of an English Pukka Sahib', wrote another, 'is the life for me.'⁴¹

British officers at Deolali were generous entertainers, according to 'Blue' Steward, medical officer with the 2/4th Field Regiment. Yet there was a sour note, for the British maintained a 'strict apartheid',