

**Many were Anzac heroes.  
Some were criminals. Some were both.**



# **BAD CHARACTERS**

**SEX, CRIME, MUTINY,  
MURDER AND THE  
AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE**

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## — INTRODUCTION —

# THE GOOD AND THE BAD

**H**ere's a photograph of ten men, in uniforms of the Great War. They're Australians—you can tell that from their slouch hats. Some grin at the camera. Some look lively lads; others less quick-witted. Perhaps they are about to go on leave, the cares of guard duty or the danger of the trenches forgotten. The photograph has been printed as a postcard, as any village or street-corner photographer would do in those days. But who are they?

We are not the first to study this photograph intently. The Assistant Provost Marshal (APM) at Le Havre—the area's chief military policeman—must have often stared at it. He didn't know these men's names either, though he very much wanted to. Why? Because through their message on the back of the postcard these deserters had defied him as directly as if they had walked into his office, sat on his desk and laughed in his face. The message read:

Sir

With all due respect we send you this P.C.  
as a souvenir trusting you will keep it as  
a mark of esteem from those who know  
you well. At the same time trusting that  
*Nous Jamais regarder vous encore.* [i.e. 'we will  
never see you again']

*Au revoir*

*Nous 'us'*

And it was not just the Le Havre APM that the cheeky diggers insulted. The postcard found its way up the chain of command of the British Expeditionary Force (BEF), all the way to the office of Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, the Commander-in-Chief of British empire armies in France, and to Edward Stanley, Lord Derby, the Secretary of State for War, at that very time still vainly trying to get the Australian government to agree that Australian Imperial Force (AIF) offenders would be executed for specified offences, just as other empire soldiers were. Did Haig or Lord Derby actually see the postcard? Its inclusion on a file in the National Archives in London suggests that at least their secretaries did. But the deserters of Le Havre simply disappeared, defying the APM to come after them. He never discovered their names, and neither will we. But they symbolise the men whose stories this book tells.

This is not the definitive history of discipline in the AIF in the Great War, based on a file-by-file scrutiny, though such a study

is grossly overdue. As the Bibliography shows, this book draws on primary sources from half-a-dozen archives and libraries in Australia and Britain. I have tried to use a study of the AIF's discipline as a means to better understand the force's distinctive character. I survey its indiscipline, ranging from the benign to the actively criminal, from bludging and dumb insolence, through malingering and shirking, to military offences that go beyond the force's celebrated larrikinism. Soldiers committed offences ranging from the endemic 'going absent' to desertion and a small number of serious civil crimes, culminating in several murders. The AIF's disciplinary problems encompassed serious riots and strikes, ending in the 'disbandment mutinies' of 1918. Its indiscipline did not end in 1918, but persisted while the force was repatriated, and continued in folklore and anecdote into peacetime. Who were these men? Why did they act as they did? Were they merely bludgers, deserters and criminals, or do their stories help to explain how this terrible war affected Australians?

Charles Bean, the AIF's first and greatest historian, wrote that the force's story spanned 'the good and the bad, the greatness and the smallness'. Hundreds of books have been written about the 'good'—the most distinguished battalions, the best commanders, the most outstanding men from a force acknowledged as being among the most effective of the war. This is the diet that has nourished the Anzac legend; but it has led to a seriously skewed understanding of Australia's military history. Hardly anything has been published about the AIF's

dark side—how war made men into criminals; how men let themselves and their mates down by going absent or wounding themselves. Hardly anyone has written much about riots and protests, or of the toll exacted by venereal disease (VD), which afflicted so many. Nearly a century on, it is time to follow Charles Bean's lead and face the bad. We will learn things about the AIF that many may wish were left unsaid. But we will also understand more about the men of the AIF, the society they came from, and the war that changed or ended the lives of so many.

While this book is called *Bad Characters*, and while it focuses on the darker side of the AIF's behaviour, it does not just deal with the relatively few outright criminals in the AIF (whether made by circumstance or character). Rather, it seeks to examine the full spectrum of indiscipline in the men of the AIF, and place their experience in several contexts: as male citizen volunteers of federal Australia; as temporary soldiers; and as survivors of some of the most traumatic ordeals that Australians have ever endured. Looking at this aspect of the force's experience will, I hope, also throw into relief its virtues and show that one of the keys to understanding the AIF's character was that it combined, as Bean knew, the good and the bad. While this book may seem superficially to muck-rake in some readers' eyes, it has grown out of a knowledge of and a regard for the AIF developed over thirty years. Charles Bean thought that the finest tribute we can pay to the men that he knew was to tell their story straight. He believed that we could understand them better as real people,

rather than as cardboard cut-out Anzac heroes. A great many of them were Anzac heroes. Some were criminals. Some were both.

While no one has written a full-length book about the AIF's discipline until now, several pioneers have tackled aspects of the subject—my copies of Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years* and Ross McMullin's *Pompey Elliott* are festooned with yellow tags, indicating evidence I might have used—and they deserve to be recognised. My precursors and helpers are thanked in the Acknowledgments.

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*Bad Characters* is arranged in sixty short chapters—coincidentally but significantly one for each thousand of the AIF's dead. They are grouped in six parts, telling the AIF's story more-or-less chronologically, from the outbreak of war in August 1914 to its long aftermath following the AIF's return and disbandment. It is organised like this for reasons I should explain. It might have been possible to organise the book thematically—looking in turn at discipline, sex, desertion, crime, mutiny and so on—and colleagues whose judgment I respect suggested this course. However, such a structure would have entailed two undesirable consequences. First, it would have involved unavoidably treating each of these aspects chronologically, and therefore reprising the events of 1914–18 repeatedly and perhaps tediously. Even

more, such a structure would have isolated wrong-doers from the broader story of the AIF's war. One of the strong arguments that this book puts is that while it is ostensibly about the AIF's 'bad characters', the hitherto neglected story of their behaviour, from harmless larrikinism to serious crime, ought to be considered in context and as a whole. As I hope *Bad Characters* shows, the AIF's behaviour changed over the course of the war, as a result of its members' experience of military service, their exposure to battle and their interactions with their allies. This explains why many subjects, such as protest, sex and VD, self-inflicted wounds (SIW), absenteeism or the disciplinary system, are treated at intervals as the years of the war unfold through the story.

In order to understand the behaviour of the AIF's men we need to grasp some elements of how they were organised. Like other British empire armies, its basic infantry unit was the battalion, a unit nominally about 750 strong, commanded by a lieutenant colonel (known as the CO, the commanding officer). It comprised four companies, each under a major or a captain. Each company comprised four platoons, each led by a junior officer (a first or second lieutenant) or a sergeant. Nominally about thirty men strong, platoons varied from a dozen to fifty or more men, depending on losses and reinforcements. Four battalions made up a permanent formation called a brigade, commanded by a full colonel or a brigadier general, and three brigades comprised a division. Several divisions in turn made up a corps (such as I and

II Anzac in which the AIF's infantry served in France in 1916–17). By 1918 Lieutenant General Sir John Monash's Australian Corps, the largest in the BEF, comprised its five infantry divisions. Each division included artillery, engineer, medical, supply and other units, all organised on a similar hierarchy. So, for example, the AIF's field artillery comprised field artillery brigades (actually corresponding in size to infantry battalions), each made up of several batteries. These brigades were mainly allocated to various infantry divisions. Similarly, the light horse regiments in the Middle East were made up of regiments containing squadrons and troops, with three regiments comprising a brigade. These, in turn, formed part of two mounted divisions, part of the Desert Mounted Corps, the first corps to be commanded by an Australian, Lieutenant General Sir Harry Chauvel.

Army ranks can confuse the uninitiated. This simplified table gives the titles, responsibilities and pay rates of infantrymen; the bulk of the AIF. Officers also received 'field allowances', while other ranks often received allowances for specialist qualifications. Men were compelled to 'defer' part of their pay and many allotted a proportion to dependants, so no one received the full daily pay. A pound (£) comprised twenty shillings (s) and a shilling, 12 pence, so a captain received one pound, two shillings and sixpence a day (plus whatever allowances were due). A private without dependants would receive six shillings, but a shilling would be deferred and he might allot another two to his family, leaving him three shillings a day or just over a pound a week to spend.



<b>Rank</b>	<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Responsibility</b>	<b>Daily pay</b>
Private	Pte	Himself and his comrades	6s
<i>Non-Commissioned Officers</i>			
Corporal	Cpl	Section; about 10 men	10s
Sergeant	Sgt	Platoon; about 30 men	10/6
<i>Commissioned Officers</i>			
Second Lieutenant	Lt	Platoon; about 30 men	17/6
Captain	Capt.	Company; about 150 men	£1/2/6
Major	Maj.	Company; about 150 men	£1/10/-
Lieutenant Colonel	Lt Col	Battalion; about 750 men	£1/17/6
Brigadier General	Brig. Gen.	Brigade; about 3,000 men	£2/5/-
Major General	Maj. Gen.	Division; about 15,000 men	£3/5/-

Abbreviations are the bane of military history, and I have tried to limit the number used in the text to the following:

AIF	Australian Imperial Force
APM	Assistant Provost Marshal
BEF	British Expeditionary Force
CO	Commanding Officer [the senior officer of a military unit]
GHQ	General Headquarters [of the BEF]
MP	Military Police

NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer [i.e. a corporal or the several kinds of sergeant]
SIW	Self-inflicted wound
VC	Victoria Cross
VD	Venereal Disease

All quotations are given verbatim, avoiding the use of [sic]. Their sources appear in the Notes on Sources. I have not attempted to do justice to ‘the literature’, so I won’t refer readers to the various revealing secondary works that extend understanding of the subject of this book, such as Judith Allen’s *Sex & Secrets*, Dale Blair’s *Dinkum Diggers* or Frank Bongiorno’s history of sexuality in Australia, which I have read in manuscript and will soon, I hope, be published. Such books are, however, included in the Bibliography. Finally, this is a frank book. It does not flinch from the unpleasant, the shameful or the crude, and some quotations may offend modern sensibilities. I follow Barry Humphries’ lead: I have honoured the dead by calling them by their real names and quoting their actual words. It is perhaps about time.

**'AN ADMIRABLE AND UNIQUE STUDY OF ALL  
ASPECTS OF AIF INDISCIPLINE—LIVELY,  
PERCEPTIVE AND ILLUMINATING'**

**ROSS MCMULLIN, AUTHOR OF *POMPEY ELLIOTT***

Australians have celebrated the Anzacs for nearly a century—but what do we really know of what war did to them? Charles Bean, historian of the citizen soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force, wrote that its history spanned 'the good and the bad'—but so far Australians have only looked at the good.

Leading war historian Peter Stanley reveals the citizen soldiers the army regarded as its 'bad characters'. These were men who went absent and deserted, caught or concealed VD, got drunk and fought their comrades, who stole, malingered, behaved insolently toward officers or committed more serious offences, including rape and murder.

This frank history—the first book on the AIF's indiscipline—shows that it became one of the war's most effective fighting forces *in spite of* its record for military misbehaviour. Stanley exposes, with a wealth of examples drawn from court-martial files and soldiers' letters, how the war turned some men into criminals, but also how bad characters made the AIF the superb force it was.

