

CHAPTER II

THE FIRST WORLD WAR BREAKS OUT

IN the last week of July 1914 the Australian newspapers were busy with the crisis in Ireland, where the objection of Northern Irishmen to be included in the home rule given by the British Parliament to the whole island seemed about to precipitate civil war; with the win by the Australian and New Zealand tennis pair over Canada in the Davis Cup match at Chicago; with the exciting flights of Guillaux, a French aviator, in Australia; with the approaching meeting in Australia of the British Association for the Advancement of Science; with the high cost of recent immigration; with the coming Australian Federal election, in which the Liberal Prime Minister, Mr Joseph Cook, and his party, who had won office just a year before, were trying by a "double dissolution" to get rid of a Labour majority in the Senate which was thwarting the will of the Liberal majority in the lower house.¹

The papers of July 24th included a paragraph reporting that the Chamber of Commerce of Hamburg had invited the boys of the Young Australia League to pay a goodwill visit to Germany. On July 27th the main news was the failure of the conference called by King George V at Buckingham Palace in an endeavour to settle the Irish Home Rule crisis. Reports of tension between Austria and Serbia—and, in the background, between Germany, Austria's ally, and Russia, which supported Serbia—had

¹ The Federal Parliament had been dissolved on June 27th and the elections were to be held on September 5th. For the details of this and the matters that follow, see *Vol XI*, pp 7-26, and *Vol I*, pp 20-32.

continued ever since the cables of June 30th, telling of the murder of the Austrian Crown Prince and his wife by a Serb at Sarajevo. Australians were, of course, aware that France was allied with Russia, and that Great Britain was loosely committed to France; and on July 27th the *Sydney Morning Herald*, in a leading article headed "Is it war?" mentioned the suspicion that Britain's immersion in the Home Rule crisis, and Russia's in a bitter political strike, might have led Austria deliberately to choose this opportunity for settling her old accounts with Serbia in the belief that these powers would be too engrossed with their own troubles to interfere. The article said that on the hope that Germany would bring pressure to bear on Austria and Britain on Russia "perhaps may hang the peace of the world".

That was the last day of Australia's feeling of secure remoteness—it is never likely to return. On July 28th news of the almost impossible demands made by Austria on Serbia, and of Russia's resentment, brought the realisation that unless Sir Edward Grey, the British Foreign Minister, could arrange a conference of the powers, war was certain between Austria and Germany on the one hand and Russia and France on the other.

Australians now followed with tense anxiety the cables posted outside the newspaper offices. On July 30th Austria declared war on Serbia. Russia ordered her army to mobilise. Germany, after futile last-minute gestures by her emperor who, too late, threatened to withdraw his support from Austria, on August 2nd declared war on Russia. That France would be involved was now certain, and for two days most Australians like most Englishmen were filled with an intense, but changed, anxiety—lest the British government, in which certain Ministers were known to be firmly opposed to war, might fail to support the French.

British governments had been most careful in the past to avoid giving the French any promise beyond that of

consultation if war should threaten, which promise had been all that opinion in Great Britain would permit; but her people now felt that, however strong the opposite intention, the French had been led to expect British support, and that the British people could never again hold up their heads if they failed to give it. When on August 2nd German armies—as the easiest way of attacking France—marched on Belgium which Germany, like France and Britain, was herself pledged by treaty to protect against any invasion, this anxiety became still keener.

But the invasion of Belgium cleared the difficulty. In the British Cabinet the party that opposed full support for France now dwindled to a few, who resigned; the remainder resolved to help Belgium and France. At 11 p.m. on August 4th, English time, Britain declared war on Germany which was already invading those two countries.²

The present writer can remember how, after the following night's work at a newspaper office, as he walked home in the small hours through Macquarie Street, Sydney, the clouds, dimly piled high in the four quarters of the dark sky above, seemed to him like the pillared structure of the world's civilisation, of which some shock had broken the keystones. The wide gap overhead seemed to show where one great pillar after another had crashed as the mutual support had failed; and, as the sky peered through, the last masses seemed to sway above the abyss. The stable world of the nineteenth century was coming down in chaos: security was gone. For the first time since Trafalgar, 109 years before, the British fleet was at sea on a mission of life or death for all British nations. Yet people's feeling, in Australia and New Zealand as in

² It is not, of course, implied that these events were the *cause* of the war. So far as is known to the writer, the best account of the events that immediately led up to the First World War is in *The Coming of the War, 1914* by Bernadotte E. Schmitt.

England, was one of relief from that latest and worst anxiety. Had Britain, despite her pledges, held out of the war, the loyalty of the oversea Dominions to her would hardly have survived the shock to the Empire's honour.

In the days when that decision was doubtful, and when it was obviously desirable that Britain's influence in any negotiations or decisions should carry the greatest possible weight, all the great self-governing Dominions independently decided to strengthen her hand by free offers of military support. Although in the international conditions of that time all their foreign relations were conducted through Great Britain, and each Dominion would automatically be at war if the Mother Country was so, not one of them was obliged to raise a soldier or sailor or move a ship or an ounce of merchandise in any effort against the common enemy. But when, on July 29th, each Dominion received from Britain a telegram (in the form specified in their defence schemes) warning them that war was imminent, and that certain precautions should be taken, it became obvious that, if the British government was to be assured of support, the assurance should be given at once. Next day, on July 30th, New Zealand—regularly first in such crises—offered to send a force of troops if need arose. On July 31st the Canadian government promised the fullest aid. In Australia Cabinet Ministers were busy electioneering; the Minister for Defence, Senator E. D. Millen, promised that Australia “was no fair-weather partner” in the Empire; but of all Australians it was the leader of the Labour opposition, Mr Andrew Fisher, who—though presumably he knew nothing of the warning message—gave the Mother Country the most comforting pledge, that Australia was with her to the “last man and last shilling”. That day the Governor-General, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, suggested to the Prime Minister, Mr Joseph Cook, that he should call a Cabinet meeting in order that the British

government might know what support it might expect from the Australian government.

Meanwhile the preliminary steps were taken. The Australian squadron was directed to Sydney for coaling and other preparation. On August 2nd the "first stage" of mobilisation was ordered. On the 3rd the Federal Cabinet met in Melbourne and called in representatives of its Army and Navy. The Canadian government was reported to have offered to send 30,000 troops.³ The Prime Minister now asked the military staff officer at the Cabinet meeting whether any plans existed for sending an expeditionary force from Australia.

Australia was quite remarkably fortunate in the leaders of her small professional military staff at that time, but it chanced that the two most distinguished of them—Brig.-General William Throsby Bridges and Colonel J. G. Legge—were away from Melbourne. Most happily, however, throughout this crisis the acting-head of the general staff at the Defence Department was Major Cyril Brudenell White, a young Queenslander, who, despite the exceptional quality of the two absent leaders, was beginning to be recognised as the most brilliant soldier the Australian permanent service had produced. Son of a courageous Irish-Australian pastoralist, who thrice quietly faced the wreckage of his fortune in the back country, Cyril White had had to struggle for his education. But, when once in the Army, his power of instantly grasping a situation, his unerring sense of proportion, the strength of his will, and the outstanding charm of his personality—helped by his training under a remarkable British leader, General Hutton—took him quickly to important work. After a term at the Staff College in England his services were asked for by the British War Office for three years to lecture and train its regular troops. As an organiser he was no whit inferior to the

³ Actually Canada had offered 20,000, though this was soon increased to 33,000.

other Australian who was to achieve great distinction during the war, John Monash.

A military defence scheme for Australia had, partly on suggestion from the Imperial General Staff, been worked on, first by Brig.-General Bridges, but of late by Major White. It dealt, however, purely with precautions to be taken in Australia; White had not been allowed to work at any scheme for supporting Britain. But one Labour Minister, Senator George Foster Pearce, who had charge of the Defence Department during the Fisher regime, had agreed to his elaborating a scheme for joint defence with New Zealand. Under this, Australia and New Zealand would furnish between them one infantry division—the only force of such size envisaged in the defence plans of these southern Dominions. This division would comprise 18,000 men—6000 from New Zealand and 12,000 from Australia. White now told the Prime Minister of this plan for despatching 12,000. Sir Joseph Cook, however, was determined that Australia's contribution should be on a larger scale, and he asked if 20,000 could be sent. White replied that they could, and that there was fair prospect of their being ready in six weeks. The Ministers accordingly decided that Australia should offer to—

- (1) place her Navy under the British Admiralty; and to
- (2) despatch "a force of 20,000 men of any suggested composition to any destination desired by the Home government", and to maintain it there.

The offer was immediately announced, and was accepted by the British government, which on August 6th telegraphed asking that the force should be sent as soon as possible. The Australian government appointed General Bridges, who had been the first commandant of Australia's Military College, and had lately been made

inspector-general, to organise and command it. He chose White for the chief of his staff.

Bridges was a deep student of his profession, a man of first-rate brain and wide learning, of great physical and moral courage, and of grim determination, though he was shy in intercourse. He had been born in Scotland, son of a naval officer who married an Australian, and he had been trained at Kingston Military College in Canada. In 1885 he joined the New South Wales permanent forces, in which the school of gunnery at Middle Head gave scope for his technical interests and enthusiasm. He served with the British Cavalry Division in South Africa, and later went to London as Australia's representative on the Imperial General Staff. The standards and tradition of Australia's new military college at Duntroon were almost entirely of his making.

Now, faced with the task of producing an Australian force for service abroad, he was determined that it should serve as a compact national contribution. The British War Office had suggested that it should be composed of brigades of separate services—infantry, light horse, and artillery—a request which indicated an intention of the British staff to distribute these separately among British divisions. Bridges telegraphed that he had begun organising an Australian infantry division and one light horse brigade, to sail in six weeks. Did the British Army Council concur? The Army Council agreed, and the principle that Australia should supply—so far as the Army was concerned—a compact Australian force, and not one to be split up among other particles forming a British army, was thus settled at the outset. Australian hospitals were the chief exception to this; throughout the war they served all troops though Australian patients largely passed through them.

In ordinary times it would have been possible to create this force by obtaining volunteer detachments from the existing home-service battalions, batteries, and

8th-10th Aug. 1914]

WAR BREAKS OUT

other units all over Australia, and so linking the home-service army with the contingent for overseas. New Zealand's force—a brigade of infantry and one of mounted rifles—was so raised, and Brudenell White would greatly have preferred this course. But the Australian citizen forces were then so largely composed of youths, in their first or second year of training under the new Kitchener scheme, that Bridges and he decided that the only method then possible was to create a special force by enlistment from the whole population. The scheme was ready by August 8th, and on the 10th recruiting was opened by proclamation. Bridges, with an eye on the initials which he knew would be used for its name, called the new army the Australian Imperial Force, the "A.I.F.". It was intended to sail for Europe on September 12th.