

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST CONTINGENT SAILS

FEW Australians—indeed comparatively few Anglo-Saxons—in July 1914 knew what a “division” of cavalry or infantry was; and to the stream of ill-assorted men who poured like ants into the barrack squares of the main Australian cities on 10th August 1914, eager to enlist, the title 1st Australian Division meant almost nothing. Probably those who applied to enter the 1st Australian Light Horse Brigade knew a little more. It was into the Light Horse or other mounted arms—horse transport and artillery—that Australians of that day tended to rush; that generation of them had no fondness for walking. “Hiking” had not come into vogue among city folk, and, if caste existed in the country, the “footman” was on its lowest rung. The old “sundowner” only tramped because he had to; and anyone who (like the famous *Times* correspondent, “Chinese” Morrison, and certain professors and poets) willingly walked, when he could avoid it, was genuinely regarded there as “queer”. Part even of the city population could then still ride—or at least had made some attempt at it during country holidays.

So there was a natural rush for the mounted arm. But so keen was the desire to enlist that many fine horsemen, fearing to be shut out, went straight into the infantry.

From before the first official day of enlistment there streamed to the military headquarters in each State numbers of the keen-spirited youngsters—and also many over the limit of nineteen to thirty-eight years—to whom

the British connection had always been sacred. There crowded to them also all the adventurous spirits, rather numerous in Australia, that *must* be in anything that was moving. For some time the only centres for enlistment were in the great coastal cities, and, partly through inexperience, the medical and dental standards were at that stage absurdly rigorous. Men who had abandoned their jobs, some who had sold their small farms and businesses, or left them to their neighbours, or had simply locked the doors and made the long journeys to the capitals, found themselves rejected for defects of teeth, eyesight, feet and so on, which a few months later were readily passed over as either immaterial or amenable to treatment. It was said that some men even broke into tears on such rejection; many were advised to have the defect treated and to apply again. In dealing with mental and moral defects on the other hand, the admission was perhaps too wide, and a severe process of discarding unsuitables had to be carried out by at least one brigade before leaving Australia, and by the whole force after arrival overseas.

One difficulty of organising a force for overseas was that, whereas the Australian Army was organised in local units, when a force had to be sent abroad it must represent all Australia. When the first contingent was raised it seemed likely that it would be the only large Australian force to be sent abroad for a considerable time; men of every State would naturally demand to serve in it. Consequently in the creation of the 1st Australian Infantry Division, each of the two most populous States, New South Wales and Victoria, supplied an infantry brigade, and the four "outer" States together supplied a third. As each brigade then comprised four battalions (each of 1017 officers and men) the composition of the 1st Division was:

- 1st Brigade (1, 2, 3 and 4 Bns), New South Wales.
- 2nd Brigade (5, 6, 7 and 8 Bns), Victoria.

3rd Brigade: 9 Bn, Queensland; 10 Bn, South Australia; 11 Bn, Western Australia; 12 Bn, half, Tasmania—half, Western and South Australia.

Besides the 12,000 infantry thus furnished, the division had its own regiment of Light Horse, the 4th (546 strong, from Victoria); its own artillery (3 brigades—in the Second World War we called them regiments—each of 3 four-gun batteries), totalling 36 field-guns, all drawn by six-horse teams; an “ammunition column”, also horse-drawn, to bring ammunition for artillery and infantry; 3 field companies of engineers; 3 field ambulances; and a divisional train (horse transport). The total strength was 18,000 men.

The 1st Light Horse Brigade (2226 strong) also represented most of Australia as follows:

- 1st Regiment, New South Wales,
- 2nd Regiment, Queensland,
- 3rd Regiment, South Australia and Tasmania,

and included also its signal troop, field ambulance (and, later, a field troop of engineers) and brigade train.

The composition of all later divisions and brigades was in general much the same, except that in the 4th Infantry Division the “outer” States were more strongly represented.

The only automobiles with the original force were five motor cars given by their owners for the 1st Division’s staff; but a “reserve park” of motor transport for the 1st Division was raised almost at once, and a few gifts of motor ambulances were received. (These motor ambulances later arriving in Egypt filled a big gap in the British provision there; and the reserve park, going on to England, served with the British in Belgium long before the Australian infantry was sent there.) The A.I.F.’s guns were then all 18-pounders, the standard British field-guns of that day, and were drawn from those

of the citizen forces. Later it had two siege batteries; but the heavies supporting it were almost always British.

Before the battalions, batteries, engineer and other companies could be formed, their commanders had to be chosen. The main staff and the artillery and infantry brigade commanders were selected by Bridges and White. For the three infantry brigades they chose Henry MacLaurin, a young Sydney barrister, a fine product of Sydney University; James Whiteside M'Cay, a Victorian lawyer, one of a brilliant family, and for a short while Federal Minister for Defence—both of these were highly trained militiamen; and E. G. Sinclair-MacLagan, a British regular officer who had been right-hand to Bridges in shaping the military college at Duntroon, and whose interest in men and sense of humour, as well as his efficiency, made him a suitable commander of Australians. To command the 1st Light Horse Brigade Bridges chose Colonel Henry George Chauvel,¹ then Australian representative on the Imperial General Staff in London. For his chief artillery officer he selected Colonel Talbot Hobbs, a keen little expert from the militia, in civil life an architect in Western Australia. The two officers chosen for the heads of his medical service proved, before long, to be inadequate for the exacting demands of the highest positions and were successively displaced by a dynamic personality, Colonel Neville R. Howse, a country surgeon who had won a V.C. in South Africa and who, through the influence given him by that decoration, managed to return from the A.N. & M.E.F. in New Guinea just in time to secure a special post as "supernumerary medical officer" with Bridges' staff. The staff included, besides several British specialist officers who were in Australia on loan or exchange, Captain John Gellibrand, a Tasmanian apple-grower, formerly in the British regular Army and

¹ At this time all infantry and light-horse brigade commanders of the First A.I.F. were given the rank of colonel, in and after the Gallipoli Campaign all were made brigadier-generals.

a contemporary of White at the Staff College; and Captain Tom Griffiths, formerly gunner in the Victorian Permanent Artillery, who became Bridges' "military secretary", dealing with the administration of the force as a whole as distinct from that of the 1st Division. None could then foretell that this tiny branch of Bridges' staff would eventually develop into an oversea miniature of the British War Office, with a staff of several thousands.

The first task of the brigadiers was to choose their battalion commanders, who then picked their company officers. These included but few "regular" soldiers. It is true that cadets of the military college, sergeants of the permanent instructional staff, and "area officers" under Kitchener's scheme were usually allotted to battalions as adjutants, machine-gun officers, quartermasters, regimental sergeant-majors and so forth. Some of these posts were also given to former officers or N.C.O.'s of the British regular Army who had emigrated to Australia, and a sprinkling of these was also among the company officers. But for the most part each commander staffed his battalion, battery, field company or other unit with officers from the Australian militia, and it was on the old militia far more than on any other body that the leading and training of the A.I.F. fell.

By about August 17th this choice of leaders was sufficiently complete for the units to be embodied; and on prescribed mornings the selected officers reported in their militia uniforms to the State headquarters, where the parade ground was crowded with men in every kind of civilian dress. As in the New Guinea force, so in the A.I.F. it was never afterwards difficult to find representatives of any calling required—dentists, labourers, surveyors, farmers, engineers, navigators, artists, masons, mechanics, chemists, even clergymen, and fine ones at that. On this first day the officers were allotted to their companies; a few sharp commands—enough of the men knew enough of their drill for the whole to be pushed

into their places; and on a final order a nondescript column, perhaps 20 officers and 300 men, marched off, winding through the barracks gate and out along the dusty road to some camp, showground or racecourse on the city's outskirts. Here among the windy tents or grandstands it began its camp life; and a collection of strangers, who arrived there meaning no more to one another than do fellow-passengers in a suburban train, began within a week or two of feverish registering, examining, and equipping, and some rough and ready training, to become the 1st, 9th, 12th or other battalion with its individual spirit and manner, easily recognisable in the later history of the A.I.F.

For Australia as it then was, the equipping of this force within a month of its enrolment, the manufacture of waggons, harness and uniforms, the refitting of passenger liners and freighters to carry troops and horses, the provisioning of fleet and army with food, stores and medical equipment so that it should be ready to sail by September 21st, was a proof—too little recognised—of the realism and ability of the small military and naval staffs built up in peace-time, as well as of the resourcefulness of Australian workers and manufacturers.²

By mid-September the newly formed brigades and battalions were sufficiently trained to march through the streets where their relations and friends proudly crowded the kerbs to see them. Not all citizens were equally impressed. The loose pea-soup coloured, dull-buttoned khaki uniforms of the A.I.F., though more workmanlike than those of any other army within the A.I.F.'s subsequent experience, appeared slovenly to critics who compared them with the traditional tight-stuffed, twinkling, gold-braided, brass-buttoned uniforms of peace-time; and there was an unevenness about these big, early troops

² It is noteworthy that the contingent raised in New South Wales in 1885 to serve in the Sudan War embarked three weeks after its formation was suggested. See *The Sudan Contingent*, by Stanley Brogden.

that caused one onlooker to say: "They'll never make soldiers of this lot. The light horse may be all right, but they've got the ragtag and bobtail of Australia in this infantry." "Going to the front!" said the manager of a great Sydney newspaper. "They'll keep the trained British regular Army for the front; the nearest these'll get to it will be the line of communications!"

The pay of Australian privates was estimated to yield to each man the same return as the wages of the average worker, and was the highest in that war—6s. a day, of which 1s. was "deferred", to be paid on discharge. A nickname of this force in those early days—with a laugh at their supposed motive of seeing the world—was the "Six-bob-a-day Tourists".

However, promptly in the fourth week of September, orders were given to the battalions to embark. A couple were already steaming round the coast on the way to the rendezvous in Western Australia, when the orders were cancelled and the ships brought into port.

This was due to the appearance off Samoa of the two main cruisers of the German Pacific fleet, *Gneisenau* and *Scharnhorst*, at dawn on September 14th. The German official history says that the raid was undertaken in the hope of making a dawn attack upon any warships of the Allies—"even the *Australia*"—or any transports, found in harbour. But none were there, and without uselessly hitting the natives Spee could not fire on the khaki figures of the New Zealanders seen ashore. He therefore left a few hours later, steering north-west.

Thus the German squadron was now definitely known to have been on that date in the south-west Pacific, 2400 miles from the Australian coast. The Admiralty ordered the *Australia* to finish its work at New Guinea and then search for the two big German cruisers. Meanwhile a strong escort, the British armoured cruiser, *Minotaur*, and the much more powerful Japanese cruiser, *Ibuki*, would go to Western Australia to protect the convoy,

which would assemble there, in King George's Sound, for the voyage to Europe. Australian and New Zealand Ministers, however, were racked by deep doubts as to whether it was safe for their unescorted transports to venture yet on the voyage to Western Australia seeing that the German cruisers might already be entering the Tasman Sea. Perceiving—and sharing—these doubts, the Governor-General of Australia, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, wisely took on himself the responsibility of telegraphing an intimation of them to the Governor-General of New Zealand, and the British Colonial Office. Although the Admiralty believed that the transports would be safe, his action caused it to send the escort all the way to New Zealand, to pick up the New Zealand transports; the Australian ones would join it as it returned.

The sailing of Australian transports was therefore cancelled; those already at sea were ordered to port and their troops into camp. On September 30th arrived news that the German cruisers on September 22nd had raided Papeete,³ 1000 miles more distant than Samoa. The New Zealand government, having by then promised its people that the troops would be escorted, insisted that the escort should come for them as arranged. The Australian government, believing the danger to be ended (and being 1000 miles farther away), ordered its transports to start or resume their voyages individually to Western Australia. The battle-cruiser *Australia*, having finished its task in New Guinea waters, went by the Admiralty's order to Fiji to search for the big German cruisers. Most of the Australian squadron was directed thither.

General Bridges had protested against the delay in sailing, feeling that it diminished the value of the help to be given by his force in the crisis on the Western Front. The anti-climax was also a severe test for the discipline of the troops: at this stage Melbourne and Sydney were

³ The French there acted most vigorously and the Germans did not land. (*Vol. IX, p. 107.*)

nightly thronged by men supposed to be in camp. It was a relief to them and to their leaders when, in mid-October, the embarkation order was renewed.

From October 24th there began to arrive in King George's Sound, the great, safe, lonely harbour of Albany in the south-western corner of Australia, transport after transport carrying men, horses, guns. The troops were not allowed to land. On the 26th came in the Orient liner *Orvieto*, now transporting General Bridges, his staff, and over 1000 men from Melbourne. On the 28th, when nearly 30 Australian transports were in port, all in their peace-time paint, 14 ships entered—the New Zealand transports, painted grey, and their powerful escort. Four days later, at 6.45 a.m. on November 1st, the *Orvieto* led the transports out from the harbour heads. The 26 Australian transports formed up first, in three divisions, steaming parallel with a mile between them, each division in "line ahead" (or, as the Army would say, in "single file"). The 10 New Zealand ships in two similar divisions followed, and the warships escorted. Two days later 2 Western Australian transports met the fleet at sea. Then with the British cruiser *Minotaur* five miles ahead, the *Ibuki* and *Melbourne* four miles out on either beam, and the *Sydney* far astern, the 38 transports headed for Suez en route to England.