Understanding the First AIF: A Brief Guide

This document has been prepared as part of the Royal Australian Historical Society's *Researching Soldiers in Your Local Community* project. It is intended as a brief guide to understanding the history and structure of the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) during World War I, so you may place your local soldier's service in a more detailed context.

A glossary of military terminology and abbreviations is provided on page 25 of the downloadable research guide for this project.

The First AIF

The Australian Imperial Force was first raised in 1914 in response to the outbreak of global war. By the end of the conflict, it was one of only three belligerent armies that remained an all-volunteer force, alongside India and South Africa. Though known at the time as the AIF, today it is referred to as the First AIF—just like the Great War is now known as World War I.

The first enlistees with the AIF made up one and a half divisions. They were sent to Egypt for training and combined with the New Zealand brigades to form the 1st and 2nd Divisions of the Australia and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC). It was these men who served on Gallipoli, between April and December 1915.

The 3rd Division of the AIF was raised in February 1916 and quickly moved to Britain for training. After the evacuation of the Gallipoli peninsula, 4th and 5th Divisions were created from the existing 1st and 2nd, before being sent to France in 1916. The five divisions were split between I and II ANZAC Corps, along with the New Zealand divisions. In November 1917 the Australians of I and II ANZAC Corps formed the new Australian corps, while the New Zealand divisions joined the British infantry.

The First AIF also included five Light Horse brigades split between the ANZAC Mounted Division and the Australian Mounted Division (initially the Imperial Mounted

Division), who together formed the Desert Mounted Corps in the British-commanded Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF). The Australian Flying Corps (AFC) was a part of the First AIF during World War I, forming the separate Royal Australian Air Force in 1921. Australians also served in the Royal Australian Navy (RAN), the Australian Army Medical Corps (AAMC), and the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS).

The First AIF disbanded in 1919. In 1939, at the outbreak of World War II, the Second AIF was formed.

Army Organisation

British army organisation was under review in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1910, Field Marshall Viscount Herbert Kitchener, later the Secretary of State for War, visited the newly federated Australia and compiled a report on its defences. Many of his recommendations were implemented. At the outbreak of war in 1914, the re-organised 'order of battle' in the Australian Army looked like this:

Organisation	Commanded by	Approx. number of men
Army	General	
Corps	Lieutenant General	
Division	Major General	10 – 12,000
Brigade	Brigadier General or Colonel	4,000
Battalion	Lieutenant-Colonel	1,000
Company	Major	120
Platoon	Lieutenant	30

In the Light Horse a *regiment* equated to a battalion and a *squadron* to a company. In the Artillery a *field regiment* was the equivalent of a battalion and a *battery* equal to a company.

Infantry

The majority of men served in infantry positions. Each platoon was made of up of thirty men, commanded by a lieutenant, and split into four groups, each led by a sergeant. Four platoons constituted a company. Four companies made up a battalion. The battalion was considered the 'home' of each man, and typically consisted of thirty officers and 977 enlisted men.

In Australia, four battalions made up a brigade, and four brigades a division. Each division included services such as artillery, transport and logistics, engineers, signals, medical, and more. A corps could consist of anywhere between two and five divisions.

Artillery

The artillery comprised 'field artillery' (mobile guns pulled by horse teams) and 'garrison artillery' (heavy guns traditionally used in sieges). A field artillery brigade comprised 23 officers and 772 men, and consisted of four field regiments of four batteries each. Each battery had four guns.

To each brigade was attached a supply unit known as the Ammunition Column. Its personnel were trained as gunners and could relieve soldiers in the brigade if needed.

Medical Corps

Each battalion or equivalent had an Australian Army Medical Corps captain, who was a qualified doctor in charge of a Regimental Aid Post.

The AAMC was also responsible for Field Ambulance Units, which consisted of doctors, stretcher bearers, and transport drivers responsible for transporting sick and wounded soldiers from the front lines to Casualty Clearing Stations.

Most Australian women who served worked as nurses in the Australian Army Nursing Service. They served in Egypt, France, Greece, and India.

Light Horse

Prior to the outbreak of war, Australia's Citizen Forces included 9,000 men organised into 23 Light Horse regiments along state lines. Light Horse brigades in the First AIF typically contained recruits who served in these regiments. Volunteers had to pass a riding test to join.

Light horsemen were used as mounted infantry rather than cavalry, and usually fought dismounted. By the end of the war the ALH were organised into two divisions: the ANZAC Mounted Division, containing 1st and 2nd Brigade with three regiments each, and the Australian Mounted Division, containing 3rd and 4th Brigade with three regiments each and 5th Brigade with two regiments. Each regiment comprised 25 officers and 400 men, and was organised into three squadrons.

> ### AIF colour patches
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> Colour patches were a system of identification worn on Australian Army uniforms. Each division had a different shaped patch: a horizontal rectangle for 1st Division, a diamond for 2nd, an oval for 3rd, a circle for 4th, and a vertical rectangle for 5th. The patches consisted of two colours, one colour for the brigade and another for the battalion.
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> Some supporting units and Middle Eastern formations had triangles, while Ammunition Columns regardless of their division had a semi-circle on a red background. Medical services typically had a brown background.

Australia's War in Context

Individual soldier service records may or may not record specific battles, movements, or other key events, which can make it difficult to understand their service in context. Two ways of overcoming this are to read your soldier's unit diaries, or to research Australia's involvement in the war more generally, beginning with the timeline provided below.

Unit diaries

The Australian War Memorial holds [unit war diaries](#) for the First World War. These are detailed documents that can be difficult to read and understand, but they do provide additional information that will help ground your soldier's individual service record in the wider context of the war.

For example, Trooper Carl Adelt of the 1st Australian Light Horse Regiment features in our *Researching Soldiers* [YouTube resource videos](#). We know he was killed in action on 16 May 1915. Reading his [unit's war diary](#), we find out that they landed on the Gallipoli peninsula on 12 May, and took consistent casualties. The entry for 16 May reads: "*Casualties from 6 am to midnight 16-17. 1 K & 4 wounded.*" This death may have been Adelt. By reading the unit war diary of the 1st ALH Regiment, we can place Adelt's personal experience of the war within that of his fellow soldiers, and Australian actions on Gallipoli more broadly.

Australia in World War I

Understanding how Australia contributed to the First World War can assist you in researching your local soldier's individual experience. This timeline is a starting point for grounding your research, and includes the major actions conducted by Australian forces in the war.

For more information, refer to the suggested reading on page 23 of the [research guide](#).

1914   4 August – **Britain declares war** on Germany, Australia joins a day later

11 September – Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Forces **capture German New Guinea** in Australia's first action of the war

9 November – The first Australian troops **arrive in Egypt**, diverted on their way to Europe after the Ottoman Empire enters the conflict

1915   25 April – Australian, New Zealand, British, and French troops land at **Gallipoli** on what is now commemorated as Anzac Day

<u>24 May</u> – **Burial truce** between Australian and Turkish troops on Gallipoli

<u>6 August</u> – ANZAC 1st Division fights in the **Battle of Lone Pine** where seven Australians are awarded the Victoria Cross

<u>7 August</u> – Dismounted men of the Light Horse charge at **the Nek**, sustaining heavy casualties

<u>19-20 December</u> – **Evacuation of Gallipoli** with a single casualty, making it the most successful operation of the entire campaign. 8,000 Australians died on the peninsula, and another 18,000 were wounded

1916 <u>31 May</u> – **Battle of Jutland** is fought between the British and German navies involving Australian forces, widely considered the last major battle in the world fought by battleships. Ends on 1 June with both sides declaring victory

<u>1 July</u> – **Somme offensive begins** with more than 57,000 casualties, the bloodiest day in the history of the British Army

<u>19 July</u> – Australians see their first action on the Western Front at the **Battle of Fromelles**. 5th Division suffers more than 5,000 casualties in a single day

<u>23 July</u> – I ANZAC Corps attacks at the **Battle of Pozieres**, with the 1st Division suffering heavy casualties. Official historian C. E. W. Bean would name Pozieres the place most 'densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth'

<u>4 August</u> – ANZAC Mounted Division fights its first major action at the **Battle of Romani** in Egypt, sustaining 900 casualties

<u>18 November</u> – **Somme offensive comes to an end** just before winter. I ANZAC Corps remains in position between the French villages of Flers and Gueudecourt

1917 <u>6 April</u> – The **United States declares war** on Germany, though it will take another twelve months until their troops arrive on the Western Front

<u>11 April</u> – **First Battle of Bullecourt**, resulting in the largest capture of Australian troops at once on the Western Front: 1,170 men of the 4th Division

<u>3 May</u> – **Second Battle of Bullecourt** fought by 2nd Division with a staggering 7,482 Australian casualties

<u>7 June</u> – II ANZAC Corps fights at the **Battle of Messines** with almost 14,000 killed or wounded

<u>20 September</u> – **Battle of Menin Road**, one of the first actions of the Third Battle of Ypres, also known as the Battle of Passchendaele

<u>26 September</u> – **Battle of Polygon Wood** fought by the 4th and 5th Divisions

4 October – I and II ANZAC Corps fight together for the first time since their formation in the **Battle of Broodseinde**

12 October – **Attack on the village of Passchendaele** commences, after which the Australians are relieved by the Canadian Corps

31 October – Australian Light Horse fight in the **Battle of Beersheba** in Palestine, winning an astonishing victory and suffering less than 70 casualties

1918

21 March – Germany launches the **Spring Offensive** along the Western Front

24 April – Australian troops launch a counter-attack on the French village of **Villers-Bretonneux**, retaking it from the Germans on 25 April

4 July – General John Monash commands the **Battle of Hamel** using some of the most effective tactics of the war, with Australian troops advancing two kilometres and capturing 1,600 prisoners in just 93 minutes

8 August – Allied armies launch a **counteroffensive at Amiens**, described by German General Erich Ludendorff as the "black day of the German army"

31 August – 2nd Division led by Monash attacks and captures **Mont St Quentin**, widely regarded as one of the greatest operations of the war

28 September – **Battle at Megiddo** in Palestine during which Australian mounted troops and airmen help capture 70,000 Turkish prisoners of war, effectively ending the Ottoman Empire's campaign

29 September – The German **Hindenburg Line is broken** by Australian, American and British troops at Bellicourt

5 October – Australian Corps fight their last action on the Western Front in the **Battle of Montbrehain**

11 November – The **Armistice** is signed, bringing an informal end to the war. More than 61,000 Australians died and another 152,000 were wounded in what was the bloodiest conflict in history, until World War II

Acknowledgements

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