

Playing soldiers: Sydney private school cadet corps and the Great War

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In an environment of growing militarism and loyalty to nation and empire, *The King's School Magazine* of March 1909 reported to its readership of students, parents, teachers, and old boys that 'the real practical work that gives a cadet [an idea] of what life is like in actual warfare, can only be had in camps, where everything is done methodically, and with discipline'.¹ Seven years later in 1916 an old boy from The King's School and an ex-cadet, Arthur Henson Smith, wrote from a dug-out in France: 'The last 3 weeks I've been through the seventh Hell to which Dante's Inferno must surely be a pleasure resort in comparison.'

Adventurous, exciting, and glorious illusions of war, and the belief that cadet training was preparing cadets for war, were both central beliefs fostered among the cadet corps of the private schools of Sydney. As this paper explores, these beliefs were also central to the nature of the confusion, fear, and shock experienced by old boys upon confrontation with the reality of the Great War, as Arthur Henson Smith's entry demonstrates.

These two worlds of peace and of war are rarely treated simultaneously in the historical literature. Social and cultural historians focus upon the pre-war years and the Australian home front while military historians take over to study the lives of Australians who joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). In addition, the immense body of literature examining the men who volunteered for the AIF has only recently begun to consider the impact of pre-war socialisation on the experience of war between 1914 and 1918. John Williams' *German Anzacs and the First World War*² and Elena Govor's *Russian Anzacs in Australian History*³ both highlighted the significance of social and cultural background on the individual's experience of war, though little attention was given in either to the significance of social class and education. More recently, Wise has linked the pre-war cultural backgrounds of working-class men with their approach towards military service as a job of work.⁴

Martin Crotty also explored the pre-war socialisation of boys in the private school system in *Making the Australian Male*.⁵ However, Crotty approached the subject in terms of the changing ethos of these schools and the effect of this upon the masculine identity. His focus was upon the transition from the masculine ideal of athleticism to the masculine ideal of militarism, and while Crotty explored the deep sense of pride displayed by private schools in sending boys away to war, he stopped short of considering the experiences of those old boys who served during the Great War.

Along similar lines David Kirk also reviewed the impact of militarised physical training on the attitudes of school boys in *Schooling bodies: school practice and public discourse*.⁶ Yet again, Kirk focused upon the changing ethos within schools and the ideals established, without considering the impact upon old boys during the Great War. In addition, both Crotty and Kirk focus overwhelmingly on Victoria, and while they make brief note of the situation in New South Wales and of the private schools of Sydney, this is only in passing.

Internationally, Peter Parker's *The Old Lie*⁷ stands alone in providing a detailed examination of the inculcation of glorious and romantic images of war in the private schools of England and the effect of these illusions on the experience of old boys who enlisted in the military during the Great War. Only Parker has followed the experience of private school boys from cadet training through to the trenches, and only Parker effectively demonstrated the links between cadet training, expectations of war, and the precise nature of disillusionment among old boys during the Great War.

Within Australia, however, a similar study of this link between cadet training, expectations, and disillusionment, and of the historical continuity between the worlds of peace and of war, is yet to be seen. A major reason for this absence is that Australian historians have frequently attempted to simplify individual causes for enlistment by placing them within one of the broader categories of patriotism, sense of duty, social pressure, spirit of adventure, self-interest, and a hatred of the 'Hun'.⁸

This simplification assists in understanding broader patterns of enlistment motivations, but skims over the complex and diverse motivations for enlistment felt by the individuals who enlisted. Gammage, for example, was content to argue for the men he studied that there were 'a thousand particular and personal reasons for enlistment'.⁹ White noted that any attempt to analyse motivation is clouded by a significant difference between a soldier's public and private reasons for enlistment.¹⁰ Furthermore, matters like class, occupation, education, and socialisation as factors explaining the decision to enlist have only received attention over the past few decades.

In 1986 Richard White made a significant contribution with his argument that class and socialisation were significant factors in the decision to enlist.¹¹ Using two case studies, one of a middle-class volunteer, the other an English immigrant

cabinet-maker who faced intermittent unemployment, White concluded that for the former, notions of duty and even adventure were paramount. The latter, however, revealed mixed motivations for enlistment that encompassed public rhetoric, homesickness, and joblessness.

Around the same time John McQuilton was also broadening this picture with his focus upon a regional community. McQuilton analysed occupational groups to suggest that social and economic factors may have been critical in the decision to enlist or not.¹² This line of argument was further extended more recently by Nathan Wise, who argued that many working-class men enlisted specifically for the pay, or for the perceived economic benefits.¹³

The cadet corps of the private schools of Sydney actively and openly encouraged their student cadets to enlist in the armed forces. But for all this clarity and the direct link made to the Great War, there has been very little attention devoted towards the cadet corps of the 1900s and 1910s. David Jones' 'The Military Use Of Australian State Schools: 1872-1914' provided an examination of the cadet corps of the state schools of Australia,¹⁴ while John Barrett's *Falling In* provided a general study of all cadet corps under Compulsory Military Training from 1911 to 1915.¹⁵ However, neither of these gave much attention to the cadet corps in private schools and once again neither followed the story of the cadets into war.

Robert Peterson presents an alternative focus in his book, *Facing the Foe*.¹⁶ Peterson utilises personal accounts to present an analysis of Shore old boys' experience in the military during the first 50 years of the school's history and in doing so he highlights the links old boys maintained with their former school. General histories of the private schools also proudly pay attention to the cadet corps and to the old boys who went to war, but the texts are rather like A. B. Gaunson's history of Sydney Grammar School's old boys, *College Street Heroes*.¹⁷ As the title suggests, notions of disillusionment or of the horrors of war were far from the author's mind.

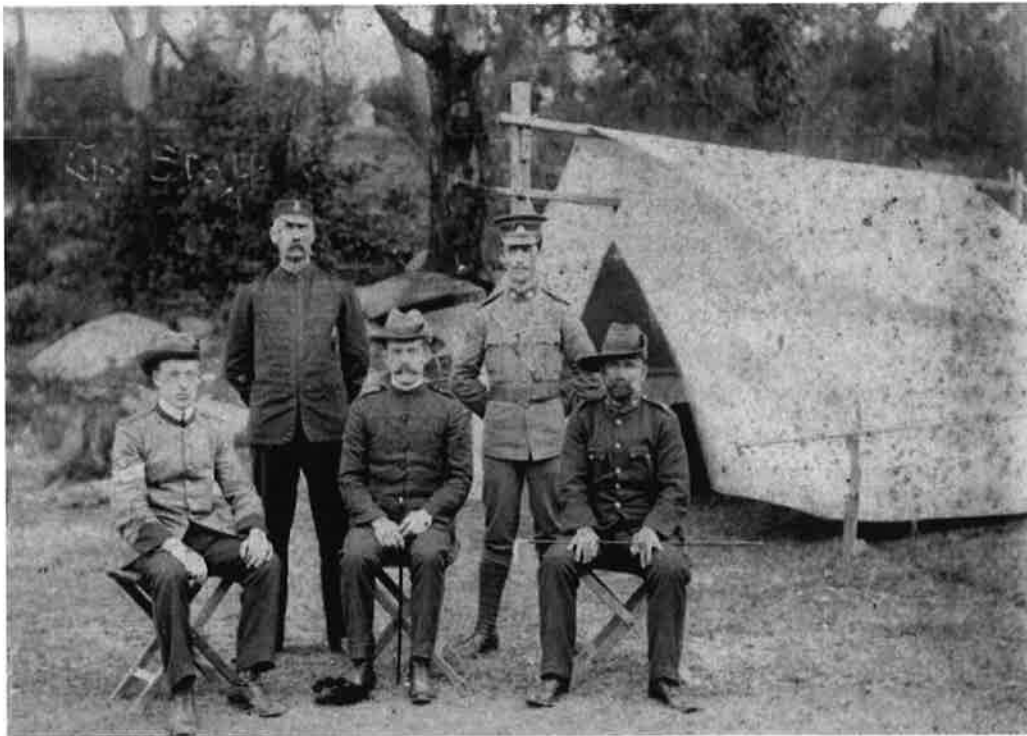
The concept of disillusionment in war is by no means new. It has been well recognised that of the 400,000 Australians who enlisted with the AIF during the Great War there were few who had an accurate understanding of what trench warfare would entail. Yet to date few historians have attempted to provide a sense of continuity between the fostering of these illusions in pre-war Australia, and the destruction of these illusions on the killing fields of Europe. This paper seeks to fill this gap by further linking specific aspects of pre-war socialisation with experiences in the military during the Great War.

Investing in the nation's youth

Throughout the 1900s and 1910s cadet corps of the private schools of Sydney promoted these illusions of war as noble, heroic and glorious. They instilled into boys a sense of discipline and notions of duty through a mixture of militarism,

romanticism, and adventure. These themes combined to advance the belief among cadets that the conditions of war and of military service would not be too unlike the conditions of cadet camps and skirmishes. These middle-class schoolboys further believed that their training was preparing them to lead the future armies of Australia and the British Empire against their enemies, when the time came. As will be explored below, it was this latter belief that would prove to be a defining factor in the nature of the disillusionment experienced by old boys during the Great War.

The progressively more militaristic Australian and English societies in the early 1900s saw a developing desire to prepare the minds and bodies of youth for an anticipated European war. Boys were sent to the great public schools of England to become what the middle class termed 'good-Englishmen',¹⁸ and in New South Wales the private schools of Sydney served similar purposes. They borrowed heavily from their English counterparts in terms of structure, ideology and notions of class. Teachers often transferred from English private schools to Australian private schools, and cadet corps leaders often had previous service experience in the British army. The values of these Australian private schools, the notions of tradition, culture and honour, were vital for the survival and success of these schools and often found powerful expression through militaristic avenues.¹⁹



*'The Staff', The King's School Cadet Camp, Middle Harbour, Sydney. c1905-09.
Cadet corps officers often had previous service experience in the British army.
(Photo: The King's School Archive Collection.)*

The Australian middle-class image of the masculine man was increasingly being cast as that of a soldier, and fighting for one's country came to be seen as the 'peak of personal achievement and the epitome of manliness'.²⁰ Throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century the opportunity for boys to pursue this image became more accessible with the growing popularity of the cadet corps. Middle-class fears of invasion, of the inadequate defences of the new nation,²¹ of a militant and class conscious labour movement,²² and of the perceived lack of national loyalty among the population further fuelled the desire to prepare boys for the future.

The cadet corps were seen as an investment in the nation's middle-class youth. The Saint Ignatius' College, Riverview, school magazine *Our Alma Mater* reported in 1909 that, 'With enthusiasm on the part of our Corps, and attention to details by the officers, both commissioned and non-commissioned, the College will be in possession of a really fine corps of the future defenders of the Commonwealth.'²³ The cadets would provide strong, disciplined, willing, and, of course, *middle-class* officers in an army in the case of it being needed for the defence of country and empire.

Youth were ripe for this targeting. They were being educated on the lessons of life at the private schools, on how to become model middle-class citizens. As patriotism and national defence became critical middle-class issues they were also introduced into the school curriculum. Thus *The King's School Magazine* asked in December 1913,

'Why do we commence with the boys?' The reason is this. A soldier takes some making, and we want to use as little time as possible for the making when he becomes of most use to the community.'²⁴

Boys were seen as objects that needed to be crafted to suit the greater class and national interests. They were told that the corps would teach them the 'very valuable and necessary lessons of life'.²⁵ This training was obviously in leadership, in military drill, and in parade, but less obvious were the inculcation of themes that were important to 'honest and respectable' Australian and British citizens – the 'valuable and necessary' life lessons of duty, discipline, sacrifice, and honour.

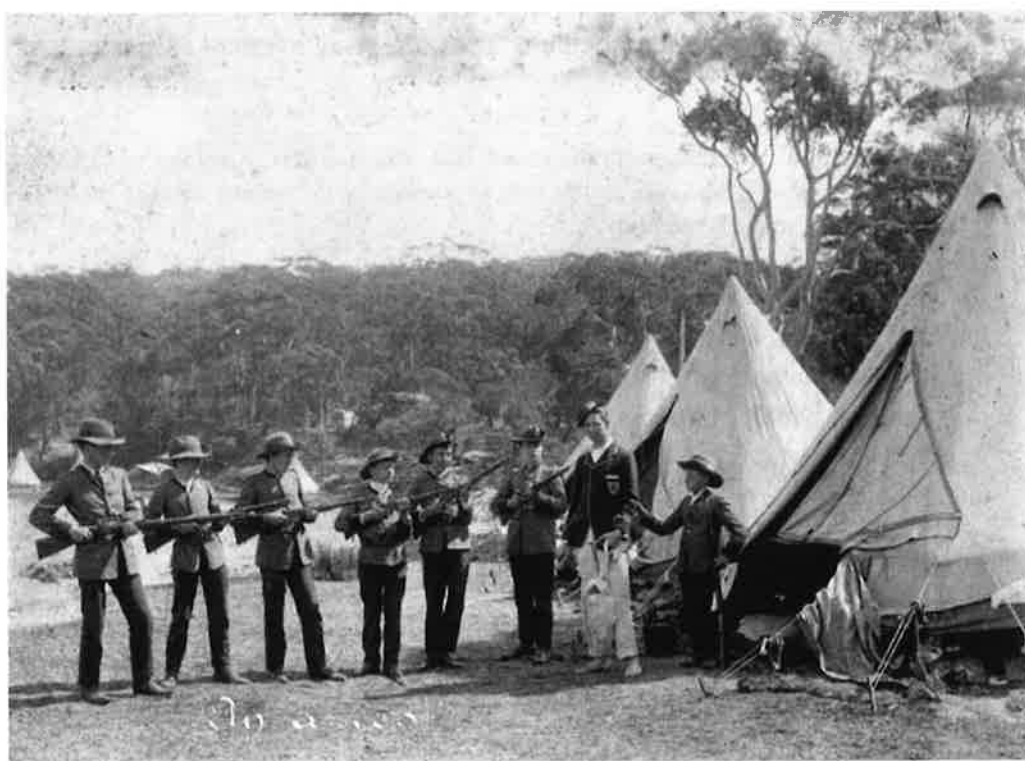
Militarism in the cadet corps

The corps structure reflected that of a military unit; each corps was organised into a company, attached to a battalion consisting of the collegiate schools of Sydney, and usually led by a military officer, preferably one with some previous experience of war. Sydney Church of England Grammar School (Shore) was proud to have a veteran of the Boer War as an instructor in 1908. The school's magazine, *The Torch-Bearer*, reported:

Sergeant-Major Cooke-Russell is an ex-guardsman and served for several years under Lord Kitchener in Egypt and South Africa, and his thorough knowledge of all things military is of great service to the officers, while his soldierly bearing is an example which all will do well to emulate.²⁶

The military experience of commanding officers, particularly experience in the Boer War, was highlighted as a credential guaranteed to improve the soldierly standing of the cadet corps and prepare them all the more for war.

From the time a boy put on his cadet uniform to the time he took it off he was treated as part of Australia's defence force. The cadet corps instructors expected the boys to act like soldiers, and subsequently they were treated as such. They were expected to take pride in themselves, in their cadet corps, and in what they were doing for their nation and empire. J. McElhone of St Joseph's College thus wrote in the school magazine in March 1911, 'When we don our uniforms, and are armed with rifles, we shall then commence to take a soldierly pride in ourselves.'²⁷ Such pride also brought with it a sense of duty and responsibility. *The Torch-Bearer* relied upon this sense of duty to call upon all students to join the cadet corps, as 'no true Australian can fail to regard it as his duty to fit himself, as far as he is able, to be of service in the case of a call to defend his country'.²⁸



The King's School Cadet Camp, Middle Harbour, Sydney. c1905-09. Cadets took part in simulations of actual warfare. (Photo: The King's School Archive Collection.)

With this sense of duty and sacrifice some boys were willing to endure the long hours of drill and the sometimes strenuous training they were ordered to undertake. Others saw it as a necessary evil that enabled them to enjoy the more adventurous and exciting aspects of the cadet corps. Occasionally cadet corps took part in what was believed to be a simulation of actual warfare, that is, a 'skirmish'. *The King's School Magazine* reported of one occasion:

Two companies took up a position on a hill near the penitentiary [sic], while the remaining six endeavoured to dislodge them. Steadily, and under a pitiless sun, the valiant six threaded their way through scrub, and over rocks, until they were sighted by the enemy, who immediately opened fire. Undeterred, they continued to advance, and having reached the base of the hill, prepared for the final rush. Amidst the rattle of musketry, the storming party carried the height, and forced the enemy to retire.²⁹

Not a single boy was killed in this skirmish. The ammunition was blank, and while loud, it was *not* deadly. The heights were carried with relative ease, the enemy being forced to retire.

Boys in the cadet corps expressed the view through their school publications that they were undergoing military training. Their uniforms, activities, instructors and officers, even their school magazines, constantly reinforced this illusion. Sydney Grammar School's *The Sydneian* reported in August 1907 that:

Military service demands constant sacrifice from both boys, and parents – sacrifice of playtime, sacrifice of money, sacrifice of anything and everything, apart from school work, in the interest of the corps. The vain puppy who wishes to be a cadet, that he may wear a uniform and paralyze his sister, must grasp this fact – that *the beginning and end of military service is self-sacrifice* – from the patent preparation in time of peace, to the stray bullet on the battlefield.³⁰

This militarism was only one part of the illusion of war fostered by the cadet corps. The complementing aspect that made the fantasy so much more destructive was the enjoyment boys experienced in the cadet corps. 'War' was romantic, 'fighting' was exhilarating, and the 'stray bullet' excited boys who saw war as an adventure.

Adventure in the cadet corps

Although the cadet corps were formed to promote militarism and to produce the ideal citizen, its activities were accompanied by a sense of military adventure and romanticism. Cadet corps may have revolved around military training, but in order to maintain numbers and ensure that boys would remain in the corps, some enjoyment had to be injected into the program. This was largely achieved through making competition a cornerstone of the cadet corps and making every aspect of the

cadet corps training a contest. Battalion sports days were held regularly where cadets would engage in tent-pitching races, tug-of-war, shooting and skirmishing competitions, as well as drill presentations that were scored by judges.³¹ Victorious cadets were given medals, prizes, and money to reward their military enthusiasm. An old boy of Newington College in 1902 'offered to present a Winchester repeating rifle to the Newington boy who obtains the highest score in the coming Schools' Competition match for the Shield',³² while in 1909 Sydney Grammar School was offering prizes of 10/-, 5/-, and 2/6 for the boys who had the best general turn-out on parade.³³

Militarism was openly combined with adventure and competition to present boys with an illusion of war as grand and exciting. In the eyes of cadet instructors and officers an understanding of 'actual warfare' could best be understood through cadet camps.³⁴

These were the most significant events on the cadet corps calendar and cadets were told that camps provided the real conditions of war. *The Torch-Bearer* referred to evenings at camp as 'Peace amid War',³⁵ while *The Sydneian* reported:

Boys who did not go to camp can have no idea of what a cadet learns in his short four days. The work may be hard, but it is full of interest, and each feels that he is no longer 'playing at soldiers', but going in for it in real earnest.³⁶

Cadets worked at militaristic activities throughout the day, went on long route marches, drilled, skirmished, and practised rifle shooting. A report written by a cadet and published in *The Torch-Bearer* of April 1909 presented this duality of militarism and adventure in the cadet camps. The camp, he wrote:

was the real thing, not much to eat or time to eat it. Those who grumbled at the hard fare may get comfort from the fact that it did them good, with a little forethought and experience, they can mitigate the severity of it on the next occasion.³⁷

Yet several pages later the report recollected exciting times in the camp, groups of boys swimming at the beach or running around the bushes, while 'fistic encounters took place when it grew dark, between chosen men from rival companies, and weird shadows darted to and fro'.³⁸

As can be seen in the above example, military training was interspersed with youthful fun. Route marches were concluded with a swim at the beach, to be followed by rifle practice, after which boys would play hide-and-seek in the bushes. Boys enjoyed cadet camps, skirmishes, and running around the bush with mates after dark. There was a risk they could be caught by the cadet guards and punished,³⁹ but this added to the sense of adventure. This, many cadets reported in school publications, was what war was really like. War was an adventure – it was a risk and it was exciting.



'The work may be hard, but it is full of interest, and each feels that he is no longer "playing at soldiers", but going in for it in real earnest.' The King's School Cadet Camp, Middle Harbour, Sydney. c1905-09. (Photo: The King's School Archive Collection.)

From cadets to soldiers

During the Great War old boys from the private schools of Sydney enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force in their thousands. They saw war as an adventure, as the chance of a lifetime, something that they could cherish for the rest of their lives. James Connor wrote to his parents on a troopship that, 'It has been a very exciting trip all the way over ... It's a great life alright & not as hard as its made out to be.'⁴⁰ Similarly Arthur Smith, an old boy from The King's School, wrote to his mother, 'I myself am in splendid health and enjoy almost every minute of the trip.'⁴¹ Two months later Arthur Smith was still waiting in Egypt where he feared he would 'miss the excitement of the firing line',⁴² while Herbert Carter referred in his diary to the 'game of war' and barely managed to suppress his excitement for departure to the front: 'We have been practising landing operations – all fairly excited – at least I am – & trying to keep quiet and calm.'⁴³ Similarly Eric Hutchinson, an old boy from Sydney Church of England Grammar School also wrote prior to arrival on the Peninsula in August 1915, 'There is an air of excitement & expectancy about. We are all keyed up.'⁴⁴ Throughout these early letters the catchwords so often repeated throughout the cadet corps literature resurface: 'excitement', 'adventure', the 'game of war', and, of course, their high expectations on what was awaiting them at 'the firing line'.

Requests to keep letters as records of their trips and complacency over the seriousness of their situation demonstrate the naivety of these men.⁴⁵ They expected the war to be over in a few months. They wanted to have a quick adventure, and return home as heroes. Letters sent home and diaries written from the trenches were to be kept as a constant reminder and used over a dinner table to recount exciting times. There were also expectations that shaped the nature of this writing. With an eager readership waiting at home, men were conscious of the impression they were giving, thus in the above example, Smith wanted it to be clear that he was enjoying military life, while Connor ensured that his family would believe he was having an 'exciting trip'.

In this vein some of these men styled themselves as pseudo travel writers, reflecting the popular middle-class trends at the time.⁴⁶ In all forms, these letters were carefully crafted to reflect their illusions of war and to present an image of the soldier as a romantic hero on a once-in-a-lifetime adventure. They provide insight into the attitudes of these individuals of the time, and of their outlook on their situation.⁴⁷

Others conveyed a sense of duty and self-sacrifice in letters home as if attempting to reassure family that their deaths would be worthy, or, in the case of their survival, that they had faced death and lived to return home a hero. In a letter written before arriving at Gallipoli, Eric Kater told his mother, 'You will remember somebody has written "How can a man die better than by facing fearful odds". My only hope is that I may be facing in the right direction and that I can lead my men decently.'⁴⁸ Similarly Wilfred Evans wrote several days prior to landing that, 'It is one's highest obligation in life to do his duty & it is undoubtedly known it is mine to go over here.'⁴⁹

The notions of duty and of self-sacrifice, however real or fabricated they may have been, were at least on the minds of these men. They felt that this was what people wanted to read about; it was one reason these old boys believed they should be fighting, and it had been inculcated into them throughout their time as cadets.

Whether anticipating adventure or a baptism of fire, few of these men knew for sure what awaited them, although all felt they had some idea. Given their 'previous military experience' in the cadet corps, the vast majority of these men were promoted to the officer class of the AIF. Of the private school old boys researched for this paper, 73 per cent were commissioned officers; by contrast, in an average infantry battalion around 3 per cent of the men were made up of commissioned officers. In addition to this, 24 per cent of these men served with the Light Horse; by contrast, the Light Horse made up only 9 per cent of the strength of the AIF.

The social background and education of these old boys gave them some standing within the rank-based hierarchy of the AIF, and as a result, their experiences of war were different from those in the rank and file.⁵⁰ These old boys were viewed as the

leaders of the AIF; their previous experience in the cadets led them to be seen as the representative soldiers who would lead their men on the great adventure. These ideas quickly vanished upon entering the front lines. Instead of a militaristic adventure, the conditions these men met shocked and confused them.

Herbert Carter's excitement before landing was shattered following his experience of landing on Gallipoli and in attempting to secure a bridgehead. In his diary entry for 25 April (actually entered four days later) he wrote, 'First day in action and a day never to be forgotten. Had in the full meaning of the word a hell of a day.'⁵¹ Carter's diary during the opening weeks at Gallipoli reveals a sense of utter confusion and an inability to comprehend his environment. This was simply not what he expected and he did not know how to tell people at home about it. Struggling to find the appropriate language to describe his situation to family at home, Carter wrote, 'I don't mind confessing that for the first two hours I was thoroughly scared & wondered how on earth anyone was to go through a campaign at this rate.'⁵² More tellingly he added, 'I had no idea as to whether the conditions were normal for war or not.'⁵³

Carter had expected one form of warfare; instead, he met with something so unimaginably foreign that he did not know if this was 'normal'. He had expected a military service somewhat akin to his time in cadets – rigorous and tough training under harsh conditions, blended in with some excitement and adventure. Instead in a letter written home less than two weeks after landing he wrote that 'the war game is not what it is cracked up to be'.⁵⁴ A key catchword of the cadet corps, the 'war game', was dismissed by Carter within two weeks. Among other men, too, the carefully planned structure of letters broke down under the stresses of trench warfare. Men who had hoped to write home of their adventures instead wrote home their desperate prayers for an end to the war.

Other old boys expressed a similar experience with this immediate shattering of illusions. When Eric Kater arrived on the Peninsula in mid-May, his pre-landing heroic tone and hopes of 'facing in the right direction' quickly changed to one of bewilderment and uncertainty, feelings that he attempted to explain to his mother: 'You have no idea what it is like ... When it became daylight the sight that met our eyes is beyond description, the ground was strewn [*sic*] with dead wherever you looked, heaped up two and three deep in places. A man's feelings are peculiar [*sic*] while things like this go on.'⁵⁵ Kater's struggle simply to comprehend his situation is evident in his writing. His feelings are 'peculiar', and he conveys the belief that those at home will have no idea what he was experiencing.

Much of this language and the clear sense of confusion, as with that of many other Old Boys, is reflective of his deep disillusionment. Eric Kater, an old boy of Sydney Church of England Grammar School, went to war with expectations of being able to face the 'right direction'; instead his first experience with combat shattered these expectations and left him dazed and confused.

These initial reactions illustrate the difference between the illusions old boys had of combat, and the reality of warfare as experienced during the initial fighting at Gallipoli. The disillusionment was remarkably swift, a pattern repeated by later arrivals on the Peninsula. Within a month of landing, James Connor, an old boy from Sydney Grammar School, was wounded and such was the extent of his disillusionment that he wished the wound was worse so he could be sent home: 'If it [a shell fragment] had been a bit harder I would now be on my way home for good. It would be a lovely place for a wound. My luck is out.'⁵⁶ The reality was difficult to adjust to. Dreams of joining the army and becoming heroes were realised to be false, and were instead replaced by the dream of surviving the conflict and getting back home.

Theatres of war

Once the initial actuality of war settled in, these men began to adjust to their situation. Old boys from the private schools of Sydney began to complain more than anything else about the heat, the flies, the discomfort of having to live in such conditions, and in particular about the monotony of it all. Cadet camps for these men had not been monotonous; they were full of excitement and games. Gallipoli was full of work, exhaustion, and disease.

Many old boys began to wish for something to happen to break the monotony. James Connor wrote, 'We expected to be in the firing line today. Most of us want to be out of this. It is too monotonous.'⁵⁷ Eric Kater echoed Connor's sentiments when he wrote, 'I am very sick of this place, 13 weeks in one place is very monotonous.'⁵⁸

With boredom and monotony came ill health. Wilfred Evans, a major in the Australian Army Medical Corps, explained that '... some of the men who have been here a long time get run down from the monotony chiefly'.⁵⁹ Sitting in a dugout in the sweltering heat, constantly picking flies out of food and having to randomly take cover against enemy artillery was not their idea of an adventure.

The reaction of old boys at Gallipoli represents a microcosm for the experience of old boys in the Light Horse. This field was a particularly attractive service option for old boys from the private schools of Sydney. The idea of riding around on one's horse from battle to battle was certainly more appealing than having to carry a weighted pack miles across the countryside. Romantic notions of charging into battle as the British Light Brigade had done at Balaclava in 1854 also inspired many old boys to enlist to pursue similar glory.

Following the Gallipoli campaign, many of the Light Horse units were resigned to either a long wait, or participation in what were seen as repetitive, tiresome, and insignificant patrols into the North African desert. Wilfred Evans, attached to the 9th Light Horse regiment, quickly tired of inaction and expressed his feelings in a letter home: 'Once again I commence a letter to you in this same old spot with practically

no news to tell you. Life continues to go on from day to day in the same monotonous way with practically no variation.’⁶⁰

Evans’ letter ideally summed up day-to-day operations in the Light Horse. Life alternated between long stretches of inactivity and inconsequential patrols lasting several days. The latter was the preferred option for old boys, as Stan Broome explained: ‘This is quite a sudden call to move on, as we had expect to be [here] for sometime, but thank goodness we are going to be soldiers again.’⁶¹ As Broome demonstrates, ‘soldiering’ clearly meant riding horses around the desert searching for the enemy, not waiting in camps for weeks on end with little to do.

Old Boys had expectations of warfare, of what fighting would be like, and of the enemy that they wanted to meet in combat. When Eric Kater’s regiment was sent to defend Sudan against the Senussi rising, he became agitated at the type of soldiering he was ordered to perform:

I am fed up of it all and very tired. They march us about and counter-march night after night until we are done, and then expect us to fight. Really men are made of iron to stand it. This want of sleep would make a cur of [the] best of men. I have been praying of late that I may be hit and finish it off for good.⁶²

Eric Kater had once imagined a war against the evil ‘Hun’, of charging across German fields to help defeat the ‘great enemy of civilisation’. Instead, he was in the sweltering heat of an African desert fighting rebels in a country he had previously heard little about. Old boys in the Light Horse expected gallant charges and a chivalrous attitude; instead, they got desert and disease.

In spite of the long stretches of monotony, the Light Horse gave old boys the closest experience of warfare to match the illusions fostered in the cadet corps. Stan Broom described the Light Horse attack on Beersheba as ‘The day of the great adventure’;⁶³ this was what he had waited for since his days as a cadet. It met, in many ways, his expectations of a battle and this pleased him immensely. In trench warfare a victory often meant the capture of a trench or of some prisoners; by contrast, in the Light Horse a victory meant the complete dislodging of the enemy from a town, thus forcing their retreat, and the capture of a significant position.

In many ways this reflected the basic nature of warfare as taught in cadet skirmishes, where groups of cadets would attack a hill, fire their rifles, and charge at the ‘enemy’, upon which one or the other would be forced to retreat and give up their position. As Norman Cull explained of the Light Horse, ‘We start out on a stunt and finish it one way or the other, and always get a definite decision.’⁶⁴ In the Light Horse, war could provide old boys with some brief moments of an ‘adventure’, but at most times it was a torment. However, these could by no means compare with the experiences of old boys on the Western Front.

In France and Belgium the experiences of old boys stand far apart from those of their peers in other theatres of war. The boredom and monotony noted by the men at Gallipoli and developed into a constant refrain by the old boys of the Light Horse virtually vanished as a theme in the letters from old boys on the Western Front. Instead, the letters reveal a desperate attempt to understand what was happening to them, and resentment about the way in which the war was reported.

Collin McCulloch attempted to describe his surroundings in a letter home. He described the shell holes, the barbed wire, and in grisly detail the sight of bodies, body parts, and the stench emanating from these. He described a bombardment as 'a nightmare that one will never forget'.⁶⁵ Yet in spite of a lengthy and detailed letter he still did not believe he could fully convey an understanding of what war was truly like: 'I don't suppose you'll understand or appreciate what I've said – but at least I have given you my impressions.'⁶⁶ The reality of war was difficult to fathom following years of inculcation in the belief that war was adventurous, exciting, and glorious.

The reality of war

The diaries and letters of these old boys also reveal an inability to cope with the reality of war. Until December 1916, Frederick Crooke wrote home regularly, about once every month. After his return to the line he did not write again for another six months. He explained in a letter home after this period, 'I've been feeling so fed up – been in the trenches paractically [sic] all the time – that I didn't feel like writing to anyone.'⁶⁷

Eventually the Western Front became too much for Crooke and he transferred to the Indian Army on 7 February 1918. In an interesting account of the reasons for the transfer, he explains that this was a 'career choice', as he intended to make a life for himself as a professional soldier, 'Should like it also, as it is rather an interesting kind of warefare [sic] out there, mere play compared to the slaughter in France.'⁶⁸ His comments are telling: trench warfare in France was not 'war', but 'slaughter'. Cadet training had not created illusions for Crooke, it had convinced him that there was a decent, perhaps glorious war out there for him; he had simply been sent to the wrong place.

The 'lies' about war confused many and made some, like William Willis, angry that they had been 'duped' into a futile situation. Willis wrote furiously about the illusions of war being propagated and attacked the way the conflict was reported in the newspapers:

Usually these lies emanate from those cold-footed beings, misnamed men, who are safely and comfortably installed in some Base job and who in the majority of cases, have never seen the firing line. Let me tell you that there isn't a front line soldier who thinks soldiering any good and as for being well treated, well it is a mere lie. We are underfed, overworked, and insufficiently clad, and to cap all we have to tolerate a

host of petty slurs and insults from a handful of fluffy-lipped, 'star' bedecked individuals who happened to own a father who in turn owned a draper shop that sold a cheap brand of silk stockings to the wife of somebody in authority.⁶⁹

Willis, like most old boys, knew very well by this stage that war was nothing like he had expected as a schoolboy.

Willis's contempt for the media for portraying the war as 'comfortable' was shared by other old boys. They believed that people in Australia and England should know what they were experiencing. They were not necessarily asking for sympathy, merely understanding. Robert Carter, an old boy from Sydney Grammar School, wrote, 'I have had my faith in newspapers rudely shaken & most of what they say is eyewash written by some correspondent miles behind the lines.'⁷⁰ Ronald Berry Finlayson reflected the similar sentiment that, 'Infantry is not the game it is cracked up to be.'⁷¹ These letters dispel the catchwords of the cadet corps and echo the disillusionment and disappointment felt by so many old boys. It was *not* the game they expected, it was *not* the adventure they had been taught it would be, and it was *not* the chance of a lifetime, as so many hoped.

Conclusion

The cadet corps commanded great prestige in the private schools of Sydney during the 1900s and 1910s and embodied a school spirit that reflected class and cultural imperatives. Values of discipline, duty, self-sacrifice and loyalty were imbued into cadets who carried them into adulthood. Further to this, the combination of romantic militarism with a sense of adventure formed the illusion among cadets that war would be a grander version of their days as cadets. The instructors informed the boys that training in the cadet corps was a preparation for warfare and, as school publications demonstrated, the cadets believed it. Camps, skirmishes, parades, drill and even the uniform lent credence to these claims and maintained the illusion.

From 1914 to 1918 these illusions were shattered, leaving old boys to search for a rational explanation for their situation. They desperately fumbled about for ways to describe their experience to those at home and to make sense of the war themselves. 'Slaughter' summed up many of their experiences, while others refused to recognise the conditions as 'war' but instead continued searching for something akin to their days as cadets.

During the 1900s and 1910s the cadet corps of the private schools of Sydney had prepared middle-class youth for a type of warfare that did not exist. The consequence was that many old boys left Australia expecting glorious charges across green fields; instead, they were met with a morose existence amid the mechanical slaughter of the Western Front until they met their deaths, or returned home physically and psychologically broken.

Yet these old boys from the private schools of Sydney were only a very small proportion of those who enlisted and served. In addition, the men whose diaries and letters were analysed are only a small microcosm of those who went to war. They do not reveal the experiences of all, but rather demonstrate trends and patterns that need to be compared with other social and cultural groups.

Working class individuals, for example, had an entirely different social background, they lived in different neighbourhoods, had different educational backgrounds, and from 1914 to 1918 came under very different pressures to enlist, and thus faced entirely different experiences with war. By linking these pre-war cultural backgrounds with military service in the Australian Imperial Force during the Great War, we can learn much more about the nature of these wartime experiences.

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Notes

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- 25 *The Newingtonian*, December 1911, p. 171.
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- 28 *The Torch-Bearer*, April 1908, p. 89.
- 29 *The King's School Magazine*, March 1909, p. 16.
- 30 *The Sydneian*, August 1907, 12, Italics in original.
- 31 See, for example, *The Newingtonian*, March 1913, p. 292.
- 32 *The Newingtonian*, December 1902, p. 7.
- 33 *The Sydneian*, June 1909, 3.
- 34 *The King's School Magazine*, March 1909, p. 16.
- 35 *The Torch-Bearer*, April 1914, p. 444.
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- 37 *The Torch-Bearer*, April 1909, p. 121.
- 38 *The Torch-Bearer*, April 1909, p. 124.
- 39 *The Torch-Bearer*, April 1913, p. 299.
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- 41 Letter dated 26 November 1914, Arthur Henson Smith, 103rd Howitzer Battery, educated The King's School, AWM PR94/365.
- 42 Letter dated 21 January 1915, Arthur Henson Smith, 103rd Howitzer Battery, educated The King's School, AWM PR94/365.
- 43 Diary entry dated 15 April 1915, Herbert Gordon Carter, 1st Battalion, educated The King's School, AWM 3DRL/6418.
- 44 Diary entry dated 19 August 1915, Eric Lloyd Hutchinson, Australian Army Medical Corps, educated Sydney Church of England Grammar School, AWM PR86/391.
- 45 Arthur Smith asked for his mother to keep the letters sent home 'as they will be a slight record of my very eventful trip'. Letter dated 4 December 1914, Arthur Henson Smith, 103rd Howitzer Battery, educated The King's School, AWM PR94/365. Similarly Wilfred Evans wrote, 'I hope you are keeping all my letters, Mum – they will be the only record of my trip that I will have.' Letter dated 19 April 1916, Wilfred Evans, Australian Army Medical Corps, educated Scots College, AWM 2DRL/0014.
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- 68 Letter dated 7 February 1918, Frederick Montague Warren Crooke, 18th Battalion, educated Newington College, AWM PR84/114.
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