

Australian Doctors at War. A literature review. Part Two: After Gallipoli¹

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Introduction

After the evacuation of Gallipoli, the AIF was reorganised in Egypt, and divided in two. The larger part, I Anzac Corps, under the Australian General Birdwood, was moved to France in March 1916. The smaller part, comprising II Anzac Corps, under the New Zealander General Godley, and later including the famous Anzac Mounted Division under General Chauvel, remained to protect Egypt, and to pursue the enemy in Sinai and Palestine. However a number of Australian doctors, who had enlisted with the RAMC, had already seen service in both these theatres of war.

World War I (1914-1918) (continued)

The AIF arrived in France and were trained there in time to take part in the battle of the Somme in July 1916. While the number of dead and injured at Gallipoli had been appalling (Australian losses were over 8,000), the Somme was a slaughterhouse. On the first day of the Somme offensive 60,000 British troops fell, a number equal to the total Australian losses for the war. In the first few days of its first action on the Somme (23-27 July 1916) the 1st Division AIF, at Pozieres, suffered 5,000 casualties. It was replaced by the 2nd Division AIF, which suffered 3,500 casualties in a few days. By 3 September 1916, when the Australians were replaced by Canadians, I Anzac Corps had lost 23,000 men in the space of 6 weeks.⁴² The AIF divisions still had nearly two years of fighting in France ahead of them.

From early in the war a number of Australian doctors served in France, mainly with the RAMC but also in other units, notably the Australian Voluntary Hospital.¹¹⁰⁻¹¹³ This unit was raised in England under Lt-Col W.L.E. Eames, who had served with the NSW Army Medical Corps in the Boer War. It hurried into action, and was on active service in France by 29th August, 1914 (war was declared on the 4th August). A number of Australian medical women made their way to France and served in hospitals run by women

independently of the army (see below). After Gallipoli many more Australian doctors went to France with the AIF.

There are several good first-hand accounts of Australian doctors' experiences in France. Most notable is that of R.M. Allan, whose letters home were published by his father.¹¹⁴ A number of shorter contemporary accounts appeared, mainly in the University medical journals and in the *Medical Journal of Australia*. These included articles by doctors Dawson,¹¹⁵ Fooks,¹¹⁶ MacLaurin,¹¹⁷ McLean,¹¹⁸⁻¹²⁰ Ramsden¹²¹ and Stacy.¹²²⁻¹²³ The outstanding writer in this group is A.L. McLean, whose beautifully composed pieces rank the best writing of the war. Gassed twice in France in 1918, McLean died of tuberculosis in Sydney in 1922 while still in his thirties. He left uncompleted a superb fictional or dramatised account of soldiers in France which was published posthumously.¹²⁴

Several doctors published reminiscences of the Western Front in later life: F.A Maguire after ten years recalled the confusion of life near the front;¹²⁵⁻¹²⁶ R.L. Forsyth gave a lively account of his experiences at Villers-Bretonneux after more than twenty years;¹²⁷ A. Birnie recounted his experiences vividly after an interval of fifty years;¹²⁸ and C. Huxtable devoted thirty pages of his recent autobiography to his World War I experiences from when he joined the RAMC in 1914- after an interval of over 70 years.¹²⁹

Mesopotamia

The British campaign in Mesopotamia ended with the surrender of their army at Kut to the Turks in 1916, after a siege of several months. A British force had been sent, early in 1916, in an unsuccessful attempt to rescue the besieged troops, and with it were several Australian medical officers. The main work by an Australian doctor in this campaign is R.M. Allan's *Mesopotamia and India*.¹³⁰ Allan also wrote a short piece for the *Medical Journal of Australia*.¹³¹ In addition there are articles by H.M.Moran¹³² and

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A.G. Anderson.¹³³ A small unit of the embryonic Australian Flying Corps also served in Mesopotamia. One of their pilots was Dr G.P. Merz of Melbourne, who was killed by Arabs after a forced landing.¹³⁴

Sinai and Palestine

Compared with the grim scenes which awaited the AIF in France, the campaigns of the divisions which stayed to protect Egypt, and to fight in Sinai and Palestine, appear in a relatively romantic light. Certainly the legendary exploits of the Australian Light Horse brigades of the Desert Mounted Corps, who were brilliantly led and repeatedly victorious, captured the Australian imagination and their story has been told and retold with great pride.

An important medical work from this campaign is *The Desert Trail*, by 'Scotty's Brother'.¹³⁵ This gives a detailed account of medical life in the desert war, in addition to fulfilling admirably its purpose as a memorial for the author's brother and the men of the Light Horse. The same gifted author, under his real name of C. Duguid, records his experiences of desert warfare at Gaza in a chapter of his autobiography.¹³⁶ J. Brown, who was serving with the RAMC near the Suez Canal when he was taken prisoner by the Turks, wrote a book recording his experiences.¹³⁷

Medical Women and World War I

Women who were doctors were not allowed to serve as medical officers in the Australian armed forces in World War I. Perhaps partly because of their determination to serve no matter what obstacles were put in their way, the efforts of these women have been more extensively recorded than those of medical women in World War II. A. Mitchell estimates that fourteen of Australia's one hundred and twenty-nine medical women made their own way to the war, and joined various British units.⁵⁹ There are accounts of the work of three Australian doctors Cooper,¹³⁸ DeGaris,^{139,140} and Bennett¹⁴¹ who served with the Scottish Women's Hospitals in Serbia. Other Australian medical women served in England and France: the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, and the article by Mitchell,⁵⁹ give brief accounts of the war service of Phoebe Chapple (RAMC England and France), Eleanor Bourne and Vera Scantlebury Brown (Endell Street Military Hospital), and Lucy Gullett and Hannah Sexton (France).

Unit Histories and Unit Publications

Unit histories are listed by Tregellis-Smith et al, along with some of the other unit publications, including honour rolls and newspapers.⁵

World War II (1939-1945)

Most readers will be familiar with the broad outlines of World War II, which will therefore not be recapitulated here. Australian military casualties were less in this war than in World War I (in round figures 40,000 dead compared with 60,000), while the number of men and women who served in the armed forces was greater (about 700,000 compared with 400,000). However the total destruction of human life in World War II (55,000,000) was far greater than that of any previous war, and included a high proportion of civilians (over 50%).¹⁴²

At the height of World War II, the Australian armed forces included about two thousand five hundred doctors,¹⁴³ amounting to more than one third of the medical profession in Australia.¹⁴⁴ Succinct histories of the medical services in this war were written by G. Jacobson,¹⁴⁵ and in a shorter version by A.J. Sweeting,¹⁴⁶ in the *Australian Encyclopaedia* (unfortunately this was not included in the current edition of the *Encyclopaedia*). A masterly overview of Australian military medical experience in the war was given in a short article by A.S. Walker, the official historian.¹⁴⁷

The Official History

The official Australian medical history of the Second World War was written by Allan S. Walker. It comprises four volumes produced over sixteen years, the last volume being completed by others after his death, and published in 1961.¹⁴⁸ Like Butler before him, Walker produced a monumental work compiled largely from military and personal records. However Walker's work is organised somewhat differently. He devotes his first volume to clinical experiences at war. He then devotes one volume to the Middle East and Far East, and one volume to the Island campaigns. His final volume covers medical services in the RAN and RAAF. Like its predecessor, Walker's history is a work of great authority, celebrating national pride and individual heroism.

The Middle East

Early in the war Australian troops went to the Middle East to support the British Army, and there they helped defeat the Italian forces in the Western Desert. Part of the Australian force was then sent to help defend Greece against the Italians and Germans. The allies were defeated and retreated to Crete, which in turn was taken by the Germans in May 1941. A total of 2,065 Australians were captured in Greece, and a further 3,¹⁰⁹ on Crete. Three doctors – Thomas,¹⁴⁹⁻¹⁵⁰ Le Soeuf,¹⁵¹ and King¹⁵² – wrote of their experiences in the campaign, the latter two being taken prisoner by the Germans.

Meanwhile, German reinforcements in the Western Desert forced British and Australian troops to retreat, some being left behind in April 1941 to defend the fortress of Tobruk. A book by J. Devine is devoted to his experiences at Tobruk,¹⁵³ a subject also covered by I. Wood in his autobiography.¹⁵⁴ Two journal articles by doctors at Tobruk, S.J.M. Goulston¹⁵⁵ and C. Morlet,¹⁵⁶ capture something of the atmosphere of the siege. At the same time, British and Australian troops invaded Syria from Palestine. A full-length book by M. Kent Hughes, who was a radiologist serving with the RAMC, describes her experiences in this theatre of war.¹⁵⁷

The Far East: Malaya - Singapore - Prisoners of War

British and Australian troops were rapidly defeated in Malaya when Japan entered the war. Two doctors wrote about their experiences in the retreat to Singapore: A.P. Derham in an article,¹⁵⁸ and T. Hamilton in his book.¹⁵⁹ When Singapore fell, on 15 February 1942, over 15,000 Australians were taken prisoner.¹⁶⁰ Cobcroft notes that of these, 87 were medical officers.¹⁶⁰ In all the Japanese took 22,000 Australian prisoners, from early 1942 onwards. It is testimony to the brutality of their captors that by the end of the war, three and a half years later, over 8,000 of these prisoners were dead, and many of the remainder were crippled for life.

The contributions of Australian doctors who were prisoners of war of the Japanese are celebrated in a relatively large number of books and articles, the best of which have found a wide audience. It was said by McWhae¹⁴³ that the one of the greatest achievements of the medical service in this war was its work among the prisoners on the Burma-Siam railway: 'if it had not been for their medical officers... few would have survived'. The most notable published works are those by the senior officers Coates¹⁶¹⁻¹⁶⁷ and Dunlop.¹⁶⁸⁻¹⁷¹ In addition there are a number of pieces, including journal articles and full-length books, by other Australian medical officers in Japanese captivity, each of whom makes a valuable contribution to the literature.¹⁷²⁻¹⁹⁰ There are a number of second hand reports not referred to here. A useful reference work is the recent publication by Brenda Heagney, which lists all the medical officers at Changi and on the railway.¹⁹¹

New Guinea

The Japanese advance continued south through the islands of the Dutch East Indies to Timor and New Guinea, where it was finally halted in the now legendary campaign in the Owen Stanley Ranges. Notable works by doctors about their experiences in

the New Guinea campaign are those by Robinson,^{192,193} Steward,¹⁹⁴ and Kingsley Norris.¹⁹⁵⁻¹⁹⁶

Air Force Medical Officers

Two doctors who served in the RAAF in World War II have published their experiences recently in some detail. They are W. Deane Butcher¹⁹⁷ and C. Roe.¹⁹⁸

Unit histories

There are a number of published medical unit histories from this war, ranging from professionally written works to those which are largely collections of anecdotes. These are listed by Tregellis-Smith et al.⁵

The Regimental Medical Officer in World War II

This is a subject which deserves more attention in the literature than it has received. Fortunately there are several full length books, by Regimental Medical Officers Richards,¹⁸⁷ Robinson,¹⁹³ Steward,¹⁹⁴ and Thomas.¹⁹⁹ There are short pieces by Patterson,²⁰⁰ Robinson¹⁹² and Braithwaite.²⁰¹

Medicine and literature in World War II

A. Meares, who was a RMO in New Guinea, published several poems inspired by the landscape there which reflect his experience of war.²⁰² Two novels by Australian doctors came out of the war: the surgeon H.M. Moran wrote a novel about the life of a Sydney GP, culminating with his death in England in the blitz;²⁰³ and Mary Kent Hughes wrote a well rounded story set in the Middle East, which was the scene her war service as a radiologist.²⁰⁴ She also wrote a war poem 'The Troopship .. .'

But where the sea meets sky our cruiser lies

And over it appears the Southern Cross

The pointers first, twin lamps above the sea

Then all five stars bright like the star of old

Which lit the stone-capped hills of wild Judea.

But then the message was of joyous birth,

And now of noise, home-hunger, wounds and death.

*Mary Kent Hughes, RAMC
on a troopship coming home.²⁰⁵*

Korean War (1950-1953)

Medical services in the Korean War are described by McIntyre in the official history of Australian involvement in this conflict.²⁰⁶ There are also contemporary articles by Davis,²⁰⁷ and Gandevia et al.²⁰⁸

Malaya (1950-1960) and Vietnam (1962-1973)

The official medical history of Australia's involvement in Southeast Asian conflicts 1948-1975 by B. O'Keefe (with an appendix by F.B. Smith on Agent Orange) was published recently.²⁰⁹ This is a major work in the tradition of the previous official histories. The author presents a detailed but readable, coherent picture of medical services in the Malayan Emergency and the Vietnam War.

The medical aspects of the Vietnam War were covered extensively at the time by Brass.²¹⁰⁻²¹² Articles on military medical experiences were published by Cole,²¹³ Crawford,²¹⁴ Gurner,²¹⁵⁻²¹⁶ Knight,²¹⁷ Leslie,²¹⁸

and Smithurst.²¹⁹⁻²²⁰ In addition, there were civilian medical personnel who formed what were known as the Australian Surgical Teams. Their experiences were recorded by Grove,²²¹ Santamaria,²²² and Villiers.²²³

More recent conflicts

Since Vietnam, Australian doctors have been involved officially and unofficially in a number of regional conflicts, and there are published accounts of medical experiences in Timor,²²⁴ Somalia,²²⁵⁻²²⁷ Afghanistan,²²⁸⁻²²⁹ Iraq,²²⁷ Bosnia,^{230,231} and Rwanda.²³³⁻²³⁶

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(Note: References are numbered from the previous article in this two part series)

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