



**AFTERMATH: AUSTRALIA
AFTER THE GREAT WAR**
ONE-DAY CONFERENCE SATURDAY 6 APRIL 2019
POMPEY ELLIOTT MEMORIAL HALL
403 CAMBERWELL ROAD, CAMBERWELL

KEYNOTE SPEAKER — MELEAH HAMPTON
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BATTLE OF POZIERES RIDGE 1916*

MILITARY HISTORY AND
HERITAGE VICTORIA INC.

Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs



“AFTERMATH”: AUSTRALIA AFTER THE GREAT WAR



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**THE PROCEEDINGS OF THE CONFERENCE HELD AT
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The Impact on Australia and the Return of the AIF

Dr Meleah Hampton

The Director of Education of the Australian Imperial Force in 1918, Chaplain 4th Class the Right Reverend Dr. George Merrick Long, wrote, ‘it is a gross, but common, error to imagine that Demobilisation commences when the smoke of the boats conveying troops appears on the horizon just outside the territorial limits of Australia.’¹ Australia had been transporting men and materiel to Egypt and Europe since late 1914, but the work of sending the AIF home was not a case of simply taking an established system and turning it in reverse. In fact the task was so complicated that most of 1919 was absorbed by the process of returning the AIF to Australia, one that would take months. The last main transport home left England shortly before Christmas 1919. The last members of the AIF would not return to Australia until 1921.

Around the time of the Armistice in November 1918, the best estimates were that Australia had 87,000 men in France and Belgium. A further 63,000 were in the United Kingdom, many of those in hospitals or convalescent homes, and another 17,000 in Egypt, Syria and other minor theatres of war.² There was also nearly 3,000 Australian men who went to England to work in munitions factories who were eligible for repatriation, and as many as 200 Australian soldiers per month were marrying English women and starting families. It is unlikely that the exact number of people were involved was known until well into the repatriation process; at times estimates were as many as 24,000 servicemen higher. The finer points of eligibility for a voyage home were also under negotiation for some time as questions over the inclusion of people such as fiancées or Australians serving with foreign armies into the scheme were debated. Even so, for many months before the end of the war, it was clear that there could be as many as 150,000 men, women and children requiring passage to Australia at the war’s end, and wanting it as soon as possible.

However large Australia’s cohort seemed, it was just a tiny part of the vast conglomerate of people wanting to move around after the war’s end. Combatants and labourers had come from Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, India, the United States of America, North Africa, and China, and many more places. Prisoners of war and refugees were seeking to return home in several directions. In fact, so many people needed to move that French and Belgian railways and roads were completely inadequate to deal with the problem. Even more desperate was the problem at sea. In fact, there were not enough ships in the world to complete this mammoth task at all quickly. It was very clear long before the end of the war that natural patterns of commerce and immigration would be badly disrupted at the end of hostilities, and it was an ongoing part of meetings and conversations about future repatriation plans that had been going on almost as long as there had been contingents of men being sent overseas.

¹ AWM 4/30/1/1 Pt 1, ‘Report by the Director of Education AIF as to the Manner in Which the AIF Education Service is Affected by Repatriation and Demobilisation,’ undated.

² Ernest Scott, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume XI – Australia During the War*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1936, p. 825.

The British Ministry of Shipping, largely responsible for the allocation of transport, gave an initial undertaking of returning 200,000 AIF troops to Australia within nine months, that is, at a rate of 5,000 per week.³ Knowing that Australia was not the only country hoping to secure more ships, every effort was made to keep pressuring the Ministry of Shipping to keep to this undertaking even before the end of the war, but it was a process of constant negotiation. Ernest Scott, the author of the Australian Official History volume devoted to the home front, noted drily that “the Ministry of Shipping knew a surprising number of polite synonyms for ‘it can’t be done at present.’”⁴ Considering the Australian government did not own enough passenger ships for the task, so there was no choice but to wait on British authorities.

Conversely, even while Australian authorities overseas were determined to keep pressure on the Ministry of Shipping to keep to their undertaking of 5,000 Australians per week, there was a sense that this actually might be too many people at once. There was no point raising this with the Ministry of Shipping just yet, but the act of returning tens of thousands of men to Australia had the potential to cause serious damage to both the economy, and repatriation systems in Australia. There were very real fears that this glut of young, potentially unemployed men returning to society would upset the balance of trade, industry and public and private life. Certainly the sheer number of passengers on the usual trade routes between Australia and the United Kingdom had a direct bearing on the volume of cargo space available both to and from Australia, with the potential to disrupt international imports and exports. If the steamers followed the usual trade routes, which they almost certainly would, they would clog ports all along the way and would impact any other shipping. The process of repatriation would limit manufacturing opportunities in Australia with both a shortage of raw materials and a shortage of shipping for export. The situation was fraught with danger from many different directions, and needed careful handling.

As George Long was well aware when he wrote his lines, AIF authorities had been working on the demobilisation process long before the smoke of any troopships appeared on the horizon. In fact, organisation had been under some form of consideration since at least 1916. By October 1917 it was suggested that an officer should be appointed to coordinate all of the ideas, questions and fears to do with repatriation that were flying around AIF Headquarters, and indeed at home in the government, and to lay down some kind of basic policy. As a result, Major Guy Sherington, was appointed to the role of Staff Officer Repatriation and Demobilisation in February 1918 and would go on to act as a liaison between military authorities overseas and the government in Australia until a few weeks after the Armistice. He began work with a small staff which grew over time, and was responsible for laying out as clearly as he could the various different parts, and attendant complications, of the task. By trying to clarify difficulties with either the AIF or the Australian government in order to institute as many strategies as possible before peace was established, Sherington hoped that the work of repatriation could begin smoothly when required.

³ AWM 4/30/1/1 Pt. 1, ‘Minutes of a Conference re Demobilisation AIF between Prime Minister of Australia and Brig. Genl. Dodds, Commandant, Administrative HQ’, undated.

⁴ Scott 1936, p. 825.

Any study of repatriation must recognise that Australians use the word as a coverall for three separate aspects of the process. “Repatriation” as a word refers to the act of returning someone to their home country. Another part of the process is “demobilisation” – getting men out of the army and preparing them for some kind of civilian occupation. The third aspect of the process has been described using words like “rehabilitation” or “reestablishment” or “reinstatement in civil life”, referring to the reinstatement and ongoing support of men returning to a civilian society and life. All three of these processes were clearly recognised by Australian authorities both during the planning and the execution phases of the repatriation of the AIF, but in the post-war years they came to be mixed together under the term “repatriation”. The Australian government’s primary focus was reestablishment – in other words, how the government was going to manage the influx of recently returned, employable men. This aspect of repatriation dominates the pre-armistice conversations and policies around the issue of repatriation, and as a result the basic policies established by Sherington and his office tended to reflect the needs of the Australian nation.

One of the central strands to the basic policy of repatriation was the return of men in order of those with guaranteed employment. An unofficial press cable of November 1918 reported that “The troops will return as units under their own officers. The battalions, regiments, and batteries will be divided into halves, the first coming half containing as many men as possible meriting preferential treatment according [a] priority list.”⁵ The first priority would be men with guaranteed employment in Australia together with married men with families. The next priority would be single men with guaranteed employment, followed by men with no guarantee of employment by order of length of service. It was also hoped to give precedence of return according to trade, prioritising those in primary production before other various classes of unskilled labour. The example given was “a soldier employed at the Lithgow Iron Works rolling sheet iron should be returned to Australia before a soldier employed in manufacturing buckets from raw material which is secured from the Lithgow Iron Works.”⁶ In other words, basic manufacture first.

After months of investigation, Sherington’s early investigations led to a “Definite Basic Policy” on which the development of a repatriation scheme would be based. George Long was appointed director of education, and a sports board was planned to conduct courses and competitions during the waiting period. Sherington established some concrete policies through negotiation between the Australian government and AIF authorities. But of perhaps more value was the list of questions he established that would need answers as soon as possible. Sometimes there were no answers available; at other times answers had to be pried out of the right department, but Sherington had set the course for obtaining the answers in a logical way. And then, for many months the Repatriation Section was stalled, waiting for an answer to many questions. Who would be eligible for return? Who would be eligible to discharge from the military while still in England? Did the government have plans for the men while they were waiting to leave, or would it be up to the repatriation section to occupy

⁵ AWM 4/30/1/1 Pt 1, Unofficial press release, ‘British Australasian’, 21 November 1918, in ‘AIF Repatriation Precipos of Correspondence from 27.12.16 to 18.11.18’.

⁶ AWM 4/30/1/1 Pt 1, ‘Repatriation, Demobilisation and Rehabilitation of the AIF’, 26/10/1917.

them? If a man went to fight and his wife made her own way to England to be near him while he was fighting in France but then he was killed in France, was it even possible to deny the widow free passage back to Australia? Should the AIF continue to get its harness, saddlery and vehicles, which it has already paid for, from the British War Office, or should they try to get their money back and source them from Australian manufacturers in order to keep the Australian people happy should they ever get wind of a perfectly acceptable and paid for process? All of these questions were raised in the months before the Armistice.

By September 1918 the War Office had been arranging fortnightly conferences including representation from each of the Dominion forces to discuss matters of repatriation and demobilisation, with the intention that each Dominion be fully informed regarding repatriation proposals and keep evenly in line of progress.⁷ These conferences offered both the chance to develop ideas with delegates from the other Dominions, and also to find out which concessions given to Australia would have to be carefully guarded against theft by the other Dominions.

In the midst of this global dilemma, Australian authorities put a commendably high degree of emphasis on the individual. Repatriation forms were issued to the troops asking them about their future work prospects. It was difficult to get many men to fill them out, however, as too many suspected that the information they gave would be used to limit their access to post-war pensions. There was no suggestion that men would be conscripted to specific tasks on their return to work in Australia, as could be a possibility. Instead men would be given a choice, education, and as many opportunities as possible to determine their own future.⁸

And then, on the 11th of November 1918, the Armistice came. The following day a conference regarding the extension of the powers of the Repatriation and Demobilisation Section was held at AIF Administrative Headquarters. Within the week, Major General Brudenell White had arrived, and established the foundations of a Demobilisation department. Less than two weeks later, on the 20th of November, Lieutenant General Sir John Monash, recently in command of the Australian Corps, took command of this new Demobilisation Department, establishing a position between AIF Headquarters in London and the Ministry for Defence and the Ministry of Repatriation at home in Australia. By the 26th of November they had determined that Australia's ports of embarkation in the UK would be Southampton, Devonport, Liverpool and possibly one other. In France they would embark from Le Havre and possibly Marseilles. But after such a quick flurry of organisation, progress stalled in the midst of uncertainty and yet more questions.

The newly expanded office of the Repatriation and Demobilisation Section had to grapple with the issues of finding accommodation for all of the men under their command in France and England, as well as for their stores and equipment. They also had to finalise shipping arrangements and determine what people would be allowed to take home with them. The Australian Prime Minister, William Hughes, gave a last minute decree that everyone should get leave in Britain before returning to Australia which caused considerable logistical

⁷ AWM 4/30/1/1 Pt. 1, Note by Sherington on minutes of Prime Minister and Dodds conference.

⁸ AWM 4/30/1/1 Pt 1, 'Proceedings of Conference on Repatriation and Demobilisation', 9/8/1918.

complications and further delays. Despite earlier concerns about returning too many men at once, the Australian government expressed an unexpected wish that men should be returned at the maximum rate,⁹ with a suggested numbers of 10,000 per month for the first 3 months and 15,000 a month thereafter. And the only answer was to chip away at the questions. Ships might be available one week but not the next. Fresh and unexpected billets might open up and you could move more men further down the process. There were a thousand strings, and the Demobilisation Department had to keep their fingers on them all, adapting to change on a near daily basis.

The basic premise of the repatriation process from the perspective of the military authorities changed when Monash took control of the section. He was a man long used to commanding large bodies of men, and for him the priority in repatriation was not the needs of the Australian nation. In charge of tens of thousands of bored young men desperate to get home as soon as possible, Monash determined that the most important thing was to meet their needs first, and the needs of the nation second. In an address to divisional and brigade commanders of the AIF on the 26th of November, he summed up the situation.

Try to envisage the psychology of the man in the ranks today. He now has a confused and uncertain outlook. No one has yet spoken to him with any sense of definiteness. He asks ‘what is going to happen? Are we going to Germany? If not, why don’t they send us home?’ etc. There is a general feeling of uncertainty and unrest among the men, and, every day that passes while that feeling of uncertainty and unrest continues, the men are slowly, from the psychological point of view, slipping from our grasp.¹⁰

Left unchecked, he said, “this feeling of uncertainty and unrest will in a very few weeks develop into something very much worse.”

Monash’s observations were astute. To take the Canadians as an example, between November 1918 and June 1919 there were at least thirteen examples of mass insubordination among Canadian troops awaiting repatriation. The worst of these happened on the 4th and 5th of March 1919, at their camp at Kinmel Park near Bodelwyddan in North Wales. For two days 15,000 troops rioted after food and coal shortages, a lack of pay and inadequate accommodation. Monash was desperate to avoid this, so making sure basic requirements were met across the AIF – food, shelter, pay – was critical. More than that, though, Monash wanted to alleviate uncertainty. His address in November gave his thinking on the matter, as he added

We ought therefore to take them into our confidence at the earliest possible moment. We ought to tell them all we possibly can as to the elements of the problems, as to the probable course that events will take, and as to what we

⁹ Scott 1936, p. 826.

¹⁰ AWM 30/4/1/2 Pt 1, ‘Repatriation and Demobilisation: An Address to Divisional and Brigade Commanders on November 26th, 1918, by Lieut.-General Sir J. Monash, KCB, VD.’

hope in the course of time to be able to do for them... We want, among the men, to ensure that the same attitude of cooperation and mutual help, and, above everything else, we want to create in the minds of the men a lively sympathy for the difficulties of the whole problem. If we can achieve that attitude of sympathy, we shall obviate 90% of the inevitable grumbling and dissatisfaction that would otherwise arise.¹¹

Monash had proven himself as a military commander. Just four months before, during the battle of Amiens on 8 August 1918, he deftly inserted his corps into a massive undertaking. The British attacked with four corps along a 16 kilometre front, leapfrogging full divisions through each other in the field. Two thousand artillery pieces supported the attack, along with 1000 aircraft, and every tank available to the British. They all needed to know what they had to do at the right time, they needed food, ammunition, fuel, hay, tea, maps, burial. Organisation on a massive scale was not a stranger to Monash, and he turned his considerable energy into protecting the interests of his men.

A key component to the achievement of this relative patience among the troops. As soon as Monash took over he decisively changed the approach to that all important question of who was to go home first. Where the priority had always tended towards men who had jobs and families first, in order of service, it was changed to men who had served the longest, in order of who had jobs. Again, the basic emphasis had changed from the interests of the Australian government to the interests of those trying to maintain order and a sense of fairness in overseas theatres. It is now a famous concept that the egalitarian AIF was sent home on a “first come, first home” basis, but it was not as clear a choice at the time. But any other method of sending people home, Monash argued, would result in disciplinary issues among the tens of thousands of Australians waiting across France, Belgium and the United Kingdom.

Myriad programs ran in the year after the Armistice served these waiting men. The Education Section, based in military camps at Weymouth on the Dorset coast, ran courses in the arts, law, medicine, engineering, agriculture, commerce, mechanics, artisanal trades, history, geography, mathematics, literature and physics. It sent doctors, fully experienced in wound management and emergency surgery, to English hospitals to learn new techniques in paediatrics; it sent farmers to Denmark to see how they produced wool. It both entertained, and prepared men to come home. By early 1920, nearly 13,000 soldiers and nurses went on to actually complete their courses, with thousands more participating in part-time or unfinished study.

¹¹ AWM 30/4/1/2 Pt 1, ‘Repatriation and Demobilisation: An Address to Divisional and Brigade Commanders on November 26th, 1918, by Lieut.-General Sir J. Monash, KCB, VD.’



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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A commercial and general subject class in Dorset, England, March 1919.

Arguably of equal importance to the Education Section was the establishment of a Sports Section. Being outdoors and participating in sport had long been seen as an important aspect of maintaining a healthy mind and body, and now it had the added bonus of keeping impatient, unoccupied young men tired and happy. Sports officers were appointed at every level from company to corps, and if there was enough interest in a particular sport, the Sport Section would facilitate a competition in it. All of this activity combined with Monash's open approach to serve the AIF well, and they avoided serious unrest like the Kimmel Riots.

Materially assisted by the early preparatory work of men like Guy Sherington, Monash ably negotiated the maze of tasks and difficulties. Lecturing his officers on the use of returned soldiers to expand the Australian economy and pay back war debts one day, Monash or a member of his staff was negotiating the purchase of saddle leather for use in staging camps the next. The task of repatriation was one of equal parts enormous concept and untold detail. For the next year, the Repatriation and Demobilisation department worked to both keep their charges content, and to get them home as quickly as possible.

A few thousand Australians took the opportunity to be discharged from the military in the United Kingdom, although the Australian government was reluctant to allow them to do so. In the last return recorded by the Repatriation and Demobilisation Department, by February 1920 there were just 3,243 members of the AIF in the United Kingdom, a few more scattered around Europe, and just over 3,000 soldiers, wives and dependents awaiting repatriation. 149,969 soldiers had already embarked for Australia, as had 1,104 nurses and 16,626 wives and dependents. It took as many as 176 voyages using 137 different ships to complete the work.

Of course, in Australia “repatriation” means more than simply returning people home, and the work of the civilian Repatriation Department would continue for decades – in fact, it continues today in the work of the Department of Veterans Affairs. And it pays us to remember that, while this war is about organisation, manoeuvre and endeavour on a vast scale, it is also about the experience of individuals. Nor should they be forgotten.



In order to pay some tribute to the experience of the men returning home, I will look at the experience of one platoon of B Company of the 29th Battalion. This platoon was photographed on 8 August 1918, during the battle of Amiens, the Black Day of the German Army.¹² The photo shows 17 men who had moved into position shortly after midnight, ready for their role in the second wave of the advance. At 3.30am they had been issued a rum ration, and were reportedly in “excellent spirits and anxious for the order to push on” as the immense wall of noise and smoke of the artillery barrage began in front of them.¹³ At 5.35am they moved forward in the heavy fog, managing to keep in touch with each other and the platoons around them, despite being able to see only fifteen metres in any direction. At 7.30am they arrived in a shallow valley near the village of Warfusee-Abancourt, about an hour after it had been captured by the first wave of the attack, where the photograph was taken. They would leave this valley at 8.40am, and reach their objective a little under two hours later.

The day after the photograph was taken, the first man on the left, Sergeant William Patrick O’Brien, was hit by a German artillery shell and killed. The cigarette case recovered with his body was returned to his father. Not six weeks later two more men would be dead, the third

¹² Photograph is held by AWM, E02790.

¹³ AWM4 23/46/37: War Diary 29th Battalion, August 1918.

and fourteenth men in file, namely Private Alfred Olive and Private Jack Arlow. Killed in action during the capture of the Hindenburg Line, the remains of neither man would be recovered from the battlefield. And one more man of the 17 in the photograph would not survive the war. Two to the left of Jack Arlow stood Private Horace Towers, a farmer from Cootamundra. He had survived wounds to his face and head at Polygon Wood, and went through all of the fighting of 1918 safely, only to die of pneumonia in hospital in Abbeville on Armistice Day.

Of a randomly photographed group of seventeen, four did not survive the war. What of the others? The war certainly had a negative effect on the health of some of them. Private Herbert Davidson, number 11 in line, died in 1928, although records are not clear whether or not his death was directly related to the war. Private Timothy Leyden, ninth in line, would be gassed a few weeks after the Amiens battle, and would suffer from the effects for the rest of his life. After years of persistent chest problems he underwent an operation in 1941 and never recovered. He died aged 49.

Lance Corporal Louis Price, fourth from the left, had enlisted in 1915, and won the Military Medal in 1917 for running messages through artillery fire and gas clouds. He went home and got married. By 1924 he had lost his wife and daughter, both dead, and in the 1940s he would lose his eldest son from his second marriage at the age of 12. Private Frederick George Hall, second from the right in the photograph, standing with a relaxed hand on a shovel, would have that hand seriously wounded the next day. He sought help from the Repatriation Department on a number of occasions later in life.

Probably the worst story of those in the photograph belonged to Private Horace Joseph Buckley, standing sixth from the left. He had enlisted in November 1915, and was about to be wounded – on the 9th of August he left the front line with gunshot wounds to his left hand and face. He did not cope with his war experience. In 1919 he was treated for “nervous debility” in hospitals in France. Sent to England on his way home, he was charged with begging in the streets. Returning to live in Geelong, he was repeatedly ordered into the Lara Inebriates Retreat through the court system – later he would take to checking himself in voluntarily. After years of dealing with alcoholism and homelessness, Horace Buckley died alone in the state hospital in Lidcombe, New South Wales, at the age of 51.

And so it is possible to paint a very grim picture of the fates of seventeen men photographed standing in the midst of battle. But of course, as with all human experience, the reality of their lives was not necessarily that straight forward, nor should it be considered particularly honest to paint a picture of nothing but sorrow and loss. For example, Horace Buckley was not necessarily a bronzed, courageous Anzac hero broken by his experience of war. Just months after his enlistment he absconded from military camp, and was declared a deserter. He voluntarily reenlisted in 1917, completed his training and left Australia. His resolve to serve did not last long, and he deserted again when his ship reached Durban in South Africa. Caught six weeks later, he was remanded in a local jail cell until a new troopship could be found for him. After arriving in England he again repeatedly went absent without leave until

he was finally escorted to the front under armed guard. He participated in the battle of Amiens under duress – albeit a situation he brought onto himself by enlisting voluntarily.

Timothy Leyden had a life shortened by his war experience. But despite his disabilities, he returned to work on the railways. He married and had six children, and as station master at Kilmore was reported to have “served the public... faithfully and well, his work being marked by courteous and zealous service.” A newspaper article describing his funeral tells us how a “large and representative gathering present, [which] includ[ed] the Reverend Brothers and students of Assumption College, members of the local branch of the Returned Soldiers’ Association, members of HACBS and CYMS and many railway men, [who] all bore eloquent testimony to the respect and esteem felt for the late Mr. Leyden and his family.”ⁱ

Lance Corporal Louis Price, having come through the entire war, and having lost one wife and two children, raised three more, was married for decades, worked consistently to his retirement and died at the age of 98. Louis Price, one of the longest serving in the picture, was the longest lived of all of them.

Others who successfully resumed a civilian life include Private James Cryer, second from the left. He had been born in Manchester, England, and came to Australia with a group of young single farmers in November 1912. He went back to Australia after the war, and in April 1926 he married Edith Coombes. They don’t seem to have had any children, possibly not by choice, and lived in Darvell Street, Eastwood for more than 40 years. In 1952 James took Edith back to England on a trip to meet his family. He died in 1973.

The youngest member of the platoon was Private Harry Phillips, fifth from the left. He enlisted almost as soon as he turned 18, after having been turned down because of a hernia and recovering from the corrective surgery. Three weeks after the battle of Amiens, he was badly wounded, and limped for the rest of his life. Nevertheless, he lived to be 78 years old, dying in 1977.

These men included labourers, leather workers, school teachers, clerks, packers and farmers. They were young and old, married and single, sober and inebriate. One had contracted venereal disease already, another would contract it before going home. Three had been formally punished for poor military discipline, most had clean conduct sheets. They had been wounded in the legs, backs, buttocks and faces. And on their return to Australia, they had equally varied experiences. Some died early, but five survived into the latter half of the seventies or beyond. Four of those lived into their eighties or more. Most of them came home, found wives, settled down and raised their families. This is a small, but representative group of individuals in the midst of an immense, global war. Theirs was the full range of experiences, the good, the bad, the indifferent. Living with their wartime experiences was almost certainly not easy, and many did not manage to do so. However, so many more did, that their story should be told as well.

ⁱ ‘Obituary: Mr. Timothy Leyden’, *Kilmore Free Press*, 6 November 1941, p.4.