

# Chaplains, Australian Army, First World War

## Formation of the Australian Army Chaplains Department

In 1913 representatives of the Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Methodist denominations met with the Australian Army's Adjutant General, Lieutenant Colonel Harry Chauvel, to establish the structure of the Australian Army Chaplains Department. It was agreed that each denomination would appoint one chaplain general, and one senior chaplain per state to administer that denomination's chaplains. One chaplain from each of the four denominations would also be attached to each infantry and light horse brigade. In total, the proposed establishment would comprise 116 chaplains. The Australian Army Chaplains Department was promulgated in the Commonwealth *Gazette* on 20 December 1913.

Conditions of service were based on the British model. Promotions were governed by length of service and chaplains were exempt from normal retirement ages. Unfit chaplains would be placed on the unattached list.

Chaplains were commissioned as officers. Although the chaplain general had no equivalent military rank, the four classes of chaplain corresponded to the relative ranks of colonel, lieutenant colonel, major, and captain. Chaplains were appointed initially to class IV (captain equivalent).

## Recruitment of Australian Army chaplains

The Australian Army had very little input into the recruitment of chaplains. The six senior chaplains from each denomination forwarded the names of candidates for chaplaincy to the Military Board via the chaplain general.

While the original plan incorporated an equal number of chaplains for each denomination, the numbers were revised after the start of the First World War. Allocation of positions was now based on the proportion of each denomination in the population according to the 1911 census. This became a constant source of friction during the war as Anglicans believed they had enlisted in greater numbers than census proportions suggested. As a result, honorary chaplains were appointed to serve on transport ships without pay or rank.

In July 1915 the "Other Protestant Denominations" (OPD) petitioned unsuccessfully for the appointment of their own chaplain general. The Minister of Defence ruled that there would be only one senior chaplain for OPD in each military district. Although a roving Jewish chaplain was commissioned during the First World War, the first Jewish senior chaplain was not appointed until 1943. The Salvation Army petitioned for a senior chaplain but was denied because its status as an orthodox church was questioned. Although no senior chaplain was appointed, several South Australian Salvation Army officers were appointed as chaplains and welfare workers.

During the course of the war 414 clergymen served in the Australian Imperial Force. Their denominations were:

- 175 (42.3 per cent) Anglican
- 86 (20.8 per cent) Roman Catholic
- 70 (16.9 per cent) Presbyterian
- 54 (13 per cent) Methodist
- 27 (6.5 per cent) OPD
- 2 (0.5 per cent) other



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Gallipoli, Turkey, 1915. Chaplain Ernest Northcote Merrington (right) conducts a communion service for members of the 3rd Light Horse Brigade at the “Apex”. For an altar Padre Merrington is using two biscuit boxes draped in a cloth.

Chaplains were appointed for either “continuous” or “voyage-only” service. The latter accompanied troopships to Egypt or England and then returned on the next available hospital ship. Chaplains employed for continuous service were assigned four to a brigade: two Anglican, one Catholic, and one Protestant.

The average age of chaplains was between 30 and 40 years, although Catholic chaplains were often older. Those employed for continuous service had to be between 30 and 48 years old, while voyage-only chaplains were accepted up to 52 years of age. The chaplains were overwhelmingly of British origin.

Chaplains received no special training or induction into the military. A few had served in previous conflicts such as the Boer War, and some had cadet training in secondary schools. However, most had little or no understanding of military life or its customs.

## **Role of chaplains**

With little explicit instruction, chaplains used their own initiatives to determine the nature and extent of their duties.

On board the troopships chaplains organised study groups, sing-alongs, and boxing tournaments. They were also among those with the unpopular task of censoring letters. For many chaplains, however, the voyage provided a great opportunity for ministry through church parades, religious services, and individual counselling.

On board ships and in the field chaplains were responsible for burials, which for safety reasons had to be undertaken at night, and this took up a large part of their time. Chaplains recorded the details of the dead and their place of burial, and arranged for recovery of their personal effects. They also often wrote to the family with details of the individual’s death.

As well as conducting church parades and religious services, chaplains organised activities to improve the morale and welfare of soldiers. In Sinai–Palestine marquees, games, libraries, and comforts were provided in an attempt to keep soldiers out of brothels. Chaplains gave lectures on topics such as ancient history, and organised tours for soldiers and nurses. They also organised sports events, sing-alongs, concerts, and lantern slide nights. Eventually, auxiliary organisations such as the Red Cross, the YMCA, and the Australian Comforts Fund took on more of these entertainment and diversion roles.

## **Recognition for bravery and sacrifice**

A total of 72 honours and awards were bestowed upon chaplains on active service with Australian forces during the First World War, including: two Orders of St Michael and St George; two Commanders of the Order of the British Empire; four Distinguished Service Orders; nine Officers of the Order of the British Empire; one Member of the Order of the British Empire; 23 Military Crosses; one French Croix de Guerre; and 31 Mentions in Despatches.

Eight chaplains from the First World War are commemorated on the Memorial's Roll of Honour, and two are recorded on the Commemorative Roll.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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An army chaplain offers prayers for a dead soldier before his body is buried at sea.

### **Some well-known chaplains**

Salvation Army padre William “Fighting Mac” McKenzie buried General William Bridges in Egypt. His good humour, booming voice and presence with his soldiers in the front line, even under shelling, made him a popular padre. McKenzie regularly risked his life to bury the dead and was well-known back home in Australia. More than 7,000 people attended his welcome home concert in Melbourne.

Anglican chaplain Walter Ernest Dexter was one of the longest-serving padres, enlisting in the AIF in September 1914 and serving until July 1920. He was also the most highly decorated chaplain in the Australian Army, being awarded the Distinguished Service Order and Military Cross, as well as being Mentioned in Despatches. He was also responsible for mapping the cemeteries on Gallipoli before the Anzacs were evacuated in 1915. Of the same faith, Frederick

William Wray, was awarded an Order of St George and St Michael and made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire, as well as being Mentioned in Despatches twice. And the Oxford-educated William Maitland Woods, who gave lectures to the troops while in Egypt, was responsible for the excavation of the Shellal mosaic which now resides in the Australian War Memorial.

John Fahey was a Catholic padre from Perth. He was an excellent sportsman, with bush experience. Fahey was assigned to the 11th battalion and was the first chaplain ashore on Gallipoli, disregarding the order to stay on the ship. He was evacuated due to illness in November 1915 but re-joined the battalion in Egypt before being transferred to France in 1916. Fahey was the longest-serving front-line chaplain.

## Sources

- - Australian Military Forces, *Regulations for the Chaplains' Department*, 1915. Extract from the Commonwealth Military Regulations.
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  - Michael Gladwin, *Captains of the soul: a history of Australian Army chaplains*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, New South Wales, 2013
  - Tom Johnstone, *The cross of Anzac: Australian Catholic chaplains*, Church Archivists' Press, Virginia, Queensland, 2000
  - Michael McKernan, *Padre: Australian chaplains in Gallipoli and France*, Allen & Unwin, North Sydney, 1986
  - Graham Wilson and Joe Crumlin, "Trooper Bergin, S.J.", *Sabretache* 38, 1997, pp. 3–16
  - Michael McKernan, *The Australian churches in the Great War: attitudes and activities of the major churches* (PhD thesis), Australian National University, Canberra, 1975

## Further Information

- Collection items held at the Memorial

The Memorial holds more than 100 private records and manuscripts relating to chaplains. Private Record Series 1DRL includes records of individual chaplains collected at the request of John Treloar. These include descriptions of their wartime experiences and suggestions for changes to various aspects of chaplaincy such as status and duties.

- Emily Robertson, "[Shellal mosaic](#)" (Australian War Memorial blog post)
- [Maitland Woods Papers at the State Library of Queensland](#)

Contains a digitised collection of letters between the Reverend Maitland Woods and Canon Garland in Brisbane during the First World War.