

# Kangaroos by the Pyramids

-Duncan Beard, Australian War Memorial

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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An Australian soldier plays with a regimental mascot at Mena Camp, December 1914.

The first contingent of soldiers destined for the war in Europe left Western Australia on 1 November 1914, thinking that they were headed to England for training before proceeding to the Western Front. But it was decided that the overcrowded military camps in England were unsuitable for so many men over winter, so the Australians instead disembarked in Egypt on 3 December 1914, making their way to Mena Camp, a vast training facility near the great pyramids about 16 kilometres from Cairo. At its peak, there were around 25,000 soldiers in camp. After training for six days of the week, the soldiers were allowed to explore. Most had never been outside Australia, and became eager tourists. While the pyramids and Sphinx were popular attractions, it was also easy to travel into Cairo city, with its bazaars, cafés and brothels.

When Charles Bean arrived in Egypt, he was ordered to prepare a booklet. *What to Know in Egypt: A Guide for Australian Soldiers*, published early in 1915, was similar in form to a tourist guide. It explained common causes of sickness and how to avoid them; the history of the pyramids, provided useful phrases for the visitor, and warned against “familiarity with native women”, which could lead to venereal disease. Bean warned: “A great part of the population is anxious to know the European in order to make money out of him. They will become a nuisance if allowed to be familiar.” The handbook included a dozen helpful phrases in Arabic, including two ways of saying “go away”.

As Australian troops were some of the best paid, shops called The Fair Dinkum Store, Ribuck Goods and The Melbourne Store (located next to the Sydney Store) began to appear. The locals became known to the diggers as “Gyppos”, and were viewed as devious and conniving (although easily beaten), subservient and unclean figures who obsequiously attempted to extort tourists. Mistrust led to tension, and there were plenty of instances of physical confrontation. Captain Kynvett, who gleefully recounted teaching Egyptian newsboys how to swear, boasted in his memoir:

*There was a good deal of Irish blood among us, and many men who would rather fight than go to the opera, so there was some good old ding-dong scraps. Of course the ‘Gyppo’ is no fighter, but he can stand behind and throw stones and can’t resist plunging the knife into an inviting back, so sometimes our boys would get laid out ... I saw a pretty ugly-looking crowd dispersed with a characteristic Australian weapon. Firing over their heads had no effect, nor threats of a bayonet charge, but when two Australian bushmen began plying stockwhips, those n\*\*gers made themselves scarcer than mice on the smell of a cat.*

To many Australian soldiers, the cosmopolitan nature of Cairo came as a shock, and some viewed the city as a den of vice. Guy Thornton, a chaplain of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force, wrote a book entirely devoted to the evils of Cairo:

*It was a nightmare – inconceivably vile and horribly grotesque. The narrow, evil-smelling, tortuous lanes literally lined by these poor degraded women of almost every nationality, the foul cries of solicitation sounded in a veritable Babel of tongues, the barbaric dress and ornaments which many of them wore, the flaring lights, the flaunting evils, all combined to produce on the mind of a European an impression of unreality ... Thank God, however, there was not one British woman in that motley throng.*

There were, however, plenty of European sex workers in Cairo, largely a result of British colonialism. Although supposedly part of the Ottoman Empire, Egypt had been occupied by the British army since 1882. With the declaration of war in 1914, a protectorate was formally declared. Fear of venereal disease led British authorities to create a system of regulations for state-controlled prostitution. Women were given licenses and underwent regular medical check-ups. Venereal disease continued to run rampant, but there was an insatiable demand from the army, the colonial bureaucracy and the tourist sector. By the time the Anzacs arrived, the brothels were doing a roaring trade. A class system was in operation, with French women servicing officers, while the services of Egyptian, Sudanese and Nubian women were offered in the Wass’ah district, close to Shepheard’s Hotel, where the elite colonials mixed and mingled.

When the Anzacs arrived, “the Wazza” became well known for venereal diseases. With no reliable form of protection, Australian soldiers who visited the brothels became infected with gonorrhoea, syphilis, and chancroid.

By February 1915, the VD epidemic among Australian troops was alarming their commanders. A Cairo conference of army doctors was told that about 1,000 men were in hospital with venereal disease every day. The 520-bed 1st Australian General Hospital was established, but the number of venereal patients was so great that another 500 beds were added. The 300-bed 2nd Australian Stationary Hospital at the Mena camp was, by the end of January, completely filled with venereal patients, with 150 more waiting to be admitted.



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Four Australian soldiers from Mena Camp visit the Sphinx, c.1915.

**The Wazza**

By April 1915, there were a lot of troops with venereal diseases, and tensions in the Wass'ah district were high. There had been complaints about the quality of alcohol sold in the area (one soldier said that the beer "was expensive and it was reckoned that the Gippos pissed in it to give it colour"). There was concern about the spread of venereal disease, as well as stories of pimps ripping off soldiers.

The 2nd of April 1915 was Good Friday. Anzacs waiting to go to Gallipoli were on leave, when a rumour spread that Egyptians had stabbed some Anzacs. By the afternoon a riot had developed. At its peak, up to 2,500 Australian and New Zealand soldiers were involved. Sex workers were thrown from the windows of several houses in an alley. Furniture was piled onto a street, and a fire was started. Firefighters sent to stop the blaze were attacked. When British military police arrived, they fired shots over the crowd to disperse the rioters, who responded by pelting them with rocks and beer bottles. A gang of soldiers began looting and burning shops. By nightfall, the rioters had dispersed, and by early morning the excitement died down. Some believed that it had started with a mission to rescue a young Englishwoman who was being held as a sex slave. A court of inquiry "found that the riot grew out of an incident arising from two or three disgruntled Australians trying to extort money from some prostitutes who they said had given them VD."

Regardless of its origins, the fracas entered into Anzac folklore, and became known as "the battle of the Wazza". A Greek counterfeiter manufactured a medallion, one side of which read, "The Battle of the Wassaa"; the other read, "I was there". The Memorial has a dug-out sign from a Gallipoli trench with "The Wozzer" inscribed on it. In the Official History, Bean noted that the riots "were not heroic, but they also differed very little from what at Oxford and Cambridge and in Australian universities is known as a 'rag'." While it is the best known example of Australians terrorising the local population, the battle of the Wazza was a large-scale version of what was happening on a regular basis. Many of the Anzac troops revelled in the destruction they caused in Cairo, most of which was written off as larrikinism: boisterous but harmless skylarking.

## **The Egalitarian Myth**

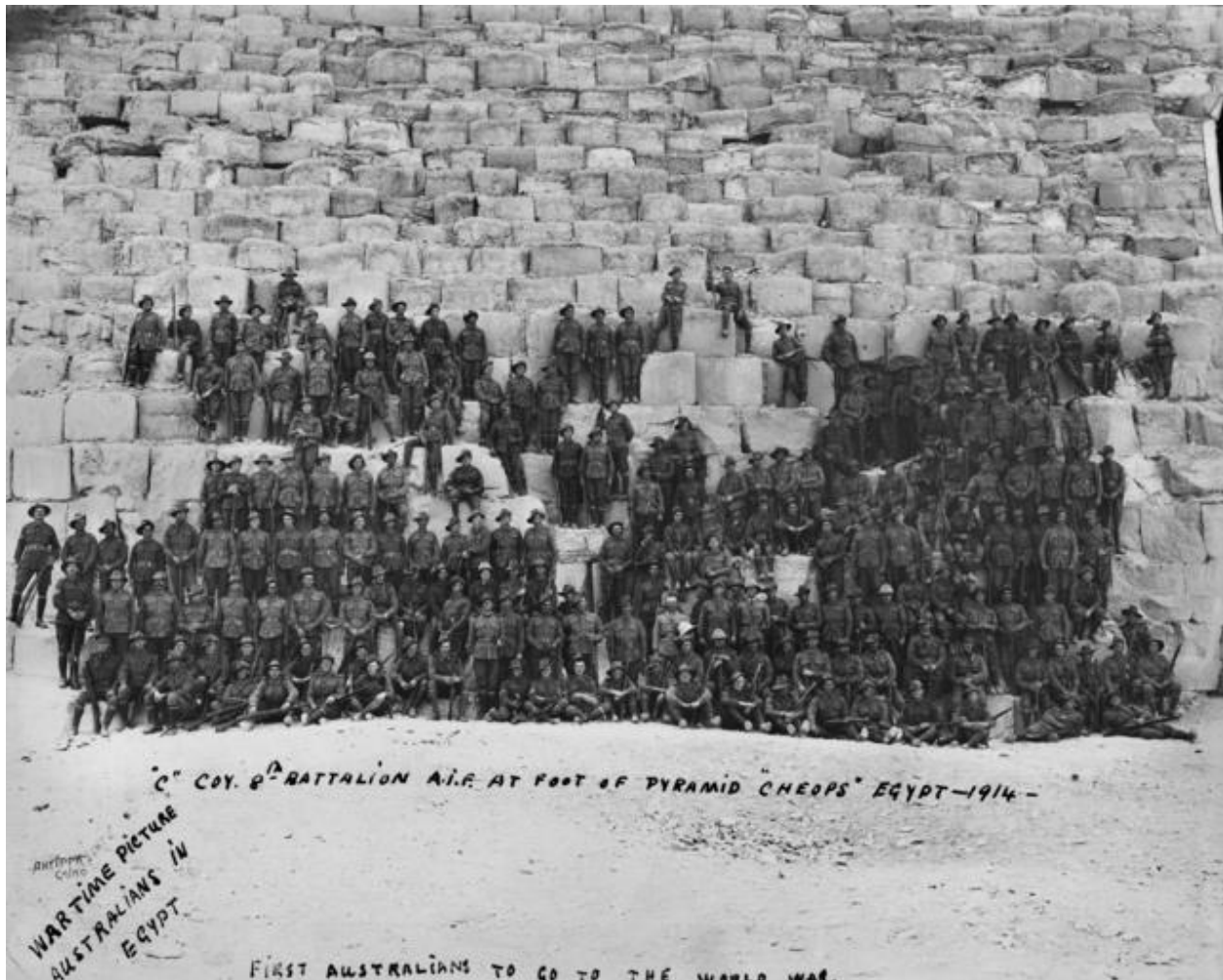
Some accounts claim that this can be partially explained by the fact that, while English soldiers had a tendency to stand apart from the local population and maintain cultural and colonial and class barriers, the Australians did not, instead interacting openly with locals without much consideration for difference, which led to conflict. While this idea really leans into the ideal of Australian egalitarianism, it does not account for the fact that a similar riot took place in 1919, involving British troops. While the Australians may have interacted with locals differently from the way British soldiers did, they were by no means above treating Egyptians with superior disdain, and in many instances this appeared as outright bullying.

With the local population suffering at the hands of a heavy-handed occupation, Egyptian support for the war evaporated. As well as thousands of imperial troops (including unruly Australians) being stationed in Egypt, over one and a half million Egyptians had been conscripted into the Labour Corps. Buildings, supplies and animals were requisitioned for use in the war effort. Shortly after the 1918 Armistice, a delegation of Egyptian nationalist activists led by Saad

Zaghlul made a request to end the British Protectorate, and to gain Egyptian representation at the planned peace conference in Paris. In response, Britain ordered the exile of Saad Zaghlul and other members of the group, leading to a countrywide rebellion in March and April of 1919. Australian troops who had remained in Egypt after the war were involved in suppressing the rebellion. Australian Captain Hector Dinning's memoir describes how senior commanders sent Australian troops to patrol in the Egyptian provinces:

*Two Australians were shot whilst patrolling the Canal. In the general flogging that ensued in that village, many died of the laceration. This was the end of sniping. Inciters to revolt in the provinces and plunderers were court-martialled and flogged. It was very effective. Gradually the provinces were forced into quietness.*

The rebellion suppressed, numerous villages incinerated, and with the deaths of many Egyptians, Britain unilaterally declared Egyptian independence (without any negotiations with Egypt) on the 28th of February 1922. The Anglo–Egyptian Treaty of 1936 allowed Britain to maintain a garrison of 10,000 men in the Suez Canal Zone, and to maintain control of Sudan. The treaty failed to provide independence; power was still in British hands, and the treaty's signing produced a new wave of anti-British demonstrations.



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C Company, 8th Battalion , AIF. at the foot of the Great Pyramid of Giza, Egypt, 1914.

## **Second World War**

With the beginning of the Second World War, Egypt again became vital to British interests. For its part, Egypt considered the war a European conflict and hoped to avoid being involved. Egyptians grew increasingly convinced that Germany would win the war, and many were pleased by thoughts of the destruction of the hated occupiers. Egyptian troops were not sent to fight, for fear that they would revolt. Instead, they were used for guard duty and logistical tasks. Egypt remained technically neutral until it declared war against the Axis in February 1945.

Amid all of this, Australian soldiers returned to the Middle East. The 6th and 9th Divisions would be there for two years, the 7th Division for more than one. In total, 100,000 to 130,000 Australian soldiers served in the Middle East during the Second World War. Memories of Australians rampaging through Cairo were still fresh; and according to some, this caused the Egyptian government to insist that Australian troops be kept out of the country, which was part of the reason they were sent to Palestine instead.

Just as the typical First World War soldier had few experiences of international travel, the average Australian soldier of the Second World War was a labourer who had left school before he was 14, and would have had little knowledge of the people and places he would visit. Australians were again noted as not relating to locals with the same authoritarian attitude as the British, but being just as overbearing. Seeing the pyramids and going to where their fathers and uncles had encamped during the First World War was significant to the men of the Second AIF; they were acutely aware of their Anzac forbears, and were impressed by the stories they had heard from veterans reminiscing about the battle of the Wazza. Those veterans had told younger troops that Egyptians would “thieve the eye from a needle”, while NCOs told their men that Egyptians were disease-ridden thieves.

After the experiences of the First World War, most British officers assumed that Australian soldiers would be ill-disciplined. British General Sir Archibald Wavell, Commander in Chief of the Middle East, greeted the arriving Australians. He told them that their forebears had “left a very great reputation as soldiers out here, which I am quite sure you will maintain and increase ... But they also left in some countries of the Middle East a reputation of another kind, for a lack of restraint and discipline, which I am sure you will not wish to maintain but to remove.”

In the Wass'ah district of Cairo, the military again set up brothels controlled by the Medical Corps, and medical centres were established to try to prevent servicemen contracting VD. Army medical services oversaw regular check-ups of sex workers carried out by civilian authorities. There were warning signs, showing a cross on a white background, at both ends of the street.

Jack Barber of the 2/17th Battalion noted on his arriving at Port Said:

*We had all been lectured on VD and personal hygiene, and certain places in the city were declared out of bounds to all. In one area of the city, there were streets of brothels. These were to pose a big problem for the army with so many men on the loose at night. It was only a matter of time before the CO and medical officers decided to ban all the brothels with the exception of two ... which were regularly visited by the medics. The girls working in these places had a framed calendar in their rooms which was stamped whenever they had passed the regular medical inspection.*

He also made remarks that bring to mind the background of the battle of the Wazza: “With the rapid influx of so many soldiers from allied countries, it wasn’t long before some of the back streets ... became inter-colonial battlegrounds ... The troops fighting each other would immediately become friends and start fighting the [British Military Police].”

However, there were no large-scale riots this time. While there was certainly conflict, when the 6th Division was sent to Helwan (near Cairo) and Amiriya (near Alexandria) there were fewer incidents than expected. The official history reports that even when several thousand Australians were on leave, only a dozen or fewer were arrested each day; on days when there were 500 or fewer on leave, there were usually no arrests. There were no further battles of the Wazza. Authorities closed down the red light district in May 1942 after two Australian soldiers were killed in the area. Some of the troops blamed General Bernard Montgomery, who had a reputation as a puritan, for this closure.



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Mena Camp, Egypt, 1915.

### **Real soldiers**

Australians maintained their reputation as outstanding soldiers, while continuing an overbearing relationship with locals. As British Gunner Len Tutt recorded: "I yield to no one in my admiration of them as soldiers," but "anyone with coloured skin was akin to the aborigines of their native land, and the whole world knows how badly they have treated them. All the Egyptians were, in the diggers' eyes, seventh or eighth class citizens. It was possible to inflict any indignity upon one of them and it could be put right afterwards by tossing him a couple of piastres." Tutt reported that Egyptian sex workers "really dreaded the Australians as customers". As was the case during the First World War, Australian soldiers often refused to pay their bills and had a reputation for terrorising the local population.

While the similarities to the First World War experiences of Australians in Egypt are many, what had changed was the scope of Australian military action in Egypt, which became the site of the Australians' most significant battle in the Middle East. In late 1941, the German Afrika Korps, led by "Desert Fox" Field Marshal Erwin Rommel, entered western Egypt, threatening Cairo and the Suez Canal. As part of the British Eighth Army, the Australian 9th Division played a key role in turning the tide during the battles of El Alamein. Lieutenant Tas Gill of the 2/48th Battalion, described the sight of a 40-mile convoy of Australian troops heading towards El Alamein: "Cairo went hysterical when the Aussies, loaded on trucks and stripped to the waist, eating watermelons stolen from the street vendors, went slowly through."

Tim Fearnside of the 20th Brigade said that the reason that the Egyptians welcomed his unit in Alexandria "certainly wasn't because they liked us, or anyone else in the Allied forces, but probably because we were the devil they know." The 2/48th Battalion historian wrote that Australian soldiers found the Egyptians strange in their failure to take up arms in defence of their own country, while others noted that occupation had forced the Egyptians to become strangers in their own country.

After success in North Africa, the bulk of Australian troops left the Middle East to take part in the Pacific War. With the spread of the Japanese army and the fall of Singapore, the war had come closer to home, and Australia felt increasingly threatened. In leaving the Middle East, Australian soldiers left, as a soldier of the 2/23rd Battalion put it, "a land hated and even loathed at times, yet loved because it held the mortal remains of our men buried in its soil." Soldiers remarked of their time in Egypt that it reminded them of "just how fortunate we are to be British"; "all of us will be glad to leave this Arab, fly-ridden country."

Those who worked in AIF hospitals, on Royal Australian Air Force bases operating from North Africa, or who visited ports while serving with the Royal Australian Navy may have had



different experiences, but on the whole there was no love lost for the land or the people of the Middle East.

Terms of racial abuse in this article reflect the standards, language, and attitudes of their time. They are not condoned by the author or the Memorial.