

Life in the rear:

Estaminets, billets, and the AIF on the Western Front, 1916–18

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The First World War is invariably characterised by the mindless slaughter of troops, the images of men running over the parapet, the mud, and the trench warfare. The major battles are celebrated and commemorated; places such as Fromelles, Pozières, Bullecourt and Passchendaele. However, in the daily lives of the soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) these were the exception. More common was the drudgery of war. Soldiers were in the front line for only part of the war, while much time was spent behind the lines resting in French and Belgian villages, in billets, and on bivouac. There soldiers had baths, repaired equipment, wrote letters, got drunk, and visited brothels.

This paper examines the lives of soldiers during rest on the Western Front, and will use unit diaries, soldiers' personal diaries, letters from soldiers to their loved ones at home, and published histories of battalions to shed light on this neglected aspect of the First World War. Letter and diary writing was a way for soldiers to stay in touch with their family and loved ones and to record their adventures in case they did not make it home, but it was also a common way for soldiers to pass the time. The content of these and diaries varied from everyday discussions about the social lives of a soldier's friends and family back home to harrowing accounts of trench warfare and humorous anecdotes of what soldiers got up to whilst on rest and leave.

Here the focus is on rest, although the very idea seems to have been a fairly contentious one among Australian soldiers. Despite the connotations, it was not free leisure time but simply a respite from the trenches and the hazards of the front line. There was still much work to be done behind the lines; sometimes soldiers were

busier behind the lines than they were in the trenches. Manual labour featured heavily, and so did tedious tasks such as drill, parades, and repetitive training.¹

Rest was a factor the British Army had formally recognised to ensure all troops were running at their peak performance. When an infantry division occupied the trenches of the Western Front at any time, two infantry brigades were in the front line positions and one was resting. An infantry brigade of four battalions usually had two in the trenches and two behind the front lines billeted in farms, barns, and villages. The two battalions in the front line had two companies in the front and support trenches, with two in the reserve positions. The two forward companies had two platoons in the fire and command trenches and two in the support trench. About every eight days the two battalions in the front line changed places with the two battalions billeted behind.²

Robert Stevenson's analysis of the 1st Australian Division details the number of days Australian troops spent in the trenches and at "rest". From a total of 1,683 days, the 1st Division spent just over half of those in operations which included support, and offensive and defensive operations against the German Army. The remaining days were equally divided between training and administration. The 374 days spent training included individual, collective, and combined training, while the other 423 were spent doing administration, moving between camps, and logistics.³ Of the 1,683 days spent on active service in the First World War, troops spent just 153 actually resting, relaxing, and enjoying the freedom of their own downtime.⁴

While this is an analysis of just one of the five Australian divisions serving during the First World War, it gives an indication of how misleading the term "rest" truly was. It also highlights the fact that soldiers spent only about half their time in the

¹ J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale and popular culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, England, 1990, p. 78.

² T. Ashworth, *Trench warfare 1914-1918: the live and let live system*, Pan Books, London, 2000, p. 12.

³ R. Stevenson, *To win the battle - the 1st Australian Division in the Great War, 1914-1918*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 2013, appendix 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*

front line, with the other half devoted to labouring behind the scenes in what tended to be hard, menial work.

Australian troops often complained about the work they did during “rest” periods, and comments on the unfairness of “using rest for hard manual-labour”⁵ were common. Many troop papers published articles and comments on the unfairness of this, which they considered “a refined form of punishment to troops” and a “certain cure for men tired of being ‘up the line’”. Rest was also considered to be “a short term used to express endless parades, ceaseless polishing, burnishing’s and inspections”,⁶ as well as “a period of torture for infantry during which they are ... assiduously instructed in the art of cleaning buttons and shining mess tins, saluting by number and by request, and such intricate knowledge as the correct manner of pointing the toe in the ‘slow march’”.⁷

Training:

Initially, there was a thought that idle minds would tend to mischief, and it was therefore best to keep the soldiers occupied at all times. However, endless hours of kit cleaning, mechanical labouring tasks, repetitive training, and parades led to resentment and a desire to “get revenge” on the administration that had devised this.⁸ In May 1916 Captain Louis Piggott, a Regimental Medical Officer for the 17th Battalion, wrote a letter to his mother regarding the work he performed during rest periods:

At present I am in what is called ‘in rest’ – that is, our division is miles away from the firing line, and out of the noise of the big guns, and at the present time ... I am in charge of a working party in the forest, making roads and

⁵ Denis Winter, *Death's men: soldiers of the Great War*, Penguin Group, Middlesex, England, 1978, p. 159.

⁶ *The mudhook*, 3 January 1918, in J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, p. 4.

⁷ *The listening post*, 28 September 1917, in J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, p. 192.

⁸ J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, p. 9.

*cutting and loading timber. The division is supposed to be 'in rest', but you must not be misled by the term, as 'in rest' over here means hard work.*⁹

Piggott's sentiments were echoed in the 2nd Brigade war diary, which outlined how the brigade spent its time in France throughout the quiet month of January 1917. Training reinforcements were carried out, along with refitting and improvements to the divisional fatigues: "latrines were entrenched – stables – corduroy road completed and several duck paths put down".¹⁰

Training formed a large part of a soldier's time during rest, particularly in the earlier stages of fighting on the Western Front. Private Charles Harris from the 42nd Battalion lamented in his diary about the tedium of training before the battalion was sent up to the front line. According to him, "the training part of the joke was right":

*Some fool got a notion that it might be a good [idea] to try and find the limit of endurance so they ran us over a mile of ploughed ground and then gave us some luke-warm tea. In the meantime my Puttee had become unrolled and was dragging along in the mud until some goat walked on it nearly bringing me down. Got home chaffed, footsore and weary with nothing worth mentioning to eat.*¹¹

The 2nd Brigade unit diary does not record just how repetitive and dreary this training truly was. There are many entries that simply read "training recommenced" or "training continued". One can assume these entries cover the basic, repetitive training. However, the unit diary does detail when an aspect of training seems to be out of the norm. On 9 August 1916 the diary reads: "14.30 training continued. Aeroplane attack work. Position taken up on E. side of wood and flares and white sheet shown to aeroplane."¹² The training syllabus between 29 May and 4 June 1917

⁹ "Conditions in France – An Australian's Experience of 'Rest'", *The Queenslander*, 6 May 1918, p. 41.

¹⁰ War diary, 2nd Infantry Brigade, 1–6 January 1917, AWM4, 23/2/21.

¹¹ Diary, Private C. Harris, 1916–17, accessed from http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/32360/20100306-0022/www.diggerhistory.info/pages-asstd/hell_babes.html on 31/01/2013.

¹² War diary, 2nd Brigade, May 1917, AWM4, 23/2/16.

includes company drill, platoon manoeuvres, musketry instruction, and range practice, as well as the construction and consolidation of strong points.¹³

Billets:

While training and on rest, soldiers were often placed in billets; temporary lodgings provided to soldiers by the AIF when they were stationed behind the front lines. The troops were accommodated in a range of civilian buildings that had been acquired for military use. They were often farmhouses, but the ranks also slept in barns, halls, or whatever accommodation was available.

The *Field service pocket book 1914* outlines the requirements for “quarters” and the correct procedure for acquiring and allocating billets, with the final point reading: “Tactical considerations have precedence over considerations of comfort. As many men and animals as possible are billeted, and the remainder bivouac.”¹⁴ Sometimes billets were not available, and soldiers were required to bivouac – set up a temporary shelter constructed of whatever materials the soldier could find. These sometimes included tents, but could also be a soldier’s overcoat, branches, or leaves. The great variance in the standard of billets provided during the war was often dependent on location and the period of the fighting.

While the soldiers were still in Egypt awaiting transportation to France they were told they would be billeted in houses with French civilians. This was great news to the men, who were looking forward to dining “with a charming mademoiselle beaming upon us”.¹⁵ But the reality of the fighting in France was vastly different to what the men expected. Troops often found themselves in sheds and barns, forced to steal straw to relieve their discomfort.¹⁶ Corporal Ivor Williams from the 21st Battalion wrote in his diary in March 1916 that after arriving at their allocated billet they found there was no room, so they had to “march back a mile to the next village

¹³ *Ibid.* 23/2/25.

¹⁴ Great Britain War Office, *Field service pocket book 1914*, Harrison and Sons, London, 1914), p. 30.

¹⁵ W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond: the official history of the 24th Battalion, Australian Imperial Force*, Alexander McCubbin, Melbourne, 1920, p. 83.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

(Rincq) where we were billeted for the night in a barn. It was very cold.”¹⁷ Another entry reads: “We are feeling stiff after last night. The billeting officer did not have room for our section so had to sleep where we could.”¹⁸

It wasn’t always bad. At Ebbingham, Williams wrote: “Here we were billeted in a beautiful Chateau, the grounds of which were simply lovely.”¹⁹ More often than not, however, the conditions in these temporary lodgings were considerably poor. In October 1916, for example, the 2nd Battalion spent the night at Pommier camp: “Conditions extremely bad only cover for 20% troops and ground ankle deep on mud, no drainage”.²⁰ Lance Corporal Albert Coates recorded sleeping “on the footpath in my overcoat”²¹ and camping “in a tent in the farmyard”.²²

This was not the case for officers, who were often billeted in the relative comfort of civilian houses. Lieutenant Fred Appleton of the 14th Battalion wrote to his sister Vera in July 1916, boasting how he was “again fortunate in my Billet I have a nice big bed to sleep in; most of the others are sleeping on the floor in other Houses”.²³ Captain Louis Piggott similarly wrote of the “fairly decent place, with a comfortable room” in which he was billeted in the final months of 1917. He wrote that his servant, who cooked his meals in the kitchen, also slept in the house. The house had a fire which was “quite a boon ... you can get your clothes dried at night”. Piggott acknowledged that his men’s lodgings were “not so comfortable as things might be. This is just a small country village of a few farm houses; you can’t expect much. I have done all I can to improve their condition”.²⁴

Billeting was one of the main forms of civilian interaction for many soldiers. Piggott, as a billeting officer, wrote to his mother of how most of the French were very

¹⁷ Diary, Corporal I. Williams, 28 March 1916, accessed from <http://www.nashos.org.au/16diary.htm> on 01/02/2013.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 1 May 1916.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 9 July 1916.

²⁰ War diary, 2nd Infantry Brigade, May 1917, AWM4, 23/2/18.

²¹ Diary entry for 25 August 1916 in A. Coates, *The volunteer: the diaries and letters of Albert E. Coates*, No. 23 – 7th Btn, 1st AIF First World War 1914–18, self-published, Melbourne, 1996, p. 141.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Letter from Lieutenant F. Appleton to sister Vera, 17 July 1916, AWM 1DRL/0048.

²⁴ “Conditions in France – An Australian’s Experience of ‘Rest’”, *The Queenslander*, 6 May 1918, p. 41.

obliging in providing assistance for billeting. However, he noted there were some who “would not put themselves out in the slightest to give any assistance in billeting”. Piggott expressed his annoyance with these people, writing, “They don’t realise that the very men they are refusing to take in are the men who are keeping the enemy from their doors.”²⁵

While some found the French obliging, other Australian soldiers questioned French hospitality. In one billet, a 24th Battalion soldier wrote of how an “old Flemish farmer makes a fuss because some of the men bathe their sore feet in his duck pond. The lads threaten to raid his orchard if he does not display a little more hospitality”.²⁶ The farmer also put his son on guard duty in an attempt to prevent the troops smoking cigarettes whilst on the hay, to no avail.²⁷ Some Australian troops had their suspicions about the French civilians. Charles Harris described the civilians in Armentières as: “A more or less homogenous population with a large proportion of German sympathisers. They are mercenary, dirty and dishonest.”²⁸

The French met the Australian soldiers with varying degrees of welcome. Sergeant Major Norman Ellsworth of the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade documented his first opinions of France and the French. For most Australians, France stood in stark contrast to the slums of Egypt, but for Ellsworth they were somewhat comparable: “The houses & shops seemed very untidy, & in fact, put me in mind of portions of Cairo, but of course the people are ever so much cleaner in their appearance than the Egyptians, & they greeted us cheerfully.”²⁹ Ellsworth also commented on the number of war widows and family members the troops saw dressed in black.

Despite his initial reserved enthusiasm for the French, only two weeks later Ellsworth wrote again to his mother, grumbling that they were dirty, and that their town stank of fish.³⁰ He noted that the towns were busy places, with clothing and

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond*, p. 86.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Diary, Private C. Harris, 1916–17.

²⁹ Letter from Sergeant Major N. Ellsworth to his mother, 31 August 1916, AWM file: 12/11/1146.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 12 September 1916.

munitions factories dominating. Women worked there, as most men were off serving with the army. He wrote of the French women that he saw “nothing in the shape of beauty, except an Australian Nurse”.³¹ Ellsworth also complained about the conditions of the rest camps, saying that of comforts there was “not so much as a newspaper”.³²

Ellsworth went into Amiens one day and wrote in detail of his trip and of the meal he received: “Had sardines for our first course at dinner; – fish omelette for our second; fish fried for our thirds, & fish boiled for our fourth, & when the woman brought us salmon for the next, I got up & walked up & paid my bill & cleared out.”³³ Ellsworth described this as a meat-less day, although he did not indicate if this was because it was a Friday in a Catholic area, or whether the establishment was simply unable to obtain meat.

Ellsworth also wrote of the sites in Amiens. He went to the cathedral, said to be one of the finest in the world, but Ellsworth was very much put off by all the “Roman Catholic ‘tommy rot’ & candles & all that stinking incense business”.³⁴ Ellsworth’s regard for Catholicism did not increase upon witnessing a solemn requiem for dead French soldiers in one of the villages he visited. He wrote of the “ridiculous nonsense” that the priests engaged in, comparing the procession with a “Gipps show in Egypt”.³⁵ Ellsworth’s records do not indicate his religion, so it is hard to tell if he had a particular aversion to all religions, or just Catholicism.

As an artilleryman, Ellsworth appears to have spent most of his time in France at the training bullring at Étaples, and was continually moved between units. He wrote mainly of his experiences behind the line and not about the action in the front line. Perhaps he could not bring himself to write about the traumatic experiences of the tasks he performed as an artilleryman, or perhaps he did not want his mother to

³¹ *Ibid.* 12 June 1917.

³² *Ibid.* 10 October 1916.

³³ *Ibid.* 12 June 1917.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*

know the truth. It is also possible that he may not have spent enough time at the front to have anything of significance to write about.

Interactions with civilians:

Despite grumblers like Ellsworth, some soldiers became quite close with the children and wives of French soldiers.³⁶ In November 1917, Sergeant Edward Gilmore of the 6th Australian Tunnelling Company was incensed when German shell-fire caused a number of casualties among a group of French civilians. He wrote in his diary how his blood would boil when a German shell would come over and he had to witness French women and children running down the road to the dugouts. However, on one occasion a house was shelled, and Gilmore witnessed a little boy and girl running out of the house afterwards, holding a three pound piece of red-hot shrapnel shouting, "*Allemand no bon!*" ("Germans no good!")³⁷ Gilmore was impressed that the Germans could put no fear into the French children.

The children's fathers were invariably away fighting with the French army, and they lacked father figures. Conversely, Australian soldiers who had children, or else nieces and nephews or younger siblings of their own, missed them dearly, and in some sense "substituted" French children for their own. Children were the embodiment of innocence, and allowed soldiers to get some distance from the front line, albeit briefly. Corporal Williams wrote of one day in which they had "organised games and had some great fun with the French kiddies."³⁸

Estaminets:

Despite the poor standard of many billets and bivouacs, and the boredom and tedium of training and fatigue parties, life behind the lines brought soldiers into contact with civilians, and with the simple pleasures in life. One of the most greatly

³⁶ W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond*, p. 83.

³⁷ Diary, Sergeant E. Gilmore, 6 November 1917, accessed from http://members.iinet.net.au/~dodd/gail/memorial/hughie/part_2.html on 01.02.2013.

³⁸ Diary, Corporal I. Williams, 14 August 1918, accessed from <http://www.nashos.org.au/18diary.htm> on 01/02/2013.

appreciated aspects of rest was the estaminets – shabby French cafés that served wine, beer, eggs, and chips.

Alcohol was the main attraction of the estaminets. Drinking was a pastime that many soldiers had enjoyed in Australia, and was one of the few luxuries Australian troops could enjoy when billeted behind the front line. *Aussie*, a newspaper the soldiers published for themselves during the war, included the following poem, entitled *In billets*, in their June 1918 edition:

*You say we're mad when we strike the beer!
But if you'd stood in shivering fear
With the boys who bring the wounded back
Cross no-man's land where there ain't no track
You'd read no psalms to the men that fight!
You'd take to drink to forget the sight
Of torn out limbs and sightless eyes
Or the passing of a pal that dies.*³⁹

Indeed, some soldiers sought to forget traumatic experiences through alcohol. For some, religion was of little use and drink was a much better solace.

Charles Harris often wrote of his drinking in estaminets. One diary entry read, “As fast as the various Madamissiolers (sic) we visited could pour it out we drank it, irrespective of colour or quality.”⁴⁰ After drinking about 50 francs’ worth of alcohol, Harris and his mates left one estaminet for another, where “there were several girls, a lot of Tommies and an accordion”.⁴¹ The tale continues with Harris waking up in a stable surrounded by animals, and stumbling back to his billet half-naked to get a lecture “on the evils of drink and the bad example I was setting young fellows like Clarke and Warren. Two young buggers by the way who drink a dam sight more than I do”.⁴² Harris also wrote of a separate occasion when most of the platoon, including his sergeant “got beastly full”. The platoon’s antics included climbing up

³⁹ *Aussie* 5, June 1918, in J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, pp. 74–75.

⁴⁰ Diary, Private C. Harris, 1916–17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

and falling down the stairs repeatedly, cleaning muddy boots on other people's clean blankets, can-can dancing for the French civilians, competitions to vomit into a biscuit tin, and climbing up onto the estaminet bar counter to sing.⁴³

Estaminets also offered the prospect of flirtation with French women, as well as the potential for sex, including with prostitutes.⁴⁴ Harris wrote of his experiences with "the girls who come around hawking", and believed all it would take was a little payment for him to be right to go home with them. However, he discovered that this was often not the case; he felt it was because he was not an officer, nor could he offer enough money. He wrote of one brothel, describing it as an "imitation paradise" – however, it had a mounted guard on it and it was reserved for officers. "Selfish brutes", as Harris saw it.⁴⁵

This diary entry is quite rare, as not many soldiers wrote of their encounters with women, whether they were prostitutes in brothels, or "amateur" women who believed a "loosening of sexual relations promoted the winning of the war, or was, in a way, a patriotic act".⁴⁶ These women frequented streets, hotels, cafés, and bars.⁴⁷

The *Official history of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914–1918* details that, between 1916–19, 13,105 Australians were admitted to field ambulances with venereal infections, including syphilis, gonorrhoea, and a number of unspecified diseases. This number made up 6.19 per cent of all admissions from 1916 through to 1919.⁴⁸ It was of huge concern to senior Australian commanders, as venereal disease

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, p. 75.

⁴⁵ Diary, Private C. Harris, 1916–17.

⁴⁶ A. Butler, *Official history of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914–1918*, Vol. III, Problems and Services, Halstead Press Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1943, p. 152.

⁴⁷ C. Makepeace, "Sex and the Somme: the officially sanctioned brothels on the front line laid bare for the first time", *Daily Mail*, 29 October 2011, accessed from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2054914/Sex-Somme-Officially-sanctioned-WWI-brothels-line.html> on 31/01/2013.

⁴⁸ A. Butler, *Official history of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914–1918*, Vol. II, The Western Front, Halstead Press Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1940, p. 502.

was “creating medical problems which occupied the attention of the medical staff to the detriment of more important matters.”⁴⁹

After it was established that chaplains appealing to the men to remain abstinent on religious grounds was “worse than useless”,⁵⁰ medical officers gave more practical advice to soldiers. Every month all ranks were lectured to by a medical officer who detailed meticulous accounts of diseases, as well as measures for their prevention. The lectures also included a “denunciation of the idea that continence is ever harmful, or that incontinence is an essential attribute of manliness”.⁵¹ Further, men were warned of the dangers of drinking too much and having their judgement impaired. Men were offered a free prophylactic kit, given the opportunity to purchase condoms, and provided with an information card and instructions to head to the closest “early treatment” centre if they ran the risk of infection.⁵²

Entertainment:

Other than women, the soldiers had myriad entertainments with which to amuse themselves, and in some cases spent whatever period they could in having a good time. Concerts, film screenings, church parades, carnivals, and dances were provided by both military and civilian organisations. These volunteer organisations, such as the Red Cross and the Australian Comforts Fund, aimed to provide “comforts” to Australian soldiers and to supplement army rations and personal kits. They provided an estimated 12 million mugs of tea, coffee, and cocoa to soldiers leaving the trenches.⁵³ “No charge whatever was made to the men for comforts, with underclothing, eatables, drinks, smokes, amusements, &c., all being provided free.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* p. 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 155.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* p. 158.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 158.

⁵³ “Teacup in a storm”, accessed from <http://www.anzacday.org.au/miscellaneous/teacup.html> on 14.02.2013.

⁵⁴ “Trench comforts fund activities”, *The Mail*, Saturday 18 May 1918, accessed from <http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/63841177> on 14.02.2103.

In addition, 1,354,328 pairs of woollen socks were knitted by volunteers and shipped to Australian soldiers in Europe.⁵⁵

Many soldiers were grateful for the escape these organisations provided from the drudgery of war. Corporal Williams wrote in his diary on various occasions of the entertainment provided by the Australian Comforts Fund, which included a Vaudeville show,⁵⁶ gramophone records,⁵⁷ a free cinema for the troops⁵⁸ and “an open air service held by the finest Padre I have met ... commonly known as “The Father of the Aussies” .⁵⁹

The soldiers themselves also put on many concerts and plays whilst on leave. The Canadians at Winnipeg Camp constructed a large corrugated iron concert hall, which the Australians often used when in the vicinity. One night the soldiers put together a skit entitled *A night in Cairo*. The actors blackened their faces with paint, and used the transport section’s mascot – a monkey – to portray scenes from Egypt. The play was completely unrehearsed, with the actors ad libbing on stage. The show reached its pinnacle “when the monkey attacked the actors” at which point the play became “decidedly entertaining – for the audience, at least” .⁶⁰

Often, during these performances, “good-looking youths were selected to impersonate the lady characters” .⁶¹ These concerts were often comedic, and invariably satirised command and the state of the war.⁶² Cinemas were also established. Battalions would be marched to the Loker theatre, with the admission

⁵⁵ “Teacup in a storm” .

⁵⁶ Diary, Corporal I. Williams, 20 January 1917, accessed from <http://www.nashos.org.au/17diary.htm> on 01/02/2013.

⁵⁷ Diary, Corporal I. Williams, 14 April 1918, accessed from <http://www.nashos.org.au/18diary.htm> on 01/02/2013.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 10 August 1918.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 11 August 1918.

⁶⁰ W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond*, p. 116.

⁶¹ *Ibid.* p. 203.

⁶² J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, p. 100.

fee paid out of the regimental funds. At other times the YMCA also entertained the troops at cinemas.⁶³

Most battalions had a band, with performances sometimes held in the village square for the amusement of troops and civilians alike.⁶⁴ Sergeant Major Ellsworth wrote in a letter to his mother:

*We have a fine Tommy Dio band play in the beautiful woods that are by, & they comprise of English professionals, & gave us a rattling programme last night ... I did enjoy it & am eagerly awaiting their next performance.*⁶⁵

Hygiene:

A simpler pleasure granted to soldiers behind the lines was the opportunity to have a bath and get a clean uniform. Mass bathing tubs were constructed from brewing vats. Soldiers exchanged their infested clothing for freshly disinfected and fumigated items, although they were patched and threadbare.⁶⁶ Lieutenant David Caldwell, of the 27th Battalion, wrote about the bathing process:

*We are fairly well looked after here; we get a good hot bath & a change of clothing at least once a week. We strip & get into a giant big hot bath about 20 at a time & my word you do feel alright afterwards especially if you have just done about 12 days in the trenches.*⁶⁷

Corporal Ivor Alexander Williams of the 21st Battalion seemed to have a different opinion of the baths, perhaps because he was an NCO rather than an officer. He wrote in his diary that the baths were “really insults to the name”.⁶⁸ Jam tins with perforated bottoms were used, with the water slowly trickling through. After the

⁶³ W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond*, p. 204.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* p. 170.

⁶⁵ Letter from Sergeant Major N. Ellsworth to his mother, 1 June 1917, AWM file: 12/11/1146.

⁶⁶ D. Kent, *From trench and troopship – the experience of the Australian Imperial Force 1914–1919*, Hale & Iremonger Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1999, p. 125.

⁶⁷ Letter from Lieutenant D. Caldwell to his mother, 12 July 1916, AWM, PR83/174.

⁶⁸ Diary, Corporal I. Williams, 1 April 1917, accessed from <http://www.nashos.org.au/17diary.htm> on 01/02/2013.

initial tin, the soldier then soaped himself up, before another pint of water was released. If a soldier missed the second round of water, he had “to wipe the soap off with his towel”⁶⁹ and then clean clothes were issued. Williams wrote of the disappointment of getting a different set of clothing, “because now one has just got rid of all the old ‘Intruders’ out of his shirt (now 3 to 4 or even 6 weeks old) so one has to start and exterminate the new breed”.⁷⁰

These everyday activities were sometimes documented by officials. An official war photographer took an image of Private Verdi Schwinghammer of the 42nd Battalion and his mates standing around in an old barn, shaving and “chatting” – the process of removing body lice from one’s clothing.⁷¹ This was quite a relaxed, jovial time amongst soldiers.

These instances of basic hygiene seem to rate very highly in most soldiers’ opinions. Almost every bath was mentioned in many men’s diaries. The process of washing the mud and grime away can be seen to represent the washing away of the horrors of battle this brief return to cleanliness, to normalcy, may have reminded soldiers of the lives they once lived.

In addition to bathing, being able to go for a swim was much appreciated by the men. Not only was it relaxing, but with the shedding of clothes all ranks appeared much the same. At these swimming places, senior officers and commanders who were not well known to their troops “found themselves addressed as ‘Diggers’, and were fortunate if they were not accorded less complimentary attention”.⁷² Most officers enjoyed these informal interactions with their troops, and many would go to great trouble to disguise their ranks so they would not be recognised.⁷³

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Diary, Private V. Schwinghammer, accessed from <http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/32360/20100306-0022/www.diggerhistory.info/pages-asstd/schwinghammer.html> on 30/01/2013.

⁷² W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond*, p. 286.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

Sport:

Sport occupied much of the soldiers' time in rest. Indeed, in the latter stages of the war it became a part of formalised training, with sports played after lunch during periods of rest.⁷⁴ Informal games between friends or inter-battalion competitions were vital for morale and *esprit de corps*.

In the AIF sport developed a competitive spirit and camaraderie, and competitions were followed by all in the battalion. Each unit had their own team, and battalions carried their colour to the field, marched to conquest to the music of their bands, and endeavoured to uphold their reputation.⁷⁵ During the winter of 1917-18 "football competitions were the supreme interest behind the Messines front", with the men "more keen on their football for the moment than anything else in the world".⁷⁶

Sport also played an important role in breaking down the dehumanising and bureaucratic barriers existent in military life. British troops often remarked on the Australians' casual disregard of rank when playing sport. One battalion diary read:

*matches between the officers and NCOs provided keen enjoyment for the troops, who relished the privilege when "barracking" of calling the officers by their Christian names or nicknames. Even the acting CO was not exempt from the popular practice ... the Diggers employed all their powers of humour in supporting both sides.*⁷⁷

Such sports allowed a brief mental escape from the stress and horrors of war; indeed, "most of the men were playing football within half an hour of finishing a heavy march a fortnight in the trenches".⁷⁸ It was eventually acknowledged that if rest periods were to be of any value to the men they must be provided with moments of both physical and mental rest. Sports and games provided this mental

⁷⁴ J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, p. 88.

⁷⁵ E. Wren, *Randwick to Hargicourt: history of the 3rd Battalion, AIF*, Ronald G. McDonald, Sydney, 1935, in *ibid.*, p.90.

⁷⁶ J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, p. 87.

⁷⁷ W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond*, p. 117.

⁷⁸ J.G. Fuller, *Troop morale*, p. 86.

relaxation, as well as reminding men of their lives before war, when the outcome of a match may have been their only concern. Charles Harris wrote:

*We played the 41st football today (13/3/17) and it resembled water Polo more than football – right between one of the goalposts there was a lake of water and it ran back about 25 yards. We played a good hard game taking everything into consideration.*⁷⁹

Invariably, sports would lead to gambling, and this was present at the rest camps. Some soldiers adopted the role of bookmakers, laying odds for events, and this element of speculation added to the excitement of the match.⁸⁰ Once again, playing sport and having a gamble were all welcome relief from the horrors of the front.

However, not all rest camps were exciting. Sergeant Edward Gilmore of the No. 6 Tunnelling Company wrote in his diary: “Slept all day and went for a bit of a walk during the night. The town is like the rest, nothing to do in it but watch people drink beer.” The next day’s entry reads, “Been writing letters all day long.”⁸¹

Exhaustion in the AIF:

Rest was essential to the soldiers’ morale and fighting ability, and provided a mental respite from the routine of the front line; moreover, rest allowed soldiers to have a bit of fun during an otherwise horrific war. It is clear from events in 1917 and onwards that soldiers believed downtime to be crucial to their survival.

The repeated offensives of 1917 began to sap the energy of the AIF, with many men becoming depressed over the long periods they had spent in the trenches – longer than those of the British.⁸² Under normal circumstances, divisions were usually granted rest before they reached breaking point. Despite the perceived durability of

⁷⁹ Diary, Private C. Harris, 13 March 1917, accessed from http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/32360/20100306-0022/www.diggerhistory.info/pages-asstd/hell_babes.html on 31/01/2013.

⁸⁰ W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond*, p. 117.

⁸¹ Diary, Sergeant E. Gilmore, 13–14 March 1917, accessed from http://members.iinet.net.au/~dodd/gail/memorial/hughie/part_2.html on 01/02/2013.

⁸² P. Stanley, *Bad characters: sex, crime, mutiny, murder and the Australian Imperial Force*, Pier 9 Publishing, Sydney, 2010, p. 130.

the troops, there was a limit to what they could take, and exhausted men needed to be given adequate time to recover.⁸³ It appears commanders on the ground were fully aware of this as, following intense periods of battle, soldiers in rest were given more genuine rest time instead of training.⁸⁴

The unit history of the 24th Battalion reads:

*The Australian Divisions had been fighting strenuously since they were thrown in on the Somme early in the spring to stop the German swoop on Amiens, and now that the summer had passed, and the German army, like the leaves on the tress, was falling into decay, it was felt that the Australian Corps could well afford to take a rest.*⁸⁵

Towards the end of the war, division generals were requesting additional leave for their divisions from General Sir John Monash, the Australian Corps commander. Regimental officers were so concerned that they believed “any chain of mischances increasing the burden [on troops] might precipitate a local mutiny”.⁸⁶ Monash wrote that he was “compelled to disregard the evident signs of overstrain which were brought to my notice by the divisional generals and their brigadiers”.⁸⁷ He believed “six days’ rest and a bath restores the elasticity of a division. The troops are not tired – a little footsore”.⁸⁸

Some of these “footsore” troops mutinied. The 59th Battalion was relieved on 14 September 1918 after a week of continuous fighting, and no sooner had the men reached their bivouac and settled down to sleep than they were summoned to the line again. Three platoons refused to return, and their officers supported them,

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 132.

⁸⁴ War diary, 2nd Infantry Brigade, January 1917, AWM4, 23/2/21.

⁸⁵ W.J. Harvey, *The red and white diamond*, pp. 303–04.

⁸⁶ C. Bean, *The official history of Australia in the war of 1914-18: Vol. VI, the AIF in France 1918*, Halstead Press Pty Ltd, Sydney, 1942, p. 875.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

believing these actions were the only way to “impress the higher authorities with their needs”.⁸⁹ This refusal was eventually overcome.⁹⁰

In a separate incident, the 6th Battalion mutinied over lack of rest, refusing to move from their bivouac site upon learning they would be returning to battle.⁹¹ Men from other companies learned of the mutiny and joined in; all up, 119 men disappeared.⁹² These men were all tried, and “with one exception, found guilty, not of joining in a mutiny, but of desertion”.⁹³ What happened to the mutineers afterwards? Although mutiny was a capital offence in the AIF, they had their sentences commuted to hard labour.

Official historian C.E.W. Bean believed that Monash “was right to work his troops to the extreme limit of their endurance, which normally is beyond the limit to which men themselves think they can endure”. He went on to say that the value of armies depended greatly on their ability to hold out the longest, “withstanding strain, toil or exhaustion in perhaps unbelievable degree and for an unbelievable time”.⁹⁴ Some would disagree: rest may seem frivolous, carefree, and at times against the very values of the Australian Imperial Force, but this crucial psychological rest from the front line could very well have been the only thing holding the entire AIF together. Despite the large role rest played in a soldier’s experiences of the First World War, there is still little known about it, though exhibitions such as the Australian War Memorial’s *Remember me: the lost diggers of Vignacourt*, and the proliferation of First World War publications in the lead up to the centenary, may change this fact.

Australian soldiers on the Western Front spent a significant portion of their time in the rear, whether in training or at rest. Here soldiers learnt valuable new fighting skills and formations, but they also had crucial mental breaks. Although not restful, manual labour tasks behind the line removed men from the drudgery of trench

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* pp. 875–76.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p. 933.

⁹² *Ibid.* pp. 933–34.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p. 940.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

warfare. While in rest, soldiers also got the opportunity to clean up and be issued with new clothing. Soldiers could sleep, read, and write letters to loved ones back home. Men were sometimes able to visit local villages and see the sites. Food and alcohol were popular pleasures, as were women. Units, as well as civilian organisations, put together social events such as sporting competitions, theatre productions, and musical performances. These breaks were crucial to the fighting force of the AIF, as they allowed a brief return to normality for the troops and provided an increase in morale. Life in the rear played an extremely important role in a soldier's experiences, and should be remembered as such.