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Author: G. P. Cuttriss

Illustrator: Neil McBeath

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[Illustration: Major-General Sir John Monash, K.C.B., V.D.
Photo by Elliott & Fry.]

'OVER THE TOP'
WITH THE THIRD AUSTRALIAN
DIVISION

BY

G.P. CUTTRISS

WITH INTRODUCTION BY
MAJOR-GENERAL SIR JOHN MONASH,
K.C.B., V.D.

ILLUSTRATED BY NEIL McBEATH

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TO THE
FADELESS MEMORY OF OUR HEROIC DEAD
AND TO
THOSE WHO HAVE LOST
THIS BRIEF VOLUME OF SKETCH AND STORY
IS DEDICATED,
IN UNSTINTED ADMIRATION,
IN AFFECTIONATE SYMPATHY,
AND IN THE UNSHAKEABLE BELIEF THAT

'As sure as God's in heaven,
As sure as He stands for right,
As sure as the Hun this wrong hath done,
So surely we'll win this fight.'

PREFACE

In response to numerous requests from the 'boys,' this brief volume of story and sketch is published. It makes no pretension to literary merit, neither is it intended to serve as a history of the Division. The indulgence of those who may read is earnestly solicited, in view of the work having been prepared amidst the trying and thrilling experiences so common to active service. The fighting history of the Australian Forces is one long series of magnificent achievements, beginning on that day of sacred and glorious memory, April 25, 1915. Ever since that wonderful test of capacity and courage the Australians have advanced from victory to victory, and have won for themselves a

splendid reputation. Details of training, raids, engagements, and tactical features have been purposely omitted. The more serious aspect will be written by others. In deference to Mr. Censor, names of places and persons have been suppressed, but such omissions will not detract from the interest of the book. 'Over the Top with the Third Australian Division' is illustrative of that big-hearted, devil-may-care style of the Australians, the men who can see the brighter side of life under the most distracting circumstances and most unpromising conditions. In the pages that follow, some incidents of the life of the men may help to pass away a pleasant hour and serve as a reminder of events, past and gone, but which will ever be fresh to those whose immediate interests attach to the Third Australian Division.

G.P. CUTTRISS.

[Illustration: The Author.
Photo by Lafayette, Ltd.]

INTRODUCTION

At the outbreak of the World War in August, 1914, the Australian as a soldier was an unknown quantity. It is quite true that in the previous campaigns in the Soudan and in South Africa, Australia had been represented, and that a sprinkling of native-born Australians had taken service in the Imperial armies. The performances of these pioneers of Australia in arms were creditable, and the reputation which they had earned was full of promise. But, viewed in their proper perspective, these contributions to Imperial Defence were no true index of the capacity of the Australian nation to raise and maintain a great army worthy and able in all details to take its place in a world war, beside the armies of the great and historic civilizations of the Old World.

No Australian, nor least of all those among them who had laboured in times of peace to prepare the way for a great national effort, whenever the call to action should come, ever doubted the capacity of the nation worthily to respond; but while the magnitude and quality of the possible effort might well have been doubted by our Imperial authorities and our Allies, and while it was certainly regarded as negligible by our enemies, the result in achievement has exceeded, in a mighty degree, the most optimistic hopes even of those who knew or thought they knew what Australia was capable of.

For, to-day, Australia has, besides its substantial contribution to the Naval Forces of the Empire, actually in being a land army of five

divisions and two mounted divisions, fully officered, fully equipped, and stamped with the seal of brilliantly successful performance; and has created and maintained all the hundred and one national activities upon which such an achievement depends.

We are still too close to the picture to realize the miracle which has been wrought, or to understand in all their breadth the factors on which it has depended; but, fundamentally, and overshadowing all other factors, the result is based upon the character of the Australian people, and upon the personality of the Australian soldier.

It is the latter factor which, to one who has been for so long in intimate daily contact with him, makes the closest appeal. It is from that close association, from the knowledge born of experience of him in every phase of his daily life, that the Australian can be proclaimed as second to none in the world both as a soldier and as a fighting man. For these things are not synonymous, and the first lesson that every recruit has to learn is that they are not synonymous; that the thing which converts a mere fighting man into a soldier is the sense of discipline. This word 'discipline' is often cruelly misused and misunderstood. Upon it, in its broadest and truest sense, depends the capacity of men, in the aggregate, for successful concerted action. It is precisely because the Australian is born with and develops in his national life the very instinct of discipline that he has been enabled to prove himself so successful a soldier. He obeys constituted authority because he knows that success depends upon his doing so, whether his activities are devoted to the interests of his football team or his industrial organization or his regiment. He has an infinite capacity for 'team' work. And he brings to bear upon that work a high order of intelligence and understanding. In his other splendid qualities, his self-reliance, his devotion to his cause and his comrades, and his unfailing cheerfulness under hardship and distress, he displays other manifestations of that same instinct of discipline.

Some day cold and formal histories will record the deeds and performances of the Australian soldiery; but it is not to them that we shall turn for an illumination of his true character. It is to stories such as these which follow, of his daily life, of his psychology, of his personality, that we must look. And we shall look not in vain, when, as in the following pages, the tale has been written down by one of themselves, who has lived and worked among them, and who understands them in a spirit of true sympathy and comradeship. The Author of these sketches is himself true to his type, and an embodiment of all that is most worthy and most admirable in the Australian soldier.

JOHN MONASH, Major-General.

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= 'OVER THE TOP' =

FROM 'THERE' TO 'HERE'

Towards the end of November, 1916, our hopes of moving out from 'where we then were' to 'where we now are' materialized to the evident satisfaction of all. Few, if any, cared as to our probable destination; the chief interest centred in the fact that we were to start for the Front. The time spent Somewhere in the Motherland was by no means wasted. Due regard had been paid to the training of the men, who reached a standard of efficiency which earned for the Division a

reputation second to none. While in England the Third was the subject of scorn and bitter criticism. Older Divisions could not forget, and possibly regretted, the fact that they had had no such prolonged training in mock trenches and in inglorious safety. However, since leaving England the Division has lived down the scorn that was heaped upon it, by upholding the traditions handed down by older and more war-worn units. Recently the Division was referred to by a noted General as one of the best equipped and most efficient units not only amongst the Overseas Divisions but of the whole Army in France.

The arrangements for our moving out were approximately perfect. There was no hitch. The military machine, like the Tanks of recent fame, over-rides or brushes to one side all obstacles. There was manifest among all ranks an eagerness to leave nothing undone that would in any way facilitate entraining and embarkation. The knowledge that we were at last on our way to the 'Dinkum' thing had the effect of leading us to take a more serious view of the situation. It is surprising, however, how soon men become attached to a place; and though the conditions at Lark Hill were in no sense ideal, it had been our home for several months and we were loth to leave. Perhaps the thought that many of us might possibly never return inspired the longing looks that were directed towards the camp as we marched on our way to the station. Who of those who took part in that march will forget the cheers with which we were greeted by the residents of that picturesquely situated village as we trudged along its winding road? We had enjoyed their hospitality, and we appreciated their cordial wishes for success and safety.

The task of entraining a large body of men was expertly accomplished, and after a brief delay we were speeding in the direction of the port of embarkation. The train journey was practically without event. The men were disposed to be quiet. On arrival at the quay parties were detailed to assist in putting mails and equipment aboard the transports. Punctually at the hour advised we trooped aboard the ships that were to convey us across the water. There was very little accommodation for men, but they squeezed in and made the best of the situation. The trip across was not as comfortable as it might have been, but its duration was so brief that the discomfort was scarcely worth serious thought. The transports cast anchor off the harbour early the following morning, but it was not until late in the afternoon that they were berthed alongside the wharf. Scarcely had the transports touched the wharf-side when they commenced to disgorge their living freight.

[Illustration: The trip across was not as comfortable as it might have been.]

From the waterside we marched to No. 1 Rest (?) Camp, situated on the summit of a hill on the outskirts of the town. The camp was reached some time after darkness had settled down over the land. The weather

was most miserable. The air was charged with icy blasts, and rain fell continuously throughout the night. The least said about our impressions and experiences during our brief stay in that camp the better; suffice to state that one of the most miserable memories that can be recalled in connexion with our experiences on active service is associated with No. 1 Rest Camp.

The following morning we marched to the main railway station and entrained for the Front. The accommodation provided was fairly comfortable, though the carriages (?) had been used more for carrying mules than men. The train journey extended over thirty hours. All along the route there were evidences of military activity denoting extensive and effective military organization. We noted the continuous stream of traffic on the roads, and were amused with the names chalked on the heavy guns, which were being drawn by a style of tractor quite new to most of us. 'No friend of Fritz' was a powerful-looking gun, and greatly impressed us; but the sight of a number of heavier guns thrilled us, and we involuntarily shouted 'Good old England.'

There was not a dull moment during that thirty hours' run. There was much to interest the 'freshmen.' Eventually we reached our rail destination, and marched to our quarters, where we arrived late at night. That we were not far from the fighting line was very evident by the close proximity of the artillery, which expressed itself so emphatically that the air reverberated with its deep boom, relieved at intervals by the staccato reports of machine-guns in action.

The troops were quartered in different places. They were as indifferent as they were different, but any place which afforded shelter from the rain and protection from the cold was greatly appreciated. Despite the inconveniences within and the noises without few had difficulty in wooing Morpheus and reposed in his embrace until a late hour next morning.

Opportunity was afforded during the day for having a look round and cultivating an acquaintance with the district. The country round about is fairly level, and, despite the fact that it was just behind the lines and under enemy observation, farming operations and business were carried on in perfect serenity. A cinema afforded entertainment in the evenings. The men were cheerful, and accepted the change from the 'sham' to the real uncomplainingly, and commenced making their billets as comfortable as circumstances would permit. Stoves were greatly in demand, but few were available. The law in France is that nothing shall be removed from a building without permission. Troops were forbidden to enter houses under any pretence whatever; but very occasionally men lost their way, and unwittingly (?) wandered into forbidden places, and when detected by certain officials evinced great surprise on being found therein. The Town Major on one occasion was walking past a building, the door of which was ajar, and he observed two men struggling with a stove half up the stairway. 'What are you

doing with that stove?' he peremptorily asked. 'Putting it back, sir,' was the prompt reply.

It is surprising with what readiness the Australian adapts himself to whatever conditions prevail. He possesses plenty of initiative, which is an invaluable asset on active service. Friendships were quickly formed with the villagers, who were chiefly refugees, and much amusement was caused as the troops sought to make use of the French words which they had endeavoured to learn. There was scarcely any necessity, however to try to speak French, as most of the people understood sufficient of the English language for ordinary business transactions. It was only when love-making was resorted to that a knowledge of French became a vital necessity.

There was a great deal to interest the troops in this district, which for a brief period had been occupied by the enemy. The town was subjected to heavy shell fire almost daily. Evidences of the enemy's brief stay and the effects of their 'frightfulness' were not lacking. Since our occupation, the place has been reduced to a heap of ruins by the enemy's artillery, which appears to have paid special attention to church buildings, for many of them have been totally destroyed. Almost immediately upon our arrival in this place certain units of the Division occupied the trenches along the Divisional Front, and very soon proved themselves to be just as capable as the more experienced troops which they had relieved.

We were located in and about the town for several months, during which time the Third Division won a name for the efficiency and daring of its raids, and silenced for all time the gibes and criticisms of the more war-worn comrades of the older divisions. 'Here' the Division has comported itself precisely as it did over 'there.' In training the men tried to do their duty. In battle they have done their duty, many of them even unto death.

[Illustration: When you are perfectly sober, and you imagine you're not.]

What of the future? Just the same; but with that courage and confidence born of experience, still greater attainments may be expected.

AUSTRALIANS--IN VARIOUS MOODS

The Australian soldier is a peculiar mixture; but for pluck in the face of danger, patience in the grip of pain, and initiative in the presence of the unexpected, he holds a unique place amongst men. He

has been subjected to considerable adverse criticism for seeming lack of discipline. Kind things and other kinds of things have been freely said to his detriment; but if every word were true, he is not to blame. The Australian soldier, like any other soldier, is but the product of a system, the standard or inefficiency of which it would not be just to hold him responsible for. The majority frankly admit that soldiering is not in their line. They would never choose it as a profession; yet the man from 'Down Under' has given unmistakable proof that he is as amenable to discipline as any other, and rightly led he, as a fighting force, compares favourably with the best that any nation has produced. His language at times is not too choice. It is said that on occasions the outburst has been so hot that the water carts have been consumed in flames. Be that as it may, his diction in no sense denotes the exact state of his mind or morals. His contagious cheerfulness has established him a firm favourite with the French people, whose admiration and affection he will hold for all time.

An officer belonging to another part of the Empire tells a story against himself. Arriving in a village late at night, he inquired at a cottage as to whether a billet could be provided. Before replying the occupant, a widow, asked whether he was an Australian or a ----. Upon learning his regimental identity, she told him that she had no accommodation. Somewhat vexed, he retorted, 'If I were an Australian you would probably have found room for me.' 'Yes,' was her reply. 'Well,' the officer observed, 'I fail to understand what you see in the Australians; they're savages.' Before closing the door the occupant said, 'I like savages.'

The following incidents but imperfectly portray the irrepressible humour, unexampled heroism, and splendid initiative so commendably displayed by the Australian under the varying and trying conditions common to modern warfare.

IMPROMPTU WIT.

The ----th Battalion had been relieved. The men had been in the lines six days. They looked forward to a few days' spell at the back of the trenches. On reaching the back area some of the men were detailed to carry supplies up to the lines. Whilst so engaged they were met by a General, who was in the habit of visiting the trenches unaccompanied. This officer, himself a young man, ever had a cheery word for the 'boys.' One of the men on duty lagged some distance behind the main party. The expression on his face indicated that he was 'fed up.' He was also beginning to feel the weight of the sack which he was carrying. As he passed, the General acknowledged the reluctant turn of his head by way of salute, and then asked, 'Where are you going, my man?' 'In the ---- knees, sir,' was the ready and witty reply.

[Illustration:

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