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Photograph Albums, World War I

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These two albums, origin unknown, are a fine record of the 8th Infantry Training Battalion at Hurdcott, Wiltshire, between 1916 and 1917. They were compiled as a keepsake by an Australian soldier as a permanent record of this part in his wartime experience. There are no photographs from France as troops were forbidden to take cameras with them. Whether the compiler was eventually posted to France is unknown. Nor is it clear whether he survived to return to Australia. The 8th Training Battalion was formed at Larkhill, Wiltshire, on 8 August 1916. It was moved to Codford on 2 October 1916 and Fovant on 16 November 1916. It was disbanded on 5 November 1917.1 In July 1917, a magazine was published, the Hurdcott Herald.2

The creator of the albums is in at least four of the photographs, identifying himself only as ‘self’, and on one occasion as ‘the photographer’ (on this occasion he must have handed the camera to someone else). Most of the photographs were taken in camp of individuals or small groups, evidently as a record of his ‘cobbers’. He does not set out to record the training, except one photo of musketry training and another of a parade of the whole battalion. The visit of King George V on 17 April 1917 is a highlight. A group of photographs is captioned ‘King’s Review, Australian troops on Bulford Field, Salisbury Plain, 17. 4. 17.’ He was able to get quite close to the king, and the resultant picture is respectfully labelled ‘H.M. the King’.

The four photographs show a short and stocky man, with one tooth missing and a somewhat baggy, ill-fitting uniform. He is evidently a private soldier, as there is no indication of rank. He is aged about 30 and smoked a pipe. As he is in a training battalion, he does not wear the colour patch of an infantry battalion.

2 Held by the National Library of Australia.
The albums were put together with great care and pride. The photographs are well arranged and sometimes grouped with a central caption such as ‘With the “8th T.B.” at Hurdcott’. Captions are written in white Indian ink, often used in that era for such purposes. It is evident that the writer had learned his handwriting well, and was the product of good primary schooling. The spelling is a little shaky on words such as ‘Parliament’.

The 8th Training Battalion was one of several which supplied reinforcements to the AIF on the Western Front. Initially these training battalions supplied reinforcements to brigades of the same number. Thus the 1st Training Battalion supplied reinforcements to the 1st Brigade. Had that still obtained by 1917, the 8th Training Battalion would have supplied reinforcements principally to the 21st, 22nd, 23rd and 24th Battalions. However the great wastage on the Western Front evidently meant that numbers had to be made up from whatever source of trained troops was available. It appears that many men from this Training Battalion went to the 30th Battalion.

The photographer does not comment on the severe conditions, but it is evident in the photographs that the huts behind the men were heavily covered in snow. The winter of 1916-1917 was one of the most severe on record, and troops leaving Australia in warm Spring weather late in 1916 suffered badly a few weeks later on the bleak, exposed Salisbury Plain, a major military encampment. The South Australian Agent-General in London, F.W. Young, came to hear of this, and wrote to the AIF’s Director of Medical Services, Sir Neville Howse, about it.3

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3 The following discussion is taken from Stuart Braga, *Anzac Doctor: the life of Sir Neville Howse*, pp. 231-232.
"During sick parades some men are compelled to wait for their turn and have been exposed to the cold weather for a considerable time which aggravates their sickness. In the very natural desire of the medical men to prevent malingering, they are apt to have a bias against the men on parade ... a man might be compelled to parade several times before his case is considered serious enough for hospital, and in such cases the illness has become acute and he is sent to hospital in extremis, dying within a few hours of his admission."

Howse had already acted on the matter, and on 30 November 1916 reported to his superior officer in Australia, General Fetherston: “Have had some unpleasant and stormy interviews with War Office lately about Salisbury Plains Camps, but think I have obtained everything that is necessary. ... All our men are now well housed in good camps and I have no fear for the health of the men ... You have no idea what a bad winter means for camping in England, notwithstanding the fact that they are all housed in warm, dry huts."

It was imperative to get the men away from the bleak conditions of Salisbury Plain. In the churchyards of neighbouring villages in the county of Wiltshire are buried 630 men of the AIF and several nurses. Many died from pneumonia either in that hard first winter or the great pandemic of 1919. It is a larger number than those who died in either the Boer War or the Vietnam War, and is more than 1% of Australia's war dead of the First World War. Howse's 'unpleasant and stormy interviews' saved many more from this miserable end.

It is interesting that so many of the photographs are of officers. The photographer clearly respected his officers and asked permission to photograph them. There was a good rapport between this man and those who commanded him.

Among those whose names are given in the captions are the following. In some cases, their units are indicated. This reflects the intense pride in and loyalty of their unit felt by the Diggers of the AIF. Experienced officers might be detached from their battalion at the Front to act as trainers for a time.
Lt Jack Rule, Lt 31st Battalion, from Chatswood. Killed.

Lt Wisdom

Lt Sime – photographed twice

Lt Evans 30th – photographed twice

Lt Treasure 32nd

Dundas 29th

Andrews 32nd – photographed twice
Capt Harry Stephens. Killed 30th Battalion

Captain Morrison 30th

Padre Smith

Lt Boorne

Major Sloan – photographed three times

Capt Blumer AAMC

Norm Howell

Sgt Lamphry

Lt Morrison

Lieutenant-Colonel Abbott

Capt Rogers 32nd

Lt Facey

The Service Records of the following eight officers have been examined.4

Lt Harry Stephens was a University Medallist in Agriculture at the University of Sydney. He was a musketry instructor in the 8th Training Battalion until he was posted to the 30th Battalion on 18 October 1916. He was killed on 19 November 1917.5


5 University of Sydney Book of Remembrance, p. 477.
John Clinton Rule ('Jack') of Chatswood, 31st Battalion. Jack Rule sailed from Sydney with
the 3rd reinforcements of the 31st Battalion. He landed at Plymouth on 16 June 1916 and was
then posted to the 5th Division Base, one unit of which was the 8th Training Battalion. He
did not stay long and joined his battalion in France where he was killed in action on 2
November 1916.

Captain George Albert Blumer, Australian Army Medical Corps. Posted to AIF Depots
January to March 1917.6

Major Hannibal Sloan was seconded to the 8th Training Battalion on 1 February 1917. In
these severe winter conditions, not even a senior officer could escape sickness. Within three
weeks he was sent to Fovant Military Hospital where he stayed until 17 March, when, as his
Service Record puts it, he ‘Marched in to 8 Training Battalion from Fovant’. He was later
severely wounded in France and was invalided to Australia. Nearly twenty years after the
war, he wrote The Purple and Gold, a history of the 30th Battalion, taking the title from the
battalion’s colour patch. Sloan does not mention the 8th Training Battalion.

Lt Frank Alan Wisdom. 30th Battalion. Adjutant 8th Training Battalion, 18 October 1916.

6 University of Sydney Book of Remembrance, p. 46.
Lt Andrew Ramsay Sime, 31st Battalion. Quartermaster, 8th Training Battalion, 26 November 1916 to 16 May 1917.

Corporal Norman Howell. Training Battalion Hurdcott, 3 December 1916 to 19 February 1917.

Lt Cecil William Treasure, 8th Training Battalion 22 August 1916 to 16 September 1916; 19 July 1917 to 24 July 1917.

-----One soldier (whose photograph is not in this album) who trained at Hurdcott was Harold Leslie McLeish, later to be remembered as one of the youngest boy soldiers of the AIF. Joining up on 1 November 1916, McLeish put up his age, as many others did. He told the recruiting officer ... that he was a coal miner, which may have been true, and had reached the age of 19 years, 9 months, he being only 14 years, 8 months old at the time. By the end of the month, he was on his way to England, departing Sydney aboard the *Beltana* on 25 November. McLeish spent the next nine months training in England, with the 8th Training Battalion at Hurdcott, before being sent to France on 24 October 1917.7

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The second album shows that the photographer used his leave well, taking his camera with him into nearby towns such as Marlborough, and to Stonehenge, already famous as one the wonders of ancient Britain. On the South Coast, he visited the resorts of Bournemouth, Swanage and the Isle of Wight. He bought postcards and included them with his own photographs. Naturally, he went to London, and a later section of the album shows that he visited Wales.

Summary:

This pair of albums is a useful indication of the way an ordinary soldier coped uncomplainingly with hard training conditions in wartime, and how he used his leave. Underpinning the images in the two albums is the enduring theme of mateship, so strongly celebrated in later generations.

Stuart Braga

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