

## **Before the Storm: The Australian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division on Salisbury Plain in the First World War**

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*“Rain Swept the open country and poured into the white-chalk trenches. When at night several companies entered the trenches to take up their positions, men floundered through pools of whitewash, and got covered with sticky white mud. Verrey lights went hissing up through the driving rain, to illuminate a dreary landscape. Rifles cracked, and the dull detonations of hand grenades momentarily drowned the angry hissing of the rain” (Fairey, 1920, 7)*

Travelling across the expanses of Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire, there are archaeological sites of great antiquity at every turn; prehistoric burial mounds, hillforts and, of course, Stonehenge. Since 1897, a further chapter was written following the acquisition of land in this area by the British Army. The army now encompasses some 38,000 hectares on the Plain making this the largest Training Estate in Britain.

Throughout the landscape there are traces of the lives of soldiers that practiced for war here: their graves, carvings of initials and a date onto trees, and old barrack huts. The Anzacs are a case in point. There is a strong tradition in Wiltshire, supposedly dating back over a thousand years, of carving horse effigies into the hillside – the figure showing up gleaming white as the green of the turf gives way to underlying chalk. Nothing perhaps prepares viewers for the chalk kiwi at Bulford or the Australian Imperial Forces badges at Codford and Fovant, figures carved by soldiers from New Zealand and Australia as they suffered in training on the Plain in the First World War. The site of the badge at Codford was known as ‘Misery Hill’; emphasising that fatigues spent in this area were far from joyous.

Following discussions at a conference on Battlefield Archaeology in London, Peter Stanley (Australian War Memorial), Martin Brown and Richard Osgood (archaeologists at Defence Estates) agreed to co-operate on a project to examine the presence of the Australian 3<sup>rd</sup> Division on Salisbury Plain. In particular we wanted to investigate the Unit’s training in the Great War prior to embarkation for the Western Front and the battlefields of the Somme and Third Ypres. We wanted to know quite how realistic the trench systems were, how well they survived, what they could tell us about the lives of those that served.

Michael Molkentin, a scholar at the Australian War Memorial, identified a site known as “The Bustard” (after a local pub) near Larkhill as the most suitable area of research. Here the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division had dug a trench system in late 1916, replicating conditions in France and Belgium. Their Commander, Major-General John Monash, wanted realism to be paramount, aiming for a system where brigades “can go to live for several days at a stretch and then carry out a complete relief” (Monash to Birdwood, 2<sup>nd</sup> August 1916, in Molkentin, unpublished, 2005, 26). Their realism is perhaps reflected by the introductory quote above from the 38<sup>th</sup> Battalion’s historian – this relates to the Plain rather than the Somme or Ypres!

Little remains of these trenches above ground, but Michael unearthed a plan of the layout and several letters from those that trained here. With these, and an aerial photograph from the 1920s, we chose the best location for a geophysical survey. The

resulting plot was informative in showing some of the trench layout including an unknown 'island traverse'.

Armed with this information, under the watchful eyes of a British Army EOD expert, a team from the Defence Estates team, assisted by No Man's Land, excavated two sondages through a Communication Trench and one through an element of the front line. It was soon apparent that all of these trenches were relatively shallow – certainly below regulation depth. As we hit the hard chalk layer at the bottom of the trenches we realised why: troops curtailed their digging when they encountered solid chalk bedrock. On the Western Front, such construction would have exposed those within to enemy sniper fire even if one considers the presence of earthen parapets and parapet.

The front line trench yielded a blank .303 cartridge indicating that 'dry' training was accomplished at the Bustard. The communication trenches showed a cluster of fired 'live' .303 rounds dated to 1917; as these were made after the Third Division moved to the Western Front, they presumably illustrated the effectiveness of this as a training resource for other units. Further finds included a push plate from a shrapnel shell and a pair of scissors the latter perhaps used as part of a front-line medical unit kit. The lack of detritus was perhaps unsurprising – soldiers after the war being detailed with cleaning-up operations.

One of the major strengths of the practice at the Bustard was instilling the readiness for the explosion of large mines under enemy positions, their capture and re-fortification; practice that would prove essential in the highly successful action at Messines in 1917. Sadly, although we could locate several large craters on the ground, these had largely been filled and some are now a "des res" for burrowing animals – badgers. These creatures are astonishing tunnellers but their academic recording strategies are somewhat lacking. Thus finds from the craters, of Bovril jars, Camp Coffee and Anzora hair cream bottles, although perhaps interesting at hinting at the lives of the soldiers, are sadly out of context. Government legislation also precluded our working within 10m of the badger sett.

Our work confirmed statements that mentioned live-firing and also retrieved artefacts relating to life in the camps. It found that the trenches were surprisingly shallow – perhaps diverging from the actualities in France and Belgium, that rifle fire occurred in support trenches and the possibility of practice advanced field-dressing work. Though men complained of the cold and wet of Wiltshire, they would soon find experiences in Flanders far more challenging.

### Bibliography

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