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Fighting a Different Enemy: Social Protests against Authority in the Australian Imperial Force during World War I*

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Summary: During World War I, the rank and file of the Australian Imperial Force utilized humour in their social protests against both their officers and the military regimen. This paper looks at the expression of this humour through a variety of mediums and explores the value of humour in providing an outlet through which these men could vent their anger at the military system. It further seeks to highlight how the adoption of humour in social protests became a secure part of the Australian soldiers' "working" identity and how this was sustained throughout the war by the masculine image of the soldier. Further to this, the paper examines the decline in the use of humour in social protest amongst war veterans in the postwar era and its replacement by a more sombre attitude towards protests.

INTRODUCTION

On 31 December, 1916, men of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) aboard the HMAT *Suevic*, an Australian troop transport on its way to the Western Front, conducted a funeral service on deck. Cecil Monk, a farmhand serving at the time with the 34th battalion, described the scene,

> [...] one fellow walked in front with an open book, a couple with a dish of sausages, and a party with brooms as reversed arms, the parade halted in front of the officers mess. The acting parson read with a loud solemn voice as they were dropped in the sea. Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust, the soldiers cant [*sic*] eat you, so the fishes must.[1]

The "deceased" on this occasion was the morning's sausage breakfast. The mock "funeral service" conducted in front of the officer's mess was

* The author wishes to acknowledge the assistance received in the research of this paper through a Milt Luger Fellowship from Mitchell Library of the State Library of New South Wales, and through a research grant from the Australian Army History Unit.

1. Cecil George Monk, No. 3153, farmhand, Newtown, Mitchell Library, MSS 2884, memoirs in diary form, entry dated 31 December 1916.

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intended as a protest against the deteriorating quality of food, and the "death" of "good taste".

The use of humour in social protests by the rank and file of the Australian Imperial Force was not an uncommon occurrence during World War I. However, in the historical literature on the war the use of humour has been almost entirely ignored. Instead the focus is more often directed towards what Dale Blair identifies as "the reasons for victory or defeat".[2] Those men who served are written of as "soldiers", as those with a duty to "do or die". There are preconceptions within the language used that these men are expected to serve dutifully, to sacrifice their lives for the greater good, and to obey their officers to the end. When alive, they are the "strength" of a unit; when they die, they are simply "wastage".[3] Their "experiences" are too often written of solely as "experiences of combat"; their attitudes towards each other, towards their officers, and towards the military system have largely been neglected.

The treatment of these men as "soldiers", the focus upon "victory or defeat", and the use of this language in describing the lives of human beings as the tools of war have overshadowed the cultural expressions of social protest and resistance amongst members of the AIF. Subtle protests by these men have instead been seen as "indiscipline", "insubordination", or at its most extreme, "mutiny".[4] The causes and motivations for these protests have been ignored, or else written in military terms as "failures of Australian leadership",[5] or at its simplest as "insufficient training".[6]

WORKING-CLASS HUMOUR IN PROTEST

In actuality, few men serving in the Australian Imperial Force had experienced military life before and those few who had were almost immediately promoted to the officer class.[7] By contrast, the working class made up the vast majority of the rank and file, with men from typically

2. Dale Blair, *Dinkum Diggers: An Australian Battalion at War* (Melbourne, 2001), p. 15.
3. See for example Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, V, *The AIF in France: December 1917–May 1918* (Sydney, 1941), p. 3.
4. The military has often attempted to downplay the seriousness of these protests in an attempt to present an image of a disciplined army. See Rowan Cahill, "The Battle of Sydney", *Overland*, 169 (Summer 2002), pp. 50–54.
5. For example, Sir Douglas Haig blamed the commander of the Australian Corps, Sir William Birdwood, for the Australian disciplinary problems; J.G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914–1918* (Oxford, 1990), p. 169.
6. The belief in the importance of training in maintaining discipline can be seen in Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, III, *The AIF in France: 1916* (Sydney, 1941), pp. 164–168.
7. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, I, *The Story of Anzac: The First Phase*, p. 54.

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working-class occupations making up more than two-thirds of the AIF.[8] These men brought with them typically working-class attitudes and expectations. Within the strict military hierarchy of the Australian Imperial Force the relations between officers and the rank and file thus came to reflect the class relations that had existed in civil society. Employers and the middle class once more became the favoured leaders in the officer class, whilst the dirty work fell to the working class.[9]

Throughout World War I many who had experienced repetitive patterns of civilian work expected a not too dissimilar life within the military. Many enlisted specifically for the pay, for the pension, or for the benefits they believed they would receive upon discharge. Others approached military service in the same way that they approached any other form of employment, as a "job of work" to be undertaken for a reasonable rate of pay.[10] This was reflected in the continuation of occupations from civil life into the military – Thomas Goodwin, a farrier in civil society, became a farrier in the artillery;[11] Frederick Blake, a sanitary inspector in civil society, became a sanitary inspector in the army;[12] and William Burrell, a railway signalman in civil society, became a railway signalman in the army.[13] These men expected relations with their officers to be similar to the employer–employee relationship that they had experienced in civil society and they commonly referred to their officers as "Mister" or by a nickname.[14] During their initial training many left camp at the end of the day's work to return home, only to return the following morning to "clock on" again.[15]

Included in this approach towards military service as a term of employment was the belief amongst the rank and file that they had the right to complain about unacceptable living conditions. If working hours were too long, they would strike; if the food was of poor quality, they would dump it; if an officer was too overbearing, he would be singled out for attention by the rank and file. Yet any aggressive action would bring the full attention of the military authorities with their near limitless power

8. An estimated 112,452 men were tradesmen, 99,252 were labourers, 57,430 were from country callings, 6,562 were from seafaring occupations, whilst an additional 14,122 were considered "miscellaneous". See "Occupations of Members of the AIF", in Ernest Scott, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918,* XI, *Australia During the War* (Sydney, 1941), p. 874.

9. Blair, *Dinkum Diggers*, pp. 17–36.

10. Graham Seal, *Inventing Anzac*: *The Digger and National Mythology* (St Lucia, 2004), p. 3.

11. Thomas Edwin Goodwin, No. 161, farrier, Stanmore, Mitchell Library MSS 1598.

12. Frederick Blake, No. 16886, sanitary inspector, Petersham, Mitchell Library MSS 784.

13. William Henry Burrell, No. 3461, Mitchell Library MSS 1375, railway signalman, Camperdown, Mitchell Library MSS 1375.

14. Blair, *Dinkum Diggers*, p. 54.

15. Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Ringwood, 1987) p. 31; Greg Wahlert, *The Other Enemy?: Australian Soldiers and the Military Police* (Melbourne, 1999), p. 21.

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of judgement and punishment over enlisted men. Thus humour was incorporated into protests to pacify potentially violent situations, to reduce the aggressive tone of the complaint, and to appeal to the officer class's sense of humour in seeking a satisfactory solution without retribution.[16]

The rigid martial culture of the military did not sit well with a great many working-class men who had difficulty placing the strict hierarchical system within their independent and egalitarian mindset. The rank and file did not see officers as superior men, merely as superior ranks. Thus, officers who demanded a greater degree of respect than their men felt they deserved were often targeted for reprisal. Frederick Blake thus explained some of the methods his unit used to counter the "crank" of a sergeant-major,

> Guard duty to day. Our S.M. is considered a Military crank. Very amusing. Going through procedure changing guard. Everybody fed up. S.M. at his word. Jim. B supposed to be on duty at Guard room. Your humble [*sic*] expected to march up with guard, halt & proceed with Military manoevrues [*sic*]. Jim B. supposed to challenge & call out guard. This is what happened. Marched up to Guard room. Jim B. instead of challenging said in a dramatic voice. (Who are these people) Little Ernie a Corporal appeared from nowhere & said I'm — if I know. Result collapse of Guard with laughter S.M. went mad & dismissed us with disgust.[17]

The display of the guards demonstrated their dislike of the strict "military ways" whilst at the same time utilizing humour at the sergeant-major's expense. A simple refusal to work was a protest against the military regimen that would likely be met with the full force of military law; by contrast, the incorporation of humour into a protest left the sergeant-major "mad", and the men feeling a greater sense of cohesion.

The humour of the protests was of a form that men could relate to. They shared the sentiments of frustration with their officers, with the poor quality of the food, and with the military system for demanding that they work on their "time off". This feeling of shared frustration also assisted in the formation of an *esprit de corps* amongst the rank and file, a sense that all were in the same sinking boat or "smelly shelter".[18]

16. By contrast with examinations of humour in the military, a vast body of literature is available on the use of humour in the workplace. Several starting points are Larry R. Smeltzer, Terry L. Leap, and W. Jack Duncan, "Humor and Work: Applications of Joking Behaviour to Management", *Journal of Management*, 16 (1990), pp. 255–278; David L. Collinson, "'Engineering Humour': Masculinity, Joking and Conflict in Shop-floor Relations", *Organization Studies*, 9 (1988), pp. 181–199; Janet Holmes, "Politeness, Power and Provocation: How Humour Functions in the Workplace", *Discourse Studies*, 2 (2000), pp. 159–185.

17. Frederick Blake, No. 16886, sanitary inspector, Petersham, Mitchell Library MSS 784, diary entry dated 18 April 1917.

18. David Kent argues that the creation of an *esprit de corps* was one of the main intentions of the troopship newspapers; David Kent, "Troopship Literature: 'A Life on the Ocean Wave', 1914–1919", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, 10 (1987), p. 4. Additionally, humour has also

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In this way humour served to bond the rank and file together against the officer class.[19] It assisted in the creation of the shared "digger" identity amongst the rank and file and reasserted their masculine superiority as those who could "take the joke", whilst raising the ire of the "mad" officers.[20] Through this use of humour in social protests the men of the Australian Imperial Force, much like workers in any other occupation, identified themselves as a group of "diggers", as fiercely independent, egalitarian-minded, loyal to mates, adventurous, and irreverent to those in positions of authority.[21] In their humorous criticisms of officers they were at one level protesting against the attitude of their officers, and on another level reinforcing these characteristics and asserting this independent identity.

This additional level excluded officers from the rank and file's social identity. Officers and the "old-fashioned" British army became "the other enemy", those who demanded salutes, high standards of dress, and the seemingly constant demands of work, drill, and parade. Through these social protests and the assertion of a shared social identity the rank and file reasserted their belief that although they may be of a lesser rank, they were not lesser men. This "digger identity" satisfied Australian needs for "internal self-identification and external distinctiveness",[22] and humour, as a core characteristic of the identity, was used almost as though it were a matter of national pride. Amid the horror of war and the uncertainty of this different life in the military, men could refer back to their humour to present a more acceptable image of themselves both within their own minds, to their officers, to their allies, and to a wider civilian audience in Europe and at home in Australia.

"Poking fun" at the military through humorous protests also undermined the serious nature of circumstances and brought power back into the hands of the rank and file. Coming from a culture where status was determined less by social standing and birth, and more by masculinities,[23] these soldiers believed that if they controlled the humour, they controlled the situation,[24] as an entry from John Bruce's diary demonstrates, "Stuck

been recognized as contributing towards a sense of belonging and a sense of cohesiveness amongst workers. See for example Smeltzer, Leap, and Duncan, "Humor and Work", pp. 255–278.

19. Charles Gruner argues that the shared laughter that results from humour bonds people together; Charles. R. Gruner, *The Game of Humor* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2000), p. 75.

20. The assertion of a masculine identity through the use of humour in the workplace is further explored in Collinson, "Engineering Humour", pp. 181–199.

21. Seal, *Inventing Anzac.*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 18.

23. Charles Fox and Marilyn Lake, *Australians at Work: Commentaries and Sources* (Ringwood, 1990), p. 22.

24. Lefcourt argues that the results from the successful use of humour encourage and empower the "joker"; Herbert M. Lefcourt, *Humor: The Psychology of Living Buoyantly* (New York [etc.], 2001), p. 7.

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our gas-masks + tin-hats on + marched to a Gas-area for instruction. Sat in a dug-out with tear-gas in it. All round in a row like a lot of crows, and sang (?) 'If you were the Only Girl in the World' with our masks on. Lovely!"[25] His "devil-may-care" attitude towards gas instruction reflects the relaxed and laconic characteristics promoted within the digger identity. Combined with his unit's humorous protest, the diary helped to assist Bruce in establishing his identity as a typical masculine male soldier. Humour thus became one of the most powerful tools utilized by the rank and file of the AIF to reassert their sense of masculine superiority over officers, in the absence of their rank superiority.

Confrontational protests such as those shown above made clear soldiers feelings about their predicament, though it also made them slightly more susceptible to punishment. Cecil Monk's description of a "funeral service" for the day's meal mentions no punishment from his officers; he even adds that this was "a common occurence [*sic*] with most of the food we were given".[26] Though in an almost identical protest John Bruce explains how men risked reprimand from their officers who could not "take the joke": "Had a funeral service over the sea-pie we had for breakfast, + got roared up a treat for it. Old Bulldog Smith thought there was another riot on. All the quota got 1 day's C.B. [Confined to Barracks]."[27] Targeting individuals in this open, confrontational form of humour could be dangerous, and though there are examples to the contrary, most of these forms of protest were general and indirect, aimed more at the general *modus operandi* of the military.

NEWSPAPERS

Protests against individuals were more frequently conveyed through trench and troopship newspapers. In this form humorous protests could appear through verse, short stories, single line quips, or cartoons. In newspapers protests were effectively "tamed" and turned into light-hearted comical complaints. Thus, instead of having to conduct a funeral service in front of the officers' mess, the editors of the newspaper of the transport *Aeneas*, *The Aeneasthetic*, printed "Fatal Food",

"Say, lad, was that a cricket ball
You were bouncing on troop-deck E?"
"Nay 'twas but some of the pudding, sir,
They gave us in No. 3."

25. John Bruce, No. 34710, telephonist, Paddington, PR87/115, diary entry dated 14 October 1917. The question mark was in the original, perhaps to denote the poor quality of the singing.
26. Cecil George Monk, No. 3153, farmhand, Newtown, Mitchell Library MSS 2884, memoirs in diary form, entry dated 31 December 1916.
27. John Bruce, No. 34710, telephonist, Paddington, PR87/115, diary entry dated 6 April 1917.

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"Why is yon gunner upside-down?
Explain the thing to me."
"He's eaten some E deck pudding, sir,
It's the law of gravity."

"Why do you hold your waist and moan?
Say lad, what aileth thee?"
But the soldier answered never a word:
A poisoned corpse was he.[28]

Newspapers were circulated around the ship's decks where all could read about the poor condition of the food. In addition, many newspapers were produced as a memento to be kept, shown around, and even sent home.[29] Thus, a small criticism of the military made in a newspaper on a troopship had the potential to reach eager critical eyes back home in Australia. The protest would be made, the complaint noted amongst officers, and changes made to the food.

Humour also alleviated many of the strains suffered by soldiers, such as boredom and the conditions on the front lines. Having a humourous cartoon or newspaper helped soldiers to cope with their position; it kept their minds occupied for a time and buoyed their moods in an environment that was otherwise bleak and desolate. The effects of a trench newspaper or cartoon were similar to the effects of letters and parcels from home; anything that would keep an individual's mind away from the reality of their position in the trenches would help. Humour provided an escape, however temporary it may have been. Through its content and intended message humour also conveyed the feeling that other men were in a similar position; those in the trenches could feel as though they were not suffering alone.

Additionally, boredom was a chief motivation for protest. Throughout the war the rank and file of the Australian Imperial Force suffered from the inability of their officers to organize sufficient leisure activities.[30] At the same time the authorities officially banned many of the activities that the rank and file created themselves, such as "two-up" and "crown and anchor".[31] Long voyages on troopships followed by camps in the desert surrounded by sand led many to complain that this was not the life they had signed up for. In the newspapers these protests were aired in verse form,

28. *The Aeneasthetic*, No.2 edn, 21 October 1916, Australian War Memorial S18.
29. Kent, "Troopship Literature", p. 4.
30. See for example, Suzanne Brugger, *Australians and Egypt, 1914–1919* (Melbourne, 1980), p. 51.
31. Though Graham Seal notes that many officers turned a blind eye; Seal, *Inventing Anzac*, pp. 140–142.

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There's nought to do all day but sleep and eat
And be latrine fatigue by way of change
If 'twas not for the fact there's little meat
Like lazy dogs we'd get the blinking mange.[32]

On the one hand, these verses were a protest against the ways of the army, though on the other hand, the humour contained within enabled a brief escape from the horrors and the monotony of military life.[33] Graham Seal argues that within six weeks of the Australian landing at Gallipoli a number of newspapers were circulating among the "dugouts" and "possies", giving men something to read, to voice their complaints through, and to occupy their time with.[34] Humour thus provided a momentary "release" from the monotony of the military, and the monotony of work. A demanding officer could be frustrating, but being able to laugh about him afterwards made the situation more tolerable.

These written forms of protest formed an integral part of the trench and troopship literature of World War I and were an effective means of getting a point across to those in positions of authority. David Kent argues that protests in the form of a humorous verse may have dignified or intensified the sentiments expressed, or else were simply a reflection of the Australian familiarity with simple balladic verse forms.[35] Thus the newspaper of *The Euripides*, *The Euripidean*, printed "To the Censor" as a dignified and humorous protest against the harshness of the military censor,

You cannot tell your best girl that you love her; if you do,
The Censor marks it out and leaves a line that's blank and blue.
You mustn't say your [*sic*] happy, or he'll make you feel quite sad
By sending home your letter, which would make folks think you're mad.
He simply dashes all your hopes, and makes each page a blot;
I wonder what he writes himself to the best girl that he's got.[36]

"To the Censor" reflected the rank and files's general disregard for what they saw as the unnecessarily over-cautious ways of the military, yet it also bordered on a personal protest against the "censor" as an individual.

Protests could also be personal and direct, aimed at a specific officer, a

32. "Port Lincoln Lyre", 9 November 1916, Australian War Memorial S472, cited from Kent, "Troopship Literature", p. 7.
33. In the same way that it was also used to escape from the monotony of working life. See Smeltzer, Leap, and Duncan, "Humor and Work", p. 255.
34. Graham Seal, "'Written in the Trenches': Trench Newspapers of the First World War", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, 16 (1990), p. 30.
35. Kent, "Troopship Literature", p. 5.
36. "The Euripidean, Souvenir of Voyage", Australian War Memorial S77, p. 15.

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specific person, or a specific group. In this way humour was an ideal tool for a soldier to take revenge. If a man could not physically "hit out" at an officer (though many did),[37] they could assault them verbally in a poem, a cartoon, a furphy, or a short story.[38] Again, trench and troopship newspapers provided an anonymous medium through which to voice complaints. Authors could simply give their rank, such as "By a Private" or "Written by a Gunner" thus providing assurance that they would not be targeted for retribution, whilst also acknowledging the source of the protest as being amongst the rank and file. In many cases the use of humour would continue into this pseudonym, such as "Acting Private", "Ex-Private", or "The Donks' Mess Orderly". The *Aussie* newspaper reported thus in February 1918,

> "T.M. Gunner" makes a suggestion: The G.O.C. [General Officer Commanding] recently made a request for articles to be sent to the Australian War Museum, especially those illustrating the terrible weapons that have been used against the troops in the war. Why not get all the Military Police photographed for the Museum?[39]

The author "T.M. Gunner" made clear his rank of "Gunner" without revealing any more about himself. In a similar fashion the newspaper of the First Australian Field Ambulance, *Ghutz*, humorously identified two individuals who were to be "decorated" for their annoying habits,

> Decorations
> [...]
> M–t–n R–d–y
> For acting – quite unofficially – as Gotha guard
> [...]
> T–m C–p–t–r
> Industrially blowing that weird brass instrument under such adverse conditions as the accompaniment a piano two tones below pitch.[40]

Thus through a short humorous article in *Ghutz* "T–m C–p–t–r" would learn that his musical ability, or lack thereof, was irritating other members of the unit.

Protests within newspapers could also inform officers when their men were dissatisfied with their attitudes and behaviour. *The Euripidean*

37. Geoffrey Barr, *Beyond The Myth: Australian Military Police, 1914–1920* (Weston, 2005), p. 20.
38. A "furphy" was a rumour, absurd story, or false report; Amanda Laugesen, *Diggerspeak: The Language of Australians at War* (Oxford [etc.], 2005), p. 91.
39. *Aussie*, (Bullsbrook, 1985), No. 2, 16 February 1918, p. 2.
40. *Ghutz*, Australian War Memorial S94, No. 1, February 1918. This extract from *Ghutz* is an example of an inclusive form of humour. Those within the unit would understand the jokes and the reason why M–t–n R–d–y and T–m C–p–t–r were targeted, but outsiders would not. M–t–n R–d–y's decoration for "Gotha guard" may have been due to a paranoia of air attacks (as a Gotha was German bomber), or perhaps the individual targeted was known for spending long times looking aimlessly into the sky.

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printed the correct procedures that the rank and file should follow in the case of a private falling overboard, then advised,

> In the event of a sergeant or sergeant-major falling overboard, square the stokers to fire up, the only other precautions necessary being to observe strict silence for one hour and a half. If after that period the sergeant or sergeant-major should accidentally be saved the troops will endeavour to cheer.[41]

Additionally, *Ghutz* printed similar advice to men, and warnings to officers,

> Little words of anger.
> Pretty words of praise
> Make an erring Sergeant
> Mend his naughty ways.[42]

Humorous criticisms of officers may have been allowed in newspapers that were operated and edited by the rank and file, though they were rarely seen in the more common trench and troopship magazines.

CARTOONS

Trench and troopship newspapers were also a medium through which to publish cartoons. As with verse, cartoons were a core part of these newspapers throughout World War I and were an additional form of protest for the rank and file. Officers were often caricatured in a compromising situation. More often cartoons presented situations that portrayed the complaints of the rank and file – imperious officers, overbearing military police, poor food, boredom, or too much work.

In 1917 Cecil Hartt, a cartoonist serving with the Australian Imperial Force, had a collection of his cartoons published as *Humorisities*.[43] Hartt poked fun at the military ways whilst also reasserting the independent and masculine identity of the rank-and-file soldier. The cartoon presented in Figure 1 can be read on a number of levels. Immediately one can see the tall Australian soldier with hands in pockets "at ease" with the officiousness of the slender, awkward, and anxious looking officer.[44] The soldier is taller, more confident, and can be seen as a superior man, in spite of his inferior rank. The soldier's claim, "I'm a farmer", reasserts the common belief

41. "*The Euripidean*, Souvenir of Voyage", Australian War Memorial S77, pp. 6–7.
42. *Ghutz*, Australian War Memorial S94, No. 3, February 1918.
43. Cecil L. Hartt, *Humorosities: By an Australian Soldier* (London, 1917).
44. This is known as the "representational" or "denotative" level and refers specifically to the visual image. See, for example, Andrew Bethall, "An Approach to the Study of Images", *Screen Education*, 13 (Winter 1974/75), pp. 32–33; Helena G. Studdert, "In Black and White: Representations of Women, Race and Class in Cartoon Imagery in Australia during the Nationalist/Federation Period 1880–1910", (B.A. (Hons.), University of New South Wales, 1992), p. 12 [hereafter, "In Black and White"].

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Figure 1. Cecil L. Hartt, *Humorosities* (Canberra 1917).

amongst Australian soldiers that they were "civilians in arms", or "citizen soldiers", merely volunteering to work for the duration of the war.[45] This response to the officer's disapproval additionally reflects the desire by many soldiers to carry over similar employee–employer relations into the

45. See for example Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living With The Legend* (Oxford [etc.], 1996), p. 25; Gammage, *The Broken Years*, p. 32. This second level of meaning within the

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military – employers may dictate duties and provide men with fortnightly pay, but they are not saluted.[46]

This refusal to salute was reinforced in the lyrics of an Australian version of the British marching song "Fred Karno's Army" which were printed in *Aussie*,

> We are the Ragtime Army,
> The Aussie Infantry.
> We cannot shoot,
> We don't salute:
> What b—y good are we?[47]

Both the cartoon and the song were protests against the official army policy of saluting superiors, which the Australian rank and file persistently defied.

Hartt's cartoons were sold throughout England and were aimed at soldiers who kept such collections as mementos of their experiences. On an unofficial level, cartoons were transferred from person to person, reproduced in greater numbers, and shown around the various battalions of the AIF. William Burrell, a railway signalman before the war, explained coming across a protest on the demands of work that was placed in a prominent location, "a nice sketch has been put up on the door showing a swagman with a wooden leg + hook arm + these words: What did you do in the great war eh? The reply is 'fatigue'."[48] Pinned up on a door for all to see this cartoon would make clear to officers that the rank and file considered their recent workload to be too demanding.

A similar cartoon from *Aussie* (Figure 2), depicting a soldier at work on railway lines can also be read as a protest against the constant demands of manual labour within the military. The caption, "Dear Mother, I am at present resting, and I'm picking up well", assists in identifying with the soldier's perspective whilst also revealing frustration at having to do this work whilst officially "resting" from the lines.[49] Australian working-class men saw the "real work" of war to be up in the trenches and fighting the enemy. When out of the lines they saw this time as their own, where they

cartoon is often described as the "connotative" level and refers to the meaning or the protest that is to be interpreted from the entire cartoon; Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message", in Susan Sontag (ed.), *Barthes: Selected Writings* (Oxford, 1982), pp. 196–200; Studdert, "In Black and White", p. 12.

46. The third level of meaning to a cartoon reveals the broader attitudes and beliefs of the cartoonist and the implications of this cartoon upon a representative body. In this case the representative body is the rank and file of an army; Bethall, "An Approach to the Study of Images", pp. 33–34; Studdert, "In Black and White", p. 15.

47. *Aussie,* No. 2, 16 February 1918.

48. William Henry Burrell, No.3461, Mitchell Library MSS 1375, railway signalman, Camperdown, Mitchell Library MSS 1375, diary entry dated 25 May 1916.

49. Studdert, "In Black and White", p. 18.

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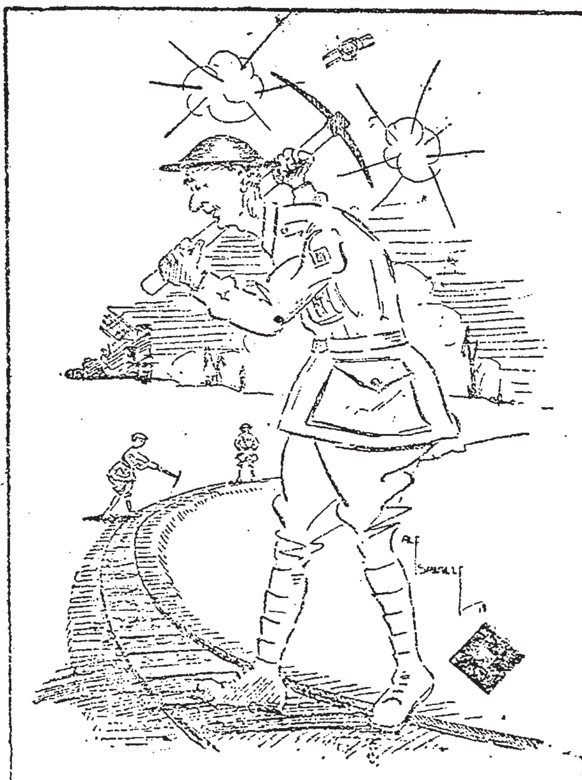
THE DONKS' MESS ORDERLY.



Drawn by Alf. Saville.

EXTRACT FROM LETTER.

Dear Mother, I am at present resting, and I'm picking up well."

Figure 2. "Picking Up Well", Aussie, (1920).
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should be free to do what they liked. The rank and file anticipated a week's "rest" as a relaxing break from the horrors of trench warfare: they did not expect officers to continue ordering them about with more demands of work.

The Australian use of humour through trench newspapers was not too unlike that of their British counterparts. The British also utilized similar forms of humour to convey the complaints of the common soldier through mediums such as *The Wiper's Times* and through soldier-cartoonists of their own, the most notable being Bruce Bairnsfather, creator of the "Old Bill" series of cartoons. In many cases the situations portrayed within cartoons were replicated by the different armies. For example, one cartoon

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portraying a barber cutting a soldier's hair in the trenches with the caption "Keep yer 'ead still, or I'll 'ave yer blinkin' ear off" appears in two forms, one drawn by an Australian cartoonist portraying an Australian barber and an Australian soldier on Gallipoli, the other drawn by a British cartoonist, Bruce Bairnsfather, portraying a British barber and a British soldier on the Western Front. The cartoons are identical, but for the different uniforms, and the different backdrops.

However, in most cases the Australian use of humour was unique. Whilst other armies may have shared their complaints, only the Australians felt suitably secure with their officers to feel the freedom to voice them. British soldiers used humour to complain about conditions in the trenches, about the horrible nature of war, or about the dangers of the enemy. Australian soldiers complained about similar themes, though they also extended their use of humour to act as a form of protest against officers and the military regimen. J.G. Fuller identifies some causes of these differences by arguing that the Australian army was relatively classless in comparison to the British army.[50] Class differences certainly existed in the AIF, though from a British soldier's perspective the relationships between the rank and file and officers of the Australian army were remarkable, and their use of humour to protest actively against officers and their behaviour unconscionable.

AFTER THE WAR

The end of the war, the disembarkation of soldiers in Australia, and their discharge back into civilian clothing did not see the death of the digger identity. Rather, returned services leagues that had been formed throughout the war to represent veteran's social and political issues took up the banner as "caretakers" of the identity. Returned soldiers would be protected against a civilian population who had little understanding of the horrors they had experienced, and also protected against themselves.

These men, civilians once again, had spent up to four years within the military, within a world of war where men were educated on how to kill more effectively, where dismembered, decaying, and unrecognizable bodies were not an unfamiliar sight, and where personal identities and understandings of "self" were forever transformed.[51] At the same time the world they returned to had changed in their absence. The crowds that had urged them to enlist in 1914 and 1915 now wanted to forget the war and

50. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914–1918*, p. 51.

51. The transformation of these identities is best illustrated in Eric J. Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat and Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1979).

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move on to happier times. In this confusion returned men felt the sense of having lived two different lives in two different worlds.[52]

The "new world" showed little tolerance for the military ways. The sense of community that had bound social protests together and given them strength fell apart as discharged men spread out across the country in search of family, employment, and a peaceful, productive life.[53] With this, the sense of camaraderie among the rank-and-file soldiers, from which the digger identity had been a natural product, became tangled in postwar politics. Returned soldiers were recommended as "strike-breakers" and "special constables" for employers and police alike to enforce a new brand of law and order.[54] In addition, frustrations with the lack of government and community assistance, the failures of repatriation schemes, and the pressures associated with returning to a peaceful life led to outbreaks of "digger" violence.[55] The result of this was that in the late 1910s Australians began to turn away from their veterans, and, as a response, returned soldiers' associations dug their heels in to protect the image of the soldier.

In these immediate postwar years the returned soldiers' associations decided that the characteristics of the Australian "soldier" needed modifying to provide a more sanitary ideal more suited to civil society. The sense of independence and loyalty remained, though the humour, irreverence, and "larrikinism", core qualities of the digger identity that appeared so strongly in social protests throughout the war, were hidden within a new encompassing sense of respect and remorse, and a new identity in the "Anzac". The Victorian Branch of the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia gave one of their objectives as,

> To perpetuate the close and kindly ties of friendship created by a mutual service in the Great War, and the recollections associated with that experience; to maintain a proper standard of dignity and honour among all sailors and soldiers; and to set an example of public spirit and noble-hearted endeavour.[56]

Larrikinism, irreverence, humour, and protests against authority did not fit well with these aims. In the desire to promote the interests of veterans and present a "clean and tidy" image to the public the "digger" myth was pushed into the shadows in favour of the more reverent "Anzac" legend.[57]

52. Nathan Wise, "Different Worlds, Different Lives: Labour History Approaches to Histories of the Military", in Greg Patmore, John Shields, Nikola Balnave (eds), *The Past Is Before Us: The Ninth National Labour History Conference* (Sydney, 2005), pp. 491–497.

53. Stephen Garton, *The Cost of War: Australians Return* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 118–142.

54. Bobbie Oliver, "Disputes, Diggers and Disillusionment: Social and Industrial Unrest in Perth and Kalgoorlie 1918–24", in Jenny Gregory (ed.), *Western Australia Between the Wars, 1919–1939,* special issue of *Studies in Western Australian History*, 11 (June 1990), p. 20.

55. Garton, *The Cost of War*; Oliver, "Disputes, Diggers and Disillusionment", pp. 19–28.

56. "Constitution of the RSSILA", in The Returned Sailors' & Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia, Victorian Branch, *Speakers Handbook* (Melbourne, 1932), p. 46.

57. For an examination of the contrast between the digger myth and the Anzac legend see

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The "Anzac" was pure, noble, and loyal; the "digger" was tainted, humorous, and irreverent. Anzacs were seen to be pushing the concerns of returned soldiers on a legitimate political front; diggers were seen to be begging in the streets or else responsible for mob violence. This division resulted in the "Anzac" identity becoming a more comfortable image to a postwar conservative society than the unpredictable "digger". In the transition that followed, the humour that had formed a large part of the digger identity was also lost. The camaraderie of returned soldiers was split over the political divide,[58] and the common cause, the same "smelly shelter", that had once held soldiers together, fell apart under the weight of the civilian world.[59]

The causes for complaint from soldiers also changed from the military, to civil society. Complaints about poor food in the military became an inability to afford food in civil society, bad officers became bad employers, and poor working conditions in the military became poor working conditions in civil society. The complaints were much the same, simply within a different environment. Attempts at humour continued in veterans' publications such as *Smith's Weekly*, or in the publication of humorous compilations from the war.[60] On occasion, cartoons and satirical comments were directed at politicians or policies for purposes of protest. Though in spite of these efforts to continue the spirit of the Australian soldier throughout the postwar years, it could never match up to the close bonds that had held men together during the war, and this humour never formed part of the core culture of the postwar returned soldier. In postwar Australia, there was simply no avenue through which to direct humorous protests.

The complaints of returned soldiers in the postwar years were aired within a different world, with different rules and different ways of life. Protests, when they did occur, were typically marked by the anger and frustration of returned soldiers. Shortly after the armistice a group of men reputedly singing "The Red Flag" were attacked and beaten by a group of men shouting "diggers to the rescue".[61] On another occasion in March 1919 several thousand returned soldiers, organized by a returned soldiers' organization, attacked South Brisbane's small Russian community, believing them to be "disloyal".[62] Sentiments that had been harboured

Thomson, *Anzac Memories*. In particular see Part 2, "The Politics of Anzac", pp. 103–174.

58. Oliver, "Disputes, Diggers and Disillusionment", pp. 19–28.

59. During the war soldiers used the word "Anzac" to refer to an individual who had served on Gallipoli. By 1917 and 1918 this term was resented as it excluded the vast majority of the AIF, and thus the inclusive term "digger" was preferred; Seal, *Inventing Anzac*, p. 19. Following the war the origins of "Anzac" were ignored in the search for a more palatable identity.

60. For example, *Aussie* was published in book form in 1920. See *Aussie: A Reprint of all the Numbers of the Diggers' Own Paper of the Battlefield, Wholly Written, Illustrated and Printed in the Field by Members of the AIF* (Sydney, 1920).

61. Garton, *The Cost of War*, p. 60.

62. *Ibid.*; Oliver, "Diggers, Disputes and Disillusionment", p. 21.

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during the war could now be expressed more openly and, in spite of attempts by the returned soldiers' organizations to present a "peaceful" image of the veteran, these occasions were often marked by their violence, and the stark absence of humour.[63]

CONCLUSION

Throughout World War I the rank and file of the Australian Imperial Force successfully employed humour in their social protests to achieve a number of objectives. Primarily, humour provided a much-needed vent through which the rank and file could air their grievances without putting themselves at any significant risk of punishment. Men could complain about conditions within camps or on troopships, treatment at the hands of their officers, or even the broad culture of the military within a light-hearted environment. The use of humour in this way served to "cushion" the impact of criticisms. The often anonymous complaints printed in verse or short story form within trench and troopship newspapers allowed men to bring attention to their complaints without revealing their identities. Additionally, this medium served to alert individuals and officers about behaviour that was irritating other members of the unit whilst reinforcing the reluctance of the rank and file to submit to traditional military discipline.

The advantages of the use of humour in social protests also led to it becoming a core characteristic of the Australian "digger" identity throughout World War I. Through humorous protests and the assertion of a unique social identity Australian soldiers reasserted their masculine authority and a sense of social power over their superior-ranked officers. Though Australian military law strictly forbade the striking of an officer, it tended to turn a blind eye toward subtle and humorous criticisms of officers within trench and troopship newspapers. In addition, the pressures upon officers to "take a joke" with the rank and file also left many men undisciplined for using humour in a confrontational protest.

The success of humour in social protests during World War I to undermine the power of officers, to reassert the masculine independence of the rank-and-file soldier, to maintain the "digger" identity, and to vent frustrations and complaints without reprisal were simply no longer suitable in postwar civil society. The bonds that had held men together during the war years fell apart upon their disembarkation in Australia's cities and the parliamentary politics of old took charge again to determine the postwar rights and liberties of veterans. Whilst the use of humour in social protests had been a source of power at the hands of the rank and file during the war, it proved to be useless in civil society and has been all but forgotten in the historical literature on World War I.

63. Garton, *The Cost of War*, pp. 60–61.

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