

Australians at War: Food Matters

Véronique Duché and Daniel Russo-Batterham

Introduction

Over the past several years, the centenary of the First World War has led to significant new research into the war itself and Australia's participation. The year 2016 marked the centenary of the arrival of the Australian Imperial Force on the Western Front. In the absence of conscription, Australian soldiers were volunteers and for most of these young men the war represented their first contact with France and Europe. One area of the Australian war effort to receive comparatively little attention is the role of food in shaping the day-to-day life of soldiers and enabling unique intercultural encounters, be this with French civilians or soldiers from other nations.

The aim of this article is to document and analyse Australian soldiers' experiences and intercultural interactions around food in the First World War. The corpus comprises materials found primarily in the University of Melbourne Archives and includes letters, documents, photos, trench journals, personal diaries and other objects produced or used during the war.

Food is explored from two different perspectives:

1. The role of food in soldiers' everyday life
2. The role of food in mediating intercultural encounters between Australian troops and soldiers or civilians of other nationalities

Food and the structure of daily life

At the most basic level food for the Australian soldiers provided not only nutrition, but structure, to everyday life in the army. Soldiers were typically required to eat at specific times. Maintaining this strict routine provided an opportunity for them to socialise at meal times and helped to instil discipline and a sense of common purpose that would be essential to Australia's contributions on the field of battle. In an article entitled 'Everything on its Belly', Wilson (2000, 10–11) examines the feeding of the Australian Imperial Force in the First World War, including in camp in Australia, in transit by sea from and to Australia and in the field. This trifurcation proves useful in his discussion of how food experiences varied across different locations during the war. Although Wilson (2000, 17, 19) gives two sample menus organised by 'Breakfast', 'Dinner', 'Tea' and 'Supper', he does not specify the time for these meals.

Archival sources indicate that while soldiers' daily eating habits remained part of a structured routine across varied environments, the timing of this routine changed significantly. A number of sources in the University of Melbourne Archives document the feeding of the troops before they arrived at the front, as is evidenced by a 'Ship routine' kept by W. R. Keast,¹ an engineer who trained in Egypt before serving in Gallipoli, Pozières and Ypres.² A typical day at sea began with a 'Reveille' at 6 a.m. and concluded with 'Lights out' at 9 in the evening. Among the nineteen entries to describe this routine, most are associated with a specific number of bell rings to convey the time to those on board. Three regular meals were scheduled each day at 6.15 a.m., 12 p.m. and 5 p.m. Most other tasks relate to cleaning, assemblies and inspections. This can be contrasted with a diary entry from Wilberforce Newton, an Australian member of the Royal Army Medical Corps, describing a typical day after his arrival in England.³

Friday, 4th. Up at 6 a.m. Run squad drill with 53rd. 7.45 breakfast. O.C's parade. 9 squad drill, stretcher drill, and many other forms of drill.

¹ University of Melbourne Archives, Keast, 1972.0025, Box 1, Diary March 1914 to October 1915.

² W. R. Keast, 'Person', The University of Melbourne Archives, <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/61804>.

³ University of Melbourne Archives, Newton, 1980.0146, Box 2, 5/1/2, Typescript of a war diary divided into 3 parts.

Lecture by C.O. till 1, lunch. Fall in at 2. Squad drill till 4. Sent to London to complete kit. Leave till Sunday night.

Outside of mealtimes significant work was involved in the procurement of food and sanitary measures. The simple disposal of food waste required some creativity at times, particularly when camped away from fixed amenities. In some of the *Camp Standing Orders* kept by Derham, a former member of the Melbourne University Rifles,⁴ it is noted that:

Incinerators must be constructed and all camp refuse burnt in them. A system for the emptying and removal of bucket latrines should be improvised, if not already provided.⁵

Given the difficulty of bringing food and other resources to the front, there was a concerted effort to waste as little as possible and food containers were no exception. These were reused for other more utilitarian purposes: 'Receptacles, such as empty biscuit or oil tins should be placed at convenient spots close to the tents at night for use as urinals.'⁶

Food quality during the war

Despite serious food shortages in some regions affected by the war, there is little in the tone and content of archival material from the Australian soldiers to suggest that they were broadly at risk of starvation, although it seems probable that substitute foods were at times required (see Franc 2011, 73–83). Wilson notes, for instance, that while there were some initial challenges in feeding the Australian troops, many of which centred on a shortage of sufficiently skilled cooking staff (2000, 11), by the time Australian soldiers were at the front many parts of the supply chain responsible for feeding the diggers had become surprisingly effective. He observes that:

⁴ Jeffrey Grey, 'Derham, Alfred Plumley (1891–1962)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/derham-alfred-plumley-9985/text17635>, published first in hardcopy 1993.

⁵ University of Melbourne Archives, Derham, 1963.0024, Box 2, Orders, Messages and Signals, Memoranda.

⁶ University of Melbourne Archives, Derham, 1963.0024, Box 2, Orders, Messages and Signals, Memoranda.

Service on the Western Front and in the UK was something of a military culture shock for the first Australians to arrive. Their experience of war to date had been the desert and Gallipoli campaigns. Arriving in England or France they found themselves part of a large modern army with well established systems of supply, transport and support and they had to fit themselves into this vast machine (Wilson 2000, 27).

Concerning Australia's contribution to this 'machine', Wilson (2000, 29) gives examples of Australian field butcheries and Australian field bakeries, observing that they were:

...grouped together in and around Rouen, located either in civilian facilities or in purpose built installations. This grouping allowed the Australian bakeries and butcheries to achieve excellent economies of scale and indeed they became so efficient and proficient that they were utilised to supply a large number of British units in addition to the AIF.

Nevertheless, the bland nature of the food compared with what could be found in Paris or back home was frequently the subject of complaints and jokes. In a chapter entitled 'British Army Provisioning on the Western Front', Duffett (2011, 38) considers the psychological burden of altered food habits for soldiers, suggesting that they were 'distressingly different from their pre-war eating'. Wartime literature exemplified in the University of Melbourne Archives suggests that humorous devices such as irony and sarcasm were important mechanisms for coping with food-related 'distress' of the kind examined by Duffett. Indeed, an abundance of recent literature has focused on the clinical effectiveness of humour in those recovering from traumatic experiences (see, for instance, Henman 2008).

Although the daily ration for most Allied soldiers was built around bread and meat (Duffett 2011, 30), of all the food offered to the Australian troops, tins of 'Pork and Beans' were among the most despised and form a useful case study for examining how humour was deployed in wartime literature to make difficult culinary circumstances more palatable. In a cartoon entitled 'Safe Generosity' from the trench journal *Aussie*, an Australian soldier *kindly* offers a German the pork from his tin of 'Pork and Beans'.⁷ The intimation of this and similar examples is that such food was deemed so bad as to be fit for the enemy.

⁷ *Aussie*, *The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 12, edited by Phillip Harris, March 1919, p. 16.

Some, but not all, issues of *Aussie* magazine can be found in the university archives and it was one of the most popular trench journals of the war.⁸ By the third issue of *Aussie* 100,000 copies were printed, an amazing feat despite challenges in finding enough paper and labour to fold it.⁹ Elsewhere in the magazine (in a section entitled ‘Aussiosities’), one author suggests that ‘the bloke who put the pork in the tins of issue pork and beans’ is perhaps ‘the Meanest Man On Earth’.¹⁰ In this final example shown below, an Australian cook gets a letter praising him for pushing the Germans back with the terrible smell of his cooking.¹¹



Drawn by I.v.a. E. Stretton.

DURING THE PUSH.
The Babbling Brook reads his Aussie Mail.

⁸ See, for instance: University of Melbourne Archives, Jones, 1981.0081, several issues of *Aussie* magazine.

⁹ Phillip L. Harris, ed., *Aussie: A Reprint of All the Numbers of the Diggers' Own Paper of the Battlefield*, Sydney, Phillip L. Harris on behalf of the Australian War Memorial, 1920, preface: ‘The Story of *Aussie*’, no page number.

¹⁰ *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 3, ed. Phillip Harris, March 1918, p. 2.

¹¹ *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 9, ed. Phillip Harris, December 1918, p. 9. Digital images for this and other illustrations from *Aussie* are drawn from the digitised version of the magazines published by *Archive Digital Books Australasia* (which also provided permission for the reproduction of the images here) available at: ‘*Aussie: The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*’, *Gould Genealogy & History*, <https://www.gould.com.au/aussie-the-australian-soldiers-magazine/au0016/>.

Despite the less than ideal quality of the food, it still represented a point of comparative safety, and was often valuable as a distraction from the surrounding terror of war. In extracts from Sydney de Loghe's *The Straits Impregnable* cited in *Aussie* magazine, a protagonist tranquilly stirs food despite the carnage that is happening all around. The author recounts that:

In spite of the lazy shelling, the beach was thick with the usual crowds...I went on stirring Welsh rabbit in a mess-tin lid, all my hopes fixed on it.¹²

Food and troop morale

Many of the foods given to Australian soldiers served less to provide nutrition than to lift morale and maintain some connection with the quality of life they had enjoyed as civilians. Duffet (2011, 34) considers the importance of variety in the choice of foods available to soldiers in preventing boredom. Beyond variety, however, certain foods were inherently comforting due to the nature of the food itself (such as alcohol), its origins (as was the case for gifts of food sent from home), or some combination of these or other factors. Materials found in the University of Melbourne Archives form a valuable resource in tracing the role of comfort foods in lifting troop morale.

Chief among comfort foods, and one of the few to be provided as part of regular rations, was alcohol. Given the harsh reality of life on the front soldiers from all nations took comfort from the provision of alcohol, and it is among the most common topics of discussion in trench literature available in the archives. By contrast, it is less frequent in the letters and diaries, which tend toward a more serious tone.

The social function of drinking was frequently represented in drawings and photos. One illustration from a book collected by Derham and entitled *War Sketches on the Somme Front* (Waller c1919, 47) shows the artillery soldiers gathered together awaiting their rations of rum.¹³ The caption for the image reads as follows (Waller c1919, 46):

This is the most important parade of the day while on active service, especially in winter-time, for most of the artillery boys. It prepares them

¹² *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 12, ed. Phillip Harris, March 1919, p. 12.

¹³ University of Melbourne Archives, Derham, 1963.0024, Box 5, book entitled *War Sketches on the Somme Front by Bombardier Waller*, p. 47.

for the strenuous duty of unloading some hundreds of heavy shells—a task that presents itself later in the frozen twilight when the ammunition wagons will arrive at the gun position.¹⁴

Despite the importance of alcohol for the Australian soldiers, limits were often placed on its availability and consumption. Note the following passage from a memorandum also collected by Derham prohibiting the purchase of alcohol outside of authorised canteens:

Troops are forbidden to purchase alcoholic liquors of any kind in the Isle of Lemnos, whether from the inhabitants, from the Troops of our own Allies or from any other source, except from authorised canteens, where they exist.¹⁵

On other occasions, however, soldiers were free to frequent small popular cafés or bars during certain times and took full advantage as discussed in a later paragraph.

Nostalgia for home

Perhaps the rarest and most meaningful food experiences for soldiers were gifts from home. These parcels helped those at the front to stay connected to their Australian homeland. Many letters in the University of Melbourne archives attest to soldiers' delight at receiving food and other gifts from loved ones. And at times they would request specific items.

For example, in a 1916 letter to his parents, the Australian soldier and pilot William Palstra wrote the following:

Don't trouble to send large parcels. Rather send small parcels fairly frequently. Send me a jar of honey as soon as you can, and repeat the dose as often as you think necessary.¹⁶

As dark a place as the war front was to spend Christmas away from loved ones, soldiers did their best to make the day special. Wilberforce Newton writes in his 1915 diary that:

¹⁴ University of Melbourne Archives, Derham, 1963.0024, Box 5, book entitled *War Sketches on the Somme Front by Bombardier Waller*, p. 46.

¹⁵ University of Melbourne Archives, Derham, 1963.0024, Box 2, Orders, Messages and Signals, Memoranda.

¹⁶ University of Melbourne Archives, Palstra, 1984.0057, Box 1, Letters from Palstra to his parents.

Xmas day we managed to give the patients and orderlies an extra feed, tinned fruits, lollies, cigarettes, above their ordinary rations.¹⁷

Even the welcome alcohol rations served as a reminder of home. In a poem from *The "Dernière Heure"* entitled 'The Tankard's Brim', the protagonist dreams of recounting the war from a safe distance with a mug full of ale in hand. In the following passage the author highlights the pertinence of the culinary experience of the war, while at the same time criticising the iniquitous distribution of food, which as Duffett (2011, 29) observes, was at times determined by rank:¹⁸

For men will tell how the bullets sang,
And how good blood ran red,
But I will relate in contemplative state
Of how the Generals fed.
Of heaps of tins that I saw on the beach;
Asparagus, chicken and tongue.

Comfort food and parcels

Beyond parcels from family and excess rations scrounged together at Christmas, various collectives were created in Australia to support the wellbeing of soldiers. One such group was called the 'Busy Bees'.¹⁹ There was also an official Comforts Fund established with money from benevolent groups in Australia:

The Australian Comforts Fund was established in August 1916 to co-ordinate the activities of the state based patriotic funds, which were established earlier in World War I. Mainly run by women, they provided and distributed free comforts to the Australian 'fit' fighting men in all the battle zones.²⁰

This fund distributed items such as cocoa, milk, tinned soup, sugar, tinned fruit, sweets and portable cookers as well as other items to improve the

¹⁷ University of Melbourne Archives, Newton, 1980.0146, Box 2, Typescript of a war diary divided into three parts.

¹⁸ University of Melbourne Archives, Jones, 1981.0081, Box 7, *The "Dernière Heure"*, p. 9.

¹⁹ See, for example: University of Melbourne Archives, Swallow & Ariell Pty. Ltd, 1961.0035, various images and other items relating to the 'Busy Bees'.

²⁰ 'Australian Comforts Fund, (1916–1920)', *Trove*, 2008, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.party-563480>.

soldiers' quality of life such as gramophones, footballs, socks and books. Close to two million packets of biscuits were distributed by the Comforts Fund during the war (Jackson 1949, 334), however whether any of these were of the famed ANZAC variety is unclear.



**Reinforcement: "What's the balloon for, Digger?"
Old Hand: "Oh, that's a Comfort's Fund Canteen for the Flying Corps!"**

So deeply entrenched in the Australian vocabulary and psyche was the Comforts Fund that it appears frequently as the subject of humour, as in this cartoon.²¹

²¹ *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 1, ed. Phillip Harris, January 1918, p. 2.

The sense of goodwill and connection with home created by these gifts seemed particularly visceral at Christmas time when a longing for family was likely to be at its most potent. Consider, for instance, the following passage drawn from *Proud Story: The Official History of the Australian Comforts Fund* (Jackson 1949, 318):

Of all the many practical achievements of the A.C.F. the Christmas Hamper scheme which was brought into being soon after the formation of the Fund, and continued until the close of the war, deserves exceptional praise. It can safely be claimed that the appeal it made to both donors and recipients established a closer personal link between the men and women on Active Service and the people at home in Australia than did any other form of gift; whether by way of personal comforts or amenities for the general use of the Services.

For soldiers, food provided by the Comforts Fund formed culinary highlights that could perhaps only be matched by personally addressed parcels, or food obtained while on leave. The following passage from *Aussie* is a good example of this:

Every Digger in France knows and loves "Good Old Comforts." To say that anything is "as good as Comforts stuff" is the highest praise there is. There is no stuff better.²²

Intercultural encounters

While experiences of food were most commonly shared among compatriots, when Australians did have the opportunity to mingle with soldiers and civilians from other nations, food played a role in reinforcing shared values.

Occasionally Australian troops encountered British or American forces in a social context. In such cases sharing a drink represents the bonds of friendship between troops from different backgrounds. In the following cartoon, for example, the Australian soldier offers to buy a drink for an American, as long as it is not too expensive.²³

²² *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 6, ed. Phillip Harris, August 1918, p. 8.

²³ *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 8, ed. Phillip Harris, October 1918, verso of cover page.



Drawn by W. Fraser.

THE WRONG GUESS.

Aussie (who has invited Yank to a drink): "What's yours, Yank?"
Yank: "Guess I'll have champagne!"
Aussie: "Better have another guess, Yank. I've only got a franc."

Food as a broadening experience

As soldiers tried new and different foods, their culinary horizons broadened. Perhaps just as common, however, was the prospect of familiar food made new by culturally different perspectives. Whatever one makes of the following joke, it is worth noting that *eggs*, a food familiar to the Australians, is framed as something wholly different when prepared in France or Belgium:

Our Babbling Brook says that if you want to enjoy a good feed of eggs in France or Belgium, they must not be beaten, but "flogged".²⁴

²⁴ Aussie, *The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 13, ed. Phillip Harris, April 1919, p. 3.



Drawn by Allan M. Lewis.

ON PARIS LEAVE.

“Hey, Digger, what sort of an eggs and chips joint is this boozer?”

At times, soldiers were unrealistic in their expectations of French food establishments. In this cartoon a digger standing in front of the high-end Maxim’s restaurant, founded in 1893, asks ‘what sort of an eggs and chips joint is this boozer?’²⁵ It is perhaps doubtful that soldiers could have afforded to pay the exorbitant prices of this restaurant.

Although soldiers extended their palates while in France, French civilians still made significant efforts to make foreign troops feel at home, with sometimes comical results, as alluded to in the following quip in *Aussie*: ‘Sign seen outside a village café: “STEAK AND SHIPS AND EGGS SOLD HERE”’²⁶

For French civilians, particularly those in charge of the *estaminets* and places of recreation, the sudden influx of rowdy and insatiable Aussies was at times overwhelming. An emblematic example of this is the following passage drawn from a story entitled ‘The Egg Hunt’:

²⁵ *Aussie*, *The Australian Soldiers’ Magazine*, n° 5, ed. Phillip Harris, June 1918, p. 5.

²⁶ *Aussie*, *The Australian Soldiers’ Magazine*, n° 9, ed. Phillip Harris, December 1918, p. 8.

It seemed when we reached the *estaminet* that the whole Batt had arrived and invited all the other Batts in the Division. We cut into a surging mob of Diggers, and got near enough at last to see a pitiful Frenchwoman trying to get rid of the crowd. “*Finis eggs; finis cheeps!*” she wailed. “*Non! Finis! Finis! Tout les eggs finis maintenant!*”. Her fingers worked excitedly to illustrate the number of eggs she had had.²⁷

The word *estaminet* was used regionally in Belgium and the North of France and refers to a small popular café.²⁸ The role of the *estaminet* for the Australian soldiers seemed to be primarily social, and Wilson (2000, 33) argues that they were frequented primarily for ‘a change of scenery, a break from the military environment, and even a change in the style of cooking rather than any great problems with the military rationing and feeding system’.

Alongside the *estaminet*, the French *café* was an important food establishment for the Australian soldier, offering unique cultural and culinary experiences. Although the Australians seemed to associate the *estaminet* more with drinking and merrymaking than the *café*, the difference between the two words is today narrow. However, in a story entitled ‘Leave-making in Paris’, Phillip Harris, the editor of *Aussie* magazine gives the following nuanced account of the Parisian cafe:

The cafes of Paris are interesting places. They receive the backwash from the great, noisy, flowing human tide of the Boulevards. The French cafe is a combination of the English bar-room, club, tea-room, restaurant, lounge and study. It is for the Parisian equivalent to all these institutions, but is like none of them.²⁹

Due to the simple necessity of ordering food, Parisian cafes formed the backdrop for many linguistic misadventures among the Australian soldiers. Such stories are gleefully recounted in various trench journals found in the archives. In one example, an Australian soldier orders four eggs in English,

²⁷ *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 9, ed. Phillip Harris, December 1918, p. 17.

²⁸ Alain Rey, *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, Paris, Le Robert, 2012, vol 1, p. 1310. ‘*Le mot désigne aujourd’hui (dep. 1909), dans le nord de la France et en Belgique, un petit café populaire, mais il n’est usuel que régionalement s’il est connu dans d’autres parties de la France.*’

²⁹ *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 2, ed. Phillip Harris, February 1918, p. 15.

but after confusing *quatre* with *cat*, he is horrified at hearing that he will be served *cat* eggs.³⁰

Despite frequent misunderstandings, Australian soldiers were whole-hearted in their willingness and efforts to engage with French culture and the French language. This process of cultural engagement with France began even before they left for the front. Organisers of send-off dinners often included French foods on the menu. For instance, the archives contain a menu from a dinner held at the Grand Hotel, Melbourne, in September 1914 that features both a '*Salade Française*' and '*Petit pois*'.³¹ Perhaps just as common as the adoption of French terms in an English written or spoken context, was the mixture of French and English to form a new entity. Ray Jones, 'a signaller in the 19th Battalion of the AIF',³² for instance, collected a programme that lists among menu items '*Eggs a la staircase*', '*Tres beans a la can*' and '*Rice a la Raisin*'.³³ Such examples not only lift morale with their comical tone, but are testament to the affection with which Australians held the French language and people.

As the war progressed, food came to be a kind of lingua franca. Although the Aussies struggled to communicate with the locals, many of the words and other communicative gestures they knew were food-related. Through this vocabulary other broader ideas could sometimes be communicated. In a short story in *Aussie* entitled 'The Linguist', a digger tries to explain that some cows have escaped and are eating the *madame's* cabbages. He does so by using the expression '*le lait promenade!*'. After much back and forth the *madame* understands. This prompts the digger to acknowledge that "things 'ud be pretty crook if us blokes didn't cotton on to the lingo so well".³⁴

³⁰ *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 3, ed. Phillip Harris, March 1918, p. 14.

³¹ University of Melbourne Archives, Derham, 1963.0024, Box 3, Programmes and Menus.

³² Ray Jones, 'Person', The University of Melbourne Archives, <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/126780>.

³³ University of Melbourne Archives, Jones, 1981.0081, Box 7, Programmes and Mementoes.

³⁴ *Aussie, The Australian Soldiers' Magazine*, n° 13, ed. Phillip Harris, April 1919, p. 10.

Conclusion

A reminder of civilian life, food helped soldiers to maintain a connection both with their homeland and their own humanity, despite the atrocious atmosphere of war and the acts it necessitated. Yet it also helped to foster new experiences and intercultural interactions. Whether unfamiliar or nostalgic, food played a significant role in shaping soldiers' experiences of the war and the University of Melbourne Archives provide a unique and valuable window onto these Aussie culinary adventures.

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