

First AIF Enlistment Patterns and Reasons For Their Variation

By Colonel K.H. Jobson, AM

From a population of less than five million, an army of almost 417 000 men was raised between 1914 and 1918; over 330 000 served overseas.¹ The approximate percentage of Australian males between the ages of 18 and 44 that enlisted was 38.7 per cent, New South Wales had the highest proportion at 39.8 per cent and Western Australia the lowest at 37.5 per cent.² The proportion of the eligible male population that voluntarily enlisted was very high as were the casualty rates, both non-battle and battle casualties. Of course, many of the surviving casualties were wounded or injured several times. Men who suffered wounds that were not disabling were returned as reinforcements to their units after recovery. During the war, 60 000 casualties who were evacuated from units were returned fit for duty by the Medical Services.³

A primary feature of enlistment pattern was the difference in enlistments between the years 1914-16

and the significantly lower figures for 1917-18. Figure 1 gives a comparison of enlistments by years.

This chart displays AIF enlistments for WWI.⁴ 1914⁵ covers just less than five months and 1918 covers only eleven months. Bean believed that enlistment for 1914 was affected by "war fever" and constituted "the first fine rush to enlistment".⁶ The only full years were 1915-17 and as can be seen enlistments showed a marked almost uniform decline over these three years.

Enlistments never exceeded 5 000 per month during 1917-18. Whether this was due to war weariness⁷ and a lack of available manpower given the very high figures for 1914-16 is difficult to determine categorically, but a combination of both is probable. Figures 2 and 3⁸ show monthly enlistments for 1915 and 1916. Since conscription was not adopted in Australia during the war the figures only reflect volunteers. The political fervour generated by the conscription issue was the most probable cause of the high rate of enlistment for 1916. The highest enlistment month, July 1915, is closely associated in



France, 13 October 1918, a 114th Howitzer Battery Gun of Australian Field Artillery, drawn by mules, on its way to the forward areas to support the advance.

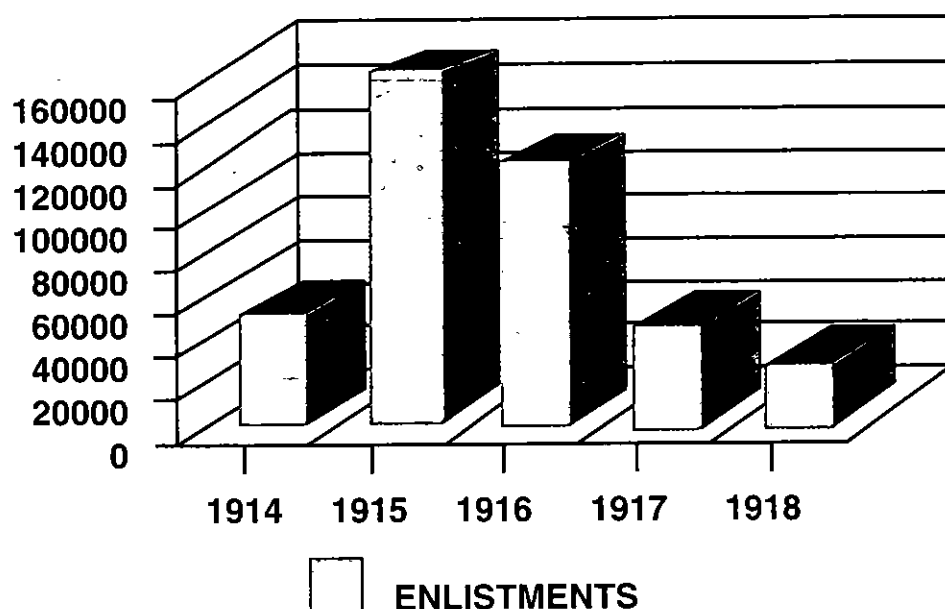


Figure 1. Annual Enlistments 1914 - 1918

time with the losses at Gallipoli, the sinking of the *Lusitania*⁹ and the government call for volunteers to reinforce losses, for these not to be regarded as the major causal factors for such high figures. The first 22 casualties from Gallipoli were announced on 2 May, by 25 June 10 000 had been listed.¹⁰ Only nine casualties were suffered in the German New Guinea campaign in 1914. Many men were motivated by revenge, wanting to fill the gaps and the sure knowledge that a real fight was occurring. Gammage believed that many men were persuaded to join simply by being asked, previously they had not thought that they were needed.¹¹ "Snowball" recruiting marches to enlist also manifested themselves in New South Wales during late 1915.¹² Early 1916 resulted in high figures that dropped to August. In August, Prime Minister Hughes announced the coming conscription referendum. Enlistments rose markedly during September and October. Anecdotal evidence indicated that many men sought to avoid the inevitable and in some cases fearing embarrassment, enlisted.¹³

British-born enlistees made up eighteen *per cent* of enlistments, this was a marginal over representation. These men were affected by the call to defend the Empire, but were also attracted by the prospect of a free trip home. The high rate of pay was an initial attraction for most young enlistees.¹⁴

The AIF was the only purely volunteer army that fought in WWI. Physical standards for enlistment were not altered during the war, even though there was great pressure in the last year to do so.¹⁵ In this statement General Monash has overlooked the reduction in minimum height to 5' 2" from 5' 6" in July 1915. This height limit remains today in the Australian Army. The British Army lowered their minimum height requirements to below five feet and formed the 35th "Bantam Division".¹⁶

Casualties were not the only reason for increased enlistments. In early 1916 it was decided to double the AIF divisions to five. The Third Division was raised in early 1916, the Fourth in February and the Fifth in March 1916 in Egypt.¹⁷ Despite losses Australia maintained these divisions for the remainder of the war.



Men of the Original Light Horse of the AIF before departure from Australia in 1914.



Recruiting Poster

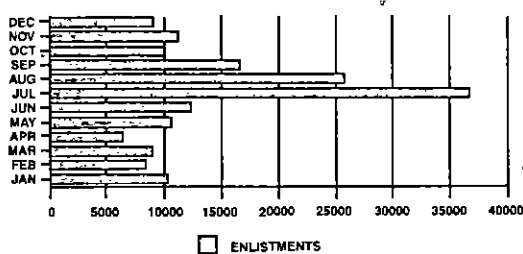


Figure 2. Monthly Enlistments AIF 1915

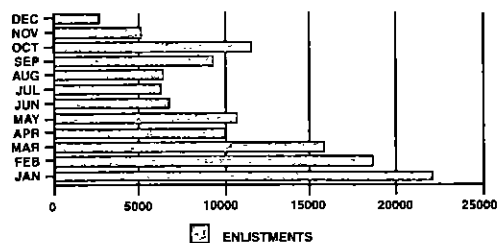


Figure 3. Monthly Enlistments AIF 1916

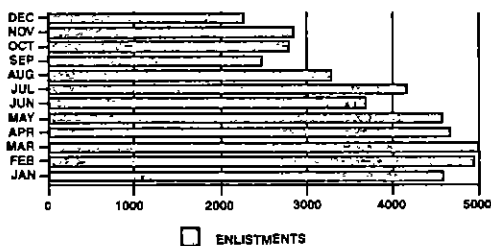


Figure 4. Monthly Enlistments AIF 1917

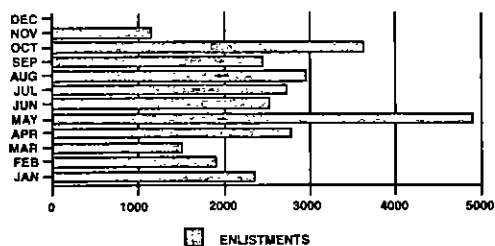


Figure 5. Monthly Enlistments AIF 1918

Campaign	Period	Killed	Wounded	Total Cas
Gallipoli	9/14-12/14	8587	19367	27954
Northern France	4/15-12/15	1624	4409	6033
1st Somme	3/16-7/16	7487	23277	30764
1st Hindenburg line	11/16-5/17	8295	23280	31575
Nth France	11/16-6/17	944	4153	5097
Messines	6/17-6/17	2298	6701	8999
3rd Ypres	7/17-10/17	10107	30612	40719
Messines Front	11/17-3/18	1512	4670	6182
Lys	4/18-8/18	1672	5311	6983
Dernacourt, V Bret & Hamel	13/18-8/18	6088	17856	23944
3rd Somme	8/18-10/18	8782	23938	32720
Mid East	4/16-10/18	1626	3200	4826

Figure 6. Casualty Figures

Figures 4 and 5¹⁸ show enlistments for 1917 and 1918. They are on the same scale and clearly show that 5 000 enlistees monthly was not attained. The average monthly enlistment for 1917 was 3 149 and 1918 showed a drop to 2 625. Every month, except for December 1916, in the three previous years was above 5 000. During 1917-18 a Federal Director of recruiting was appointed to lead a new recruiting campaign. Even though thorough organisation and funding were provided for the campaign, it fell well short of expectations. Bush towns were seen to be war weary. "Everyone knew this and people were not encouraged to join in recruiting drives".¹⁹

Casualty figures for the war are shown in Figure 6 drawn from data presented in Smith's work.²⁰

Wounded to dead ratios were approximately 2:1 for Gallipoli and 3:1 for the remainder of campaigns. While a link is clear between casualties in 1915 and enlistments that is not the case for the remainder of the war with the possible exception of 1st Somme. Major losses such as 1st Hindenburg Line and 3rd Ypres did not result in an increase in enlistments. These losses better explain a war weariness and lack

of volunteer manpower, particularly since many permanently disabled wounded had returned to Australia for convalescence. They were in the public and private eye and would have presented a shocking example of the consequences of war. The dead were not buried in Australia, rather they were buried in war cemeteries near battlefields. While their deaths clearly led to much suffering at home they also remained invisible since conventional family burial and proper mourning did not occur.

The early patterns of enlistment reflected enthusiasm and pride of empire. Individual motivations are difficult to measure although evidence from the time and from the hindsight of survivors confirms the early war euphoria brought about by adventure, pay, and a desire by the eighteen *per cent* who were British-born recruits to gain a free trip home. The response to early casualties from Gallipoli, the *Lusitania* sinking that was seen as a cowardly act by the German Navy and the government call for volunteers were the primary reasons for the high figures for July 1915. The casualties for 1917 and 1918 were unable to be

replaced by enlistment and improved medical procedures. The failure of the conscription referenda initially provided a boost to enlistments, but was a negative aspect for 1917 and 1918. What is clear, however, is the significant *per capita* commitment in human resources and finance made by Australia when compared to the other allies.

NOTES

1. Beaumont, J. *Australia's War 1914-18*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1995, p. 1.
2. Scott, E. *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, Vol. XI Australia During the War*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1939, p. 874.
3. Butler, A. *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, Vol II*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940, p. 447.
4. Scott, *op cit*, pp. 871-2.
5. Gammage, B. *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, Penguin, 1975 p. 6. 52 561 from 820 000 eligible by age had enlisted.
6. White, R. "Motives for joining up: Self-sacrifice, self-interest and social class, 1914-18", *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, No. 9, October 1986, p. 4.
7. Smith, S. *Australian Campaigns in the Great War*, Macmillan, Melbourne, 1919, p. 198. Total casualties of all types for 1917 and 1918 were approximately 157 500 of an Australian war total of 225 855.
8. Scott, *op cit*, p. 871.
9. Robson, L. *The First AIF a Study of its Recruitment*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1970, p. 46.
10. Gammage, *op cit*, p. 10.
11. *ibid*.
12. Robson, *op cit*, p. 57.
13. Gammage, *op cit*, p. 13.
14. White, *op cit*, pp. 7-8.
15. Monash, J. *The Australian Victories in France in 1918*, Hutchinson and Company, London, 1920, p. 291.
16. Gibbs, P. *Realities of War*, Heinemann, London, 1920, p. 329.
17. Monash, *op cit*, p. 6.
18. Scott, *op cit*, p. 872.
19. Robson, *op cit*, p. 141.
20. Smith, *op cit*, p. 198.

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Colonel Keith Jobson graduated from OCS in June 1971 and was posted to 3TB. He served with 6 RAR from 1973-74 as Assault Pioneer Platoon commander and as a Staff Officer at HQ 1MD in 1975-76. In 1977 he was posted as Adjutant 49 RQR. He was selected as an exchange officer with the Guards Division in Germany and England from 1978-79 as a Mechanised Company 21C, Company Commander and Battalion Operations Officer. Upon his return to Australia he was posted as Adjutant and Tactics Instructor Infantry Centre from 1980-82. He was posted back to 6RAR as a Parachute Company Commander and Operations Officer from 1983-85 and attended the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff College in 1986. He filled the Staff Officer Grade Two Personnel appointment in the Infantry Directorate from 1987-88 and was promoted to the Grade One appointment in the Directorate in December 1988. He assumed command of NORFORCE in January 1990. He was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in the 1992 Queens Birthday Honours for outstanding service as commanding officer of NORFORCE. In July 1992 he was posted as an instructor at the Command and Staff College at Queenscliff. In 1994 he was seconded to United Nations Headquarters in New York as the head of the Duty Room in the newly formed Situation Centre of the Department of Peacekeeping Operations. He was promoted to Colonel upon his return to Australia in January 1996 as the Director of Joint Exercise Plans. His appointment as Director Military Personnel Operations within the Defence Personnel Executive based in Canberra was assumed in December 1997. He is currently the Director General of Public Affairs.

Colonel Jobson holds an Arts Degree, majoring in History, a Graduate Diploma in Management Studies and a Diploma in Occupational Health and Safety Management.