



Charge of the Anzac releases

Christopher Bantick

EACH year, in the month before Anzac Day, battalions of books march from publishers' warehouses. This year, perhaps more than any other, there has been a big push to secure the patriotic dollar and outmanoeuvre lead titles. While there is a growing interest in Australia's participation in war, and specifically World War I, the frontal assault publishers have launched will inevitably have casualties. These may be readers.

Simply put, there is much material of a similar kind being published. Therefore, books which offer a new approach on the well-trodden Anzac Digger experience are increasingly hard to find. To this end, *The Anzacs: Gallipoli to the Western Front*, began unpromisingly before steadily improving.

Peter Pedersen is a well established military historian and his approach in this book is to present in a single volume, the Australian Imperial Force's journey through World War I from Gallipoli to Western France. While this is done well with a highly informed and sympathetic coverage, it is slightly irritating that Pedersen's interpretative assessment of the AIF can be distilled into unquestioned cloying praise:

"Their deeds and sacrifice during its course transformed Australia from a collection of disparate states into a true nation and earned it the esteem of the world. Along the way they developed a tradition that gave the nation its soul. Without this inspirational force, Australia would have been a different place."

With that out of the way, Pedersen then settles down to write a substantial and generally fine historical account. The trajectory of the book follows a standard line. There is adequate space given to the call to arms and Australia fighting for Empire and in this, Pedersen captures the initial optimism well.

This is all the more powerful when tonally there is a clear change. The huge losses of the Western Front shift attitudes both at home and in the front line. Where the book has its undeniable strength is in Pedersen's portrayal of the Australian

infantryman as he emerges from defeat at Gallipoli to arguably the status of the finest soldier out of all commonwealth forces by 1918.

Pedersen's background is of the military and he is a graduate of Duntroon. Why this is important is that it shows his empathy with his subject. He also does not resile from graphic illustration. Besides the highly evocative photographs, he employs artistic representations done at the time of battle. The inclusion of a page of photographs showing disfiguring wounds highlights the life-changing severity of war.

Where Pedersen provides a single-volume history of the Anzacs, Mat McLachlan in *Walking with the Anzacs*, combines history with the growing travel industry of battlefield tourism. This is a handbook for those who want to see where some of the legendary battles of World War I took place.

The intention is to create a reader-friendly guide and on this basis the book is highly successful. Thankfully, McLachlan does not try to do too much. He avoids offering interpretative comments on the war and sticks to the paths that the Anzacs followed. Even so, the potted history he provides is effective in setting the context for a sound understanding of the significance of particular sites.

These include names immortalised in the history of the AIF:

Passchendaele, Fromelles, Villers-Bretonneux and Hamel are there, as you'd expect, but the section on Village battles is an important body of content.

At all times, clear directions are given and McLachlan's maps are easy to negotiate. The use of remarkably narrative black and white photographs and McLachlan's strategic use of anecdotes establishes a certain timeless feel.

Although both the above books are removed from the actual battles — even though both McLachlan and Pedersen write descriptively and employ primary evidence — *A Month at the Front* is a deeply moving and poignant read. In a few short pages, the enormity of war is captured and

words written in utter unselfconsciousness carry a weight of horror and understated heroism.

This diary is that of an unknown soldier who may have survived the war, or not. It was discovered in a box of items donated to the Bodleian Library at Oxford in 2005. The donor knew nothing of its background.

The author was a soldier in D Company of the 12th Battalion East Surrey Regiment. The diary is set in France in July and August 1917. A helpful introduction by John Pinfold, puts the diary in its particular time frame and the overall sense of the unknown soldier is created through Pinfold's depiction of the East Surrey Regiment.

While the background is necessary and informative, the actual diary is written with a kind of detachment. It is short and can be read in an hour. Its significance lasts much longer.

The diary records the awfulness of battle and the inevitability of death. This is reported on with a sense of having seen it many times. Even so, there are moments when the writer is incapable of recording the extremity of war. The days and nights merge into one long period of horror and actual dates are superfluous. He struggles at some point in August 1917 to capture his thoughts after he had stumbled into the trench he had dug that same day but left earlier because of artillery bombardment:

"I did not recognise it at first, no one will ever realise what it is to be driven about as we were that afternoon. It was something awful and no words will ever be able to describe my feelings accurately."

The simplicity of the entries embodies the power of the unknown soldier's observations. This is war in all its unadorned terror.

***The Anzacs: Gallipoli to the Western Front*, Peter Pedersen (Penguin Viking, \$59.95)**
***Walking with the Anzacs: A Guide to Australian Battlefields on the Western Front*, Mat McLachlan (Hachette, \$35)**
***A Month at the Front: The Diary of an Unknown Soldier* (The Miegunyah Press, \$19.95)**



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WHEN Olive King wanted to help the war effort, she not only had to pay her own way, she had to take her own ambulance. Her heroic feats are just one of the stories you'll read in *Women at War*, a special Anzac Day series in *The Courier-Mail*. Read of the extraordinary contributions of Australian Women at War, every day from Monday to Saturday.