MEDIA MONITORS
INCISIVE INSIGHT

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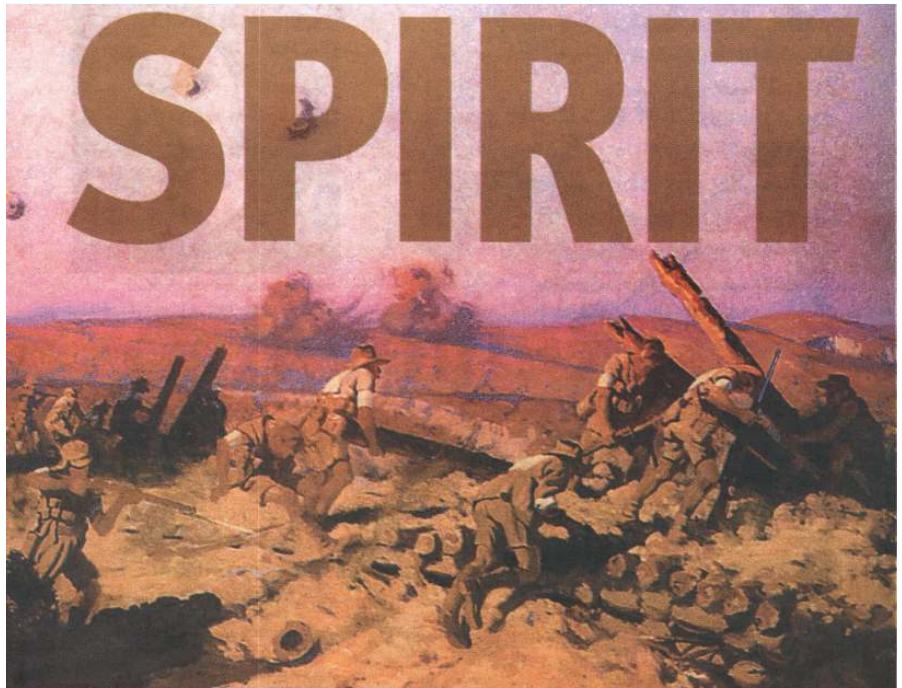
FIGHTING SPIRIT



As Anzac Day approaches, **Stephen Matchett** is impressed by the latest crop of combat histories

THERE are ways in which Anzac Day is commemorated today that are reminiscent of the way it was remembered when the generations who fought the world wars were a living presence. Although the overwhelming sense of loss is long gone, the popular pride in Australian achievement is still there. So is a fascination with the details of combat history.

The story of the First Australian Imperial Force on the Western Front is beginning to match the shorter and simpler story of Gallipoli, and there is a rash of books on the fighting in Papua New Guinea in 1942.

Too much of the recent writing on Australians at war is populist ephemera. At the other end of the spectrum there is a solid body of scholarly literature on Australian military history. It is what is in the middle that is most interesting for what it says about the way Australians are interested in understanding their military past.

Each Anzac Day brings a new set of combat studies written for a general audience prepared to invest in learning about battles almost incomprehensible in the way they were fought and the horrors they imposed. The message of most of them is largely unchanged since the first generation of histories, written 80-odd years ago. As Peter Pedersen puts it in his new book *The Anzacs: Gallipoli to the Western Front* (Viking, $59.95), when Australian soldiers were well trained, properly led and supported by professional staff planning, they were "masters of their trade".

But Pedersen goes further, defining the characteristics of the First AIF in language that could have come from a veteran memorialising his lost mates in the 1930s: "The Diggers ended the war with the same qualities as they began it: initiative, resilience, a rough humour concealing an inner nobility, disrespectful of authority in its outward forms and, above all, loyalty to mates."

Inevitably there are academics anxious to argue that there was nothing all that special in Australia's military record and they have a point. Not all Australian battles were victories, not every Digger was a hero.

But, in the main, Australians interested in military history still accept the version of the characters and achievements that the generations of the two world wars set out for themselves. There is a renewed sense that the ground that they cover is sacred.

Mat McLachlan's *Walking With the Anzacs* (Hachette Australia, $35pb) is a conventional, competent battlefield guide that describes Australia's fights on the Western Front. The only way to understand a battle is to walk the ground, and McLachlan's guide makes it possible for visitors to the old front to impose the military topography of 1916-18 on the modern landscape of northern France and Belgium.

McLachlan knows his stuff and includes places that are not especially important to Australians but are worth visiting nonetheless. In particular, he explains the importance of

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Beaumont-Hamel (as distinct from the Australian memorial at Le Hamel, an entirely different place) where a battalion of the Canadian Newfoundland Regiment was slaughtered on the first day of the Battle of the Somme in July 1916. The trenches there are preserved, making the tactics and sheer horror of trench warfare much easier to understand.

Inevitably, there are quibbles. McLachlan underestimates the importance of the Flanders Field Museum in Cloth Hall at Ypres (the locals call it Ieper), an extraordinary museum that explains the miseries the war inflicted on ordinary people. But as for the battlefields and villages I know, his descriptions are accurate and his advice is sensible.

Sydney Loch's memoir *Gallipoli, the Straits Impregnable* (HarperCollins, $32.99) — reprinted with a new biography of the author by Susanna and Jake de Vries called *To Hell and Back* — was originally published as a novel in 1916 to placate the censors. It provides a plainly written description of the misery of Gallipoli as a largely static combat zone where soldierly routines are interrupted by shot, shell and slaughter.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the book is how much it reveals about Gallipoli and the nature of warfare, where no amount of Aussie elan could compensate for artillery and machineguns while the war was on. Even accepting the defeat of both conscription referendums, that Australia stayed solid in support of the slaughter in France that followed the defeat at Gallipoli is remarkable given how much was known at home.

Bart Ziino deals with the aftermath of that information for the hundreds of thousands Australians whose lives were blighted by the loss of any of the 60,000 men who died in action in *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War* (University of Western Australia Press, $39.95).

Ziino's is a straightforward social history of the way generations of Australians tried to incorporate what was, and remains, the nation's greatest loss into its sense of identity. As such it is a useful addition to Ken Inglis's enormously well regarded study of the way Australians used

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monuments at home to commemorate veterans, living and dead, *Sacred Places*.

That those who were killed on the Western Front were buried close to where they fell, far beyond the reach of relatives, made the cemeteries and statues on the ground where they fought the responsibility of the state. It was one that was originally met by an imperial, rather than a specifically Australian, organisation. Fabian Ware, head of the (British) Commonwealth War Graves Commission, did an extraordinary job in breaking down class distinctions by ensuring that officers and men were treated the same in death. The rich were forbidden from bringing the remains of their loved ones home precisely because doing this was beyond the means of the poor.

But regardless of responsibility, the Australian cemeteries, especially those on the Western Front and specifically the memorial garden just outside the village of Villers-Bretonneux, were and remain physically beautiful, although still desperately sad places. Among the Australian tombstones inscribed with messages of love and

No amount of Aussie elan could compensate for artillery

loss there is one that simply asks why this soldier had to die. It was and still is a fair question.

Pedersen does not answer it. However, he provides an excellent overview of the Australian achievement in his new illustrated history of Australians in World War I.

Pedersen is a substantial military historian whose work on the Western Front is not as well known as its quality merits. His new book does not add anything especially important to the scholarly record of Australia in World War I and there is nothing in its maps and illustrations to surprise anybody interested in the war.

But this is no criticism. Apart from academic specialists and people who are less interested than obsessed with the tactics of trench warfare, there is not much to distinguish one Australian fight on the Western Front from another, from 1916 to John Monash's victories in 1918. And while Pedersen covers the ground quickly compared with *The Great War*, Les Carlyon's comprehensive book on the Western Front published earlier this year, this is as good a one-volume history of the Australians in World War I as any general reader could need.

But anybody interested in a complete record of the nation's military record this Anzac Day should consult the second edition of John Coates's *An Atlas of Australia's Wars* (OUP, $195). This is a superb production, perhaps made possible only by the taxpayer subsidy that supports it.

The numerous maps are easily understood; the reproduction of paintings and photographs is exquisite, making it is as close as you can get to a walk around the Australian War Memorial without going to Canberra. (Although why the project was produced as a book rather than a website, a format that can reach a greater audience for a fraction of the cost, escapes me.)

But the real strength of the book is its text, which is easily overlooked given production values that are nothing less than lavish. Coates writes for a general audience, albeit one that already knows a fair bit about Australian history and tactics in 20th-century warfare. Although his subject is complex, the text is clear and comprehensive. Starting with frontier conflict between indigenous and settler Australians and ending with the present deployments in East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan, this book concisely covers all the nation's wars.

Despite the quasi-official status public funding inevitably implies, this is a historian's, not a mythmaker's, text. As Coates records it, the Australians on the Western Front in World War I did not all perform brilliantly all the time. His description of the fighting along the Kokoda Track (not trail, as it is defined by the Australian battle honours) avoids populist nonsense that makes all Aussies heroes.

No overview history is definitive, but for anybody who wants a single, albeit flash book as exquisite artefact to commemorate Anzac Day this year, this is it.

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Horrors of war: From far left, a messenger rides past Australian graves at Gallipoli in 1915; *The Taking of Lone Pine* by Fred Leist; burying the dead in France, 1918; below, treating the injured

Pictures: Australian War Memorial

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