

Warm-up– The Early Years 1868-1918

Australian military involvement in the sport of Rugby Union can be traced back to the early part of the nineteenth century and the recording, by the Sydney Monitor, that private soldiers in the barracks 'are in the habit of amusing themselves with the game of football'. While the game was imported with early settlers and soldiers of the imperial regiments posted to the colonies of Australia, there was of course no 'Army' then as we know it today in the Australian colonies.

From the mid-1850s some very small units of Volunteers were formed in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria. The imperial regiments were formally withdrawn in 1870. The Volunteer units gradually grew in number through most of the colonies but by the mid-1880s began to be replaced in part—but not entirely—by partially paid Militia forces. There were also a very small colonial cadre of permanent artillerymen and engineers in the coastal defences around the major cities.

In the decades that followed, the English game of Rugby Union emerged in NSW as a pre-eminent football code and an integral



A Rugby Union Match in Queensland in the early 1900s.

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part of sporting activities amongst members of the Australian colonial military forces. In July 1868, for example, the 50th Queens Own Regiment won their match against the Sydney Football Club at Victoria Barracks and later in the year the University of Sydney won a match against the Royal Navy's HMS *Rosario*. Over the years, the first Rugby Union club established in Sydney, the Wallaroos, played numerous matches against local Militia teams, for example in 1871 against No. 10 Battery of the Volunteer Artillery.

Even after Federation in 1901, it took several years to establish a proper functioning and largely Militia based

Australian Army of which the permanent forces were a very small proportion. The new Australian Commonwealth government, being mostly short of money, spent as little as possible on defence in its first few years. Any organised sport among the new units of the Australian Army was therefore by its very nature *ad hoc*, no matter what in which State it was being played.

In the wake of a formal inspection visit to Australia by Lord Kitchener in 1910, a range of defence measures were undertaken by the Australian Government to improve Australian defences. Among the most important in terms of its bearing on the growth of Rugby Union in the Army was the establishment of the Royal Military College (RMC) at Duntroon. Rugby Union emerged as Duntroon's principal football code soon after the establishment of the College in 1911. Although there had been heated discussions about the code of football that would be played by College cadets, the decision in favour of Rugby Union was strongly influenced by the game's pre-eminent position in NSW and therefore Canberra as much as by the small numbers of cadets available from which teams were to be drawn. Simply put, the College could not carry teams from two competing codes and rugby won out.

Duntroon's first Rugby Union club was established by V. J. R. Miles, the professor of English, and on 15 July 1911 the First XV played its inaugural match against the local Queanbeyan team, the Warrigals (losing 12-nil). That

year there were two more matches played against visiting sides and a total of seven matches in 1912. By 1913, a total of twelve matches had been scheduled. Duntroon won against Sydney's Great Public Schools on 9 June 1913 (12-nil) and played another five matches before an outbreak of smallpox in Sydney resulted in the cancellation of further matches. Further interruptions to the Rugby Union program occurred in 1914, again due to an outbreak of infectious disease—in this case, diphtheria.

The progress of Rugby Union during Duntroon's early years was, however, significantly influenced by other events beyond its control—most particularly the outbreak of the First World War (WWI) in August 1914 which resulted in a rapid depletion of players at the College as they were deployed to active service. The departure of the First Class cadets saw the loss of half the rugby team and by the end of the year all but two had gone to the War.

Yet, despite depleted numbers, Rugby Union continued to be played against visiting teams from Sydney Grammar, Newington College, The King's School, Sydney University, and, from 1916 a new competition against the Royal Australian Naval College (RANC) at Jervis Bay. The first match was played at Jervis Bay in September 1916 with the host side winning 20-9.

The inauguration, in 1917, of the Forsyth Shield competition gave an added impetus to the growth of Rugby Union at Duntroon. This annual event between representative teams from Sydney's Great Public Schools



Officers of the 1st Battalion (New South Wales) outside their tents at Mena Camp, Egypt, during training, March 1915. Sitting on the left in the back row is Major Blair Swannell, a Rugby Union international who, according to one witness, had "his head half blown off" on the day of the Gallipoli landings. Also killed that day was the man sitting in front of Swannell, Lieutenant William Duchesne. Next to Swannell sits Lieutenant Alfred Shout, who received the Victoria Cross for bravery at Lone Pine, but died on 11 August 1915 of wounds received in the fighting. Captain Harold Jacobs, seated in front on the right, was the only one to survive the war.

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and the United Services (RMC and RANC) provided important opportunities for cadets to test their skills in a wide range of arenas.

In 1917 the match against Navy was played at Duntroon before a large crowd that included Brigadier General

Parnell and staff, Mr W. W. Hill, the secretary of the NSW Rugby Union, prominent local identities and a contingent of ladies. The match was refereed by Captain Broadbent and from the opening kick-off play was 'fast, open, and interesting.' The final result was a decided victory for Duntroon 47-nil. Similar results were recorded in 1918 (RMC 33-RANC nil) and 1919 (RMC 99-RANC nil).

Not surprisingly, the raising of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) attracted a significant number of Rugby Union players to the ranks and press reports from early 1915 frequently contain detailed information about enlistments from NSW and Queensland metropolitan and country clubs alike. At home the NSW and Metropolitan Rugby Unions decided 'to play only a limited number of fixtures and devote the time thus gained to the training of its players, ex-players, officials and supporters for military purposes.' The scheme for military drill gained support in Sydney and outlying districts as the Rugby Union association became a driving force behind recruitment of sportsmen from clubs and local associations.

From the beginning of the First World War campaigns at Gallipoli in 1915 through to the years on the Western Front, Rugby Union became well established itself as a popular pastime for AIF footballers and an integral part of army sporting events between units of the AIF and of course, against the New Zealanders and British in particular. In Egypt army Rugby Union flourished with

most units of the AIF containing players who were well known in their home states:

Mr. W. W. Hill, secretary of the New South Wales Rugby Union, has received word from Egypt that a match under Rugby Union rules was played there last month between New Zealand and New South Wales, the former winning by 24 to 17. There were eight players on the winning side who had previously played with a Dominion representative side, while seven New South Wales Blues figured with the losers...

Later Hill's brother in Cairo wrote that: 'The New South Wales Brigade and its attached units have been playing inter-brigade and inter-unit matches,' most of which were held 'on beautiful flat land at the foot of the Cheops Pyramid'. From these games it was the Army Medical Corps that 'emerged victorious'.

Of course AIF personnel in England for training, medical recuperation or posted to AIF depots there quickly engaged with local British Army and civilian teams. For example, in April 1916 a team of Australian soldiers played a match against a team representing the North of England at Headingley, Leeds. A crowd of twelve thousand spectators saw the Australians defeated by just two points on the 'well-appointed ground of the Leeds Northern Union Club.' The Australian soldiers were received with enormous enthusiasm and entertained at a civic dinner hosted by Leeds' Lord Mayor. Proceeds from the event were distributed to war charities.

March 1917 saw a match between a team from AIF Headquarters (HQ) London and the Wanderers, with AIF HQ victorious 44-3. A year later AIF HQ played the NZ Convalescent Hospital (a draw) and played the NZ HQ (a loss 3-11). An Army team also played crew from HMAS *Australia* in September 1917, reflecting an Army-Navy competitiveness also being played out at home between RMC and RANC that year.

In fact there were so many matches going on in England, principally involving the AIF HQ, that a comparison with the match opportunities on the Western Front could not have been starker as the soldiers at the front fought, rested or labored, only being able to play in the main impromptu or intra-unit matches. Between October 1917 and November 1918 alone, matches were played in England against the Welsh Guards, NZ HQ, Greater Public Schools, Royal Aircraft Factory, Royal Naval Depot, Aldershot Command Group, NZ Field Artillery, Canadian HQ, Royal Flying Corps, NZ Convalescent Hospital, the British Army Service Corps, British Army Motor Transport Corps, Haileybury College, Cardiff and the Pill Harriers Club from South Wales, among others.

We know from photographic evidence alone that Rugby Union was played at all levels and all types of units, including fighting units of the AIF whether in France or the Middle East. Australian soldiers loved their sport, and being close to the front line wasn't going to stop them from having a good match of Rugby Union,

among other sports.

The AIF HQ team was to remain a fixture of the Rugby Union scene for the AIF throughout the war, even though it would have seen constant turnover in players. On the Western Front, divisional teams came together to form an AIF 'Trench' team to play against the French Army.

With the end of the War, a new period of intense Rugby Union competition asserted itself in both France and England, in part to keep the AIF personnel active and engaged while they awaited repatriation to Australia. The Trench Team and the AIF Headquarters team were to come together to form the famous 1919 AIF Rugby Union teams.



The 59th Battalion playing rugby football behind the line at Barleux. Identified is 5196 Private W. R. Saunders (holding the ball, second from right, foreground). 20 September 1918

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The Rugby Union Team of the 116th Howitzer Battery, Australian Imperial Force.

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