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"All was not well with the soldiers' diet": An evaluation of the effectiveness of official Australian Imperial Force food provisions, 1914–18.

Introduction

One of the elements of the popular narrative of Australia's participation in World War One is that Australian soldiers lived on a diet largely composed of bully beef (tinned corned beef), tough savoury army biscuits (now often confused with the post-war sweet Anzac biscuit),[1] and all washed down with copious amounts of tea, rum and beer. Bully, biscuits and tea were in fact major components of the diet of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). But unlike the French army, where a half litre of wine per day formed part of the official issue,[2] rum was issued in relatively small quantities and often infrequently, while beer was rarely officially issued, instead being privately purchased by soldiers in canteens, pubs and estaminets. The idea of a diet almost exclusively composed of bully and biscuits is not an invention of the modern Anzac legend, instead having its origin during the war itself, an enlistee expressing surprize that "the food in the trenches is very much different to the bully beef and biscuits which we were led to believe was the main ration."[3] · So, while bully, biscuit and tea created an indelible impression as the substance of the AIF diet, the Australian army consciously sought to provide what they considered to be an adequate diet, though there is no broad study as to how effective this was. Indeed, civilian home front diets during wartime have received more scholarly attention than parallel studies of how soldiers ate.[4] This article, while filling a gap in our knowledge of AIF provisioning, also offers evidence in the evolution of the

Australian diet in general, from a narrow British cookery typical of the Great War era to that of a wider global food culture.[5] It also adds to other studies on the development of military thinking on the importance of diet as a factor in effective military performance, especially during World War One, where the limited number of studies of military and civilian diet in Europe particularly highlight its importance to our understanding of war.[6]

An early study of the AIF diet came from dieticians Caroline Laurence and Joanne Tiddy, who devoted about 14 pages to the Great War in their short analysis of Australian army food during the two world wars, making some useful observations with their focus on nutrition, and reinforcing the notion that bully beef, biscuits and tea were "the mainstays of Australia's fighting force."[7] Countering this, Anzac myth-buster Graham Wilson launched a vigorous attack on the bully-and-biscuit myth, dedicating a chapter to the topic in his demolition of the Anzac myths that most annoyed him. It draws in great detail from both official sources and soldier diaries, concluding triumphantly that soldiers ate a far more diverse diet than the mythical "unrelieved diet of tinned, preserved meat (bully beef), Army (or dog) biscuits, jam and black tea."[8] Wilson acknowledges problems of supply and cuisine at various times, but rightly points to "a sophisticated ration supply system and a catering department … which, while by no means perfect, generally did the best it could at all times."[9] However, Wilson is prone to both overstate his case and ignore the psychological dimensions of food in drawing the conclusion that army catering was basically good. The first question of this article is to test how adequate army catering was, and provide a more accurate verdict.

By far the best analyses of the AIF diet, and therefore the most valuable to this study, are two pieces by Alison Wishart, the first evaluating the role of food and health in the Gallipoli campaign, concluding that nutrition and hygiene played crucial roles in its failure, the other giving an overview of nutrition in the Australian army diet from Gallipoli to Afghanistan.[10] This study seeks to understand whether Wishart's conclusions about food and diet at

Gallipoli are born out in the experience of soldiers in the Palestine and Franco-Belgian theatres of operations, as well as to army camps in Australia and Britain.

A series of outstanding studies of British army catering services during World War One by Rachel Duffett offers very useful points of comparison and analysis, especially given the symbiotic ties between Britain and Australia. The Australian army imitated the organisation of its British counterpart as much as possible, and in the battle theatres had most of its food supplied directly by the British army.[11] Duffett emphasizes that, contrary to the approbatory reports of British army officials, soldiers were unhappy with both the food and the service, arguing that "all was not well with the soldiers' diet."[12] The AIF experience needs to be compared to her conclusions.

Alan Weekes' investigation of Great War British army food adds useful comparisons between the British army and the AIF.[13] This article also draws on research into various other historical, sociological and cultural studies of food, society and war, as well as primary sources in official army archives and the letters and diaries of over 1,200 members of the AIF, the latter offering a mix of objective and subjective evidence on army provisioning.

Background to Official Army Rations

On the matter of army rations, the newly-fledged Australian Commonwealth Military Forces simply copied the British army ration allocation.[14] By contemporary standards, it was a reasonably generous daily allowance, featuring about 570g of fresh bread or 340g of hardtack biscuit, 570g of fresh meat or 450g of preserved (tinned) meat, plus a further 90g of bacon, 230g of fresh vegetables or 56g of dried vegetables, 60g each of rice, cheese and sugar, 30g of butter, 85g of jam, as well as tea, condensed milk, salt, mustard, and pepper. This amounted to over 4,000 calories per day, a figure that compares favourably with the provisions made for other Great War Allied and Central Powers armies, as well as

calculations of modern British army calorie needs.[15] The rations represented a considerable, though painfully slow, evolution of British army practice in feeding its soldiers, expanding from its traditional emphasis on just meat and bread.[16] Consistent with the "new knowledge" of nutritional science at the time, it included a selection of calories from what were considered to be the key nutrients: proteins, carbohydrates, fats and salts (minerals).[17] The emerging category of vitamins was rated as "accessory substances," and "fruit and green vegetables were regarded by many as unattractively 'water rich,' that is 'calorie deficient,' and an unnecessarily extravagant purchase on a limited income."[18]

Some scholars, in comparing the army diet to that of civilian Britain, concluded that soldiers were better fed than the working class who made up the bulk of the rank and file, particularly in the matter of protein, not to mention vegetables, with Weeks arguing that many British soldiers actually put on weight and condition on the army diet.[19] Duffett allows it to be true of the poorest classes but misleading of the broader social cross-section inducted into the army during the war.[20] However, Ramford Haines was one of several Australians, some of them middle class, to make the same observation, surprized at putting on weight while training hard.[21]

Traditional civilian British food was characterized by large serves of roasted or grilled meat, with sides of potatoes and greens, with gravy. Quantity triumphed over variety of both ingredients and cookery. The working poor were particularly noted for a "dietary conservatism" which was "both monotonous and low in nutrients," subsisting on carbohydrate-heavy diets, with relatively few fats, meat, and vegetables.[22] As a deliberate counter to elitist "unwholesome French kickshaws," the promotion of "plain British cookery," often stereotyped as "meat and three veg," emphasized simple cooking methods as a means of avoiding "gustatory temptation," and of bolstering "moral rectitude."[23]

It is probable that both the English and Australians ate more vegetables in a greater variety than is generally recognized, for their relatively invisibility in contemporary records was partly due to being regarded as low-prestige foods at the time. However, salads were not only socially typecast as "an upper class dish" but also gendered as "a woman's dish,"[24] in counterpoint to the valorization of meat-eating as "masculine," one that would not only build up the body but also protect it from disease,[25] (ironically what vitamins in vegetables would actually do compared to proteins) further diminishing the perceived value of vegetables in the diet of an army populated by mostly young men constantly testing their masculinity against their peers.[26]

Unsurprisingly in an Australian culture increasingly genuflecting to Britain, the civilian diet was closely patterned on the British diet. An aggressive promotion of a British Imperial identity from the 1890s onwards led to a growing cultural revulsion against indigenous foods, which had been eaten in early settlement times, but were now displaced by abundant home-grown mutton and beef, the latter considered the "ne plus ultra of food for the Englishman" and therefore also for the Australian.[27] In the decades either side of the war, foreign visitors and Australian food thought leaders attacked what they considered to be an excessive dependence on the traditional "meat and three veg" served by Australian housewives, with one Frenchman condemning Australian cuisine as the world's most "abominable," while others bemoaned the "limited vegetables" and absence of salads.[28]

Such generalisations overlooked the nuances of Australian cooking, where gourmet restaurants, the urban upper class and the rural squattocracy could employ the best chefs cooking prestigious French dishes.[29] Australian diets also included some local fruit and vegetables such as pawpaw, passionfruit, gramma squash and chokos. Australians further differed from the British in eating on average twice as much meat, while per capita tea consumption also easily exceeded that of Britain. While some considered that Australia's

elite lived ten times worse than Britain's elite, the poor lived much better, particularly in eating meat every day, often at each meal.[30] Australians were also voracious consumers of condiments and pickles, as well as developing a national sweet tooth for biscuits, cordials, cakes, and jams, fed by the burgeoning supplies of cheap sugar from Queensland cane-fields. These "gastronomically loud" items "gave life a sparkle" absent from the bland foods that formed the backbone of the national diet.[31]

Despite some differences, a "plain-style" British cookery characterized many homes, as well as the popular cheap restaurants serving staple meals of simply-cooked meat and vegetables. One historian summarized Australian cuisine as "largely faithful to its English parent while taking on some modifications in respect to its new environment," while another generalized it as "red meat and vegetables cooked in a plain British style."[32]

It is evident, then, that the Australian army diet was not that far removed from the common Australian civilian cuisine. Army leaders naturally gravitated towards the foods both conventionally and scientifically associated with manliness and manly health. Its simplicity of ingredients and cookery was also well adapted to military campaigning. However, while it met contemporary cultural and scientific standards of nutrition, the diet suffered from a number of grievous flaws, ranging from an actual, though unrecognized, nutritional imbalance, to problems of preparation in camps and at the front, and a failure to recognize the crucial social-emotional role of food for soldiers, not to mention issues of supply that affected the campaigns even during stalemates, let alone periods of movement.

The Adequacy of the Official Army Diet

Part of the problem in evaluating the adequacy of the army diet is the gap in official documentation. Official ration tables indicate what was theoretically issued, which has satisfied Wilson in his vigorous defence of the Australian army diet in quantity and largely in

quality.[33] However, Duffett disputes the accuracy of such tables, despite the triumphant tone of official reports into food supply, noting the frequent lapses in delivery and constant pilfering along the supply chain that at times significantly reduced the official scale, especially in the trenches.[34] Apart from that, unit diaries and other official sources are silent on the vital matter of the feeding of soldiers, while documents directly on food supply and catering appear to have been considered so unimportant that they were only partially archived.[35] Indeed, rations ranked below ammunition and horse feed in the army's delivery priorities, forcing researchers to turn to unofficial and incidental sources such as soldier diaries and letters for a better picture of their daily nourishment.[36] On the latter, Duffett considers that British soldiers wrote home about their diets to reassure family.[37] However, a reading of many hundreds of AIF soldiers' writings suggests that Australians were more likely to write honestly about conditions, given the widespread frankness of their comments.

The army saw food purely in terms of "the delivery of sufficient calories," measuring diet primarily in mechanistic terms of supplying energy to its fighting men.[38] Thus the diet was heavily weighted to what were at the time considered "the essential components," delivering excessive quantities of proteins, carbohydrates, fats and salts.[39] In conspicuously short supply were fresh vegetables and fruit, apart from regular issues of potatoes and onions. Comparisons to the German army ration show that the British ration provided by some measures at least one-third more, if not twice as much, meat.[40] Yet one scholar argues that the German soldier had too much protein in his diet, to the detriment of the civilian population, which by 1916 was already showing signs of malnutrition.[41] By this standard, the Australian soldier was ingesting far too much protein.

Added to this was the high level of fats in the diet, considered essential at the time for supplying energy. However, combined with excessive salt and iron, the high fat-and-protein diet disrupted digestion, promoting constipation. These were exacerbated by insufficient

clean drinking water, poor sanitation, a lack of dietary fibre, and vitamin deficiencies, especially evident at Gallipoli, where an official scientific evaluation blamed the failure of the campaign, among other things, on poor health.[42]

Superficially, the vegetable ration of 230g of vegetables per day went some way to meeting baseline dietary requirements, being roughly equivalent to three-fifths of the modern recommended minimum, but this was still at best only a quarter of what the German soldier was allocated.[43] Part of the problem with evaluating it is simply the lack of detail, for when mentioned at all, they were usually aggregated into an undifferentiated category of "vegetables."[44] Various sources list an assortment of vegetables, the most commonly mentioned in soldier diaries being potatoes and onions, distantly followed by haricot beans, peas, cabbages, carrots, and marrow. A trainee AIF cook was taught how to cook potatoes, cabbage, carrots, parsnips, French beans, beetroot, turnips, marrow and "dry pulse vegetables" such as haricot beans, butter beans and blue peas.[45] However, in practice, the dominant, and all too often the only, vegetables were potatoes and onions.[46] For the Australian Army Service Corps (AASC), tasked with food supplies among a host of other things, this was understandable, as both are compact, have a long storage life and are less susceptible to damage in transit. Conspicuously absent are leafy greens, which were much more problematic to store and transport, especially in the uncongenial circumstances of active warfare. Indeed, the general absence of greens traditionally served by the British alongside meat led one AIF Inspector of Catering to champion the addition of nettle to the menu, over the objections of Australian suspicions of this foreign French vegetable. To disguise it, he advocated using about a spoonful per man in stews "as flavouring items, the same way as parsley." He also recommended dandelion in place of lettuce with cheese.[47]

Compounding the effect of the shortage of dietary vegetables was the nature of their typical preparation. Army cooks were taught at official army Cookery Schools to overcook

vegetables, with boiling times given as 30 minutes for cabbage and green beans through to an astounding two hours for carrots, though this was perfectly in keeping with typical civilian British-Australian vegetable cookery.[48] However, over-cooking vegetables was destructive of some vitamins, exacerbating the shortage of essential nutrients which left many men suffering from low-level vitamin deficiency during their war service, a deficiency much more marked during the Gallipoli campaign, where alternate sources of food were difficult to access.[49]

While there were clear inadequacies in the army diet, officials were mostly operating according to best-known practice, supported by both the science and the culinary culture of the times. They were also concerned with costs and economies, at the expense of a satisfying diet. In doing so, they failed in two key areas in the effectiveness of eating. Firstly, the low level malnutrition and inadequate fibre led to digestive disorders, promoted lethargy, reduced immunity, lowered morale, and retarded wound recovery.[50] The benefits of vegetables and fruit were not fully understood, though it was known that they should be included in the diet. The official British army cookbook of 1915 listed vegetables such as lettuce, beetroot and asparagus as having specific benefits, including for the nerves, blood and kidneys.[51] A number of Australians complained about the lack of vegetables, sometimes overtly linking this to their poor health, a fact recognized by an official issue of lime-juice, a time-proven anti-scorbutic.[52]

Secondly, the army did not understand that food was not merely a matter of calories, but instead part of a complex socio-emotional-psychological reality that deeply influenced peoples' attitudes, well-being and sense of identity. Army provisioning only paid attention to its physical dimensions, and complaints about army food in the British army often stemmed from its emotional and psychological failures, though usually couched in terms of the actual food itself.[53] Of course, grumbling about army food is probably as old as armies themselves,

a ritual common to institutional food, which is generally rated lower in satisfaction than similar home-cooked food precisely because it lacks the same emotional and social meanings. Indeed complaints about food became the focal point of grievances about all aspects of British army life.[54]

When it comes to Wilson's championing the diversity of the AIF diet, there is a case to be made both for the dominance of bully and biscuit, and for a greater dietary variety. Wilson is correct in arguing that soldiers ate more than mere bully and biscuit; official documents and soldier diaries back up his assertions. Some soldiers expressed admiration for the organisation, quantity and quality of their food. "I often think what a lot of money it must take to feed an army, as we are all very well fed," wrote an appropriately-named Leslie Tucker ("tucker" being Australian slang for "food", equivalent to "chow"), noting that they generally had meat at every meal, including one of "nice" bully beef, alongside plentiful jam, cheese and margarine. He itemized one dinner (lunch) as "roast mutton, cabbage and potatoes, tea, bread and raspberry jam, apple tart and custard," concluding, "So you see we live well here"[55]. The menu would not have disgraced many Australian homes.

Camp food in particular could be of good quality. In Egypt, the generous supply of plump fresh vegetables often impressed. "As for tucker, we get better fed than in Australia," wrote a delighted Tom Wade, listing a diet of "tea, steak, onions and tomatoes, and porridge" for breakfast, "roast meat, potatoes, sweet potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, turnips, and plenty of tinned fruit" for dinner and a supper of "tinned fish, with plenty of bread and jam, treacle, and syrup. We also get condensed milk, and, in short, plenty of everything."[56] Several Australians praised the salads of Egypt, often preferring them to the "oil-drenched" ones they were later served in France.[57] In England one gushed, "The food we get here is absolutely the best we have ever had since we have been soldiers," though there was nothing special about the menu he listed, which included the usual suspects of porridge, bacon, bread, sausages, soup, steak,

carrots, onions and potatoes, and plum pudding with custard. “In fact,” he concluded, “it is impossible to get any better food amongst such a number of men”[58]. While some of these letters may have been attempts to reassure family at home, there are too many examples from soldiers otherwise given to blunt reporting to write them all off as mere eyewash.

Yet these experiences were not universal, even in base camps with secure lines of supply and permanent kitchen facilities. Food shortages in Britain, particularly from 1917 onwards, led to parsimonious meals at some camps, labelled by one soldier with a penchant for hyperbole as “not fit for pigs,” claiming the chickens at home were better fed.[59] At Tel-el-Kebir in Egypt, a strike eventuated over poor food, the catalyst being a meal of one tin of meat and a loaf of bread shared between five men[60]. Although the full table of official rations was theoretically available each day, in practice, a disproportionate number of meals were made up of the emergency rations of bully beef and biscuits carried at all times by soldiers, supplemented by whatever they had hoarded from previous meals or acquired from sources to hand. Their sheer ubiquity and repetitiveness in the army diet imprinted them deep into soldier memory. Just two months into his military service, one complained of the endless “bully beef which one gets sick of. Bully, bully, bully.”[61] The limited skills of the typically inept company cooks ensured that far too many meals were the “eternal” and “inedible” stew, made from bully and whatever vegetables were available, provoking grievances over its monotonous regularity. It was the subject of jokes and satirical verses, with sarcastic comments about how it was indistinguishable from dixies of tea, while one soldier threatened his future wife with divorce if she ever served him stew.[62]

In the trenches themselves, circumstances often restricted the supply of hot meals from the company cookers to delivery under the cover of darkness, and these all too often consisted of more greasy stew, half-cold by the time they arrived, especially in the bitter winters of Flanders and the Somme.[63] During daylight hours, soldiers improvized with tins of bully

beef, tinned meat-and-vegetable stew, and biscuits. In Sinai and Palestine, long supply lines and hot weather regularly disrupted fresh rations. However, front line supplies in all theatres could be better at times: in France, one soldier appreciated "plenty of good food, including roast meat, roast potatoes and vegetables of all kinds, cabbage and peas, jam, plenty of bread and butter, syrup, lettuce, and generally bacon for breakfast; that is right up in the firing line."[64] Fascinatingly, his "vegetables of all kinds" listed just four specific varieties, if one includes the potatoes.

While Wilson is technically correct that the army diet was more than an "unrelieved diet" of bully beef, biscuits, jam and black tea,[65] in practice, bully and biscuit were far more common than they should have been. Outside of the Gallipoli campaign, problems of supply had largely been addressed on a macro scale, especially during the long stalemate on the Western Front.[66] But the quantities despatched from AASC units at army depots in accordance with official tables of issue were not necessarily what arrived to the soldiers at the end of the supply line. Spoilage, often from rough handling by careless soldiers, affected perishable items such as sacks of vegetables, fresh meat and bread.

Armies have also entrenched theft as a way of life, the Great War being no exception, and pilfering from army stores along a lengthy and vulnerable logistical supply chain was hardly regarded as theft at all, rather being "something of a badge of honour," so that even an Australian chaplain was admiringly nicknamed "The Pinching Padre" for his "peculations."[67] However, front line troops blamed it on those who never faced danger, such as supply-line troops and privileged officers' batmen, skimming off the more desirable items and leaving the dregs for the fighting men. A quartermaster's claim that supply was a complex matter and that the men got their full rations was dismissed as "ridiculous" by a front-line officer, blaming shortages instead on "stealing and negligence on the part of the Q.M."[68] A British

soldier noted that "the nearer one got to the front lines the shorter the rations became," pinning most of the shortage on "the number of hands through which the food had to pass."[69]

Wilson's conclusion also fails through measuring food in purely mechanistic terms, just as army authorities had done. As Duffett has pointed out, soldier satisfaction was predicated on more than mere calories, being "understood as a medium through which the social and emotional experiences of military service were expressed."[70] Meals, she argues, were not just a matter of quantity or even quality, for they operated "in a more complex fashion: an emotional litmus paper, a medium through which other feelings, not obviously related to food, were gauged and articulated."[71] Cultural food studies bear this out. Beardsworth and Kiel observe that food "is absolutely central to our sense of identity," both collectively and individually.[72] Duruz links cuisine to social roots and rituals, the emotional life, and shared memory and tradition, "with participants' intimate histories inscribing collective culinary imaginaries," thus being far more resonant than simply satisfying physical hunger.[73] It did not help that army cooks were widely characterized as "a kind of useless man," "the dirtiest, slowest, clumsiest and laziest," chosen despite their almost universal lack of "any previous culinary experience," and given cursory training, if at all, in army cookery schools, where the emphasis was on economy not gustatory appeal, and "variety" meant the same old ingredients thinly disguised as different dishes.[74] Such men produced monotonous, uninspired meals, generating what is now labelled "menu fatigue," which was "one of the principal causes of troop discontent" in the British and Dominion armies.[75] While the soldiers of the AIF were supplied more than just bully, biscuits and tea by the army, these items were the most common and the most vivid in their "collective culinary imaginaries," and hence Laurence and Tilly's statement that they were "the mainstays of Australia's fighting force" is both emotionally and practically true.[76]

Army food preparation and consumption took place within a specific culture, connected to but distinctly separate from the civilian Anglo-Australian world from which the AIF was drawn. It suffered from the characteristic limitations of institutional food, that of being neither a dining out nor a home dining experience, and of meeting physiological but not sociological or psychological needs.[77] The army had its own food rituals, marked by bugle calls, queues, unwelcomed fatigue duties, and rough collective dining in an environment of competitive "unrelieved masculinity," in stark contrast to the civilian domestic meal environment with its comforting homely touches and loving motherly care. Despite serving up largely similar food to the civilian diet, army food regularly failed to satisfy at the sociological level.[78]

Catering Failures at Gallipoli Compared to Other Theatres

Wishart's linking of the catering failures during the Gallipoli campaign to its military failure raises questions about other campaigns, as official rations remained substantially the same. In fact, the full issue of official rations at Gallipoli was frequently curtailed by a "unique" combination of adverse circumstances: professional inexperience and logistical difficulties exacerbated by "location, topography and the weather."[79] Insufficient water, which in any case was often impure, intensified the problem, as did poor sanitary conditions and inadequate labour to move supplies, not to mention constant Turkish shelling of the entire shallow bridgehead. In other campaigns, most of these problems were, if not fully removed, at least mitigated. Both France and Sinai-Palestine offered safe bases from which logistical support could operate without harassing enemy fire. Transport systems, particularly in Europe, benefitted from modern shipping, port facilities, railways and roads. The AIF learnt from Gallipoli and delivered much more effective support, especially when embedded in the more experienced British army network.

Nevertheless, the fundamental problems of the army diet remained: too much protein, fat, carbohydrates and salts, and a deficiency of fresh vegetables and fruit. In some circumstances, this lack made itself evident in the later campaigns, particularly Sinai-Palestine, where conditions occasionally resembled Gallipoli, as poor supply lines cut access to proper nutrition, and hostile weather and terrain magnified health issues. Outbreaks of "Barcoo Rot," an Australianism for ulcerous skin often caused by malnutrition, were attributed by an officer to "poor Tucker" and "the want of Vegetables," with rations "of green stuff" often not delivered.[80] It is fascinating that he could identify the cause of the problem which seemed to evade the recognition of senior staff.

The availability of fresh food in other theatres was part of the reason Australian troops avoided the worst effects of the malnutrition inflicted by the army diet. At Gallipoli, there were few alternate sources of food to the official rations. Brief periods of leave in the Greek Islands, or hospitalisation in Egypt or Malta, allowed access to fresh food, prized by the Australians as much for its change of menu as for its additional nutrients. Supplies sold by enterprising British sailors, the limited canteen set up late in the campaign, and food parcels from home also offered some variety, though usually low in vitamin-rich food.

However, in Palestine, and especially in France, a wider vista of alternative food sources opened up. Army canteens sold mainly starchy and sweet food, but restaurants, cafes and estaminets offered broader choices, while billeting in French homes offered welcomed home cooking, usually with a good variety of freshly-picked vegetables accompanying the meat or in soups, broths and salads. These social occasions were considered by one historian "an underestimated factor" not just for physical health but also in maintaining high British troop morale.[81] Soldiers bought fruit from locals, or raided orchards, and picked berries from hedges and fields. In one instance, drunken soldiers devastated a pea field growing by the side of the road, the diarist justifying the raids because "it was the only way to get green

vegetables," asserting that a diet of bully, "without any vegetables whatever, is not the best food to live on."[82] Soldiers often helped themselves from gardens, particularly in ruined French villages during the war of movement in 1918. Having collected "quite a large bunch of rhubarb" from a deserted village in May 1917, one Australian added, "it will be the first green vegetable food we have had in France."[83] He had been there since February.

In Britain, soldiers ate in cafes and restaurants, and were frequently invited to dine in the homes of locals while in training, convalescing or on leave. In a large number of cases, these were close relatives from the original British branch of the family, and the opportunities of dining English-style among family or in family-like contexts provided the normalising culinary context of familiar food in domestic environments. British-based relatives also sent food parcels which, having a transit time of just a few days, could include welcome fresh items, and parcels were typically shared with close friends, ensuring that those without such sources still benefitted. The presence of young women in British and French homes and restaurants added further lustre to these occasions, providing a restorative holistic food experience that no army ration table could have conjured.[84] Thus it was through the unofficial additions that the members of the AIF limited the damage of the deficiencies in their official diet.

Adding to Australian dietary agency was the generous AIF pay-scale, which offered several times the purchasing power of a British soldier, and more than any other Allied soldier, making additional food purchases more possible and in some cases causing inflation that priced others out of the market.[85] While Australians reputedly spent all their pay on drink, the reality was that some did, while many also bought food as well. In all these cases, it was not just a matter of food and nutrients that made the experience holistic; it was also the sense of "self-determining agency" being restored against the army's practice of micro-managing its soldiers' lives.[86]

British Army versus AIF perceptions of Army Diet

Finally, we turn to Duffett's conclusion of the "clear difference of opinion between the feeders and the fed" about the quality of the army's catering. To some extent we have already addressed the failure of the army to understand that food was more than "the provision of a diet that was physiologically sound,"[87] but Duffett's conclusions go further, noting that "Army food was found particularly distressing during the men's initiation into military life." While many factors alienated and dismayed the new recruit, "it was the medium of food that was returned to repeatedly as the gauge by which their experience was measured," for food constituted "a basis for relating oneself to the rest of the world."[88] This disillusionment was not limited to first contact with the army, but remained a festering grievance throughout their service.

Yet there are notable differences between the British and Australian records of war in the culinary realm, despite sharing effectively identical diets. To begin with, inflexible habits are considered typical of societies with "relatively low rates of social change,"[89] such as Britain. However, Australians came from a society of relatively high social mobility, living in circumstances where adaptation and change were part of the social fabric. Hence, the changes in conditions imposed by their enlistment appear to have had less dramatic effects on the members of the AIF.

The atmosphere in the Australian army was also less smotheringly patronising and austere, due to a different culture especially in the relationship between officers and men. Rigid British army traditions juxtaposed all-powerful officers and NCOs against the minion rankers, in part reflecting similar hierarchies in civilian society. While the influx of men of all walks of life into the hierarchy of both rankers and officers seriously challenged this during World War One, it still did not match the Australian dynamic where the bulk of the men

retained a distinctively civilian outlook, and officers and men typically shared similar levels of military experience, and in many cases were socially connected in civilian society. Hence the gap between officers and lower ranks was much smaller, and informality more marked, so that the "Anzac experience may have been the exception to the rule" of strong distinctions between officer and ranker catering.[90]

In the diaries, letters and memoirs of more than 1,200 servicemen and women scrutinised for this study, no Australian recorded the same kind of distress when entering the AIF that Duffett considers widespread in the British experience.[91] A number of Australians wrote, sometimes in great detail, of their initiation to the army, adopting a tone of curious observer-participant in their early messing experiences. One recorded his "first and by no means worst, army meal," and though titling his memoir *No Memories for Pain* may suggest that he mentally edited out the unpleasant experiences,[92] others recorded similar sentiments. A teenage soldier captured the novelty of his first experiences in a cheerful detailed account for his family, flaunting his newly-acquired military vocabulary by explaining army jargon such as "Mess orderly" and "Mess shed." He admitted that army life could be rough, though he expected familiarity to reduce this, but his letters fail to record any kind of alienating distress despite his habitual hyperbole, a silence on the shock of army food evident across all the diaries perused.[93] This is not to say that all was well; complaints about army food began in training camps. When one protester against the dust and dirt in his food was asked by the Orderly Officer if he had not signed up to fight for his country, he replied, "Yes, but I didn't enlist to eat it."[94] The incident speaks richly of the freer culture of the AIF, for a British sergeant asking if the troops were satisfied with their rations "would breathe fire, smack his cane on a table and yell out…'Any Complaints?' It took a brave man to risk such wrath and express a grievance."[95] By comparison, there are many recorded incidents of Australian rankers complaining to good effect about their rations, in one instance bringing about a

severe dressing down of the cooks by an orderly officer with a consequent "noticeable improvement," while a colonel sacked his cooks with "sulphuric," "frightful" language after having his attention drawn to what he thought was "not bad" soup, only to be told it was tea.[96] Lieutenants in training were taught to report any lapses in catering to their company commander.[97] Perhaps the availability of redress muted the potential distress of army catering lapses. In any case, alongside extensive complaints about the quantity and quality of food, in particular repeating the same British complaints of insupportable monotony, are others praising the food they received. Again, some might be discounted as reassuring the folks at home, but others are in private diaries not necessarily intended for a wider audience.

Conclusion

While the argument above does not completely discount Duffett's thesis that army food proved unsatisfactory on the whole, it does qualify its extent in the context of the AIF. Army food continued to disappoint, both physiologically and emotionally, leaving an overwhelming impression of being limited to just a few ingredients, and in practice not being much better. While vegetables and fresh meat and bread formed part of the official ration, they were regularly in short supply, leaving soldiers in a permanent state of mild malnutrition, which only their extra-army diet alleviated to some extent. Its monotonous nature, compounded by a complacent high command and mediocre cooks, added to the dreariness of much of army life, leaving an indelible impression on the soldiers of the AIF. Nevertheless, they appear to have been more resilient than their British cousins, suffering less from culture shock during their military service.

Wishart's conclusions about the Gallipoli campaign can also now be extended across the whole AIF experience during the war. Her findings remain valid for all theatres, with the official diet's inadequacies only mitigated by soldiers accessing civilian sources, which were

more readily available in most other campaign theatres. It was these additional foods that, for the most part, prevented the dietary problems of Gallipoli from repeating themselves on a large scale.

The problem of diet endured not just throughout the First World War but also into the Second. One historian noted that at the start of the Second World War, both British and Australian army cooking was "abysmal," and "the dreadful food undermined military morale," with troops still dependant on the demonstrably inadequate "bully beef (corned beef) and biscuits, just as they had been during the First World War." Unsurprisingly, the campaigns in North Africa and New Guinea were marked by the same health problems caused by a lack of fresh food, a situation not addressed until 1943.[98] One can conclude therefore, that despite the experience of long campaigning, official army rations in the AIF remained effectively unsatisfactory over the course of the Great War, and beyond, and were only ameliorated when troops could access non-army sources of food.

Declaration of interest

I have no conflict of interest to disclose.

Notes

1. Santich, *Bold Palates*, 205-7.

2. Duffett, "Taste of Army Life," 255.

3. Arthur Hawke, *Petersburg Times*, March 3, 1916.

4. Ibid., *Stomach for Fighting*, 7.

5. For example Newton, *The Getting of Garlic.*

6. Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Duffett and Drouard, *Food and War in the Twentieth Century.*

7. Laurence and Tiddy, *Bully Beef to Icecream*, 22.

8. Wilson, *Bully Beef and Balderdash*, 216.

9. Ibid., 272.

10. Wishart, “As fit as fiddles”; Ibid., “From Bully Beef”.

11. Duffett, “War Unimagined”; Ibid., *Stomach for Fighting*; Ibid., “Taste of Army Life”; Ibid., “British Army Provisioning”.

12. Ibid., “Taste of Army Life”, 252-3; Ibid., *Stomach for Fighting*, 6.

13. Weeks, *Tea, Rum and Fags*.

14. Butler, “Appendix 6”.

15. Lumme, “Food Provisioning,” 32; Butler, “Appendix 6”; Duffett, “British Army Provisioning,” 45.

16. Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 26-41.

17. Wishart, “From Bully Beef,” 137; Duffett, “War Unimagined,” 51.

18. Duffett, “Taste of Army Life,” 254.

19. Gregory, *Last Great War,* 282; Weeks, *Tea, Rum and Fags*, 10.

20. Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 59.

21. Ramford Haines, *Border Watch*, December 25, 1915.

22. Beardsworth and Keil, *Sociology on the Menu*, 83-4; Duffett, “Taste of Army Life,” 255; Ibid., *Stomach for Fighting*, 49-51, 58, 91-2; Burnett, *England Eats Out,* 125.

23. Junor, “Meat and veg complex,” 477; Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*, 76; O’Brien, *Colonial Kitchen*, 140-2.

24. O’Brien, *Colonial Kitchen*, 10, 125; Duffett, “Taste of Army Life,” 254.

25. Duffett, “Taste of Army Life,” 254; Freeman and Leventi-Perez, *“Pardon Your Turkey*,” 107; Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 162; O’Brien, *Colonial Kitchen*, 58, 124.

26. Wise, “Job Skills,” 104-6.

27. Gammage, *Broken Years*, 2; Symons, *One Continuous Picnic,* 126; O'Brien, *Colonial Kitchen*, 58; Singley "'Hardly Anything Fit," 41.

28. Junor, "Meat and Veg Complex," 474; Beckett, *Convicted Tastes,* 91, 93, 103; Symons, "Australia's cuisine culture"; Santich, *Bold Palates*, 18, 23.

29. Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*, 74, 127; O'Brien, *Colonial Kitchen*, 128.

30. O'Brien, *Colonial Kitchen*, 41; Beckett, *Convicted Tastes*, 72; Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*, 76.

31. Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*, 110.

32. O'Brien, *Colonial Kitchen*, 57; Junor, "Meat and Veg Complex," 477.

33. Wilson, *Bully Beef.*

34. Duffett, "British Army Provisioning," 43; Ibid., "Taste of Army Life," 252-3, 257; Ibid., *Stomach for Fighting*, 5-6.

35. Wishart, "As Fit as Fiddles," 132; Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 5.

36. Duffett, "War Unimagined," 57; Ibid., "British Army Provisioning," 43.

37. Ibid., *Stomach for Fighting*, 94.

38. Ibid., 146.

39. Ibid., "Taste of Army Life," 255.

40. Lumme, "Food Provisioning," 32; Butler, "Appendix 6".

41. Lumme, "Food Provisioning," 35.

42. *Medical Journal of Australia,* 23 October 1915, 403..

43. *Eat for Health*, 42; Lumme, "Food Provisioning," 32.

44. O'Brien, *Colonial Kitchen*, 124.

45. Australian War Memorial (hereafter AWM) PR04732, Martin, Diary, September 20, 1917.

46. Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 126.

47. Symons, *One Continuous Picnic*, 75; Beardsworth and Keil, *Sociology on the Menu,* 154; AWM 25 221/3, *Reports of the Inspection of Catering*.

48. AWM PR04732, September 20, 1917; Beckett, *Convicted Tastes*, 97.

49. Duffett, "War Unimagined," 54; Wishart, "From Bully Beef," 138-9.

50. Wishart, "As Fit as Fiddles," 132; Ibid., "From Bully Beef," 139, 143-4.

[51] *Manual of Military Cooking and Dietary*, 49.

52. AWM 2DRL0785, Gallwey, Letters, June 24, 1917, August 2, 1917; Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales (hereafter MLSLNSW) MLMSS 1024, Weir, Letters, January 5, 1917, January 16, 1917, May 6, 1917; Stevenson, *Anatomy of a Division*, 145-6.

53. Beardsworth and Kiel, *Sociology on the Menu*, 52-3; Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 150; Duffett, "Taste of Army Life," 252-3.

54. Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 56; Duffet "Taste of Army Life," 253-4.

55. Leslie Tucker, *Koroit Sentinel*, January 5, 1918.

56. Tom Wade, *Port Macquarie News,* January 22, 1916.

57. MLSLNSW MLMSS 783, Gibson, Diary, December 7, 1915.

58. Horace Duckham, *Avon Gazette*, November 17, 1917.

59. AWM 2DRL0785, October 9, 1917, November 4, 1917, November 14, 1917.

60. "Letters from the Front," *Blackwood Times*, May 2, 1916.

61. MLSLNSW MLMSS 2935, O'Hare, Diary, September 2, 1915.

62. MLSLNSW MLMSS 2963, Rose, Memoir, n.d. circa October 1916; AWM 3DRL2206, Thomas, Letter, March 3, 1916.

63. Laurence and Tiddy, *Bully Beef to Icecream*, 24; Weeks, *Tea, Rum and Fags*, 8-9;

64. "Soldiers' Letters," *Port Macquarie News*, September 30, 1916.

65. Wilson, *Bully Beef*, 216.

66. Duffett, "Taste of Army Life," 257.

67. Reynaud, *Anzac Spirituality*, 227-30.

68. AWM 2DRL0786, Richards, Diary, November 13, 1916, January 5, 1917, March 19, 1917.

69. Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 119, 134-5, 149.

70. Ibid., 2.

71. Ibid., 150.

72. Beardsworth and Kiel, *Sociology on the Menu*, 52-3

73. Duruz, "Love in a Hot Climate," 16-7, 24.

74. AWM25 221/3, *Reports of the Inspection of Catering*; Wilson, *Bully Beef*, 223; Duffett, "British Army Provisioning," 51-3.

75. Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 6, 231-2.

76. Laurence and Tiddy, *Bully Beef to Icecream*, 22.

77. Mennell, Murcott and van Otterloo, *Sociology of Food,* 112.

78. Duffet, "Taste of Army Life," 260-2; Wise, *Anzac Labour*, 69, 75-6.

79. Wishart, "From Bully Beef," 140-1.

80. MLSLNSW MLMSS 1024, January 5, 1917, January 16, 1917, January 19, 1917, May 6, 1917.

81. Gibson, *Behind the Front,* 146.

82. AWM 2DRL0785, June 24, 1917, August 2, 1917.

83. MLSLNSW MLMSS 1733, Sullivan, Diary, May 6, 1917.

84. Ayton, *Hell of a Time*, 90, 125, 131; Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 217-8.

85. Gibson, *Behind the Front*, 262.

86. Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 233.

87. Ibid., "Taste of Army Life," 252-3.

88. Ibid., 253.

89. Beardsworth and Keil, *Sociology on the Menu*, 154.

90. Stanley, *Bad Characters*, 21, 37, 40, 76-8, 98-100; Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 138-9.

91. Duffett, *Stomach for Fighting*, 93; Ibid., "Taste of Army Life," 252-3.

92. "War Diary," Kingsley-Norris, *No Memories for Pain*, August 19, 1914.

93. AWM MSS1355, Gallwey, *Silver King*, 46-47.

94. "Leather Medal," *The Honk*, January 18, 1915.

95. Duffett, "Taste of Army Life," 259.

96. AWM PR03193, n.d., circa late 1917; AWM PR91015, Turnbull, Diary, 26 June 1915.

97. *Hints to Officers*, 32-33.

98. Collingham, *Taste of War*, 385, 403-6.

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