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## 'A Kind of Useless man'? An Evaluation of AIF Cooks and Cookery, 1914-1918

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## **‘A Kind of Useless Man’?: An evaluation of AIF cooks and cookery, 1914-1918**

### **Abstract**

While the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) of 1914-1918 experienced a significant shift from amateurism to professionalism over the course of the war in most areas, one crucial role not yet examined in the literature on the AIF is that of army cook. This article argues that their role was not taken sufficiently seriously during the Great War, leaving them effectively still amateurs at the end of the war. It explores the regulations for army cooks, the processes of selection, training and monitoring, as well as their performance in camps and in the field, and draws the conclusion that the army failed to professionalize role.

### **Key Words**

Army cook, cookery training, Australian Imperial Force, professionalization of army

### **Introduction**

While popular Anzac mythology often paints the men of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) as intrinsically superior fighters because of their bush ingenuity and innate skill, scholarship has shown the learning curve the AIF went through, as training and experience turned Australia’s largely amateur and misfiring army of 1915 into one of the most professional and effective fighting armies by 1918.<sup>1</sup> However, this professionalism was not universal; at least one role critical to the success of armies failed to make the same professional growth as the fighting arms: that of army cook.

‘No cook, no company’, wrote Australia’s renowned bush poet A.B. (Banjo) Paterson in one of two stories about army cooks published in 1918, while serving with the Australian Remount Unit in Egypt, claiming it ‘would be a very good Military maxim to be elaborated in lectures at Duntroon [the Australian Officer Training School] and elsewhere’, for, he insisted, the cook was ‘really a very important man’.<sup>2</sup> ‘An army lives, trains, fights, and does everything on its *belly*’, wrote an AIF

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Petersen, ‘The AIF - as Good as the Anzac Legend Says?’. *The Sydney Papers*, 19(2), 2007, p. 177; Jean Bou, *The AIF in Battle: How the Australian Imperial Force Fought, 1914-1918* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> A. B. Paterson, ‘A General Inspection’, *Kia Ora Coo-ee*, 15 November 1918, p. 17. The other article, ‘The Cook-House’, appeared in *Kia Ora Coo-ee*, 15 October 1918, pp. 2-3.

messing officer in 1917,<sup>3</sup> echoing a military adage attributed to Napoleon but conceptually dating back to Greek and Roman times. The well-being of the 416,000 men who enlisted in the AIF during 1914-1918 rested in the hands of very select groups, but despite the mountain of published research on the AIF, there is very little about their cooks and cookery, although as Paterson suggests they arguably had as much impact on soldier well-being as officers for example, if not more. Yet one inspector of catering officer described the typical AIF cook as 'a kind of useless man in any other job ... sent down to the cookhouse where he is no doubt also a bad cook'.<sup>4</sup> This article explores the role of the cooks and cookery in the AIF, and the relative ineffectiveness of attempts to improve their professional performance.

While studies have been done on some aspects of feeding the AIF, they only give perfunctory attention to cooks. Caroline Laurence and Joanne Tiddy devote about 14 pages to the Great War in their short study of Australian army food during the two World Wars, making some useful observations with their focus on nutrition.<sup>5</sup> Graham Wilson devotes a chapter of a myth-busting book to a wordy and unfocused demolition of the myth of bully beef and biscuits as the mainstay of the army diet. He mentions in passing some of the issues around the selection and training of cooks.<sup>6</sup> Ironically, Wilson is himself prone to overstate his case, drawing the opposite but equally invalid conclusion that army catering was basically good.

On the other hand, Alison Wishart offers two insightful analyses of the role of food and health in the Australian army, concluding that nutrition and hygiene played crucial roles in the outcome of campaigns, particularly Gallipoli.<sup>7</sup> Also useful for comparison are Rachel Duffett's excellent studies of

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<sup>3</sup> Information on the Messing Department, AWM25 487/6, Australian War Memorial, Canberra (AWM).

<sup>4</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering and the Organization of Cooks 1916-1919, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>5</sup> Caroline Laurence and Joanne Tiddy, *From Bully Beef to Icecream: The Diet of the Australian Armed Forces in World War I and World War II* (Daw Park, S.A.: Repatriation General Hospital, 1989), p. 22.

<sup>6</sup> Graham Wilson, *Bully Beef and Balderdash: Some myths of the A.I.F. examined and debunked* (Newport NSW: Big Sky, 2012), pp. 216-272.

<sup>7</sup> Alison Wishart, "'As fit as fiddles" and "as weak as kittens": the importance of food, water and diet to the Anzac campaign at Gallipoli', *First World War Studies*, 7(2) (2016), pp. 131-164, DOI: 10.1080/19475020.2016.1177795; Alison Wishart, 'From Bully Beef to Crème Caramel: Feeding the Troops', in Tristan Moss and Tom Richardson, eds., *Beyond Combat: Australian Military Activity Away from the Battlefields* (Kensington, NSW: NewSouth Publishing, 2018).

British army catering, with its many similarities to and some differences from Australian food issues, especially as the AIF followed British models, and was almost wholly supplied by them once in the theatres of war.<sup>8</sup>

The other aspect of AIF catering to receive academic scrutiny is that of bakers, a topic that falls outside the scope of this article. Paul Rosenzweig's article on the career of AIF baker John Burk, and Pamela Etccl's doctoral dissertation discuss various aspects of the bakers and the Australian Field Bakeries, noting the recruitment of professional civilian bakers, a situation that contrasts with army cooks.<sup>9</sup> The two histories of the Australian Army Service Corps cover all the activities of the Corps over such a large sweep of time that nothing significant is devoted to cooking in World War One.<sup>10</sup>

While these authors have made varying contributions to our understanding of the feeding of the AIF, their orientation is either towards myth-busting or nutrition, and none adequately addresses the army's approach to defining the role, the processes of selection and training, and how effective this was, nor evaluates the actual performance and reception of cooks, which this article undertakes by exploring each of these issues in turn. Sources for this study include official army papers, the letters, diaries and memoirs of soldiers, and scholarly studies of the feeding of various Great War

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<sup>8</sup> Rachel Duffett, 'A War Unimagined: Food and the rank and file soldier of the First World War', in Jessica Meyer, ed., *British Popular Culture and the First World War* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008); Rachel Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life: Food, Identity and the Rankers of the First World War', *Cultural and Social History*, 9(2) (2012), pp. 251-269; Rachel Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting: Food and the soldiers of the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012); Rachel Duffett, 'British Army Provisioning on the Western Front, 1914-1918', in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Rachel Duffett and Alain Drouard, eds., *Food and War in the Twentieth Century* (London & New York: Routledge, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Paul A. Rosenzweig, "'Veteran Soldier and a Good Citizen"', Corporal William John Burk (1886-1926)', *Sabretache*, 56(2) (2015), pp. 4-13; Pamela M. Etccl, *Our Daily Bread: The Field Bakery and the Anzac Legend* (PhD Thesis, Perth: Murdoch University, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> H. Fairclough, *Equal to the Task: The History of the Australian Army Service Corps* (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962); Neville Lindsay, *Equal to the Task: The Royal Australian Army Service Corps, Vol. 1* (Kenmore Qld: Historia Productions, 1992).

armies.<sup>11</sup> The literary remains of soldiers record extensive soldierly perceptions of how they were fed and, if used with the necessary caution for the inevitable biases of what have been termed 'egodocuments',<sup>12</sup> offer useful insight into army cookery. Perhaps one reason for the lack of focus on cooks is the fact that many relevant official documents were destroyed rather than archived, leading to a paucity of primary sources in both British and Australian archives, accurately reflecting official army neglect over the role of cooks, evident in the British army's own glacial reforms in army cookery from the Crimean War through to the Second World War.<sup>13</sup>

### **Regulations for army cooks**

When the Australian government authorised the establishment of the AIF in August 1914 for overseas service, its organisation was modelled on the British army, including in catering, with the *Manual of Military Cooking* and the *Field Cookery Book* providing directions for the role of cook. The Commonwealth Military Forces of Australia regulations stipulated that each battalion was to have a sergeant cook, with corporal cooks in the four companies under his direction, and one kitchen hand per cook, supplied on a two week rotation from the company, as well as extra men detailed to the cook-house from day to day for orderly duties such as food preparation, service and clean-up. Commanding officers were ordered to ensure that at least eight men in each company had instruction in meat preparation, making field kitchens, and cooking.<sup>14</sup>

The regulations gave reasonably detailed descriptions of the roles and responsibilities of army cooks. The battalion sergeant cook was described as being 'a specially trained man capable of instructing his cooks in the construction of field cooking apparatus, and cooking in the best and most

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<sup>11</sup> Alan Weeks, *Tea, Rum and Fags: Sustaining Tommy 1914-18* (Stroud, Gloucester: The History Press, 2009); Zweiniger-Bargielowska, Duffett and Drouard, *Food and War in the Twentieth Century*.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Fulbrook, and Ulinka Rublack, 'In Relation: The 'Social Self' and Ego-Documents', *German History*, 28(3) (2010); Rudolf Dekker, ed. *Egodocuments and History: Autobiographical writing in its social context since the Middle Ages* (Hilversum: Verloran, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> Duffett, 'British Army Provisioning', pp. 38-39, 43; Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life', p. 253; Lizzie Collingham, *The Taste of War: World War II and the Battle for Food* (New York: Penguin, 2012), p. 385.

<sup>14</sup> As explained in job descriptions in Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM; *Report Upon the Department of Defence from the First of July 1914, Until the Thirtieth of June, 1917* (Melbourne: Government Printer, 1918), AWM040757, VR 354.94066 A938r, AWM.

economical way. He should have a fair education, be of sober and steady habits, and above all be a disciplinarian'. Ideally, the sergeant cook would hold a certificate in cookery from a recognised civilian institute of cookery.<sup>15</sup>

The description says much about what was expected of the sergeant cook. He was regarded as the master of his domain, a specialist of not just cooking, but also of creating cook-houses in the field. The need to practice economy was emphasised in the first of the seven particular duties of the role, that of preventing theft and waste. The special emphasis on discipline is telling, suggesting that army cooks needed close supervision, and the remaining six duties related in one way or another to discipline, as the sergeant cook was to ensure punctual meal service, clean cooks, a duty roster, a timetable of work and a menu sheet, and that no smoking took place in the cook-house.<sup>16</sup>

The cook-house duties in each company, battery or squadron ran to sixteen items, some with multiple sub-duties, all under the direction of the master cook, who was responsible for all cook-house operations, from ensuring the right quantity of food was prepared to maintaining discipline, cleanliness, economy and order. It seems probable that the master cook referred to the same office as company corporal cook, though the documentation is not clear. There was to be a minimum of two orderly cooks on duty at all times, beginning at 4 am, lighting the cooking fires and making the morning coffee. In addition to detailed instructions on when each process of fire-lighting, meal preparation, service, and clean-up was to begin, the regulations spelled out when they might take breaks (10 am and 3 pm, for about an hour each), when the cook and cook-house inspection by the orderly officer took place (12 noon), and the inspection of the dinner (lunch) food by the same officer (1 pm), duties for cutting firewood, cleaning cooking pots, cutting up meat, keeping the stock pot, and when they might retire at night (unspecified, but only when formally dismissed by the orderly officer after the 6.30 pm meal). This long and laborious day was even more taxing for the designated master cook, who was 'always on duty, except on leave'.<sup>17</sup>

Further instructions micro-managed in typical army style the cooking of potatoes and the reuse of cooking water for dishes, the handling of firewood, refuse, and the stock pot, the duties of mess orderlies and the manner of distribution of food at mealtimes. Tables of rations and the field apparatus on which to cook them, and a suggested menu for a week, were attached. There was also a list of check points for orderly officers inspecting a field kitchen, including the weekly diet sheet (menu), stock pot, dripping, groceries, general appearance of food, cooks, kitchen, and supply of

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<sup>15</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>16</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>17</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

potatoes, noting that the master cook was to be held responsible for everything.<sup>18</sup> The *Field Service Pocket Book* offered supplementary instructions and diagrams, all rather complex in truth, on the construction of various kinds of ovens and cookers, including a field kitchen, along with basic instructions on how to cook vegetables, and roast, boil, fry or stew meat.<sup>19</sup> What the army failed entirely to recognise in any of its regulations, manuals or practice was the emotional role of food in a soldier's well-being, seeing it merely as a matter of calories, and missing the moral and psychological effect of good or bad catering.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Selection of Army Cooks**

Unfortunately, the collection of well-meaning manuals also failed to address another fundamental problem. Despite the impressive paper detail on the roles of cooks, there was no process to ensure that appropriately-qualified people were selected, nor for ongoing training. The first flood of volunteers for the AIF in August 1914 was expected to provide its own cooks, in the same way that the peace-time militia had during its limited training exercises, but the effectiveness of this varied on the luck of having someone in the ranks with previous cooking experience.

Militating against the likelihood of there being many with the necessary experience was a national culture that discouraged men from participating in cooking. Australia's early colonial circumstances meant that many men cooked, often by sheer necessity, due to low numbers of women in the colonies, as well as the heavy work required such as butchering and cutting firewood. However, with the standard of living rising among the rapidly expanding urban society of late nineteenth century Australia, suburban homes were increasingly fitted out with the latest in kitchen appliances such as gas stoves and cookers, while increasingly sophisticated food manufacturing and distribution also removed the more physically-demanding dimensions.<sup>21</sup> Women were consigned to the family kitchen, male cooks only retained in the kitchens of Australia's elite, both domestic and commercial, as prestigious chefs. They also retained a place in all-male work environments such as shearing sheds or the merchant navy, though the AIF appears to have made no effort to allocate the

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<sup>18</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>19</sup> *Field Service Pocket Book*, (Westminster: Harrison & Sons, 1914).

<sup>20</sup> Collingham, *The Taste of War*, p. 385; Wishart, 'As fit as fiddles'.

<sup>21</sup> Michael Symons, *One Continuous Picnic: A Gastronomic History of Australia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2007), p. 75.

few civilian cooks who enlisted to the same role in the army.<sup>22</sup> Otherwise, Australia's kitchens became a feminised space, so much so 'that any male who, by inclination or obligation, made the kitchen his workplace was automatically contaminated'.<sup>23</sup> Cookery schools had been established in Australia from the 1870s onwards, but these catered mainly for women, focusing on the feminine roles of 'cookery, nutrition, hygiene and mothercraft'.<sup>24</sup>

Hence, the odds were against there being a handy pool of men with the requisite skills to act as unit cooks. There were a few with bush cooking skills which, while highly rated by official war correspondent and later official war historian C.E.W. Bean, who idealised the Australian bushman, did not necessarily impress one army officer, who saw them as 'usually wasteful and not overly clean'.<sup>25</sup> Early in the war, battalion officers had far too much to do to pay much attention to cooks, leaving it to Company sergeants to appoint them, and cooks are absent from the day-to-day commentary of unit diaries, and effectively ignored in battalion histories. Short of cooks with civilian experience, men were appointed to the task regardless of suitability or inclination, and with no apparent instruction occurring to ensure at least eight qualified cooks per company as specified in regulations.

Given the fact that cookery was seen as women's work, the sergeants' choices tended towards the least soldierly, 'feminized men', or 'the dirtiest, slowest, clumsiest and laziest', probably as a convenient way to rid themselves of incompetents in their drill sections.<sup>26</sup> As appalling as that seems, it was perfectly in keeping with British army practice, the template in all things for Australian processes, while the Royal Navy had for centuries appointed sailors with missing limbs to the role,

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<sup>22</sup> Charmaine O'Brien, *The Colonial Kitchen: Australia 1788-1901* (Lanham MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), pp. 74, 89-90.

<sup>23</sup> Barbara Santich, *Bold Palates: Australia's Gastronomic Heritage* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2012), p. 187.

<sup>24</sup> O'Brien, *The Colonial Kitchen*, pp. 80-81; John Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning: The pleasure and anxiety of eating*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge, 2006), p. 62.

<sup>25</sup> C. E. W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-Volume I – The Story of ANZAC from the outbreak of war to the end of the first phase of the Gallipoli Campaign, May 4, 1915*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., (Canberra: AWM, 1941), p. 46; Letter to 4<sup>th</sup> Division Engineers, 23 March 1916, School of Cookery Alexandria Egypt 1916, AWM25 877/2, AWM.

<sup>26</sup> Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting*, p. 189; Wilson, *Bully Beef and Balderdash*, p. 223; Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life', p. 256.



the only one on board where they could be deemed useful.<sup>27</sup> British cooking manuals assumed 'the unskilled status of the cooks, many of whom were unlikely to have had previous culinary experience'.<sup>28</sup> A cook in an Australian army camp was rated 'the worst cook in the world', only avoiding the wrath of his unit by using all his pay to buy pre-cooked food for the men.<sup>29</sup> Another, unhappy at being assigned to cook for his officers, grumbled, 'I'm no good at cooking, a girl's job and I'm all boy', keeping up his griping despite turning out competent meals until he won reallocation to more manly tasks as a groom.<sup>30</sup> A British soldier afraid of combat was assigned domestic tasks and referred to as 'Mrs Clark' by his unit.<sup>31</sup> To date, Australian diaries have failed to offer similar belittling examples, though one gentle soul, of underwhelming physique who often volunteered to help with both army and Y.M.C.A. catering, was regularly allocated fatigue duties, and was denied transfers to the front on several occasions in what appears to have been a sympathetic attempt by his officers to keep him from danger, despite his high-minded insistence on sharing the risks of combat, turning down offers of safe jobs behind the lines.<sup>32</sup> The men of the AIF saw the 'unrelieved masculinity' of the army as a place to prove their manliness; adopting a woman's role, which further subjected them to an 'emasculating' subservience to other men, made cooking particularly distasteful, and perhaps goes some way towards explaining AIF cooks' stubborn independence, in an attempt to restore lost pride, as Nathan Wise points out in his study of Anzac workplace attitudes.<sup>33</sup>

While the unprecedented task of raising, equipping and deploying tens of thousands of troops to the far side of the world meant that it took time to address some of the apparently less urgent needs, such as qualified cooks, the practice of appointing incompetent company cooks actually continued deep into the war, with men appointed to the role 'though possessing no qualifications

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<sup>27</sup> Dudley Pope, *Life in Nelson's Navy* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1987), p. 88.

<sup>28</sup> Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life', p. 256.

<sup>29</sup> Wilson, *Bully Beef and Balderdash*, pp. 221-224.

<sup>30</sup> John Hutton, Diary, January 6, 1917, MLMSS 1138, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Sydney (MLSLNSW).

<sup>31</sup> Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting*, p. 189.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Reynaud, *The Anzacs, Religion and God: the spiritual journeys of twenty-seven members of the AIF* (North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly, 2019), pp. 3-5.

<sup>33</sup> Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life', p. 260; Nathan Wise, *Anzac Labour: Workplace Cultures in the Australian Imperial Force during the First World War* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 69, 75-76.

for the job', as one soldier recalled.<sup>34</sup> The AIF had no systematic process of alignment between civilian skills and army roles, but there was a general tendency to appoint qualified men to other technical roles. For example, the light horse tested men's horsemanship before enlistment, while skilled tradesmen such as carpenters, smiths and miners were often directed to the Engineer Corps and mining units. Where there were insufficient specialists, such as in wireless telegraphy, the army instituted effective training programs. But when it came to the cooks, the selection often fell on the least militarily competent men in the unit, who was exiled to the kitchen. This echoed a contemporary British observation that 'there was a tendency to appoint lacklustre rankers to the kitchen, and men who failed on the drill square generally fared no better in the cookhouse'.<sup>35</sup> The supply of competent cooks continued to be a problem even by the end of the First World War, for in 1919 an officer protested that it was very difficult to find qualified cooks among the soldiers returning to Australia, and those with qualifications often hid the information. 'The result is that the cooking staff is sometimes more willing than competent.'<sup>36</sup>

Not surprisingly, cooks quickly developed a reputation for unsoldierly behaviour, dirtiness, and eccentricity. Because their duties began before dawn and ended late in the day, they did not participate in most of the routine parades of their unit, and they came to see themselves as a breed apart. One soldier described them as the 'drollest' characters in the AIF, unshaven, wearing non-regulation clothing, 'and covered with a greasy blackness from head to foot', their discipline 'rather slack'. A cook with a 'black, unshaven face' was puzzled at being asked by an officer why he had not saluted, replying with self-evident justification for his non-military behaviour and appearance, 'I'm a cook'.<sup>37</sup> Cartoons in a regimental newspaper featured grubby cooks and poor cooking (see Figure 1).<sup>38</sup>

The selection of cooks continued to sacrifice ability to availability. One soldier diary named two cooks in his battalion, neither of whom appear to have had previous experience, nor were they given any training in the army.<sup>39</sup> Of six cooks identified in Australian War Memorial files, only two listed

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Louch, Memoir, n.d., circa December 1914, Egypt,

<http://11btn.wags.org.au/index.php/chronicles/ts-louch-memoirs/91-memoirs-ts-louch-part-1-chapter-2>.

<sup>35</sup> Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life', p. 256.

<sup>36</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>37</sup> Hector Brewer, Diary, 19 August 1917, MLMSS 1300, MLSLSW.

<sup>38</sup> *Kia ora Coe-ee*, May 1918, p. 7, 15 August 1918, p. 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ben Champion, Diary, 26 June 1916, 26 July 1916, 2DRL0512, AWM.

their peacetime profession as cooks, the others being an orchardist, two labourers and a carter. Five received cookery instruction, one in 1916, while the rest only trained from July 1917 onwards, mostly after having served as cooks for some time already.<sup>40</sup> In England in 1917, a convalescent soldier was allocated to cooking duties probably as a means of finding a useful role for someone not yet up to front line service. While he appreciated the perks of skipping parades and being kept out of danger, he did not enjoy cooking. He tried to break it gently to his mother than he was being trained as a cook, asking her not to 'burst out laughing or crying' at his new occupation, and insisting that he had not yet poisoned anyone.<sup>41</sup> Another man sent to cookery school in June 1917 was probably selected because of his age (early 40s) and poor health, having spent more time in hospital with various ailments than in his unit. It was ultimately futile as he was discharged in late 1917 with 'rheumatism, corns, and premature senility'.<sup>42</sup>

Further inhibiting the AIF cooks was the early lack of equipment, such as cook-houses, field kitchens and stoves, as well as tables, chairs, cutlery and crockery. At first they cooked over outdoor pits, called 'trench fires' in army parlance, while the army scrambled to acquire the necessary equipment, which it accomplished for Australian camps by mid-1915.<sup>43</sup> There were also early attempts to train and equip cooks in Australian camps, with supposedly 'good success' in Sydney's Liverpool camp in 1915.<sup>44</sup> Concerted efforts were made to equip units with field kitchens, either the British Crimean War-era Soyer Stove or the more eminently practical Wiles Mobile and Stationary Steam Cookers, mobile field kitchens designed and built by James Fletcher Wiles in Ballarat,

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<sup>40</sup> B2455 Packman Frederick George, National Australian Archives, Canberra (NAA); B2455 Davies William Lloyd, NAA; B2455 Mann Edward William, NAA; B2455 McArthur Robert, NAA; B2455 Hewatt Richard, NAA; B2455 Murphy Samuel Thomas Michael, NAA.

<sup>41</sup> Victor Brown, Letters, 13 September 1917, 20 November 1917, 19 January 1918, PRG 373, State Library of South Australia, Adelaide (SLSA).

<sup>42</sup> B2455 Martin JR, NAA.

<sup>43</sup> Wilson, *Bully Beef and Balderdash*, pp. 226-227.

<sup>44</sup> Letter to 4<sup>th</sup> Division Engineers, 23 March 1916, School of Cookery Alexandria Egypt, 1916, AWM25 877/2, AWM.

Victoria.<sup>45</sup> These took time to roll out, four being issued to each battalion, and in Egypt in September 1915, a soldier happily noted that a newly arrived cooker turned out 'perfect tucker'.<sup>46</sup> However, even good equipment was insufficient, as there was widespread ignorance on how to get the best out of the mobile kitchens, with equipment damaged through misuse, and a default reliance on simple stewing or boiling when they were capable of steaming, roasting, baking, and frying as well.<sup>47</sup>

So, despite the best intentions, there was still a huge gap between the outcomes intended by the regulations and what actually happened in practice, which again closely mirrored the experience of the British army.<sup>48</sup> The results were felt in the field, especially at Gallipoli in 1915, where failures in catering, namely a lack of fresh foods, poor sanitary conditions and inadequate supplies, contributed to widespread dysentery and enteric fever. At first it was easier to have soldiers improvise meals in small groups, but by mid-campaign, efforts were being made to implement company cook-houses, in part to cut down on the enormous wastage created by small-scale amateur cooking. This was easier closer to the beach; men in the front lines still relied on individual cooking because it was hard enough hauling raw supplies, let alone prepared meals, up the treacherous tracks to the trenches on the crests of the steep ridges.<sup>49</sup> Not everyone welcomed the change, for company cooks were uneven in their skills. They faced further challenges, such as Turkish shelling, and wild weather that disrupted supplies and blew over cook-houses.<sup>50</sup>

By November 1915, with the campaign limping to a conclusion, brigade and divisional inspections of cook-houses concluded 'that in almost all cases the arrangements for cooking ... are not satisfactory'. Determined efforts were made to align cookery with the *Field Service Pocket Book* regulations, with centralised catering by official cooks and proper storage of supplies and

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<sup>45</sup> J. Kenneth Wiles, 'The Development of Wiles Stationary and Mobile Steam Cookers.'

[www.nashos.org.au/wiles2.htm](http://www.nashos.org.au/wiles2.htm), 2000; Laurence and Tiddy, *From Bully Beef to Icecream*, p. 11; Wilson, *Bully Beef and Balderdash*, p. 256.

<sup>46</sup> Harrie Oliver, 'Soldiers' Letters', *Bacchus Marsh Express*, 25 September 1915, p. 3.

<sup>47</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>48</sup> Duffett, 'British Army Provisioning', p. 51.

<sup>49</sup> Wishart, 'As fit as fiddles'.

<sup>50</sup> John Reid, Diary, 19 November 1915, PR04613, AWM; Fred Biddle, Letter, 31 October 1915, 1DRL0119, AWM.

arrangements for refuse, all closely supervised by commanding officers.<sup>51</sup> It was a move too late in the right direction, for it was clear that poor cooking standards had helped sabotage the campaign, and it prompted senior combat and health officers to reflect on what could be done better.<sup>52</sup>

With time in Egypt after the evacuation of Gallipoli to digest the failures of the campaign, generals rather than sergeants took charge of change in cookery, seeking to systemically improve the standard of catering. AIF commanders began their changes in early 1916 but, with the transfer to France of the infantry divisions between March and June 1916, and the allocation of the Australian light horse to the British Egyptian Expeditionary Force in Sinai, these efforts were merged with British high command initiatives at more coordinated efforts to address a perceived weakness. Two strategies were pursued: the training of cooks, and a closer supervision and regulation of cookery in the field. By 1918, both of these processes were established routines.

### **Interventions to Improve Cookery: Cookery Schools**

In February 1916, I Anzac Corps commander Lieutenant-General Alexander Godley began action 'on the most important question of the men's cooking and messing', at last insisting on close officer supervision of cooking, especially of its hygiene, and circulating suitable simple recipes, which sadly were not archived.<sup>53</sup> Major-General Harry Chauvel and Brigadier John Antill, then the respective commanders of the Anzac Mounted Division and the 1st Light Horse Brigade, took the matter further, recommending the establishment of a School of Instruction in Military Cookery, Antill observing that 'Squadron Cooks are generally wanting in their knowledge of preparing rations to the best advantage', a situation needing attention 'as the want of efficient cooks is becoming a serious matter'. Writing to Lady Godley, who seems to have become involved on her husband's behalf, a certain Marion Higgins advised against starting a new school at Ismailia, Egypt, rather recommending that men attend her existing school at Alexandria. In all probability, the school was one of the high-minded prewar civilian establishments common in British territories, with a curriculum focused on hygiene, nutrition and morally upright British 'plain cookery',<sup>54</sup> adapted to army needs by a stereotypically stern British Sergeant Major Coop, who Higgins described as being 'one in a hundred.

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<sup>51</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>52</sup> Alison Wishart, 'As fit as fiddles'.

<sup>53</sup> Lieutenant General Godley, letter to Divisional Generals, 26 February 1916, Supervision and monthly reports on Messing arrangements, AWM25 221/9 (829), AWM.

<sup>54</sup> O'Brien, *The Colonial Kitchen*, pp. 80-81; Coveney, *Food, Morals and Meaning*, p. 62.

He not only knows his subject thoroughly, but can *teach* it, and is a splendid disciplinarian. It is quite amazing how the roughest surliest men improve after they have been with us a week.' Higgins' description of Coop's pupils fits with common descriptions of the individualistic character of many cooks in an army system that pursues conformity. At least 50 men from the Anzac Mounted Division and 4<sup>th</sup> Divisional Engineers attended the school between March and June 1916,<sup>55</sup> though nothing more is known of the outcomes of such training.

The curriculum at Higgins' school can only be guessed at from an examination paper that survives. Its emphases are on hygiene (the first question being how to kill flies and keep them out of the kitchen and the last on cleanliness and sanitation, essential skills addressing key failures at Gallipoli), organization of routines, the use of specific equipment such as an Aldershot field oven, and how to make a variety of dishes, from stock pot soup, vegetables, stews, puddings, and dishes whose exact nature is uncertain, such as 'Rice Water' and 'Turkish Pillow'. Another examination included aspects of nutrition, asking for example which were 'flesh forming and body building foods', what non-meat foods might be used to 'build up the tissues', why fruit and vegetables were necessary in the diet (all relevant to rebuilding the physiques of men debilitated by dysentery and enteric fever on Gallipoli), and what digestive juices worked on particular foods. This nutritional focus is unique in the surviving evidence of all the army cookery schools from the Great War, and represents what was for the time a rather high standard of training for army cooks.

In France, a British army report in July 1916 considered that establishing cooking schools at army level would be 'most advantageous', as graduates could train others, with a 'resultant improvement [which] would be most marked in a very short time',<sup>56</sup> but nothing came of this and, despite the recognised and urgent need for a higher standard of army cookery, it still took nearly a year for institutional cookery training to begin at corps level. Both I and II Anzac Corps added cookery schools to their existing corps training establishments in France, which merged into the training schools of the newly-established Australian Corps in November 1917. However, cookery classes only commenced in April 1917, meaning that it took over two and a half years for the wheels of British army administration in France to activate systematic cookery training, significantly behind other specialised skills schools, such as machine guns, gas, signalling, and bombing (hand grenade throwing). Even then, cookery instruction was placed at an inferior level. While the heads of all other courses were commissioned officers, the corps cookery schools were the only ones whose heads were mere sergeants, speaking to the relative lack of value placed on this vital dimension of army

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<sup>55</sup> School of Cookery Alexandria Egypt 1916, AWM25 877/2, AWM.

<sup>56</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

life, though also recognising a practical reality that on the whole, army officers knew nothing about cooking.

The syllabuses for several intakes of student cooks survive in the Australian War Memorial archives alongside the syllabuses of combat courses. Each cohort of about 30-35 student cooks went through an 18-day programme, though with breaks for holidays and sports events it amounted in effect to five and a half hours per day over fifteen and a half days – what was effectively a crash course in cookery. Admittedly, other specialist courses were also relatively short, but their graduates operated under expert supervision once returned to their unit, whereas the graduate cooks were often the best trained men in their kitchens. Though most of the students were already company cooks with some experience, this was not necessarily a marker of expertise. Even in February 1918 a unit's cooks were so mediocre that a visiting corps cookery instructor recommended 'a cook being sent to School *at once for a few days*' [sic].<sup>57</sup>

The program began with an assessment of each student's prior knowledge or experience of cooking. In an attempt to address the unsoldierliness of cooks, each day began with saluting and deportment exercises. Other topics included the role of sergeant cook, assembling, erecting and maximising the uses of improvised ovens and 'travelling kitchens' including kettle trenches, food preparation, personal cleanliness, and food hygiene. The sessions were divided into a practical component such as food preparation, followed by afternoon lectures on the various methods of cooking, such as roasting, baking, and boiling.<sup>58</sup>

The instruction on food preparation focused on the 'composition of army rations and best uses of various components', with special emphasis on economy of foodstuff and fuel and 'the necessity of rendering down every particle of surplus fat'. Making the most of by-products such as 'pastry, puddings etc from biscuits, flour and stale bread', and processing dripping, dominated the curriculum, necessarily emphasising simple cookery methods and techniques in such a truncated course. Further topics included preparing cold and tinned meats and other tinned rations, the use of rice and oatmeal in such dishes as puddings, curries, fish and kedgeriee, creating stock-pots and gravies, the uses of cheese, and 'bones, their uses and advantages in cooking'.<sup>59</sup>

A two-and-a-half-hour preliminary examination was carried out after twelve days 'with the object of finding weak points', followed by a seven-hour practical assessment on day 16 of the training, with a written examination on the last day of classes. Over time there were minor revisions to the

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<sup>57</sup> Reports from Corps Troops Cookery Instructor, Australian Corps, 25 February 1918, AWM25 221/10, AWM.

<sup>58</sup> Australian Corps Schools, Australian Imperial Force unit war diaries 1914-18 War, AWM4 32/2, AWM.

<sup>59</sup> Australian Corps Schools, AWM4 32/2, AWM.

syllabus, noting for example how cleanliness had a 'direct influence on the health of the Troops', and the 'Necessity of changing the diet as often as possible'. There was also growing emphasis on the preparation of fresh, dried and preserved foods.<sup>60</sup>

Realistically, the courses merely skimmed over various cooking skills, with insufficient time to develop expertise. The concept of creating change and variety in the diet also needs qualification: the word 'diet' was used where today we would say 'menu', and their notion of varying the diet did not focus on introducing diverse ingredients, but rather on attempting to disguise the familiar army-issue rations of fresh and preserved meat, a limited range of vegetables, flour, biscuit and seasonings in different ways.<sup>61</sup> As an inspector of catering claimed, 'The men are all well fed, but a greater variety of diet could in many cases be given with the present ration issued'. Hence, recipes circulated to create 'variety' consisted of no new ingredients or cookery methods, but rather how to use the same old rations in dishes such as Welsh rarebit, sea pie, brawn, jam rolls and puddings instead of the predictable stews that were the often-resented staple of army cooking.<sup>62</sup> Duffett describes the recipes published in official cookery manuals as superficially 'enticing', but on closer examination they proved to be 'variations on a single theme: the theme was meat, whether boiled, fried, stewed, braised, steamed or roasted'.<sup>63</sup>

Even this range of cookery methods is not supported by evidence from the cookery schools, especially when reading the notebook of trainee cook John Martin, which confirms the mediocre nature of the training. Most meat dishes were minor variations of the same ingredients of meat, flour, potatoes, onions, and seasonings, while the limited list of vegetables covered were uniformly over-cooked. Rather than a nutrient-preserving steaming, a process well within the capacity of the army mobile kitchens, all vegetables were to be boiled for anything between 30 minutes for cabbage and French beans to two hours for carrots,<sup>64</sup> which cannot have left much in the way of the B and C vitamins, already at a premium in the army diet.<sup>65</sup> His incoherent notes from a guest instructor on

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<sup>60</sup> Australian Corps Schools, AWM4 32/2, AWM.

<sup>61</sup> Duffett, 'British Army Provisioning', pp. 51-53.

<sup>62</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>63</sup> Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting*, p. 80.

<sup>64</sup> John Martin, Notebook, PR04732, AWM.

<sup>65</sup> Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting*, p. 231; Wishart, 'From Bully Beef to Crème Caramel', pp. 138-139.



cooking fish, in stark contrast to the systematic nature of the rest of the instructions, suggest an incompetent teacher on the topic, which cannot have greatly improved Martin's skills.<sup>66</sup>

Nevertheless, a report claimed the II Anzac Corps cookery school at Hazebrouck was 'a really great institution and is no doubt the best cookery school in the Army',<sup>67</sup> and given the numbers graduated through the various cohorts, it would seem that a majority of the cooks in the AIF eventually received this minimal level of formal training. Cookery classes were not run between April and June 1918, perhaps because the AIF was preoccupied with the German spring offensive, though other specialist training courses continued. During this time the corps cookery sergeant instructor conducted an audit of corps kitchens, finding much in good order, and making recommendations where things fell short.<sup>68</sup> These upbeat reports should not conceal the fact that no matter how good the school was in comparison to others, the superficial training was not making much difference to the standards of army catering.

The limitations were highlighted when the inspector of catering recommended to II Anzac Corps in July 1917 that specialist 'cooks and cooks only' should be recruited from Australia 'from now on', adding that 'They would be a great acquisition to the army and it seems to me at present a very serious matter to the Australian army'.<sup>69</sup> A few months earlier, a messing officer in a training depot in England, perceptively wrote, 'First, there is no recognised department of cooks in the A.I.F. Army, although there undoubtedly should be, because you cannot do anything with an Army if you don't feed it, and feed it well.'<sup>70</sup>

### **Interventions to Improve Cookery: Inspectors and Instructors of Catering, and Officer Inspections**

Probably the most effective intervention came from the creation of army catering inspectors and instructors, who visited cook-houses in France on a systematic basis, and messing officers appointed to the larger army bases in England. The work of these inspectors can be categorized under several recurrent concerns. First and foremost, surprisingly, was the methodical collection and rendering of animal fat. While from afar this might seem a rather tangential objective, it was central to the war effort as a precious source of glycerin for explosives. Inspectors frequently advised on the process,

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<sup>66</sup> Martin, Notebook, PR04732, AWM.

<sup>67</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>68</sup> Reports from Corps Troops Cooking Instructor 1918, AWM25 221/10, AWM.

<sup>69</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>70</sup> Information on the Messing Department, AWM25 487/6, AWM.

including making it the specialist task of just one person in the cook-house, in order to improve efficiency. One inspector kept a dedicated column in some reports in 1917 in which to record each cook-house's efforts at fat-saving.<sup>71</sup>

The second concern of inspectors was the quality of the cooking, rated from 'poor' in some instances, to the more common 'fair' and 'good', with the occasional 'excellent'. Qualitative judgments are difficult to draw, based on the few surviving reports, but it would seem that 'fair' to 'good' was the average rating, and the qualities that earned excellent reviews were 'well-cooked' food which was 'varied', 'wholesome' and 'ample'. The cooking in one battalion was praised as 'extremely good, mostly due to one, (an Australian shearer's cook), who seemed to have a hand in all four cookers', an interesting instance of civilian cooking expertise benefitting the army. Another sergeant cook was singled out for taking 'great pride in his work and looked well after the several cook-houses'. In another case, some 'efficient cooks' had to work well into the night because of 'carelessness and inattention' which rendered virtually all their stoves inoperable. Surprisingly, the worst rated mess was that of some staff officers at 1<sup>st</sup> Divisional headquarters where, 'The cooking and serving is very bad, without hesitation, the worst possible'.<sup>72</sup> Such lax service at an officers' mess at divisional headquarters is striking indeed, contradicting a widespread belief that the privileged category of staff officers paid too much attention to their own comforts.

The cleanliness both of cooks and of cook-houses also featured regularly in the reports, as well as the degree of interest and supervision by company and battalion officers. Supplies of basins, soap and towels were expected in each cook-house, and the scrubbing of tables monitored. 'Field cookers of 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion very dirty', one report noted. In one unit given good ratings for cooking and fat saving, the report approved, 'Officers taking an interest on the matter', while another won praise for 'excellent' cooking arrangements, where the sergeant cook was 'a good organiser'. A light horse regiment was rated 'exceptionally good', with 'Clean cooks. Good cooking. Food well varied. Puddings three times a week. A great deal of interest appeared to be taken by officers and N.C.O.s in the cookhouses of this unit. All men perfectly satisfied.'<sup>73</sup> Indeed, in a small instruction manual for officers, lieutenants were enjoined to ensure that 'well cooked' meals were served on time, and to

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<sup>71</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM; Information on the Messing Department, AWM25 487/6, AWM.

<sup>72</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>73</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

speak to their captain if the company cook failed to deliver.<sup>74</sup> Some training courses for new lieutenants included questions on the chief duties of sergeant cooks.<sup>75</sup>

Other items noted in inspectors' reports included cooks' medical histories of communicable diseases such as dysentery, enteric fever or venereal diseases, checking equipment such as meat safes, and monitoring the levels of food wastage. Stock pots featured frequently as a means of reusing bones and meat scraps as the basis of gravies and soups. Efficiency and economy were not just matters of money. One inspector argued that good cooking produced soldiers who were 'at their peak'. Palatable food that minimised waste resulted in 'satisfaction among the troops, efficiency and greater courage, both moral and physical, at its highest, and hence economy'.<sup>76</sup> This officer understood the intimate connection between food and moral, psychological and spiritual well-being, something that Alison Wishart noted in her studies of Gallipoli.<sup>77</sup>

Inspectors sometimes provoked hostile reactions from the units censured. A company commander openly hostile to instructions on saving fat, supervising kitchens and providing variety received a curt letter telling him to comply. Other officers traded accusations of incivility with an Inspector in letters to divisional staff, hotly denying waste and describing the Inspector as 'frantically excited, and far from respectful' in his approach, and jumping to unwarranted conclusions about what he saw.<sup>78</sup> Clearly, quality assurance involved the management of personalities as much as processes.

In addition to maintaining standards, Inspectors and Instructors also gave on-the-spot lectures on catering. An official letter attempted to defuse some of the tensions by defining the Inspector's role as 'instruct[ing] the cooks in economy, variation of diet, etc'. Officers and men were invited to attend alongside the cooks. One inspector's pet topic was how to roast meat in steak-like strips instead of attempting to cook huge pieces, while another hobbyhorse was the use of dandelion and nettles, greens popular with the French but not to Australian tastes, to add to a diet where vegetables were critically lacking. Unpalatable when served as a boiled stand-alone, the Inspector advocated for small amounts of nettle, about a spoonful per man, to be added to stews, where they

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<sup>74</sup> *Hints to Officers on Command, Discipline, and Care of the Men*, (Melbourne: Albert Mullet, 1916), pp. 32-33.

<sup>75</sup> Thomas Richards, Diary, 1 April 1917, 2DRL0786, AWM.

<sup>76</sup> Information on the Messing Department, AWM25 487/6, AWM.

<sup>77</sup> Wishart, 'As fit as fiddles'

<sup>78</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

could act 'as a flavouring items, the same way as parsley'. He also recommended using dandelion in place of lettuce with cheese.<sup>79</sup>

Where many soldiers in ignorance complained about the preserving cap of fat and oil in tins of meat, instructors pointed out that this excessively rich layer was meant to be removed before consumption, and could be reused in puddings. Some issued lists of instructions for improved cooking practice with explanations on getting the best out of the mobile kitchens, along with suggested, though still rather basic recipes for breakfasts, dinners and tea, as well as for haversack rations for men on the march.<sup>80</sup>

At times, officers introduced local variations better adapted to specific circumstances. Reporting to his colonel, a light horse captain defended his unit's cooking at troop (platoon) level rather than squadron (company), arguing that this made a greater variety of cooking possible for his detached troops, while rivalry between cooks led to less waste and a higher standard of catering.<sup>81</sup>

As previously noted, orderly officers were supposed to check the cook-house on a daily basis, though the task was sometimes delegated to sergeants. While British sergeants had an intimidating way of asking their men if the food was good, in the Australian army, men often brought militant industrial relations attitudes to their relationships with officers as if they were civilian work bosses rather than military authorities with near-absolute powers.<sup>82</sup> However, conscientious officers could make a real difference to the standard of cooking offered by unit cooks. An orderly officer sampled a meal at the invitation of his men, and immediately gave the cooks such a dressing down that 'From that time onwards there was a noticeable improvement'.<sup>83</sup> Another sacked his cooks with 'sulphuric', 'frightful' language after tasting what he rated as 'not bad' soup, before discovering that it was in fact tea.<sup>84</sup>

### **Cooking Conditions in Front Lines and Camps**

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<sup>79</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>80</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>81</sup> Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>82</sup> Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life', p. 259; Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting*, pp. 138-139, Wise, *Anzac Labour*, pp. 18-20.

<sup>83</sup> Verner Knuckey, Diary, n.d., circa late 1917, PR03193, AWM.

<sup>84</sup> John Turnbull, Diary, 26 June 1915, PR91015, AWM.

It is easy to blame the cooks for bad food, but they often worked under severe constraints, most especially at the front. Apart from the perfunctory training they received, cooks recorded a daunting list of challenges: unsympathetic quarter-masters, skimpy rations, a lack of equipment, no assistants, wind, sand, dust and flies, scant or green firewood, enemy shellfire targeting cooking smoke, sub-zero winter temperatures, frequent sudden changes of location, 'mass meetings in the cookhouse, ...[and] the sarcastic humor [sic] of alleged wits'. While recognising the range of cooks from the 'grease-besmudged' to 'the natty, smart-looking chef', with the middle ground occupied by 'cooks of varied degrees of proficiency', a unit journal article argued that cooks deserved the kind of recognition regularly granted to other branches of the army.<sup>85</sup>

Out of the line, conditions could be much better. One cook wrote home saying, 'I have not seen much of the firing line yet, as I have a pretty safe job', though another less honestly offered his family melodramatic accounts of his work under fire even though safely ensconced six miles behind the lines.<sup>86</sup> Other worked in the safety and relative comfort of permanent establishments such as army camps and hospitals, some of which had kitchens fitted out with the latest in cookery machinery, producing what one observer considered to be 'appetising and varied' dishes.<sup>87</sup> Official war correspondent Keith Murdoch praised the equipment in one division, repeating the British claims 'that no army has ever been fed so well', to which a British soldier riposted, 'Heaven help the worst fed army, then'.<sup>88</sup> Indeed, equipment was not everything: a 'well fitted out' hospital kitchen with boilers, ovens, power-driven mincers, 'plenty of cooking utensils and a large kitchen staff' still amazed one observer by producing fatty and monotonous food 'not exactly "A la Menzies"', referring to the renowned luxury Melbourne hotel.<sup>89</sup> However, a Flying Corps unit in Palestine

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<sup>85</sup> John Barton, Diary, 26 November 1917, PR00261, AWM; Verdi Schwinghammer, Diary, January 1918, MLMSS 1683, MLSLNSW; Donald Ross, Diary, 1-5 January 1916, 4-5 February 1916, 23 February 1916, 7-10 March 1916, 14 June 1916, PR02079, AWM; Thomas Alcock, Diary, n.d., circa late 1917, MLMSS 1609, MLSLNSW; Malcolm Stanley, Diary, 7 July 1917, MLMSS 3043, MLSLNSW; Herbert Bailey, Diary, n.d. Circa August-September 1918, PR90018, AWM; 'Dixie Director', *Kia-Ora Coo-ee*, 15 September 1918, p. 14.

<sup>86</sup> Edward Skelly, 'Letters from the Front', *Gilgandra Weekly*, 28 January 1916, p. 4; Stanley, Diary, 19 September 1917, MLMSS 3043, MLSLNSW.

<sup>87</sup> Thomas White, Diary, 10 September 1918, MLMSS 9654, MLSLNSW.

<sup>88</sup> Weeks, *Tea, Rum and Fags*, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> Frank Hanley, 'Soldiers' Letters', *Port Fairy Gazette*, 14 October 1918, p. 2.

literally achieved the 'a la Menzies' catering standard, having 'got hold of a rattling good cook' who 'was once a chef at Menzies, consequently we are doing very well in the tucker line'.<sup>90</sup>

### **The Soldiers' Perspectives**

It is difficult to tell from existing evidence if the various official interventions produced a consistent improvement. Soldier diaries vary considerably in their reaction to army cooking and cooks, reflecting not only the gamut of army cook competence, but also a diverse set of soldier expectations, as well as the mitigating circumstances under which cooks worked, which affected their capacity to produce satisfying food. Indeed, circumstances often had as much impact on the satisfaction levels as did the actual food itself, a simple meal after hardship often appreciated more than a more elaborate one in better circumstances.<sup>91</sup>

Soldier diaries record a mix of positives and negatives in their experiences of army cooks, one listing the many failings of his unit cook, including insufficient quantity and variety, with food often burnt or raw. Stews and soups were indistinguishable from each other, the tea like dishwater, the cooking equipment filthy, and the service funereal and niggardly.<sup>92</sup> A pervasive problem was tea that tasted like stew, due to being brewed in the same pot, though some may in fact have simply been the result of far too much tea in the pot, for inspectors labelled some teas they sampled as 'poisonously strong'.<sup>93</sup> Some cooks also exploited their position to make a little money on the side, selling rations to outsiders or charging for items that should have been given free during meals.<sup>94</sup>

The most common complaints focussed on the monotony of the food, particularly the dread of yet another meal of bully beef or stew. 'The everlasting stew,' one wrote, 'how I will hate stew after this, if my future wife makes me a blasted stew I will get a divorce'.<sup>95</sup> Other complaints centred on short rations and bad cooking. One diarist admitted that the food was 'at least very monotonous,' with 'tasteless' stews, 'very crude' desserts, 'saltless' potatoes, the tea and coffee 'pretty crook,' while the bullock's liver for breakfast got 'a wide berth', but realistically added, 'I think we forget

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<sup>90</sup> Ross Smith, Letter, 17 March 1917, PRG 18, SLA.

<sup>91</sup> Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting*, p. x; Wishart, 'From Bully Beef to Crème Caramel', p. 143.

<sup>92</sup> John Wilson, Diary, 19 November 1917, MLMSS 3057, MSLNSW.

<sup>93</sup> Weeks, *Tea, Rum and Fags*, pp. 20-21; Reports of the Inspection of Catering, AWM25 221/3, AWM.

<sup>94</sup> Wilfred Gallwey, 'The Silver King', pp. 228, 327-8, MSS1355, AWM; William Burrell, Diary, 6 March 1916, MLMSS 1375, MSLNSW; Eric Susman, Diary, 18 January 1915, MLMSS 720, MSLNSW.

<sup>95</sup> Arthur Thomas, Diary, 3 March 1916, 3DRL2206, AWM.

that we are on Active Service', and not on a picnic.<sup>96</sup> One unit complained bitterly over the appalling standard of food, even though the cooks had been trained in Alexandria and possessed good equipment.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, one soldier applauded the 'superior class of food to that usually served' after his unit's cooks returned from cookery school, their potato pie proving to be 'quite an improvement on the stew'.<sup>98</sup>

Other soldiers wrote in praise of 'good energetic cooks' who 'take an interest in trying to please the men', or 'a couple of fine cooks' in another unit, and a third described as 'a pearler', while 'cooks really turning it on' helped a battle-weary group recover.<sup>99</sup> Camp cooks could deliver satisfying meals, one soldier gushing in a letter home that 'In fact, it is impossible to get any better food amongst such a number of men'.<sup>100</sup> Cooks often made special efforts for celebrations such as battalion dinners and Christmas, in one instance, the company cooks, including the appropriately-named Ernest Grubb, were given 'a word of warm praise'.<sup>101</sup> Several veterans interviewed in 1988 were complimentary about their unit cooks. 'I reckon our cooks did a jolly good job', one recalled, while another was impressed with their ability to feed the men on the move, noting that the cooks received presents of appreciation from the men at Christmas.<sup>102</sup>

## Conclusion

There is no doubt that despite improvements made, the Australian army failed to address the fundamental issues in feeding its men. Many of the problems lay outside the purview of the cooks.

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<sup>96</sup> Robert Drummond, Diary, 22 January 1917, MLMSS 1485, MLSLNSW.

<sup>97</sup> Knuckey, Diary, 5 July 1916, 12 July 1916, n.d., circa late 1917, PR03193, AWM.

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Alcock, Diary, n.d., Vol 2, pp. 35-36, MLMSS 1609, MLSLNSW.

<sup>99</sup> Beresford Bardwell, Diary, 26 May 1915, b3967614, State Library of Western Australia, Perth; Stanley Hayne, Diary 17 August 1916, MLMSS 2775, MLSLNSW; Cyril Lawrence, Letter, 2 September 1917, *The Gallipoli diary of Sergeant Lawrence of the Australian Engineers- 1st A.I.F. 1915*, Ronald East, ed. (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne University Press, 1981); Ewen Cameron, 'Soldiers' Letters', *Grafton Daily Examiner*, 5 August 1916, p. 2; Norman Young, Letters, 12 December 1917, 27 August 1918, MS 10134, AWM; Claude Sarre, Diary, 12 June 1917, private collection.

<sup>100</sup> Horace Duckham, 'Letters from the Front', *Avon Gazette and York Times*, 17 November 1917, p. 3.

<sup>101</sup> Ronald McInnis, Diary, 25 December 1918, 1DRL438, AWM; *The 23rd*, 1 January 1918, pp. 2-4.

<sup>102</sup> Laurence and Tiddy, *From Bully Beef to Icecream*, pp. 25-26.

To begin with, the diet was intrinsically unhealthy, with far too much fat, protein and salt and far too few vitamins, meaning that many soldiers suffered low level vitamin deficiencies during the war.<sup>103</sup> Supply problems meant that even this inadequate diet sometimes failed to reach soldiers at the front.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, the army saw food almost entirely in terms of supplying energy, failing to reckon with the powerful social, cultural, emotional and spiritual meanings of food that to a large degree influenced soldiers' responses to their army diet.<sup>105</sup> But each of these is a separate topic in itself, too large to deal with adequately in this article. From the perspective of cooks, however, the failure of the army was manifest. This vital position was still staffed haphazardly by the army even late in the war, with no consistent policy of appointing men suited to the role. The training provided was clearly inadequate, both in quantity and quality. Too much emphasis was placed on economy, and too much credit given to paper-thin definitions of variety in the menu, while rosy official reviews of catering standards were out of touch with reality.<sup>106</sup> Army regulations spelled out in pedantic detail what was expected of cooks, but while the theory was in place, the system failed to deliver. In many cases, the worst-performing and least-willing men in the unit were still consigned to the cook-house.

It would take 25 years and another world war before army cooking was organised on a professional basis. The Australian army floundered its way towards a professional Catering Corps, which would not be realised until 1943 under the direction of prominent nutritionist Professor Sir Cedric Hicks, having started the next war in more or less the same lamentable position as the First World War.<sup>107</sup> 'In 1939 the standard of cookery in British and Australian military messes was

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<sup>103</sup> Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting*, p. 231; Wishart, 'From Bully Beef to Crème Caramel', pp. 138-139.

<sup>104</sup> Wishart, 'From Bully Beef to Crème Caramel', p. 139; Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life', pp. 252-253.

<sup>105</sup> Duffett, 'A Taste of Army Life', pp. 252-262; Alan Beardsworth and Teresa Keil, *Sociology on the Menu: An invitation to the study of food and society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 52-53; Michael Roper, *The Secret Battle: Emotional survival in the Great War* (Manchester & New York: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 15.

<sup>106</sup> Duffett, *The Stomach for Fighting*, p. 6.

<sup>107</sup> Heather Nash, 'Hicks, Sir Cedric Stanton (1892–1976)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography* (Canberra: National Centre of Biography, Australian National University, 1996), <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hicks-sir-cedric-stanton-10499/text18627>.



abysmal: the cooks were poorly trained, underpaid and took little pride in their work',<sup>108</sup> writes one historian in language that would fit the First World War perfectly. While the AIF made impressive leaps in professionalism in most areas, cookery was not one of them. With no career path for cooks, inadequate training, poor raw materials and an imperfect understanding of nutrition, let alone an awareness of food as a cultural experience, AIF amateurism in cookery remained effectively unaddressed.

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<sup>108</sup> Collingham, *The Taste of War*, p. 385.