

Jump TO Article



The article on the pages below is reprinted by permission from *United Service* (the journal of the Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales), which seeks to inform the defence and security debate in Australia and to bring an Australian perspective to that debate internationally.

The Royal United Services Institute of New South Wales (RUSI NSW) has been promoting informed debate on defence and security issues since 1888. To receive quarterly copies of *United Service* and to obtain other significant benefits of RUSI NSW membership, please see our online Membership page:

www.rusinsw.org.au/Membership



Jump TO Article

BOOK REVIEW

Bad characters: sex, crime, mutiny and murder in the Australian Imperial Force

Peter Stanley



Pier 9 Books, Murdoch Press: Millers Point, NSW; 2010; 287 pp.; ISBN 978 1 74196 480 6;
RRP \$29.95 (paperback); Ursula Davidson Library call number: 570 STAN 2010

A book with this title is almost guaranteed to attract interest, as it focuses on the 'dark side' of military operations – the illegal and immoral aspects of a large volunteer fighting force serving away from home. The term 'bad characters' was used by the army to refer to those who caused unrest or were disobedient: their crimes ranged from avoiding battle, absenteeism, desertion, disobedience, self-inflicting wounds and contracting venereal disease, to the more extreme charges of murder and mutiny.

The book's author, Dr Peter Stanley, is head of the Centre for Historical Research at the National Museum of Australia. A widely-respected military social historian, he was principal historian at the Australian War Memorial for 20 years. He is the author of many books on Australian military history, British imperial history and medical history.

Bad Characters deals with the challenges and problems of maintaining discipline and order in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) throughout World War I and balances the traditional ANZAC legend of the larrikin Digger hero by telling the story of those Australian soldiers in the Great War who were not heroes: soldiers who committed offences and crimes; those who malingered, deserted, robbed and murdered their comrades; and those who took part in riots, strikes and mutiny. Thoroughly researched, it includes an extensive bibliography, comprehensive referencing, and detailed notes justifying claims made in every chapter.

The book provides a chronological, six-part sequence tracing the discernable 'eras' of the AIF: Part 1, Volunteers (1914); Part 2, Novices (1915); Part 3, Survivors (1916); Part 4, Victims (1917); Part 5, Victors (1918); and Part 6, Returned Men (1918 onwards). These 'themes' are used to explain the differing challenges of maintaining discipline and order in the AIF, from its early formation and attitudes of optimism of a short campaign, followed by the realities of its terrible experiences in the trenches of Europe, including horrendous casualty rates, then the relatively rapid and unexpected collapse of Germany, leading to the euphoria of victory, followed by the 'wind down' period at the end of, and following, the war.

Each part of the book provides a review of the statistics, problems and challenges of dealing with each 'aspect' of bad conduct by providing a scholarly treatment of e.g. prostitution levels, rates of venereal

disease, crime rates and levels of mutiny and desertion; together with the efforts and approaches of the military authorities to deal with these issues.

When read at this factual level, the book is non-controversial despite its title. The illustrations and diagrams are very staid, and at no stage did this reviewer consider the treatment to be sensationalist in its approach.

The major appeal of the book is its serious attempts to analyse the underlying policy and contextual reasons for these problems, and to illustrate that they were the outcomes of clashes between two very different sets of military discipline and cultural assumptions: British command attitudes and the British military justice code, clashing with their Australian equivalents.

The author provides the telling analysis that the AIF with its volunteer attitudes and ethos, when combined with the Australian Government's refusal to let full British military discipline codes be applied (e.g. the frequent use of the death penalty by the British was not applied to the AIF under British command) led to a major paradox: AIF formations were regarded as the most effective fighting divisions in action, but were a major source of indiscipline and crime when not serving in the front line.

The author's analysis reveals the effective and ineffective leadership styles used by both British and Australian senior officers in dealing with discipline and misconduct in AIF units, and provides telling insights into the challenges of leading free-thinking volunteer formations.

Overall, this is an unflinching, humane and respectful book that recounts dramatic and often tragic stories of the AIF's dark side, and in so doing fosters a truer understanding of who these men were, what they did in the war, and what this terrible war did to them. A reader anticipating a salacious insight into misbehaviours in a Great War military setting will be disappointed, because of the book's scholarly and non-sensational treatment of the evidence and issues. The real value of *Bad Characters* is its serious analysis of government and military policies that created bad behaviour, and the military leadership styles that either minimized these problems, or were confounded and defeated by them. It should be read by all who aspire to lead Australian soldiers in battle.

Michael Hough