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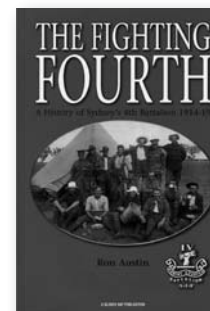


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The fighting fourth: a history of Sydney's 4th Battalion 1914-19

by Ronald J. Austin, RFD, ED

*Slouch Hat Publications: McCrae, Victoria; 2007; 256 pp.; ISBN 9780975835319;
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The Fighting Fourth is a “warts and all” history of the 4th Battalion, a foundation infantry battalion of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF). It is the first 4th Battalion history produced so it fills a gap, its late production enabling the author to write with a frankness that could not have been contemplated in the decades immediately following the Great War.

The author, Ron Austin, died last year. An Army Reserve officer, a military historian of the Great War and a battlefield tour guide, he was the author of 17 military histories.

The 4th Battalion was raised in Sydney in August 1914 as a 1,000-man plus battalion with eight rifle companies. In the 1915 Gallipoli campaign, it took part in the landing on 25 April and later at Lone Pine in the August offensive. After reorganisation in Egypt in 1916, it transferred to the Western Front, where it served at Pozières and Mouquet Farm in 1916, Bullecourt and Ypres, including the capture of Broodseinde Ridge, in 1917, and the German and Allied offensives in 1918. Reinforcements could not keep up with casualties, however, and during the final battles it was a battalion of only three rifle companies. Its final offensive action was on the Hindenburg Outpost-Line during which it captured Hargicourt on 18 September 1918. After the armistice, it was linked with the 1st Battalion briefly before dissolution and demobilisation, with the remaining soldiers returned to Australia in 1919.

Although not awarded a Victoria Cross, despite some members being recommended for that award, the battalion was highly decorated nonetheless. Among numerous Imperial and foreign awards to members for their service with the battalion were: one CMG; six DSOs (including one bar); 28 MCs; 22 DCMs (including one bar); and 126 MMs (including four bars).

The story of this renowned battalion is well told, but the book is not without its blemishes. For example, the author describes well the battalion's part in each battle recounted, but the 'bigger picture' much less so. Better provision of context would have made the book more readable.

Members with prior militia or the Boer War service are listed – which is important as such experience was valued at Gallipoli. Also, whenever an 'other rank' is first mentioned, his battalion number is provided, which assists readers who are researching individual soldiers, but tends to disrupt the narrative's flow.

Machine guns were vitally important to the battalion and the changing numbers held by it are recorded.

Initially it had two Vickers guns and this increased to four, before the Vickers was replaced by the Lewis gun. These steadily increased in number until by mid-1918, Monash rated battalions by the number of Lewis guns they held rather than by their manpower strength.

There are numerous well-chosen photographs in the book, many of individual soldiers as well as group photographs and general scenes, such as one on page 115 which brings out the desolation of the Pozières battlefield. A photograph on page 21, however, has probably been included in error. It is titled “Units of the 1st Brigade marching through the streets of Sydney”, but all the soldiers are mounted on horses. The 1st Brigade was an infantry brigade in which horses were used only by staff officers and the logistic elements.

Another weakness of this book is a lack of suitable maps. While the towns and villages mentioned can be found on modern maps, the sites of many transit camps are now covered by crops making this book unsuitable for relatives trying to ‘follow in the footsteps’ of a soldier. Even the battalion's camps in Sydney are not clearly defined.

On page 140, the description of the battalion's location does not coincide with the book's map. To further confuse matters, the village of Doignies has been mis-marked on the map; it is due west of Demicourt, whereas the map shows it north-northwest of Demicourt. On page 186 the author describes Malakoff Farm as “north-east of Bellicourt”. In fact, it is north-west of Bellicourt.

At the end of the book, the story just fades out. It mentions the presentation of Colours at a parade held in Acoz “in early 1919”, but does not give the actual date of the presentation which is usually considered a significant event in a battalion's history.

The author has prepared a number of rolls: one of all who died, one of all the honours and awards made to members of the battalion, and a nominal roll of all who served in the battalion. These lists alone make the book a valuable resource for those researching a soldier or the battalion.

The deficiencies that I have mentioned notwithstanding, this is a good unit history which will appeal to anyone interested in the history of this battalion in particular, the New South Wales infantry battalions of the first AIF more generally, the Great War and Australian military history.

John Hitchen