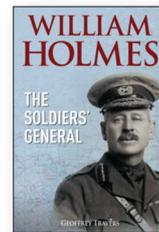


## BOOK REVIEW:

# *William Holmes: the soldiers' general*

by Geoffrey Travers

*Big Sky Publishing: Newport, NSW; 2020; 447 pp; ISBN: 9781922387004 (hardback); RRP \$34.99; Ursula Davidson Library call number 570.02 TRAV 2020*



*William Holmes* is a biography of an eminent Australian citizen soldier and public administrator, Major-General William Holmes, CMG, DSO, VD, who was born in Sydney in 1862. A Boer War veteran, he developed Sydney's water supply and sewerage system before commanding Australia's first military expeditionary force and accepting the surrender of German New Guinea in 1914. From 1915 to 1917, he served as a brigade and then divisional commander in the Australian Imperial Force on Gallipoli and the Western Front, where he was killed-in-action at Messines in June 1917.

The book is based on a thesis written by his grandson, the late Basil Holmes Travers. That work has been brought to publication by Travers' nephew, Geoffrey Holmes Travers, a great-grandson of General Holmes.

William Holmes' father came to Australia with his regiment in the 1850s. Seeing a better future for his family in New South Wales, he settled here instead of returning with his regiment to Britain at the end of its tour.

Holmes became well-known in the colony during the Boer War when the poet, A. B. (Banjo) Paterson, a war correspondent for *The Sydney Morning Herald*, commended his bravery. Wounded in June 1900, Holmes was invalided home. He led the returned soldiers in the Federation Procession in Sydney in January 1901.

His life on return saw the continuation of his development as a senior executive of the Metropolitan Board of Water Supply and Sewerage. He developed Sydney's water supply and sewerage system; and, during a severe water shortage, proclaimed extreme water restrictions and dealt with a three-part royal commission. Concurrently, as a citizen soldier, he was promoted to lieutenant-colonel and appointed to command the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Infantry Regiment from 1902 until 1911. In August 1912, he became a colonel and subsequently commanded the 6<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade until war was declared in 1914.

When the Great War began on 4 August 1914, Australia's first independent military expeditionary force, the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (ANMEF), was raised. Holmes was appointed its commander. His force comprised principally experienced naval reserve infantry from Victoria (who were sent to Sydney by train) and army infantrymen rapidly recruited and given initial training in Sydney. Rear-Admiral Sir George Patey, KCMG, RN, Commander-in-Chief of His Majesty's Australian Fleet, provided fleet support to the force – there were 16 vessels in the fleet including the submarines *AE1* and *AE2*.

The ANMEF's first task was to neutralise the German communication network centred near Rabaul in New Britain and then to occupy, but not annex, all of German New Guinea. The convoy reached Rabaul on 11 September 1914 and landed a party of naval infantry on the south shore of Blanche Bay some 10km north of the Bita Paka communication tower. The force advanced to Bita Paka, despite opposition from a German-led delaying force. There were casualties on both sides – the first loss of Australian lives during the Great War. Once Bita Paka had been captured, Holmes became a diplomat. He negotiated the surrender of all German territories and took over their administration.

He resigned from the ANMEF and as Administrator of German New Guinea in February 1915 so he could join the Australian Imperial Force. He was sent to Egypt as a colonel commanding the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry Brigade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Division. His brigade trained in the desert and then took a turn guarding the Suez Canal. In August 1915, four months after the original landing, 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade arrived on Gallipoli and entered the line, before being withdrawn back to Egypt in December.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Australian Division moved from Egypt to the Western Front early in 1916. Holmes, now a brigadier-general, led the 5<sup>th</sup> Brigade during the First Battle of the Somme from July to December 1916. Holmes was promoted to major-general to command the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division in early 1917 and led it during the First Battle of Bullecourt in April where it suffered heavy losses (3000 killed or wounded). The 4<sup>th</sup> Division next played a very successful part in the Battle of Messines in Belgian Flanders in June 1917. Following the battle, whilst escorting the Premier of New South Wales around the Messines battlefield, he was killed by shrapnel from a stray German shell.

Chapter 11, "The Forgotten General", assesses Holmes' military career, muses on what might have been had he not been killed, and wonders why he is not better known. Holmes earned a reputation for fearlessness in battle, believing that reconnaissance should be conducted by the commanders making the decisions. He was known to all his soldiers and his leadership inspired their loyalty. Holmes, a contemporary of John Monash, arguably achieved more in his early career than his peer and certainly would have been a contender for command of the Australian Corps in 1918 had he still been alive.

The Australian Army History Unit provided seed funding for this book, which deserves inclusion in the Chief of Army's approved reading list.

**Jon Breen**