

***In the Field and On the Field***  
**A Highlight History of the Australian Army Rugby Union**

**Kick-off – the 1919 AIF rugby teams**

With the end of World War I hostilities on 11 November 1918 Army authorities were keen to ensure that all members of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) were appropriately occupied. Shipping was scarce and the leaders of the AIF were keen not to undermine the reputation of the AIF with ill-disciplined behaviour which might occur as the troops waited to go home. The emphasis was on encouraging participation in all forms of healthy sport during the immediate post-Armistice period and opportunities were developed for participation in a wide range of competitions, with rugby in the lead.

Initially, much of the organization of these events occurred under the leadership of the 19<sup>th</sup> Battalion's Major S. A. Middleton, DSO, who had a distinguished reputation in both rowing and rugby. A flurry of inter-battalion, inter-brigade, inter-division and corps competitions in France, Belgium, England and the Middle East got underway. In January 1919 these competitions became more formalized when the AIF established a Sports Control Board, responsible for organising sports including rugby, Australian Rules football, 'association football' (soccer), cross-country running, boxing, rowing, and rifle shooting among others. Middleton was appointed Organising Secretary and the Australian Comforts Fund guaranteed the major portion of the cost.

In accordance with an arrangement made some time previously with representatives of the French Rugby, in early 1919 a group of between sixty and seventy rugby players, selected from the AIF, was brought together in order to choose an AIF team for the Inter-Allied Games in Paris. As there had not been enough time to conduct test matches each Division had been asked to submit the names its eight best players. Team selection for the game in Paris on 19 January 1919 was made after two weeks of training at a special school near the Belgian village of Barbencon.

This side, known as the 'Trench Team', was coached by Jim Clarken and 'Munnie' Fraser. Major W. F. 'Wally' Matthews, a well-known pre-war Sydney University player was selected to manage the AIF team which went on to win the match in Paris 6-3. At the conclusion of the match, the team left for England where it met the AIF Headquarters Team and played some other local matches. It was from the Trench Team and the AIF Headquarters Team that the Australian XV and Reserve XV for the Inter-Service Rugby Competition in England, and the awarding of the King's Cup, was selected.

***In the Field and On the Field***  
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First Rugby Team.  
*Soldiers and Sportsmen*

Selected as captain of the AIF 1<sup>st</sup> XV was Lieutenant W. T. 'Bill' Watson, MC and bar, DCM, while Peter Buchanan from the Trench Team captained the Australian Reserves team. Under the leadership of Major Matthews, the AIF teams developed a wonderful spirit of camaraderie, becoming immensely popular and successful.

In addition, a Corps competition also got underway in France, with teams from each of the Divisions and one from Corps troops; 2<sup>nd</sup> Division came out on top. Conditions did not deter the players:

...the grounds were not by any means ideal. One day a game would be played on a field covered in a couple of inches of snow. At another time the snow would give place to a similar depth of mud, and yet again the ground would be frozen hard...the teams often had to undertake journeys of between [20] and [30] kilometers – and even more – over bumpy roads, and return after the game. The Army wagon was not by any means a well-upholstered or well-sprung conveyance, and it had no central heating arrangements...

A combined Corps team was then chosen to represent the 4<sup>th</sup> Army against a 2<sup>nd</sup> Army (British) team, which they defeated in a match in Cologne. The team also played a match against the Royal Air Force, which it defeated handily.

## ***In the Field and On the Field***

### **A Highlight History of the Australian Army Rugby Union**

The Inter-Service and Dominion Forces Rugby Competition commenced in England on 1 March 1919. In addition to Australia, entries were received from Canada, New Zealand (NZ), South Africa, the Royal Air Force and Great Britain (referred to as the 'Mother Country'). The Australian teams – both firsts and reserves - trained at Chiswick Park in London. Journeying from their headquarters to Leicester, the Australian team played its first match against the Mother Country on 8 March 1919.

Contemporary accounts of the AIF Team's inaugural match note that although the game was 'an evenly contested one, the AIF team suffered from an obvious 'lack of combined effort'.' The outcome, before a crowd of nine thousand, was a victory for the Mother Country 6-3. Successive matches were scheduled against: South Africa at Newport on 15 March, NZ at Bradford on 22 March, Royal Air Force at Gloucester on 29 March and Canada at Twickenham on 5 April. Headquartered in London, about fifty players were provided with board and accommodation and transport to their matches.

The team selected to play at Newport on 15 March was somewhat different from the Leicester team in that Sergeant Bradley and Private Quinn took the places of Thompson and Murray in the forwards, while the playing coach, 'Wally' Matthews, worked behind the scrum in place of Buchanan, and Poutney and Bosward came in as centre three-quarters. The Australians won the match 8-5, Suttor and Bradley being the scorers with Stenning converting the try of Suttor.



A ticket for the (postponed) Australia vs. New Zealand game of 22 March 1919

*John Frewen*

## ***In the Field and On the Field***

### **A Highlight History of the Australian Army Rugby Union**

The postponement of the match against the NZ side due to three inches of snow on the field meant that the next AIF game was against the Royal Air Force. Changes to the AIF team included the selection of Egan in the three-quarter line to replace an injured Stenning, and Thompson to the forwards in place of Quinn. The result was not a good one for the AIF Team which lost to the Air Force 7-3.

The match against Canada at Twickenham on 5 April was attended by both the Prince of Wales and Prince Albert and it was in this game that the Australians 'played really first-class football for the first time.' The final score of 38-nil was a testament to the player's individual skills and excellent team work and demonstrated the depth of talent that existed within the ranks of the Australian Forces. At the conclusion of the match the Princes came onto the field to speak to the players.

By this stage of the competition, NZ had won all their four matches and the Mother Country three. It only remained for NZ to defeat the Australians in their match at Bradford and the cup to be presented by the King would be theirs. However, to the surprise of many, the rapidly-improving Australian XV won the match on 9 April with the tight score of 6-5. For the Australians, this was the end of the competition and NZ went on to defeat the Mother Country for the King's Cup. The beginning of the competition had seen considerable adverse criticism of the 'rough methods employed by the Australian team.' However, as the contest progressed the criticism abated and press reports congratulated the players on the positive spirit in which the matches were played.

The publicity surrounding the competition for the King's Cup tended to overshadow the extensive program of rugby games played throughout England and Wales and around London during the early months of 1919. The energy and drive of team manager, Lieutenant L. W. Seaborn, MC, contributed to the success of the Reserve Team, while Major Matthews' fine record with the First XV continued at games against:

- The Australian Flying Corps, 15 February at Gloucester. First XV won 50-nil.
- The South African Army Team, 19 February at Queen's Club. First XV won 9-8.
- Leicester County, 22 February at Leicester. Win 8-6
- NZ Army A Team, 26 February at Richmond. Loss 9-nil
- Devon County, 12 April at Exeter. Win 11-3
- Royal Naval Depot, 16 April at Plymouth. Win 14-10
- Maesteg, 19 April at Maesteg. Loss 18-3
- Pill Harriers, 21 April at Newport. Loss 12-3
- Abertillery, 23 April at Abertillery. Win 11-3
- Ogmores Vale, 26 April at Ogmores Vale. Loss 6-3
- Cornwall, 3 May at Penzance. Win 9-nil.

## *In the Field and On the Field*

### **A Highlight History of the Australian Army Rugby Union**

At the same time, the Reserve Team also established a fine reputation as a rugby force to be reckoned with, having been responsible for breaking a long-held record when they became the first team to defeat Llanelly on their own ground on 15 March 1919. The success of the Reserves can be seen from the results of matches against:

- AIF Depot, 15 February at Warminster. Win 19-10
- 18<sup>th</sup> Wing RAF, 19 February at Hounslow. Win 52-nil
- AIF Depots, 22 February at Warminster. Win 8-3
- NZ Army B Team, 26 February at Richmond. Loss 17-3
- Guy's Hospital, 8 March at Chiswick. Win 25-nil
- Llanelly, 15 March at Llanelly. Win 11-nil.
- East Midlands, 29 March at Northampton. Win 27-11
- Llanelly, 12 April at Llanelly. Loss 11-8
- Exmouth, 19 April at Exeter. Win 21-3
- Devon County, 21 April at Newton Abbott. Win 21-3
- Teignmouth, 23 April at Teignmouth. Win 40-3
- Llanelly, 3 May at Llanelly. Loss 17-3.



Reserve Rugby Team,  
*Soldiers and Sportsmen*

The teams left England in May, arriving in Australia on the RMS *Orontes* at the beginning of July to great public acclaim. The team manager Major Matthews, team

***In the Field and On the Field***  
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captain Lieutenant W. T. Watson and the thirty-five members of what was by now a well-known and popular military and sporting entity were welcomed by a large gathering of rugby enthusiasts that included the secretary of the NSW Rugby Union. The next day the team enjoyed more accolades at an official government welcome held at the Australia Hotel and later that night enjoyed a night out at the theatre, having been invited to attend the J.C. Williamson production of *Goody Two Shoes*.

On Saturday 5 July 1919, before a crowd of ten thousand, the returned men played a representative NSW team – a match preceded by a game between the AIF Reserves and a NSW Second XV, which NSW won 25-11. The Union arranged for school children and returned soldiers 'with badges' to be admitted free to the game and made special arrangements for 'wounded men from the military hospitals'. A comprehensive report of the first division game (NSW was smashed 42-14) in the *Sydney Morning Herald* went on to highlight the outstanding record achieved by the AIF teams in Britain and France: '...the Diggers thoroughly deserved the high reputation that had preceded them', and went on to say: '...the fifteen stands out as one of the greatest seen on Sydney grounds'.

The news report also drew attention to the impact the war had had on rugby. Five thousand rugby players had joined the AIF and of these more than five hundred had been killed. The loss of so many players and increasing competition from the League code saw some question whether the game would survive. However, the paper also pointed out that the return of Union players from military service overseas and the strength of the game at Duntroon and the Naval College meant that its survival was pretty much ensured.

The following Saturday 12 July, at the University Oval, the AIF team played a Australian team chosen from NSW and Queensland, defeating it 28-18. The next day they visited the 'garden suburb for soldiers at Matraville' where they labored for most of the day on various improvement projects:

Stiff and sore from their exertions on the previous afternoon members of the A.I.F. Rugby Union team were early visitors to the garden suburb for soldiers at Matraville yesterday. Arming themselves with long handled shovels they spent a strenuous morning, and after being refreshed by luncheon returned to the attack in the afternoon. It had been expected that the team which represented Australia on Saturday against the Diggers would co-operate with the latter in assaulting a sand hill, but their absence was explained by more or less general exhaustion.

On 15 July the team played a New England side in Armidale defeating it 35-11, before travelling to Brisbane where they defeated Queensland 38-7 on 19 July in front of a crowd of around five thousand spectators. On 23 July the team played a

***In the Field and On the Field***  
**A Highlight History of the Australian Army Rugby Union**

Queensland AIF team (which included some of their own reserve team) on the Brisbane Cricket Ground and defeated them as well, 30-3. On 26 July they played again against Australia at the Brisbane Cricket Ground and defeated the joint Queensland-NSW team 20-13. On their way back to Sydney they played the North Western Association side on the Showground in Inverell, defeating it 52-6. They completed their tour by defeating Australia once again by 22-6 on 2 August at the Sydney Sports Ground. It was their last game, and the weary but triumphant veterans disbanded, their war finally over.

This final game of these unique AIF teams of 'comrades in arms and in sport' marked the end of what had been a hugely successful series of matches and heralded a re-vitalisation of the game of rugby union football in NSW and Queensland. It was remarkable that the AIF veterans still had the capacity for tough and vigorous play after the basic diet, privation, stress and difficulties faced by them during active service. The younger men who faced them on the rugby field upon their return to Sydney faced not just physically tough men but men who had played on bigger and more lethal battlefields. While some continued to play club rugby immediately after the war, most had given their all and were content to rest at last. The AIF team coach and manager, Matthews, stayed on to manage the 1933 Wallaby team tour of South Africa while the team captain, Watson, went on to win a DSO at Kokoda in WWII.

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