

Portrait of the Anzacs: deserters more interested in booze, brawls and sex

By Steve Meacham

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The postcard shows 10 Australian Diggers in their slouch hats and World War I uniforms grinning for the camera. But it was the message on the other side that must have infuriated the army's chief military policeman at the French port of Le Havre.

For the soldiers were Anzac deserters who had sent their carefully posed photo with the taunting sign-off: "Au revoir, Nous 'us'."



Deserters ... the postcard sent by the Anzacs, held by the National Archives in Britain.

Peter Stanley says the postcard is merely the most celebrated example of bad behaviour by Australia's original Anzacs.

"Australians were 10 times more likely to go absent in the Great War than British soldiers, or the Canadians or New Zealanders," says the British-born Stanley, who was principal historian at the Australian War Memorial before moving to the National Museum of Australia where he is the director of historical research.

"It embarrassed Australian commanders and it infuriated British officers like Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig that so many Australians were legging it. The British wanted Australia to introduce the death penalty for desertion but Australia never did."

Stanley's latest book, *Bad Characters: Sex, Crime, Mutiny, Murder and the Australian Imperial Force*, published today by Pier 9, is described as "a frank history" that explores aspects of the Australian Imperial Force which are usually omitted.

According to the publisher's blurb: "These were the men who went absent and deserted, caught or concealed VD, got drunk and fought their comrades, who stole, malingered, behaved insolently toward officers or committed more serious offences, including rape and murder."

Stanley says there was no official cover-up. "All the records are sitting there in National Archives. But Australians have preferred to dwell on the positives - on the best commanders, the best battalions, the great battles. And they have been reluctant to ask questions which result in awkward answers."

As he points out, "at least seven of Australia's 60 Victoria Cross recipients contracted VD". In fact, Australian soldiers were three times more likely than their British counterparts to get a sexually transmitted infection.

After unsuccessfully getting padres to preach to the men, then putting brothels off limits, Australian officers eventually issued medical advice about preventive ointments and douches. Only then did the STI rate decline.

Stanley says there are no statistics to show whether the Anzacs were more prone to drunkenness than their fellow soldiers. "But the AIF was male Australia in uniform. Drink was an important part of life out of uniform, so it became a big part of life in uniform too."

Part of the reason for the terrible discipline of the Australian troops, Stanley says, was that "these men were volunteers who brought with them into uniform the same ideas, attitudes and beliefs they had had as civilians. Right to the end of the war, the Australians still responded to the army as if it was an annoying employer".

Ill-discipline and insubordination were the flipside of the famous mateship, larrikinism and independence of spirit that is celebrated in Anzac mythology. "They were enterprising in battle but they were also enterprising in getting out of the things the army wanted them to do."

Only a handful of Anzacs were charged with murder but there were undoubtedly many rapes - of British, French and Middle Eastern women. "They were reported and it is clear that they happened," says Stanley. "But I couldn't find any successful prosecutions. It was clearly too big an embarrassment."