

Game to the Last: The 11th Australian Infantry Battalion at Gallipoli

James Hurst

Reviewed by John Donovan

The 11th Battalion was raised in August 1914 as part of the 3rd Brigade of the 1st Division. Two companies of the battalion landed with the first wave on 25 April 1915 and the battalion was not withdrawn from the beachhead for a rest until 17 November. By early October there were only 69 men left who had landed with the battalion and never left the peninsula. In September 1918, almost three and a half years after the landing at ANZAC, the 11th Battalion was withdrawn from the trenches in France and did not return to action before the war ended.

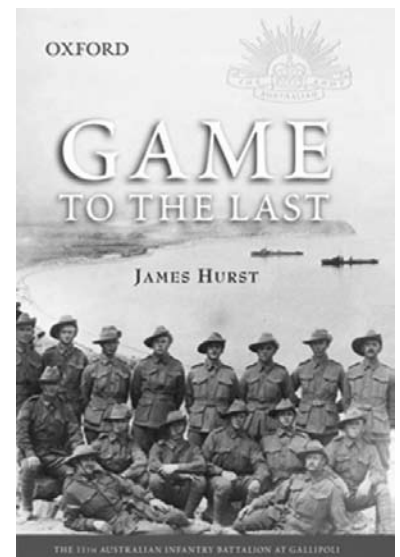
James Hurst's book follows the development of a thousand newly-enlisted civilian soldiers into the enthusiastic but inexperienced unit that landed at Anzac, through to the exhausted group of survivors who left Gallipoli. Many of those withdrawn in November were not originals, but from the 1000 or more reinforcements who had joined the battalion by that time. Hurst covers the battalion's contribution in detail, and provides sufficient context to enable the reader to understand its place in the broader Gallipoli campaign. The penultimate chapter summarises the battalion's experiences after Gallipoli and the fates of some of its members.

Following the reorganisation of the beachhead after it had stabilised, the 3rd Brigade was posted along Bolton's Ridge, south of Lone Pine. Apart from the abortive raid on Gaba Tepe in early May, this remained their location. Hurst covers the operations along Bolton's Ridge in great detail, including the heavy fighting to capture and develop what became known as Leane's Trench. He also describes day-to-day life in the trenches with its ongoing trickle of casualties.

We meet names that later became familiar, not just to the Australian population during World War I but in some cases to later generations. Many battalion members had been born in Britain and enlisted to support their homeland (and, perhaps, to get a trip back there). One battalion name very familiar today is Bert Facey, author of *A Fortunate Life*, who had two brothers killed at ANZAC, one with the 11th Battalion, the other with the 10th Light Horse.

Others were 'characters' in their era but are no longer remembered. Number 232, William Raymond 'Combo' Smith, veteran of the Boer War, was a permanent discipline problem (his fines during the war may have exceeded his pay), but was always there when the battalion was in the line. He claimed to have been the 'senior Private of the AIF' by war's end. Tom Shaw, an early enlistee with regimental number 4, was also a veteran of the Boer War. He volunteered again for AIF service in World War II, aged 68, and joined the Volunteer Defence Corps when this was declined.

Some went on to distinguished military careers. Tom Louch enlisted in 1914, landed on Gallipoli as a corporal, and finished the war as a major. In 1939 he raised the 2/11th Battalion and commanded it until he was wounded in Greece in April 1941. Another member who features regularly in Hurst's narrative is Ray Leane, an original company commander. He later commanded the 48th



Battalion, known in that era as the 'Joan of Arc Battalion' (said to be *made of all Leanes*, because of his propensity for gathering his relatives into the unit), and the 12th Brigade. Famous at the time, it is doubtful if his name would be recognised by many today.

Some battalion members died in sad circumstances. Aubrey Darnell, an original officer, and John Archibald, number 157 until commissioned at Gallipoli, were both killed by a random aerial bomb while leaving the trenches after the battalion's last day at the front in September 1918. Less than a month after returning home in 1919, Wally Graham, winner of the MC, died after falling from scaffolding in Kalgoorlie.

Hurst quotes Kitchener's assessment, before the landing, that the Australians would be good enough if nothing more than a cruise in the Sea of Marmara was contemplated. Perhaps Kitchener was animated by concern about the discipline of the Australians. If so, Hurst shows that their discipline was more than adequate. Indeed, based on his descriptions of some of the engagements, it could be argued that the troops were too disciplined, being willing to attempt the implementation of orders that were little more than invitations to pointless suicide. Later in the war, when they were more experienced, such orders would have been ignored and modified or replaced by substitutes more likely to produce a useful outcome.

Bean's concluding words in Volume VI of his epic history of the First AIF are apt:

'What these men did nothing can alter now. The good and the bad, the greatness and smallness of their story will stand. Whatever of glory it contains nothing can now lessen. It rises, as it will always rise, above the mists of ages, a monument to great-hearted men; and for their nation, a possession for ever.'

Let us always treasure that possession. ♦

James Hurst, *Game to the Last: The 11th Australian Infantry Battalion at Gallipoli*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2005, Casebound and jacketed, 267pp., RRP \$459.95.