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THE BATTLE OF SYDNEY

CENTRAL STATION; Sydney's rail terminus, officially opened in 1906; a handsome landmark, intended by its political initiators to become one of the world's great railway stations. In part the station site includes the Old Devonshire Street Cemetery, originally known as Sandhills Cemetery, a major colonial burial ground. The grim, large-scale eviction of skeletal residents to suburban cemeteries took place during site preparation in 1901.

For one day in 1916 this station had a central role in an extraordinary act of protest and rebellion, a mutiny perhaps, that culminated in military gunfire, the use of bayonets, the shedding of blood, and death.

Mutiny is a contentious legal term and definitions vary according to the laws and cultures of nations. The Macquarie Dictionary defines mutiny as "a revolt or rebellion against constituted authority". Depending on circumstances and definitions, a mutiny can involve one or more persons. Punishment for mutiny in a martial context can be the death penalty.

Under the rigid discipline code of the British army during the First World War, for example, 346 British troops were executed for crimes such as mutiny and desertion. Australia had a different military legal code and no Australian soldier was executed; but for every one thousand Australian troops there were nine in prison for military crimes, an incarceration rate far exceeding the incarceration statistics of allies New Zealand, South Africa, Canada and Britain.

Mutinies in the armed forces are controversial and messy events. Generally they indicate that there are grievances to be addressed, some problem regarding conditions of service; a failure of command may be indicated, and certainly the breakdown of grievance-handling procedures.

Since federation in 1901, mutinies have not been uncommon in the Australian armed forces. The Royal Australian Navy has had at least eleven mutinies, possibly nineteen; mutinies have also been part of the Australian air force and the army, though not to the same extent. The army set an Australian record in 1942 with its conviction of twenty-one troops for mutiny in Palestine during the Second World War.

Australian defence authorities have successfully swept mutinies under the carpet; they also tend to be deleted from official histories. To minimise the number of actual mutinies, it seems the preferred Australian option has been, where possible, to treat alleged mutinous behaviour as something less legally controversial, thereby attracting less attention and scrutiny, and avoiding political fallout. Mutinies can be political and legal quagmires; and they are not conducive to recruitment.

And so to an almost lost piece of Sydney, and military, history: what the official war historian Ernest Scott euphemistically described as "serious trouble" at Casula in 1916, glossing over it in twenty-four lines without mentioning bloodshed, but is variously known elsewhere as the 'Liverpool Mutiny', the 'Battle of Central' and the 'Battle of Sydney'.

February 1916: the war is not going well; the Western Front is a fetid bog of mud and blood; Australia is uneasily settling into its second full year of the First World War. The nation is still trying to come to terms with the blood-soaked disaster of Gallipoli the previous year; recruiting figures have plummeted; war-weariness is creeping into the national soul; initially many people thought the war
would be a short, thrilling adventure, but mounting casualty figures and the passage of time are shattering the illusion; the notion that the war reflects British imperial interests rather than Australian national interests is gaining ground; before the end of the year an attempt by the government to introduce conscription will traumatise and divide the nation.

With this in mind, imagine breakfast time in the Light Horse training camp at Casula on the outskirts of Sydney; it is early morning, Monday 14 February. Unrest is apparent as the men eat. There is a lot of anger and excited discussion. There is plenty of ‘should’ talk: ‘we should do this’ and ‘we should do that’. The raw recruits have just been informed that the army has changed the training syllabus, increasing their training from thirty-six hours to forty hours a week; the change and its sudden imposition are deeply resented.

There is a background of grievances at the Casula camp. A lot of the recruits, some only 17 years old, feel the food is not up to scratch. Others feel they have been worked too hard; some have recently been involved in camp earthworks, twenty-seven hours without break. There have been problems with leave. Some of the officers are martinet. The syllabus change is the last straw.

Over a mug of tea, someone seriously suggests taking action; a walkout, maybe a strike, but certainly some sort of protest. There is a general feeling of being fed up with grumbling and trying to go through the right channels. Among the breakfasters are men who have been involved in trade union activity in the past. Some may even have been influenced by the militant Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organisation, a claim made years later by IWW veteran Tom Barker.

So protest it is; speeches are made with varying degrees of sophistication; there is debate; delegates are elected; a quick plan of action is drawn up. Then at least two thousand men, possibly many more, all in army uniform, walk out of the Casula camp and, head in an orderly fashion for the great training camp at nearby Liverpool. For the moment they intend to confront higher military authorities with their grievances and concerns, though some may have further plans in mind. Because of the mass of men involved, Casula camp authorities are powerless to stem the tide.

Liverpool military authorities listen to the Casula men and agree to investigate grievances. But the forty-hour matter, they point out, is Commonwealth business and not a local issue. Basically it is in the realm of the non-negotiable. Some of the men are satisfied, and decide to return to Casula.

But the audacious example set by the Casula walkout is having a flow-on effect within the Liverpool camp. There are uneasy undercurrents among the Liverpool men. Apart from the news about the training changes, the camp has had problems with leave, and there is the conviction, possibly unfounded but part of ‘camp culture’, that the camp is unhealthy and has an abnormally high mortality rate. During the year ending 30 June 1916 cerebrospinal meningitis would kill 256 recruits in Australia’s crowded training camps. So thousands of the Liverpool men join the protest and quit camp. For the protesters, the issue of the forty hours rumbles; if nothing can be done locally, then why not take our concerns to the wider world? We are on a roll. And this in mind the men head for the town of Liverpool, and the railway station.

Figures relating to the number of troops involved in the Casula event, and subsequently, are shrouded in confusion; they have been consistently, and understandably, downplayed by military and political authorities, possibly fearing future emulation of the Casula events; most historians have simply echoed the official line. According to the Sydney Morning Herald’s account of the day, and a few political memoirs, some fifteen thousand men were involved; official sources claim it was only “a small number” and figures in the hundreds are cited. In Ernest Scott’s official account, the rebel troops apparently never reached Sydney. Contemporary photographs of the protesters in Sydney, however, indicate large numbers were involved, and this is supported by the logistical extent of the operation eventually mounted to end the protest.

Reaching Liverpool, some of the protesters decided to call it a day and broke off to commandeer the town’s extensive alcohol supplies from the various hotels. Liverpool was a camp town and had a lot of grog. Because of the amount of alcohol liberated from bars and cellars, and the number of available drinkers, shops were relieved of cups, glasses, pots, pans and buckets for use as drinking utensils. Bread, pies and fruit were also appropriated. When retailers demanded payment for goods, the reply was “Put it down to Kitchener”, a reference to Lord Kitchener, Britain’s war secretary. Any opposition encountered by the soldiers was met with vandalism, and there was extensive property damage during the day.
Figures relating to the number of troops involved have been consistently, and understandably, downplayed by military and political authorities; most historians have simply echoed the official line.

Overwhelmed by the invasion, Liverpool police maintained a low profile until the arrival of reinforcements from Cabramatta and Parramatta later that afternoon; by which time the majority of soldiers who had stayed in town were exhausted, or drunk, and order was restored with only a few fist fights between the opposing forces. "Several arrests" were made.

The bulk of the protesters had pushed on to Sydney before midday. They established a cordon around Liverpool Station, blocked the tracks and commandeered trains until railway authorities cottoned on and stopped the supply. The last train out of Liverpool was jam-packed with troops, the carriage roofs precariously crowded with men.

A large number of troops who made it to Sydney simply went home for the afternoon, but the last train-load had a political agenda. Disembarking at Central, they lined up on the platform in fours and began to march in a very long column towards the city. They were led by two buglers, a placard plainly announcing they were on STRIKE and would not train the forty hours, battalion flags, and the Union Jack surmounted by the Red Flag.

As the column moved through the city, down Pitt Street, into Hay Street, then George Street, soldiers snatched time to explain why they were on strike to ever-increasing crowds of onlookers, while keeping formation; they "made a really fine picture, and, keeping good time, the fours properly dressed, the men marched as if on parade". So wrote a Sydney Morning Herald journalist, noting also that the organisation on display indicated they were "evidently under someone's leadership".

The column wended its way down town to the Quay and then on to the Domain, where a 'smoko' was called. After that the column broke up. Troops spent the rest of the day drifting about the city in small groups, sightseeing, others apparently bemused, wondering what was going to happen to them when they returned to camp. Many got into trouble. Food, tobacco, alcohol and lollies were appropriated in large quantities; some hotel windows were smashed, as were the windows of shops apparently owned by people of German origin; the windows of the German Club in Phillip Street were smashed; foot-police were taunted, squirted with soda siphons, and assaulted with projectiles, including beer bottles, but mainly fruit and vegetables; there were reports of police being punched and kicked. A ground-floor window of the Evening News was smashed following evening headlines critical of the protesters; a verbal apology was extracted from newspaper staff. Civilians also got into the act and tried their hand at stealing and vandalising.

As night fell, sightseers crowded into the city. The Daily Telegraph was "astonished" by the number of women who joined the crowds, "some of them shamelessly arm-in-arm with drunken soldiers".

There was a knife-edge air of expectancy as crowds variously followed protesters around, waiting for anything to happen and for something to give, and hampering police in the process. When shots were heard near Town Hall about 9 p.m., a large crowd of protesters and camp followers scattered into the grounds of St Andrew's Cathedral.

A number of protesters engaged in a form of standoff. Selecting wealthy looking men, they inquired "Are you the sort of person we are going to fight for?" When the answer was "yes" the men demanded, "Well dig into your pockets and pay us".

The strategy for ending the protest developed during the afternoon. An over extended police force confined protesting troops to the city centre as much as possible, away from the waterfront and the Quay and possible further dispersal and mayhem. An official army notice was posted around the city, ordering the troops back to their camps and an 11 a.m. muster the next day (Tuesday); they were advised that failure to comply would be in breach of military law.

Undoubtedly the invasion of Sydney had caught the authorities unprepared. Like their Liverpool colleagues, they were temporarily overwhelmed and had to wait until evening before sufficient resources had been marshalled, and the process of herding the protesters back to Central Station, and entraining them to Liverpool under the direction and supervision of police and an armed military picket, could begin.
Six protesters were wounded: there were bullet wounds to heads, severe enough in one case to result in a coma, and a bullet-shattered kneecap, a civilian trying to get home was clubbed, another shot in the leg . . .

Paranoia was probably also involved in the response; the following day two ministers in the state government expressed the view that the rebel troops had been manipulated by German agents with sabotage in mind. This was the sort of mindset that later in 1916 helped jail twelve anti-war labour movement dissidents for between five and fifteen years, basically for conspiring to burn down Sydney. Eventually, after a lengthy release campaign, these men were cleared of most of the charges against them and released during 1920 and 1921.

By 7 p.m. all hotels in the city, Redfern, Newtown, Glebe and Paddington were ordered to close for the next twelve hours. Most city stores had closed doors and put up shutters by 3 p.m., and locked away valuables. City eateries similarly closed. As the Sydney Morning Herald noted, the popular fish and oyster shops were amongst the first to close; by 3 p.m. "there was not a crustacan on display in the city".

All available metropolitan police were brought into the city, dispatched to the city police stations and onto the streets. Posses of mounted police went into action early in the afternoon and were targeted by protesters with blue metal and lemonade and beer bottles; police and horses were injured. Motorcycle police acted as scouts, and all police and State motor vehicles were pressed into service, ferrying squads of police to trouble spots as needed. On standby was a reserve of 250 civilian volunteers, including ex-servicemen. By the end of the day, thirty-two soldiers had been arrested by civilian authorities.

A large contingent of armed loyalist troops was brought into the city and Central Station virtually placed under martial law. From about 7 p.m. onwards the threat of fixed bayonets quelled disturbance once the protesters had reached station environs. Back on the streets, police used their batons. The dispatch of protesters to camp began around 8.30 p.m.; the Daily Telegraph noted that many "decent fellows who had been menaced into accompanying the rioters" went peacefully. The rounding-up process continued well into the early hours of Tuesday 15 February. Loyalist troops remained on duty at key railway stations between Central and Liverpool throughout day and night on Tuesday.

Some time after 10 p.m. (Monday), possibly closer to 11 p.m., violence erupted at Central. As the entraining process continued, an iron gate was closed on thirty protesters. Apparently fearing an ulterior motive, and of being trapped in the area near the station's toilets and lost property depot, the men grabbed a fire hose and turned it full bore on the military picket, calling its members "scabs" and "blacklegs", and knocking a few over "like ninepins".

Ordered to desist, the men maintained the water flow. A revolver was then discharged in the air, allegedly by a protester; rumours aside, this was the only suggestion all day that any of the protesters might have been armed. The picket was ordered to "fire low", and shots were loosed off into the protesters. Men fell. The firing was followed by a bayonet and baton charge. Press reports claimed the picket fired twenty, disciplined, rounds; bullet marks in the station's roof and a wall, evident for many years afterwards, indicated a less restrained response.

In the melee, six protesters were wounded; there were bullet wounds to heads, a variety of baton and rifle-but wound, severe enough in one case to result in a coma, and a bullet-shattered kneecap. A police constable in the charge sustained a facial wound requiring X-ray. Two civilians trying to get home were wounded; one was clubbed, the other shot in the leg. The station's refreshment rooms served as a makeshift hospital; an army medical team tended the wounded.

A protester from the 6th Light Horse was killed by a bullet through his left eye and bayonet wounds to his neck and shoulder; he died in the arms of a police constable who risked personal injury to comfort him. The corpse was spirited away to the city morgue, and official attempts made next day to depict the soldier as the man with the revolver, and a protest ringleader. If so, he must have been a talented and inspiring organiser, given he had helped bring two army camps to a standstill, possibly involved some fifteen thousand men, and was 19.
The *Daily Telegraph* was “astonished” by the number of women who joined the crowds, “some of them shamelessly arm-in-arm with drunken soldiers”.

At the 11 a.m. muster the next day, most men turned out. There was an average of six men missing per company. An official warning was given that the new training syllabus would go ahead, and that any refusal to train would be regarded as “assisting the enemy”. It was a clear indication that any future protest would feel the full weight of military law.

The rest of the day went ahead normally. It was payday, so the men were paid; those normally entitled to leave were granted their leave. The army pragmatically took the view that no direct order had been disobeyed by protesting troops, and there had been no intention to subvert military authority; therefore no mutiny had taken place. No strike had taken place because in the lexicon of military law the word ‘strike’ does not exist.

However, soldiers identified as protest leaders were arrested upon their return to camp and later summarily discharged; there is evidence suggesting some were subsequently charged, convicted and jailed under civilian law. The grievances they had raised were investigated, and enough changes made to restore calm. The Casula camp was duly closed.

The new training syllabus went ahead. The rank-and-file protesters completed their training and, according to the official account, acquitted themselves well on the battlefield.

According to Ernest Scott, news of 14 February “went the world over”. And it wasn’t the last time the military authorities heard of “serious trouble”. In September 1918 there were two incidents of large-scale rebellion by Australian front-line troops in France, one resulting in 119 men being charged with mutiny—118 of them were subsequently convicted of desertion—the other a strike by eight battalions in which democratic and self-management processes were evident. Both events tended to disappear under the carpet in the euphoria of armistice.

Despite claims the invasion of Sydney by rebellious troops had been instigated by German agents and saboteurs, a view supported by Sir George Pearce, Minister for Defence, most people were happy to settle for something less dramatic; the *Daily Telegraph* preferred a less inflammatory explanation, and confidently put it down to the work of “a few malcontents”. The behaviour of troops in the camp town of Liverpool suggested alcohol was to blame. This interpretation appealed especially to the strong prohibition lobby in NSW, headed by Brigadier Albert Bruntnell of the Salvation Army who was also the State Member for Parramatta.

Following a referendum in June, all hotels in NSW closed at 6 p.m., ending late-night trading. This was intended as a war precaution, but continued until the restoration of late-night closing in 1935. The long “six o’clock closing” interregnum was a shot in the arm for the Sydney underworld; the illegal provision and supply of alcohol generated criminal fortunes and careers, created networks of corruption, and laid the foundations of organised crime in NSW.

REFERENCES

This account draws on contemporary newspaper reports. Details regarding mutiny in Australia’s armed forces are based on my reading of Tom Frame and Kevin Baker, *Mutiny! Naval insurrections in Australia and New Zealand*, Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 2000; Chapter 15 discusses mutiny in the Australian army and air force.

Ernest Scott writes about the protest, and military camp conditions, in *Australia During The War*, UQP, St Lucia, 1989, pp.228–230, 294–296.


Rowan Cahill is a writer and journalist. He is working with Terry Irving and Lucy Taksa on a history of radical Sydney.