

# MITCHAM AIF CAMP

**APRIL 1915 – JANUARY 1919**

**By Gavin Scrimgeour**



## Mitcham AIF camp

The Mitcham AIF camp was the main training ground for thousands of volunteers, predominantly from South Australia, who enlisted to fight for the Australian Imperial Force in the Great War of 1914-18. From a population point of view, when it was at its biggest in the first half of 1916, Mitcham Camp was the second largest town in SA<sup>1</sup>, a vibrant, though largely transient, community of men, with an almost total turnover of population every two or three months. At the beginning of March, 1916, 4426 men were in camp.<sup>2</sup> According to figures given in the 1920's, 33000 men passed through Mitcham camp before embarkation for overseas, and 6000 did not return.<sup>3</sup>

*How many have sojourned at Mitcham during preparation for service abroad it would be hard to say. Men are always coming and going. They are drafted in from the recruiting depots, learn their duties, and are shipped off to the front. The number must run into tens of thousands. It will be readily seen, therefore, that the care of, and provision for, so many men is a task of considerable magnitude. Not only is the soldier drilled and fed at Mitcham, but clothes must be found for him there, he is bathed under hot or cold showers, he is shaved, amusements are provided for his spare time, hospitals erected, hygiene maintained, and in fact everything which goes hand in hand with the wellbeing of a large congregation of men is taken into consideration. It is a community of it itself— a complete piece of machinery in which every unit is a cog that performs some function that is a necessity or an advantage to the common weal.<sup>4</sup>*



Figure 1

The camp was located where the present Adelaide suburb of Colonel Light Gardens now stands. Colonel Light Gardens is a State Heritage area, but in recognition its significance as one of the finest examples of the Garden City town planning movement, rather than for its connection with Australian military history. In fact, there is now only the smallest reminder of the existence of the camp – a small Cross of Remembrance on a small reserve near where the Camp Headquarters once stood, and some iron hoops embedded in large gum trees which were reputedly used for tethering horses which were watered at a pool near this spot.

Mitcham camp was situated on what had previously been Grange Farm, the 300 acre property of William Tennant Mortlock, who had died in 1913. The camp was bounded by Goodwood Rd to the west, Grange Rd. to the north, View St. and just west of Winnall St. to the east, and Springbank Rd. to the south. It was described by surveyors as being bereft of vegetation apart from '.... an avenue of pine trees, sick from the continued drought [on the western boundary and] scattered gums in the south.'<sup>5</sup> (The gazetted training area where training and manoeuvres could be held stretched from Glen Osmond to the eastern boundary of Belair National Park, through Eden Hills to Flagstaff Hotel,

then north to Edwardstown Railway Station.<sup>6</sup> However the area previously occupied by Grange Farm is what is generally regarded as Mitcham Camp)



Fig. 2 Grange Farm

## **Early days at Mitcham Camp**

### **a) Reasons for move to Mitcham**

In the early months of the war, most military training was done at Morphettsville (the racecourse) and what is variously referred to as Oaklands or Ascot Park (which is still military land). The history of the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion, the first occupants of Mitcham Camp, states, '*On April 1<sup>st</sup> the unit marched to the site of the now historic Mitcham Camp*'.<sup>1</sup> On the same day, a small item in the Advertiser announced that the military camps which had been at Oaklands (Ascot Park) and at Morphettsville '*will be removed to Mitcham today*' and it quoted authorities as stating that they would be able to work the camp more economically at the new site.<sup>2</sup> Another reason given for the removal was that the camp, if too long continued in one place, necessarily had the effect of cutting up the ground to a considerable extent, and the authorities did not wish to take an undue advantage of the generosity of the owners of the Oaklands and Morphettsville estates. This issue was prevented from becoming a problem at Mitcham when the Government purchased the estate in June 1915 with the intention to eventually establish the site as a 'model garden suburb'. Miller<sup>3</sup> states that the move was necessary because Ascot Park was totally unsuitable as a winter camp.

### **b) Early discomfort**

Lt- Col Walter Dollman was the Commanding Officer of the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion which took up residence in the camp on Day 1. Later, from Dec 1<sup>st</sup> 1916, he was the third and last Commandant of Mitcham Camp as it continued to evolve into a much better equipped and organised camp than it was in its early days. In his Battalion history, he makes a comparison of the early days of the camp with what it became.

*The inconveniences and discomforts of those early days of camp life were in marked contrast to the advantages and recreative opportunities of later times, to say nothing of the lack of hygienic and sanitary precautions, the provision of which, at a later date, made the Camp at Mitcham a model for the Commonwealth. Despite the dust of the first few days and the mud of later days, very great pride*

*was taken in the Battalion quarter. All ranks were accommodated in the old-fashioned and now discarded 'bell' tents.<sup>4</sup>*

Two weeks after the camp was opened, there were already over 3000 men in the camp. Many of the men had been against the move from Ascot Park, believing they were leaving a 'dusty camp for a dustier one'. However, according to a reporter, rain had settled the dust and it was clear that Mitcham made an 'ideal winter camp.'<sup>5</sup> He was over-optimistic. The drought broke, the 1915 winter was very wet and 'land which had so frequently been ploughed and cultivated ... soon became a quagmire' with 12 inches of mud all over the campsite.<sup>6</sup> All but 12 of the bell tents collapsed as the pegs pulled out of the soft mud. There were permanent puddles. Tom Crase who served with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Horse, remembered, 'The camp was poorly lit at night and it was quite common to step into one of the puddles at night time when returning from leave and get your boots, sox and trouser legs saturated.' At times the rain was so heavy that it ran through tents, so men had to pick up wet blankets and run through rain to the YMCA tent.<sup>7</sup> In 1927, it was remembered, 'Soon after their (27<sup>th</sup> Battalion) arrival, the wet season set in and Mitcham ..... became a series of lakes, along the shores of which training was continued under difficulties'<sup>8</sup> The weather was also responsible for other inconveniences. On 7<sup>th</sup> August 1915, an 8 minute mini-cyclone caused substantial damage, blowing over and ripping the YMCA marquee. Other tents were damaged and some military tents 'capsized'<sup>9</sup>

There is no doubt that in the beginning, conditions at the camp were very basic. All ranks lived in bell tents, on ground sheets laid on the ground. There was 'a shortage of canvas' and it was difficult 'to find sufficient tents to accommodate the men.'<sup>10</sup> Eight men slept in each small bell tent. The camp latrines were long wooden poles erected over slit trenches, without any cover although later with a hessian screen. Tom Crase said that using the latrine was like being 'a shag on a rock'.<sup>11</sup> Ern Cooper (32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion) described washing arrangements. 'To wash in, there are two long troughs with about a dozen taps at each, and there are three or four places all together. Also have a shower bath but it's a bit too cold!'<sup>12</sup> Men were also not fully equipped – 'unfortunately many of the troops have not yet been issued service uniforms, but there is hardly a man in the lines who does not possess a suit of dungarees.'<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 3. A squad of new recruits at Mitcham Camp



Fig 4. A general view of the training centre where Australia's quota of the Commonwealth Overseas Forces are prepared for the business of war'  
(Split photo - The Chronicle 25 May 1915, 2 months after the camp was set up)

## **Health Issues.**

The combination of the cold wet winter and basic living conditions inevitably lead to health problems at the camp. Tom Crase recalled that twice during his time at the camp, he had very heavy colds. Because he felt so ill and because of the lack of amenities he walked out of camp and went home. His doctor told him he could not return to camp while he was so ill, and he was allowed to remain at home.<sup>1</sup>

Very early on, there were complaints about the medical facilities at Mitcham. There was a hospital at the camp, where minor cases were treated, with more serious cases transferred to a hospital at Keswick Army Base. Very serious cases could be transferred from Keswick to Adelaide Hospital. On 24 April a 'military reporter', possibly with a brief to allay the concerns of parents and others in the community, reported in 'The Register' that he was 'struck with the splendid equipment' in the 'large well-lighted tent'. The patients' stretchers were 'low and comfortable', and although there was no bed linen, there were sufficient blankets and pillows were 'soft and – considering the dust – clean.' He could find nothing to complain about. He admitted that the care may not have been the same as given by wives or parents, but after all, he reminded readers, this was a camp and soldiers do not expect to be 'afforded luxury apartments.'<sup>2</sup>

Serious epidemics occurred at the camp during that first winter, the most serious of which was cerebro-spinal meningitis. The first death reported in a newspaper was that of Private Ernest Lovely who took ill at the camp on Tuesday and who died the following Saturday. Readers were reassured that as meningitis is a communicable disease, prompt measures were taken to isolate all contacts, 'a precaution which will meet all the necessities of the disease.' The report added that there was no truth in statements that diphtheria had broken out.<sup>3</sup> It is interesting that after this report of the death of Private Lovely, and despite the number of subsequent deaths, no other individual cases are mentioned in the Adelaide newspapers.

Despite reassurances from authorities who, it would appear from newspaper reports, consistently played down the extent of the problem, cases continued to occur. On 6 August, in response to rumours about a serious epidemic at the camp, military authorities issued a statement declaring that 'with the exception of a few cases of infectious disease, the camp is singularly healthy.' It was not unusual, they claimed, and certainly not an epidemic, that there had been a few cases of cerebro-spinal meningitis, as 'this disease is found in all large cities and camps.' Only 5 cases of diphtheria which had been 'brought into the camp through men visiting their homes,' and a few cases of German measles had been reported. All necessary precautions were being taken when an infectious disease was reported. 'Contacts are isolated, tents or huts sprayed with formalin, and clothing and blankets fumigated.'<sup>4</sup>

It was certainly true that meningitis was often found in army camps, and Mitcham was by no means the only camp infected. From August 1914 up to the end of June 1916, no less than 256 recruits in Australian army camps died of the disease out of 604 affected, and the incidence in young soldiers was 5 times that among the civilian population.<sup>5</sup> At the same time as the Mitcham outbreak, there was a meningitis epidemic in military camps in Melbourne, with 54 cases and 18 deaths occurring in one week in August.<sup>6</sup>

On 16 August it was announced that visitors would not be admitted to the Mitcham Camp 'for a few days'. The reason given was that measles was being brought into the camp by visitors and this had

infected soldiers in the camp. The statement assured the public that the camp was not in quarantine. The decision had nothing to do with 'the few cases of cerebro-spinal meningitis which had occurred', but the statement then went into extensive details about precautions which were being taken to prevent the spread of the disease. This included every man in the camp being 'issued a small bottle containing a powerful volatile antiseptic which they inhale frequently'.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult not to reach the conclusion that meningitis was the real reason for stopping visitors, and authorities were desperately trying to not cause any panic.

Despite precautions, deaths continued at the camp. On 25 August, the Chairman of Adelaide Hospital, 'in consequence of the meningitis outbreak at the Mitcham camp' made a statement that since July 21, there had been 49 cases in Adelaide, 35 being military, and 12 deaths, including 9 military.<sup>8</sup> The 'military' deaths may not include at least 2 civilian deaths at the camp, a carpenter and a volunteer.<sup>9</sup> From 9am on 23 August until midnight on Friday 27, there were 9 confirmed cases, 3 possible cases and 4 deaths.<sup>10</sup> By 8 September numbers had risen further. In reply to a question in Parliament, the Premier said that there had been 20 deaths at Mitcham camp, 22 other positive cases and 8 'doubtful' cases. However there had been no new cases at the camp for 7 days.<sup>11</sup>



*Fig. 5. Pre-war studio portrait of 2035 Private (Pte) Ronald Harry Tuck, K Group Base Depot, in civilian dress. A carpenter from Terowie, SA, Pte Tuck enlisted on 18 June 1915. On the morning of 10 August 1915 whilst on guard duty at Mitcham Camp, Adelaide, Pte Tuck complained of being unwell. Despite orders to report sick Pte Tuck returned to his duties. That afternoon Pte Tuck was admitted to the 7th Australian General Hospital at Keswick, Adelaide. He died of cerebrospinal meningitis on 11 August 1915, aged 20.*

In late August, It was also announced that 'the 9<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements would leave Mitcham for Onkaparinga. (Register 30/8/15) and that 'no more recruits would be sent to the camp until health

conditions had improved, and tents and buildings were disinfected.<sup>12</sup> (This led to a spirited exchange between an anxious mother and the military, carried on through the letters to The Register. The woman's son was beginning officer's school, and had been asked to report despite the decision to stop taking recruits into the camp. Why, she demanded, were officers treated differently?<sup>13</sup> The Army maintained that as the officer's school was separate from the main camp area, there was no more danger there than any other area of Adelaide. However, to allay the parent's concern, the son was sent out of camp.<sup>14</sup> One wonders how this exchange affected the young man's military career!)

Despite the efforts to play down the severity of the situation, the outbreak must have been of great concern both to camp authorities, and to the men training in the camp. The newly formed 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion took up residence in Mitcham Camp in the middle of August, at the height of the medical problems (or the SA half did – 2 of the 4 companies in the Battalion were from WA, and these did not arrive in Adelaide until the end of September). The first entry in the Battalion diary was on the 11<sup>th</sup> August, and the first Battalion death recorded was of L.J.F Palm who died in Adelaide Hospital on the 15<sup>th</sup>.<sup>15</sup> The next death was of W.H. Polle, who was discharged from the camp hospital on the 23rd, but sent to Keswick, then Adelaide Hospital on the 27<sup>th</sup> and he died on the same day.<sup>16</sup> Further deaths occurred on 28 August<sup>17</sup> and 7 September.<sup>18</sup>

There are various references in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion diary which refer to precautions in response to concerns about health. The first indication in the diary that there were health issues is an order is an order referring to the chain through which information should be passed when a unit was put into isolation that.<sup>19</sup> On the 16<sup>th</sup> all overnight leave was discontinued for a fortnight.<sup>20</sup> On 18 August, all tents were struck 'to allow for drying of ground on which tents are now pitched', and all blankets were to be taken to the Quartermaster's store to be disinfected by steam sterilisation.<sup>21</sup> From 24<sup>th</sup> for one week, all men would be paraded for a special medical inspection at 9am.<sup>22</sup> On 30<sup>th</sup> there is an intriguing instruction to Sergeants that 'owing to contagious diseases in the camp' they were, until the health of the camp was normal, to sleep in the tents of their section, and not all together in the same tent.<sup>23</sup>

On 11 Sept the diary includes orders from the Defence Department in Melbourne on precautions to be taken during the epidemic. It is clear from the diary that many of these were already in practice.

- Overcrowding was to be avoided, with limits set on the numbers of men in huts and tents.
- Tent flaps were to be kept open allowing a free flow of air.
- The resistance of men to disease was not to be hindered by over-exertion or exposure to weather, and the highest standards of personal hygiene were to be maintained.
- The sanitary conditions were to be assisted attention to drainage, dryness of floors of sleeping quarters, and provision for drying of garments and boots.
- Anyone with severe catarrh of the nasopharynx was to be isolated.
- Eucalyptus oil was to be used liberally, with spraying of noses and throats of suspicious cases. All men were to be issued with a daily ration of 6 drops of oil to be slowly sucked from a piece of bread. Tents were to be sprayed each evening with a solution containing eucalyptus oil, and men were to inhale eucalyptus by placing it on a clean handkerchief placed close to the face during the night. Further fumes could be inhaled by boiling water with a few drops of eucalyptus. However men were to be warned not to take large doses orally, which could have serious effects. It was the fumes which were beneficial. No overnight leave was to be granted.
- Meningitis cases to stay in hospital until it was absolutely sure they were no longer carriers

- Systematic swabbing of all sore throats.
- No new recruits to be taken into camp
- All contacts to be isolated until the incubation period is passed.<sup>24</sup>

The 32<sup>nd</sup> battalion moved to Cheltenham Camp on 16<sup>th</sup> September, where they were joined by the 2 Western Australian companies, and they remained there until embarkation on 18<sup>th</sup> November. Was the concern about the health of the camp a factor, and a reluctance to put WA recruits in a meningitis infected camp in the decision to make this move?

### **Improvements in the camp.**

The camp was never, and nor was it intended to be, a permanent facility. The Government had already decided that when the war was over, the land was to be used as the site for the new garden suburb. But as it became clear that the war was not going to be over quickly, and as numbers in the camp increased, conditions did gradually improve.

Two preoccupations during the summer of 1915-16 were dust, and the gully winds that exacerbated the problem. From January 1916 the Army Department of the YMCA produced a weekly magazine for all military camps in Adelaide called Camp YM. In each edition, a column named 'Mitcham Memo', written under a nom-de-plume by Senior Chaplain Matters, gives an idea of conditions in the camp, Strong gully winds from the hills (regular summer occurrences in the area) besides causing the chaplain's office to 'come to grief'<sup>1</sup>, 'have shifted tons of dust night after night'<sup>2</sup> 'Our military police can do everything but arrest the dust'.<sup>3</sup> New recruits were 'now sampling our famous dust'<sup>4</sup> A day where there was no dust was enough to cause comment. 'Wasn't Monday a glorious day?' was followed by the lament that those who had only seen the camp covered in dust, had not been there.<sup>5</sup> Bob Veitch of the 7/10<sup>th</sup> Battalion remembered little about the camp in early 1916 other than brown bell tents – brown with dust<sup>6</sup>

But the camp did develop, and despite the dust, conditions did improve for the men who trained there. By early 1916, the camp had taken on a more settled appearance, and had the reputation of being one of the best military training camps in Australia. Roads began to be tarred in March 1916, leading the Memo to comment, 'A monument should be erected to the person or persons who conquered Mitcham's dust'.<sup>7</sup> With drainage work done and roads tarred, when heavy rain came in June the Register reported that 'Last winter the camp was little more than a morass, but now an almost perfect system of drainage has been established, and many roads made where only quagmires existed previously',<sup>8</sup> (although drainage was apparently complicated by units who had taken matters into their own hands and dug their own drainage channels.<sup>9</sup> The Register concluded its report by referring to praise for the camp from 'interstate visitors' including the Governor General (Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson) who visited the camp on 24 May, and giving credit to Major Stuart and his officers 'who had striven hard to combat the evils arising from disorder and uncleanness'.<sup>10</sup> But wet weather still caused problems. A letter from a parent to the Register wondered why recruits could not sleep at home when drill was suspended and leave granted due to wet weather. This would avoid sickness due to 'the sloppy state of the camp'.<sup>11</sup>

There was outbreak of meningitis again in June, but it was quickly brought under control. There appears to be no reference to this in newspapers, but Camp YM reported that 'fatalities had been few'.<sup>12</sup> An embargo was put on all camp entertainment so large gatherings were avoided, but these had re-commenced by the end of the month.

## Accommodation

Tents continued to be used for some time in the camp, before being gradually replaced by huts. Two kinds of tents were used. A bell tent was a cone-shaped tent with a central pole, and these predominate in early photos of the camp. The bottom of the tent could be rolled up to allow flow of air. Early residents of the camp slept on groundsheets, but although bell tents continued to be used, later residents who were 'quartered in bell tents have the unusual advantage of wood floors'.<sup>1</sup>



Fig. 6. Bell tents at Mitcham Camp



Fig. 7 Detail of a larger photo of the camp, showing bell tents

The other kind of tent is referred to in newspaper reports as an Indian tent, and these largely replace the bell tents in later photos. 'The front and back are readily removable, again allowing the free flow of air' so 'The interior is delightfully cool on a hot day', according to *The Register* 'The floor is of boards in 4 pieces which can be readily removed, permitting the ground beneath being swept and the whole floor scrubbed and dried in the sun'. Scrubbing was done each Saturday.<sup>2</sup>



Fig. 8 Men outside Indian tent

Large galvanised iron huts were gradually built to replace the tents. The original huts, built for 42 men, but afterwards 'wings' attached to bring numbers up to 60, were conventional 4-sided buildings. These were soon replaced by rows of open-sided huts, 'a kind of verandahed house with the walls omitted'. Each hut had one set of shutters which could be used to enclose 'the weather side' when necessary.<sup>3</sup> Board floors were raised 18 inches above the ground, 'thus ensuring dryness and free current of air underneath which promotes the best sanitary conditions'.<sup>4</sup> The same report has men sleeping with head to walls and feet to centre, although the Camp Routine booklet, published after Major W. L. Stuart became Camp Commandant in September 1915, decreed that O.C.'s were to ensure that men slept 'head to foot' alternately. 'This will ensure that the head of each man is the maximum distance apart and so ensure more effective isolation.'<sup>5</sup> The men slept on straw palliasses, refilled when the Medical Officer deemed necessary.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 9 An open camp hut at Mitcham Army Camp. The huts were open night and day on both sides except when raining when the weather side was closed by shutters.



Fig. 10. A row of the open huts. They are believed to have been designed by Lt. Col. Hill, who was the camp Sanitation Officer

By Feb 1916, the health of the camp was 'excellent' due to the improved accommodation, but also to the excellent sanitary arrangements. There was "a plentiful provision of 'ablution places,' shower-baths and latrines."<sup>7</sup> A 1917 report, described bathrooms 'with ablution troughs with taps so that washing is done in running water. At the shower baths cold water, counted next to fresh air for health is supplied in plenty.'<sup>8</sup> The map of the camp shows many latrines, of course necessary when being used by up to 4000 men.

Other buildings were also erected. Headquarters was able to be moved from a tent to a 'convenient and well-lighted structure'. There was a new officer's mess, quarters and mess for instructors, and a new hospital building. By 1916 there was also a dentist's surgery.<sup>9</sup>



Fig. 11 The new hospital

The weather continued to cause problems. On the evening of 17 July, 1916 a destructive storm hit many parts of Adelaide and surrounding areas, and damage at Mitcham Camp was great enough for it to be reported in newspapers around the nation. The Register reported that that army had little sleep, 'trying to meet such brutality of force as the Huns themselves, and a worse experience could hardly have been encountered in the trenches. .... The effect on the camp was like that of an aerial raid by German aviators.'<sup>10</sup> Every strip of canvas was torn down, including a big marquee with Quartermaster's stores The Salvation Army hut was demolished and several buildings including the canteen lost their roofs. There were stories of miraculous escapes as men dodged flying pieces of iron and 'guards at their various stations had a trying time as their sentry boxes were overturned

and carried in all directions'.<sup>11</sup> Even a concert party 'The Willing Workers' on their way to the camp for an evening performance were lucky to escape with their lives when a tree fell on their trolley.<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 12 Quartermaster's marquee in the aftermath of the great storm, July 1916



Fig. 13 The Salvation Army hut after the storm

## Camp life

### Daily Routine

The daily routine and other administrative arrangements were set out in a small booklet, 'Camp Routine – Mitcham AIF Camp'. On weekdays, after reveille at 6am, all blankets were to be rolled up and kits tidied before an early morning tea or coffee at 6.30. After early morning parade at 6.45 which would involve at least 30 minutes of physical training, breakfast was at 8, before general training was carried out from 9am to 12 noon with a 15 minute 'smoko' at 10.45. 'Lecturettes' were to be delivered each day, during 'smoko' times or outside and in addition to training times. Afternoon training went from 2-5 again with a 15 minute break. 'Tea' was at 5.30, with an evening parade if required at 7. Last Post and Lights Out was at 10pm. Saturday training finished at 12 noon and there was no training on Sunday. This routine could be varied when necessary, especially to accommodate night training.

The routine could be rather monotonous. Claire Woods<sup>2</sup> provides notes made by one soldier.

*Reveille was sounded at 6 o'clock.*

*Physical drill was carried out from 7 to 8 then breakfast – 9-12 drill 2-5 drill.*

*General leave within 1 mile of camp 5-9.30*

*So day after day this programme was carried on, with an occasional guard duty all night, trench digging*

At some stage during each day, according to the Camp Routine booklet, the feet and chests of all men were to be examined, with particular emphasis on detecting 'nasal catarrh or other signs of impending disease.' Men would not have looked forward to the weekly inspection for venereal disease. If a man was found to have a venereal disease, the Medical Officer was to be notified, and the man handed over to the Military Police.<sup>3</sup>

## **Meals**

The standard ration was laid out in Army regulations, with an allowance per man of bread (1¼ lbs.) meat (1½ lbs.) potatoes or onions (1 lb.) vegetables (½lb or 2 oz. cheese), with jam tea, coffee salt pepper and cocoa. There was an extra allowance per week of rice, flour and curry powder. (Camp routine) Private Ern Cooper, a farm labourer from Gumeracha expressed satisfaction. 'The food, which is good, chiefly consists of, for breakfast fried chops, sausage or steak. Dinner stew or meat and vegetables. At tea we have bread and jam.' He added that there was always enough, and generally a lot of bread left over.<sup>2</sup> John Ross, with the 16/9<sup>th</sup> Light Horse in March 1916, remembered less food. Lunch consisted of one sausage and one potato and the evening meal was of a loaf of bread and a tin of jam per tent of 8 men. A ditty commented on the diet.

*There is a Soldiers' Camp  
Down Mitcham way  
Where we get bread and jam  
Three times a day.<sup>3</sup>*

Men were rostered for fatigue work – work that needed to be done around the camp. This could include assisting in the kitchens as Ern Cooper did. 'One afternoon I with a mate had to peel spuds. About half a dozen tubs full (not saucepans)'.<sup>4</sup> Cooking was largely done over fire trenches.



Fig. 14. Cooking over a trench at Mitcham

At mealtimes, each kitchen provided food for half a Company. The men were paraded, and when all were present, food was distributed. Men ate their meal at their tents or huts, until mess huts were built in late 1916. Before lights out, all men were provided with a cup of cocoa.



Fig. 15 Cooks ready to serve meal



Fig. 16 Parade before meal



Fig. 17 Soldiers going through an open meal line at Mitcham Army Camp.



Fig 18. Washing up after meal

## Training

The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18, states that for the duration of the war, training was carried out mainly overseas, it being recognised that that troops would only really settle to work when leave-takings were over, and that training in camps 'was never other than elementary.'<sup>1</sup> But the intention at least was to do as much preparation as possible, and at Mitcham, a 12 week syllabus of training (40 ½ hours a week) was laid down, which had to be completed before embarkation. The Mitcham Camp routine booklet sternly reminded instructors that recruits had to get the full 40½ hours, "exclusive of 'inspections', 'telling off', or other duties." For example, in the fourth week, recruits were expected to do 3 hours of physical training, 8 hours musketry, 7 hours squad drill, 9 hours extended order drill, 2 ½ hours route marching, 5 hours night work and 6 hours entrenching, plus additional lecturettes. Physical training was important through the whole programme. Weeks 7 and 8 were devoted entirely to musketry, and bayonet fighting was emphasised from week 9, and bomb throwing was introduced in the last 2 weeks.<sup>2</sup>

The 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion diary provides the daily syllabus of work for units within the battalion. On 9 September, 1915, during their fourth week of training, A Coy was originally expected to do a route march all day, but, probably to their relief, this was changed to Rifle Exercises. B Coy, after its early morning physical and running drill, did company drill all morning, and were given a lecturette during smoko on silent carrying of arms, equipment and entrenching tools. They had the afternoon off, because from 4.45-10.00pm they had night outpost exercises, with rations, blankets, rifles and entrenching tools to be carried. The 1<sup>st</sup> reinforcements of the battalion did running in the morning, 2 hours of extended order drill in the morning followed by a lecture on advance guards. The afternoon was also devoted to advance guards, and there was a short session of night operations in the evening. The Machine Gun section and the Signallers had their own specialist training programme.<sup>3</sup>

The reports and recollections of soldiers tends to suggest that training was not always as stringent as outlined in orders. Ern Cooper, who was with the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion which entered camp in mid-August 1915, gives an indication that, at least in his early weeks in camp, the routine and training programme may have been somewhat disorganised. "First I will tell you what we have to do. In the morning, the bugle goes at 6.15 to get up, then wash and fold up kit etc. The whistle goes at 6.30 to fall in. We then march out for physical exercises for half an hour, come in and break off. Breakfast at

8 o'clock, fall in at 9.00 and go for a route march or drill..... smoke-o at 10.30 for half an hour, back to camp at 12.00, dinner at 1.00, and fall in again at 2.00. Fool about at something or other, smoke-o again at 3.30 and break off about 4. So you can see we are not over-worked, in fact there is no work at all.<sup>4</sup> Probably used to longer hours of harder work as a farm labourer, Cooper reported that he now weighed 10 stone, the heaviest he had ever been. Cooper did complete three months of training. Later in the war, the need for men on the Front meant that many men did not complete the full course in Adelaide. L/Cpl Lancelot Coad of the 6<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements for the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion embarked on 11 April, 1916, only 2 months after enlistment, and 6 weeks after entering camp (including 10 days of final leave) so certainly did not complete the whole training programme. 'We did very little training there (at Mitcham Camp) with the exception of physical training.'<sup>5</sup>

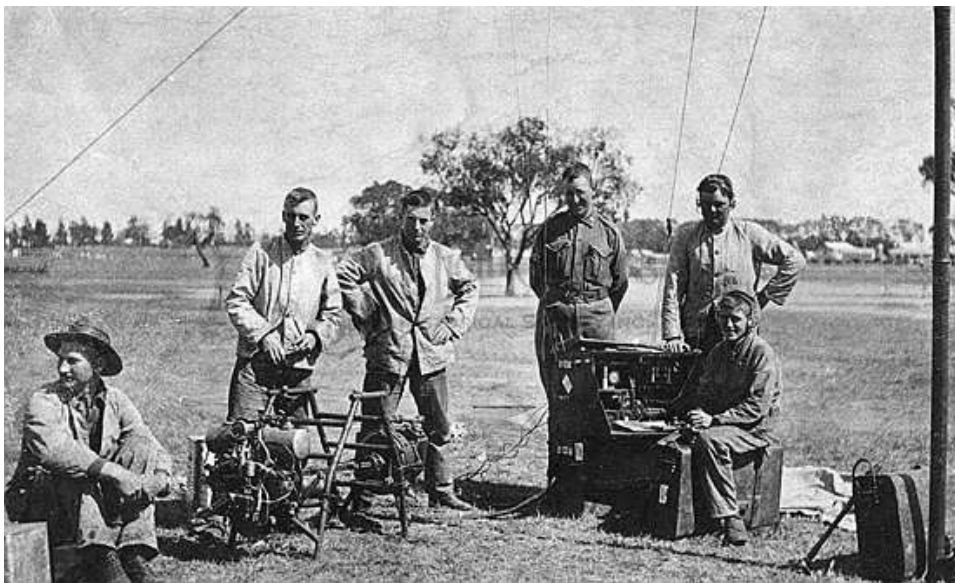


Fig. 19 Signallers at Mitcham Camp

Examples of exercises that should have been completed were given in the Camp routine booklet.. For example, bayonet fighting exercises included 'charging rows of straw filled sacks suspended from uprights, charging row hung in a trench, with part of sack, equivalent of head, over parapet, thrusting from a trench at sacks on parapet, and 'rough and tumble' in a trench with sack thrown into trench to represent enemy soldier. And so on.'<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 20 Bayonet Fighting School



Fig. 21 Bayonet Fighting practice at Mitcham Camp

Instructors were told to make training interesting, and to keep it simple – ‘ambitious schemes which handle considerable bodies or troops are useless’<sup>7</sup> – and realistic – ‘the whole secret of making training interesting is giving it an air of realism’.<sup>8</sup> They were given some simple examples of how to do this, and although, nearly 100 years later, the examples may appear somewhat ‘corny’, they do try to simulate what may face the troops at the front, and bring home the dangers that would be faced.

At Elementary Musketry – Rapid Fire Practice with Dummy Ammunition’ – *Instructor says to squad, which is standing in a trench – ‘There (100 metres away) is a German trench. The Bosches threaten to charge from it. You are to shoot them as fast as they show above the parapet. Get them as fast as their shoulders appear, and before their waists appear.’ Have a few men in the other trench bobbing up and down accordingly.*<sup>9</sup>



Fig.22 Musketry practice from a Mitcham trench

For a bomb-throwing/clearing trench exercise, *The instructor says, “We’re going to charge that trench (a properly traversed and recessed trench); we’ll suppose 100 are charging and that you 30 (if platoon is 30 strong) get into it at its west end along 30 yards of it, but the other 70 (imaginary) have been bowled over or stopped. (No glossing over the dangers here!) Then you’re to clear the whole 100 yards. I’ll walk along the parapet and tell you what enemy doings are taking place beyond each traverse as you get to it. For example, I’ll say – They’re bombing you from the next recess. You bomb them.’ Then again – Rifle fire from next recess. Bomb them and rush the recess’. Or again – ‘Machine*

*gun sweeping next recess from such and such a point; you must open fire on it and put its crew out of action'. Then do it, correcting errors and do exactly the same thing over again."*<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 23 Artillery drill At Mitcham camp.



Fig. 24 Light horsemen tending horses at their lines

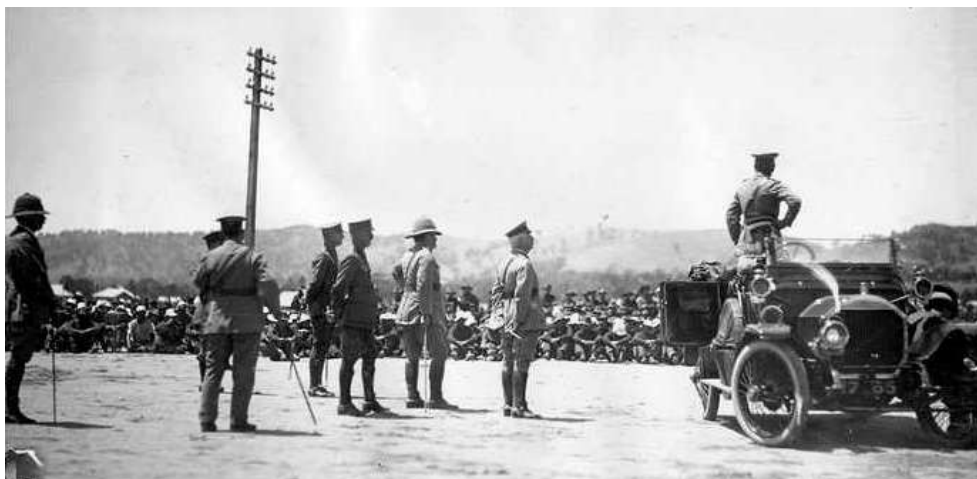


Fig 25. Officer addressing troops sitting at ease

On occasions more extensive larger scale exercises were held. In October, 1915, a night exercise involving 2000 men divided into 2 battalions was held in response to the scenario of hostile troops having landed at Willunga, and approaching Adelaide from Reynella. The defenders had to advance at midnight and 'seize and entrench Crabbes Ridge which commands the Mitcham Valley', and await the enemy attack. The covering of rough ground, scaling of ridges and ravines, the avoidance of quarries, the joining up of the 2 battalions who progressed by different routes, and then the digging of trenches was compared with the terrain that the troops would face if they had to fight in Gallipoli. (Certainly the digging of trenches, apparently successfully completed with 'two rows of trenching, about a quarter of a mile in length' would have been no small feat in an area quarried for its stone) Engineers and the Medical Corps (who' treated all manner of cases with remarkable capacity') were also involved. The oncoming enemy was attacked from the front line of trenches and this 'put the invaders to rout'.<sup>11</sup>

The Register reporter invited to view the manoeuvres was full of praise for the enthusiasm and demeanour of the participants, and described events in 'Boys Own Annual' terms. "Just as an officer faced what looked like a 10 foot drop into one of the ravines, a sturdy young fellow stepped out with the request, 'Let me go first, sir, to see if it is all right.'" Later, the men when met by the camp band, 'threw their heads back and their chests out, as they marched back into camp, 'determined not to show the fatigue they must have felt.' But he did allow himself some muted criticisms – as new recruits, 'the men could not be blamed for being ignorant of the Japanese method of coughing into the sleeve so that the sound might not be heard by the enemy', and 'some of the defenders stood and made excellent targets against the skyline for the enemy'.<sup>12</sup> The usefulness of such an exercise must have been accepted as during the next month, the recruits repelled further enemy troops who this time had landed at Glenelg.<sup>13</sup>



Fig 26. Mounted light horsemen on parade at Mitcham



Fig 27 Reinforcements in their group photo taken before embarkation. Note the trees behind them. They are the trees just east of the present Colonel Light Gardens Primary school. Most group photos were taken at this location

THE 27<sup>th</sup> BATTALION: REVIEW BY THE



THE GOVERNOR AT THE MITCHAM CAMP.



Fig 28 Parade for Governor at Camp



Fig. 29 Members of the Army Medical Corps at Mitcham Camp

Not all recruits were able to meet the physical or practical requirements of training. “Backward recruits’ were not to hold back the training of others, and were retained in special squads until fit for more advanced training. If it was decided that recruits showed themselves ‘unlikely to become efficient, (not those who so behave intentionally) they should be discharged after a fair trial’.<sup>14</sup> In the month that the 2 South Australian companies of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion spent at Mitcham – the first month of their training - 4 men were discharged as ‘unlikely to become an efficient soldier’. Of these, one was allowed to re-enlist at Mitcham Camp for ‘Home service’, and the reason for another discharge was later altered to ‘medically unfit’.<sup>15</sup>

Neither did all men in camp stay out of trouble, although apart from general references to the ‘rowdiness’, few details appear to have survived. The Official History of the war noted that ‘the youngsters in camps represented the whole community, and along with the most innocent or the most carefully nurtured there was necessarily a proportion of foul-mouthed, foul-living men to act as leaders in any folly.’<sup>16</sup> Because of censorship, information is limited, but it appears that Mitcham did not suffer from unrest and trouble that afflicted other large camps, especially in Sydney. There are 2 references in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion orders in the month they were at Mitcham to the responsibility of men to obey civil law, and their liability to arrest if they break civil law.<sup>17</sup> Military offenders were paraded before the C.O. in the custody of military police each morning, perhaps, for example, for absence from camp without a leave pass or for insubordination. In April 1915, the Register reports that ‘a few recalcitrants’ were ‘quartered in tents considerably removed from the lines and spend their hours in peering through a tall barbed-wire entanglement which surrounds their place of confinement.’<sup>18</sup> In June 1916, according to Major Stuart, the number paraded rarely exceeded eight a day.<sup>19</sup>

## Entertainment

Provision of entertainment for four thousand young men living in a relatively confined area, away from home and family, and facing an uncertain future on the Western front was understandably, from the beginning, seen as very important by the military authorities. There were two strands to this – entertainment and leisure time activities within the camp, and provision of leave for men to go outside of the camp.

## **In camp**

The in-camp facilities were largely run by the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) under the auspices of the military, who were often at pains to point out how much entertainment was provided. 2 weeks after the first troops marched onto largely vacant land, the first Commandant, Major De Passey, told the Register that 'the men are being generously catered for in the direction of entertainment.'<sup>1</sup> In the early months, the YMCA used a large marquee (blown down and ripped by the storm in July) while it was building a large hall. They provided 'some first class entertainment, at which leading artists assisted. Miss Hilda Felstead proved a warm favourite with the men.'<sup>2</sup>

On 4 October, the large new YMCA Hall, 100 x 45 feet, and lit by electricity, was opened, with speeches, a musical programme organised by the Cheer-up Society which 'included items by Hilda Felstead', (of course) and ended with 'the singing of God Save the King and cheers for the King, the YMCA, and the Cheer-up Society.'<sup>3</sup> This hall, capable of seating 1500 men, was used during the daytime for classes, and for concerts or lectures on most weekday evenings. An example of a weekly programme (from 14-18 Feb 1916) is

*Monday – Miss Gallagher's Concert Party*

*Tuesday – Mrs Edward Reeves Patriotic Pageant*

*Wednesday – Church Parade, followed by Miss Rogers Concert Party*

*Thursday – Address by Rev Henry Howard, followed by AAMC Concert*

*Friday – Thomas' Moving Pictures<sup>4</sup>*

According to Camp YM, most evenings were well attended, although Rev Henry Howard who was on the programme on most Thursdays (with a sing-song if there was no other performers) may have worn out his welcome, as there are several pleas in the magazine for men to go along to hear this 'wonderful orator' with a stirring message. Mrs Reeves Patriotic Pageant received rave reviews. It presented the story of the War, told by representatives of the various nations played by girls from the Flinders St Baptist Girls Gymnasium Club. Special mention was made of 'the fine acting of little Belgium, dignified Britannia, and fierce Germany'.<sup>5</sup> A concert party was organised by Mr. L. Langford where the audience 'sang the Canadian war song which has a stirring chorus.'<sup>6</sup> Miss Moya's Pierettes ('pierettes' being female performers in a French pantomime, usually with a whitened face and wearing loose white fancy dress) were regular performers, but Mitcham Memo in Camp YM several times gently admonishes the behaviour of their audience. There was 'a good house, although the behaviour of a section of the audience was not quite up to scratch.'<sup>7</sup> But generally the audience seems to have been well-behaved. Miss Felstead maintained her popularity, and when, in August 1917 she gave her farewell concert at the camp, the 'huge audience of soldiers sang 'For She's a Jolly Good Fellow' and cheered her again and again' before Colonel Dollman presented her with a khaki suede handbag.<sup>8</sup>

There were also speakers 'on subjects of utmost interest to the men, dealing with the places they will visit and fight in overseas'.<sup>9</sup> An example of this was the illustrated lecture on Egypt and the Dardenelles by Captain McLean, whose 'hints on the moral dangers in Egypt were not lost on the listeners.'<sup>10</sup> There were other talks of general interest, such as that of Dr Hinton, a 102 year old man who talked about a battle in India in 1843! Sergeant Nottage of the NCO School presented an illustrated talk on African Big Game which he repeated by popular demand several weeks later because on the first occasion, 'the pictures were marred by excessive heat in the lantern'<sup>11</sup>. 'Among

the Miao of China', delivered by Mr Robert Powell of the China Inland Mission, attracted attention because Mr Powell was in 'national costume'.<sup>12</sup> On another occasion, James Corbett told 'humorous stories about his travels'. The 'exhibition of moving pictures' was the regular attraction on Friday nights.

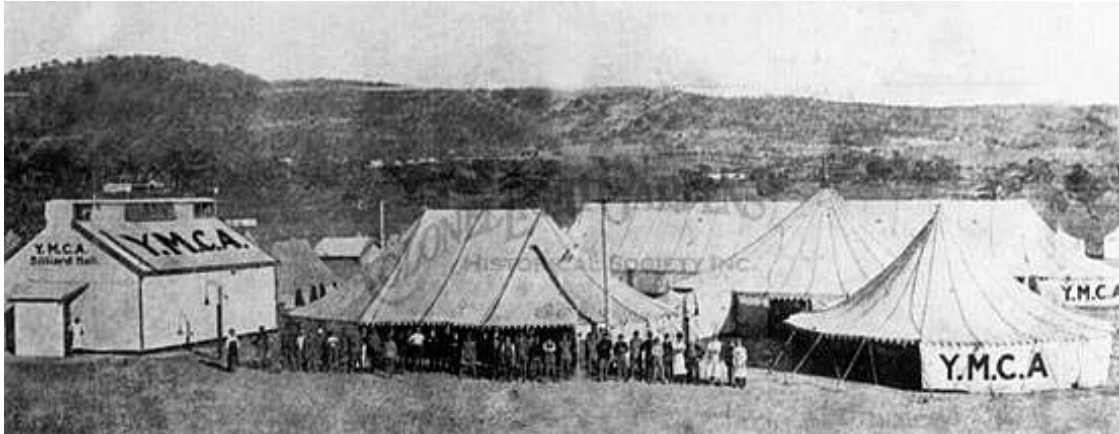


Fig. 30 YMCA area of camp

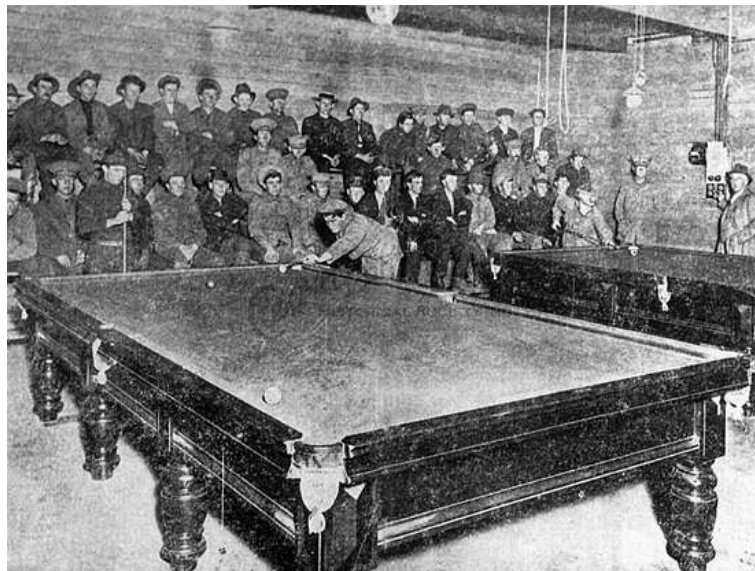


Fig. 31. The billiard room



Fig. 32 The reading & writing room



Fig. 33 Packed audience of men sitting in the Y.M.C.A. Hut

The YMCA also had an outdoor entertainment area, where events such as boxing tournaments could be held. This was later described as one of the most popular places in camp – ‘boxing being one of the healthiest of pastimes and callings, for the exercise of strong willpower and self-control.’<sup>14</sup> Camp YM reported on 2 boxing tournaments. The first in January 1916, attracted 18 entries in four divisions, but on the day, quite a few less fronted up, ‘owing to inoculation, vaccination and perhaps excusable stage-fright.’<sup>15</sup> On one hot evening, Wednesday Church Parade was moved outside to the boxing ring, with worshippers encouraged to stay on after church to watch the boxing.

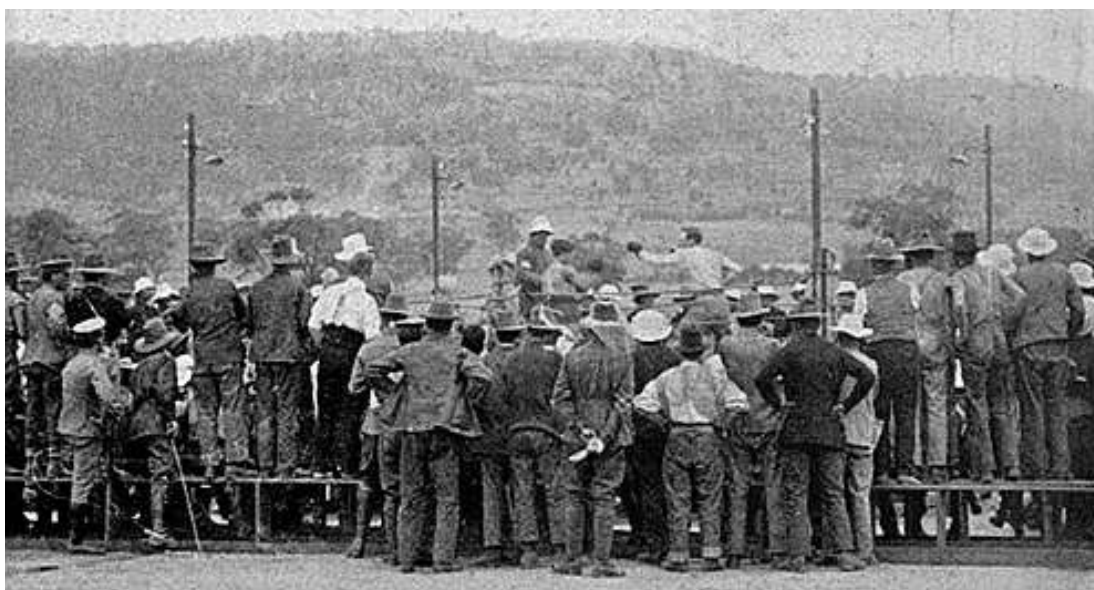


Fig. 34 Boxing tournament at Mitcham Camp

The Garrison Institute, in a building 140 x 50 feet, governed by a military committee but run by the YMCA, developed from the original YMCA canteen. Here was sold 'everything needed by a soldier for his personal use.' It was claimed that nothing cost more than it would in Adelaide, and often goods were cheaper, particularly soft drinks and tobacco. Soda-fountain drinks were 2d, (two pence) and ice-creams 4d.<sup>16</sup> According to one report, the favourite beverage with the soldiers (with alcohol forbidden in camp) is 'camp ale', 'a creditable attempt to provide a substitute for John Barleycorn without alcoholic disadvantage', which 'an old seasoned fighting man' described as being 'as near to the real thing as you can get'.<sup>17</sup> Ham, beef, eggs, fruit, pies, biscuits, cakes, tinned fish, a cup of tea, walking sticks, pipes and khaki collars are all mentioned in newspaper reports as being available. These reports often expressed amazement at the extent of business carried out at the Post Office, 'where 50,000 letters are handled every month, and £160 worth of stamps and £300 worth of postal orders are sold'.<sup>18</sup> A Commonwealth Bank agency was also busy with 'about £1000 deposited every month' by the soldiers, whose pay was 5 shillings per day. Clothes could be pressed or repaired in a tailor's shop, and 'several tonsorial artists are prepared to do business at the shortest notice' in the barber's shop.<sup>19</sup> Two billiard tables were available in the billiard room, and 6 more tables were later purchased with takings from Institute shops. These were possibly located in a recreation hut erected in 1916. Officers had their own billiard table in their club, which was also blessed with wicker chairs, magazines and 'a splendidly tuned piano'.<sup>20</sup> A 60 x 30 foot reading and writing room surrounded by an 8 feet wide verandah was also erected - in 13 days! - by the YMCA.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 35 The YMCA Reading and writing room

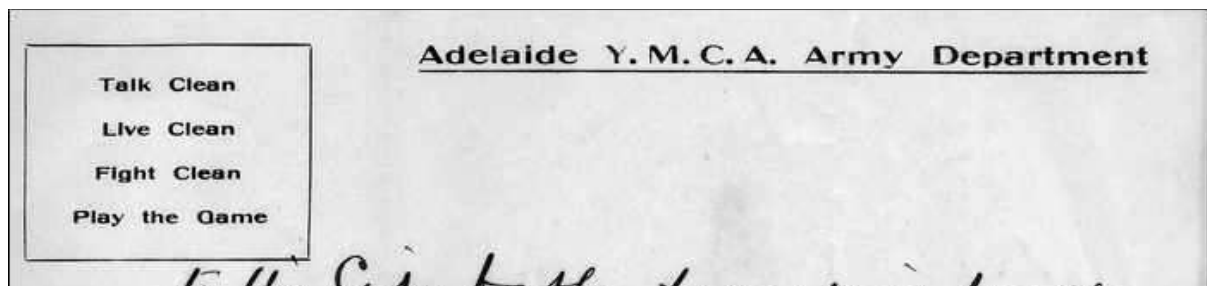


Fig 36. Letter paper provided by YMCA in reading and writing room with reminders about appropriate behaviour

The spiritual needs of the men were also catered for. Behind the Garrison Institute were the buildings of the Salvation Army, Anglican, Roman Catholic and Methodist churches, which were 'all largely used for reading and recreational purposes as well as religious services'. Another building was later built for 'other Protestant bodies'. There were chaplains for most denominations, and they

conducted, in rotation, a united Church Parade in the YMCA hall each Wednesday night.<sup>22</sup> The Advertiser reported that 'nearly 500 men attended Chaplain Colonel Maguire's Bible study class on Tuesday', and there was another large attendance 2 days later to hear Chaplain Captain McNicol talk on 'Christian character'. On this occasion, '29 men signed religious decision cards'.<sup>23</sup>

In 1917, the Societe des Professeurs Francais began classes in the camp for the free teaching of French. The professeurs were driven to the camp 'by the kindness of the Cheer-up Society' and learners 'were instructed in as much of the French tongue as is likely to serve them in good stead when they arrive in France'.<sup>24</sup> Miller, in '50000 Men' is probably referring to this when he says that the lady who tried to teach French to the men was an unofficial part of camp entertainment!<sup>25</sup>

At various times, as men came and went, sports teams were formed which played matches against community teams. In August 1918, as the numbers of recruits in the camp decreased and the focus of the camp changed, a series of fun military sports meetings to which the public were invited, began at the camp, including mounted events such as tent-pegging, wrestling on horseback, and a 'Gretna Green' Race.<sup>26</sup>



Fig 37 Tug of war at military sports day

### **Outside camp**

Leave outside of camp would obviously have been highly valued by the men of Mitcham Camp. 'There is a consensus of opinion here that the most popular general in the Army is General Leave.'<sup>1</sup> As Miller says, 'There was a fair amount of liberty'.<sup>2</sup> Sources give slightly different descriptions of the amount of leave which was granted, but it is possible to get a general idea. When the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion entered camp in August 1915, three kinds of leave were outlined in Battalion Orders. At the discretion of O.C Companies, General Leave could be granted from Monday to Friday from 5pm to 9.30pm. At these times men were restricted to a 1 mile radius of the camp. General Leave on both Saturdays and Sundays, without distance restriction, was from 12 noon to 9.30pm. Special Leave during the week could be granted from 5 to 11pm for '10% of the Coy's strength after deducting married men.' Married men's leave was from noon Saturday until 9.30p.m. on Sunday. Married men were normally not granted leave during the week.<sup>3</sup>

O.M. Book 85.

No. \_\_\_\_\_ Regiment 8/27<sup>th</sup> Batt<sup>n</sup>

**PASS.**

No. \_\_\_\_\_ (Rank) Plt (Name) Beattie G

has permission to be absent from his quarters, from 9.0 am.  
29/12/15 to 9.0 am. 31/12/15

for the purpose of proceeding to City

(Station) Mitcham Camp R. B. [Signature]  
 Commanding.

(Date) 28/12/15

By Authority: ALBERT J. MULLER, Government Printer, Melbourne.

Mitcham Leave Pass

However, other sources refer to 'the fortunate 20% who have been given leave' each week night, and this seems to have been the usual practice. The Mail<sup>4</sup> states that, 20% of men were given leave each night, generally by units, and that all men, as far as possible, were granted leave on Saturday afternoons and Sunday. It seems likely that this was the more normal practice. This may have at time included overnight leave as Tom Epps of the original 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion was 'able to go to his parents' home in Norwood overnight, and catch the first tram back next morning.'<sup>5</sup>

The Battalion orders of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion also show that authorities recognised the need for communities to say farewell to members who were going to the Front. Special Leave was granted to men attend social functions in their honour held by their church, work place, sporting club or Masonic Lodge. Prince Alfred Old Collegians were given leave to attend a meeting at the school!<sup>6</sup>

The camp had gates on the Goodwood Rd on the western boundary, and another on the western boundary near Wattlebury Rd. Horse cabs ran from the camp to and from the Torrens Arms Hotel and Mitcham tram terminus, at a cost of sixpence a head.<sup>7</sup> These may have been provided by the Torrens Arms Hotel, keen to help thirsty soldiers find their way to the hotel. According to Cec Hood (Miller, 1986), 'Horse cabs were driven by Gil Proctor and Toby Jack and others from the Torrens Arms Hotel'. They were so well used that 'at times men were hanging off the cab sides or on the horses.'<sup>8</sup> In July 1916, a returned soldier, taking advantage of his war record, also set up as a cabby offering the same price as locals. The young son of the second Commandant, Major Stuart later recalled about 12 four-wheeler cabs ranked on the Unley side of the Torrens Arms Hotel. When 6 men had clambered aboard, the cabby called, 'Right away,' and trundled off with men tenuously hanging on.<sup>9</sup> The Goodwood Rd tram terminated at Cross Rd.

How leave was used, of course, depended on the individual. Many men from Adelaide would go home at every opportunity. Some, referred to in 'Camp YM' as 'stay-ins', found it easier or preferable to relax in camp. Others, especially those from the country with no family in Adelaide,

would be looking for other things to do. Various groups looked to provide social activities. The largest of these was the Cheer-Up Society, which provided 'general comfort, welfare, and entertainment' for soldiers. The Society was founded in Adelaide in 1914 by Mrs Alexandrine Seager who assembled women helpers of 'high moral character', most with relations serving overseas. Any research into Mitcham Camp brings up many references to their visits to the camp, the concerts they presented and the luncheons they provided. They were particularly solicitous to 'lonely recruits' and to returned soldiers. They also encouraged recruitment and fundraising.<sup>10</sup>

From 1915, the Society's large tent behind the Adelaide Railway Station offered refreshment and recreation to soldiers. The tent was replaced, in October 1915, by the Cheer-Up Hut in the same area – 'not 20 metres from the Railway Station'. At the opening of the YMCA Hall at Mitcham Camp earlier in October, the Hut and the activities of the Cheer-Up Society were lauded by speakers. The Hut – 'not a hut, but a magnificent building' – would be a 'home away from home for every man in uniform.' The Cheer-Up Society, the audience was told, had been formed to give the soldiers 'something in place of the public house'. It was no good decrying the public house unless you said in effect, 'don't go to the public house but come here'. The soldiers were reminded that when they entered the hut, the women of the Society looked on them as gentlemen and men of honour. Men should regard it as sacredly as they did their own home, and treat the Cheer-up girls as they would their own sisters<sup>11</sup>. On Sunday nights a free meal was served at the Hut for any soldier who turned up.

There is no doubt that the Cheer-Up Society provided support and a 'place to go' for recruits from Mitcham who did not have family in Adelaide. In an interview recorded in 1979, Elva Morrison recalled the Cheer-Up tent and Hut 'The men were coming in hundreds and hundreds, and mothers were writing from the country and saying what a comfort it was. .... My mother and father would say, 'Well, if you find any lonely boy who would like a weekend in somebody's home and he has leave, bring him home.'"<sup>12</sup>

Church groups also provided social events for recruits, although not all took up invitations. Private Bill Renton of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion noted, 'Every Sunday afternoon the churches have sent invites for supper for the 32<sup>nd</sup>, so many to each house, but they are too 'goody-goody' for most of the boys'.<sup>13</sup>

Some were looking for other forms of social interaction while on leave. "I notice a good many are getting ready for town. The lads are pretty hot. I notice they nearly all find a tart, but they are not very hard to find in Adelaide, as they make 'googie' eyes at us as we pass."<sup>14</sup> Some managed to get themselves and their partners into trouble. Venereal disease led to a number of men being discharged as medically unfit. Almost all SA members of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion enlisted in July 1915, and passed a medical inspection which declared they did not have venereal infection. However, 2 months later in mid-September, when the time they left Mitcham for Cheltenham Camp, three men had already been admitted to 'venereal isolation'.<sup>15</sup>

But it appears to be the girls who ran more risk, and more condemnation by their involvement with soldiers. There are several reports in the press, including details of cross-examination in court, of under-age girls, or 'runaways' who became involved with soldiers from Mitcham Camp. Although it is clear that they were encouraged or 'picked-up' by soldiers, it is the girls who are named and presented in very an unflattering light in the reports. One 'runaway' was arrested at Mitcham Camp,

after a soldier had met her in the city, given her 3 shillings for food and told to meet him near Mitcham railway station that night. They went for a walk and 'misconduct took place In a 2 column report. No further mention is made of the soldier, other than that he had 'left for the front', but the girl's history is recounted.<sup>16</sup> Another report in the Register refers to complaints being made about the number of women and girls frequenting the vicinity of the camp, and local police being on the lookout for 'evildoers'. At 1am one morning two girls were found with some soldiers near the camp. The girls were arrested, handed to the State Children's Department, and then sent to Redruth Reformatory.<sup>17</sup> In another case, two women, named in the report, were arrested on Springbank Rd, taken to court and sent to gaol, one for being 'a rogue and vagabond', and the other for being 'idle and disorderly'. They had been 'wandering about and sleeping in the vicinity of the camp'. Two soldiers found with them were fined for drunkenness, but not named.<sup>18</sup>

Although Ern Cooper of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion wrote to his parents that he had nice mates who 'don't drink and are decent and respectable young fellows 'except one, and he deserted – serves him right',<sup>19</sup> many of the soldiers did like a drink. As alcohol was not permitted in the camp, many would want to quench their thirst while they were on leave.

Mrs Gertrude Thompson, licensee of the Torrens Arms Hotel, the only hotel in the locality (and still the only hotel 98 years later) possibly could not believe her luck at the ready market dropped onto her doorstep when Mitcham Camp opened. The Torrens Arms was the nearest 'watering hole' for off duty men. In fact, it was 'the only hotel in Australia within a given area of a military camp'.<sup>20</sup> Possibly this refers to the fact that it was located within the evening General Leave limit of one mile from camp. Miller (1993)<sup>21</sup> states that the hotel was off-limits, but this certainly was not the case for most of the time the camp was in existence. Two weeks after the camp opened, the Commandant, Major de Plassey, told the press that the soldiers were 'a well-conducted and disciplined group of men whose sobriety is gratifying'. He added that he was especially pleased by 'the splendid manner' in which the Torrens Arms was conducted. 'The proprietor '(Mr Albert Thompson, the husband of the licensee) 'is playing the game. He does not tolerate drunkenness and will not sell liquor for men to bring into the camp.'<sup>22</sup> He was probably earning enough not to be tempted to do this. A returned soldier later recalled, 'The rush to the nearest hotel after drilling all day in the heat, and the struggle to get served was a sight to gladden the heart of the publican.'<sup>23</sup>

No doubt the Thompsons saw the benefits of keeping on the right side of the military authorities. In March 1916, at the civil trial of a sergeant-major from Mitcham camp on trial for using indecent language after being asked to leave at closing time, Mr Thompson was proud to say that the fact that the hotel, given its proximity to the camp, remained untouched by the provisions of the War Precautions Act was 'the best evidence of the care and efficiency with which the place was managed.'<sup>24</sup>

The introduction of 6 o'clock closing in SA on March 26, 1916 must have had a marked effect on the ability of soldiers from Mitcham to get a drink. In April, Albert Thompson reported an enormous loss of custom at the Torrens Arms Hotel. 'The better class of soldier used to patronise me greatly, but since the introduction of '6 o'clock' my trade has fallen off enormously.' The temperance bar and billiard room had failed lamentably. Soldiers, he said, headed straight to the city where it was

possible to get a drink despite the new law. He had previously been offered £6500 for 'the goodwill of my house', but now doubted whether he could get £100.<sup>26</sup>

**THOMPSON'S**  
**Torrens Arms** BOTTLE AND **Store** BULK  
 CAPS 'EM ALL  
 THERE'S NOTHING SHODDY BENEATH THIS  
 THERE'S NOTHING SHODDY BENEATH THIS  
 (Practice the Patriotic Plan. Wear this Cap All Who Can.)  
 "The bravest boys defend our homes;  
 The kill-joys you'll find among stay-at-homes."  
 Like the Khaki Cap, THOMPSON'S BOTTLE DEPARTMENT "keeps well on top." THE PENALTY OF OUR  
 SPLENDID SUCCESS IS ENVY. "Everyone is doing it," but, like all who get under the Khaki Cap, "WE'RE DOING BE-  
 GENT." THERE ARE MANY "liquor sellers," but only one: "Liquor Service"—Thompson's!  
**FOR SPIRITUOUS COMFORT AND CONSOLATION**  
 RING US UP—CENTRAL 3000.  
 Cast the shadow of your burden behind you—life offers too few pleasures to sacrifice everything demanded by in-  
 temperate kill-joys.  
 Our splendid Mail and Phone Order Service has made our bottle trade one of the largest in the State. REMEM-  
 BER THIS—"WE SELL NOTHING SHODDY." YOUR Interests are considered in every transaction. Our Service is  
 PROMPT, so you can rely on your order reaching you on the day you want it to arrive. SEND US A TRIAL ORDER.

Top portion of large advertisement from Torrens Arms Hotel, appealing to soldiers<sup>25</sup>

To add to his woes, in July 1917, an embargo was put on the Torrens Arms by the Military Commandant of SA, 'in regard to the supply of liquor to the forces'. It was claimed that men broke camp to get liquor there, and that the hotel harboured men who were bringing disrepute on the troops in the camp at Mitcham. There was another claim that when some general reinforcements were about to leave for overseas, the men detailed were found at the Torrens Arms Hotel, and were unable to walk to the station.<sup>27</sup> The Thompsons appealed to the Minister of Defence, and on March 6, 1918, an enquiry was announced into 'whether ... it is necessary or desirable to continue any prohibition or restriction with respect to the hotel that may have been imposed.' On the 28 March, following the enquiry, the press announced that the embargo had been lifted<sup>28</sup> and a week later, Mr s Thompson put a public notice in The Advertiser, triumphantly announcing that the embargo had been lifted, 'after a searching enquiry'.<sup>29</sup>

Unsurprisingly, whether from drinking at the Torrens Arms or in a city hotel, men did become affected by alcohol. Cec Hood recalled that his father would sometimes rescue men the worse for wear from alcohol, and get them back to camp after a 'refreshing brew of tea'.<sup>30</sup> This drinking did cause problems for the military. Six o'clock closing met with military approval. Eight weeks after its introduction, Major Stuart declared that insubordination had been reduced by 75% since early closing came in.<sup>31</sup>

Concern about 'soldiers and drink' led to a Senate Committee on that topic. At a hearing in Adelaide in March 1918, the Senior Medical Officer at Mitcham Camp, Lt-Col. Hill was careful not to overstate the problem, and stated that he did not regard alcohol in moderation as injurious. Since January 1916, 895 men had been discharged from camp as medically unfit, and of these only 8 'were due to alcoholism'. More men were lost to the Army as a result of venereal disease than because of drink.<sup>32</sup> Others had previously wanted to make it clear, as did the S.A. Governor at the opening of the YMCA reading room, that the 'rowdiness' and drinking that went on among soldiers was confined to a very small number of men.<sup>33</sup> After a large group of men from the camp volunteered in February 1916 to

fight bushfires in the Adelaide Hills, the licensee of the Crafers Hotel wrote to record the excellent behaviour of the 300-500 soldiers who visited his hotel after the fire. There was 'an entire absence of any rowdyism or bad language'.<sup>34</sup>

It was made very clear in the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Orders that absence from camp without a leave pass could lead to arrest. But the attractions of leave, whether they were the comforts of home, the company of loved ones or the lure of social life in the city, meant that men did not always make it back to camp on time. The impression given in the Battalion Orders is that although this was frowned on, and although absenteeism led to forfeiture of pay, the authorities were reluctant to come down too hard on occasional lateness. A soldier's absence for more than six hours, or any absence which meant he could not fulfil a duty, led to loss of a day's pay. Absence for 12 hours with 6 hours in each day, that is, overnight, led to loss of 2 days' pay. Forfeiture of pay for absence was 'automatic under regulations' although 'not a punishment'.<sup>35</sup>

The Battalion diary records significant numbers of forfeitures of pay. It is not confirmed that the forfeitures were for absences from camp, but the assumption can be made (because of the dates recorded and the number of references to absences in the diary) that this was the main reason. On 6<sup>th</sup> September, there was a particularly long list with 18 soldiers forfeiting pay for absences over various days, including one who had been absent for 18 days.<sup>36</sup>

### **Scaling down and closure of Mitcham Camp**

As time went on, recruiting numbers dropped, and Australians voted against conscription. With the demand for manpower at the Front and need for frequent reinforcements, the size of reinforcement contingents was lowered. As early as the beginning of October, 1916, publication of 'Camp YM' ceased because the smaller number of men (in all training camps in SA) meant that sales had dropped and production costs could not be covered. In the final edition on October 6, came the news that concerts in the YMCA 'had been cut out due to the difficulty of securing an audience big enough to make it worthwhile for parties to come so far'.<sup>1</sup> Numbers did pick up again, and concerts resumed, but not at the frequency of earlier times. Finally, in early 1918, the whole policy of training recruits was officially changed. It was decided that most training would be done at overseas bases in Egypt and England, and men were despatched as soon as a troopship became available. They were not attached to a unit until overseas.<sup>2</sup>

This meant changes for Mitcham Camp. Advanced instruction ceased, and the large staff of officers reduced and 'despatched for service overseas'. Numbers in the camp were substantially lower, and the camp was also used for Citizen Force training. Mitcham became a holding camp, 'utilised for the purposes of inoculation, vaccination and elementary training' until recruits could be embarked.<sup>3</sup>

The Armistice was signed on Nov 11, 1918, and on 19 November, the 600 officers and men remaining in the camp were entertained at a Farewell Concert in Unley Town Hall.<sup>4</sup> The next day, men started leaving camp and returning to civilian life, and preparations were being made for the camp to be closed for AIF purposes. Advertisements appeared for the disposal of items from the camp - buildings ('well-built canteen - gal iron and wood 140 x50') billiard tables, barber's chairs, electric motors, and many other things.<sup>5</sup> Some of the buildings ended up at various sites around the

state. The Methodist Hut became the clubroom for the Sturt Bowling Club at Unley Oval, and the Presbyterian Church purchased the Officer's Mess.<sup>6</sup>

The end of the war coincided with the worldwide influenza pandemic which killed more people than the Great War. With so many soldiers returning from Europe, and the need to quarantine them on arrival, Mitcham Camp was seriously discussed as an isolation area. The SA Chief Secretary revealed at the end of January 1919 that 'it had been originally intended to place the camp at the disposal of the Government', but it had been ruled out<sup>7</sup>. Although the Camp was used for a while as a training area for Civilian Forces, it was officially demobilised as an AIF Camp in January 1919. It now was time for planning and building of the new model suburb which was to become Colonel Light Gardens.

### **Mitcham Camp and Colonel Light Gardens**

Nearly 100 years later, very little remains to remind residents of Colonel Light Gardens that their suburb was the site of the camp from where thousands of men prepared before leaving for overseas as reinforcements at Gallipoli and for the battles of the Western Front. Many thousands would not return, and many thousands more would be wounded, disabled, and traumatised. As previously mentioned, there is a small memorial in the open space at the end of Doncaster Ave, close to where camp headquarters had been. Further back down Doncaster Ave are some of the giant red gums which lined the entrance road first to Grange Farm, then to the Mitcham Camp. In one of another group of gums just to the east of the Colonel Light Gardens Primary School are embedded iron hoops, used to tether horses watered at a pond near this spot. Also near this spot is where men were lined up with their unit for their official photograph prior to embarkation.<sup>1</sup> All other traces of the camp have disappeared. When The Colonel Light Gardens Institute was opened on West Parkway in 1926, the old Grange farmhouse which served as the Camp Commandant's residence for part of the war was 'incorporated into the structure' and the 'outline was still familiar.'<sup>2</sup> This and other contemporary newspaper reference seem to disprove Woods statement (p120) that the house had been replaced by an unkempt (at her time of writing) house, typical of the houses built in the suburb in the 1920's. Any remnants of the farmhouse seem to have disappeared, perhaps demolished later to make way for a new frontage for the building.

On Remembrance Day, 1933, returned soldiers held a 'Back to Mitcham Day' at Mortlock Park, and already there was very little to remind the men of what had once been there. At this event, Colonel Dollman eloquently expressed his disappointment that this was the case.

*Here it was that many thousands of the Australian Imperial Forces were trained for the great adventure on which they embarked full of enthusiasm and national pride. Here they pledged their lives if need be for the good of their country, and learnt the art which enabled them to face their relentless foe with unconscious heroism and steadfastness. From here they marched to where the great grey ships waited to carry them to those final scenes of achievement, victory and, too often, death..... I personally regret that when the town of Colonel Light Gardens was laid out on the historic site of the Mitcham Camp, no provision was made to perpetuate the importance and significance of the camp.*<sup>3</sup>

Map 1. Overlay plan of Mitcham Camp on the streets of Colonel Light Gardens



Colonel Dollman must also have been disappointed that earlier plans for a war memorial on the triangular block near the old Camp Headquarters had not come to fruition. When a sub-branch of the RSSAILA was formed in Colonel Light Gardens in 1926, it was expected that they would ensure that the site was remembered.<sup>4</sup> On ANZAC Day 1926, the Advertiser called for a memorial, stating that in the design of Colonel Light Gardens, the town planner, Mr Reade, 'thoughtfully reserved a site for the possible memorial to record some of the associations of the site of Mitcham Camp.'<sup>5</sup>

In July the Mitcham Camp Site War Memorial Committee was formed. The Garden Suburb Commissioner gave the RSL sole control over arrangements for the Memorial, and it was decided to open a 'shilling fund' to raise money for the memorial, to ask for a subsidy from the government, and seek donations from other organisations.<sup>6</sup> In August, there was discussion with the Institute of Architects about a competition for design of the memorial. Although the original plan had been to inscribe the names of all AIF soldiers from Mitcham Camp who lost their lives in the War, it was realised that this would be too expensive, and rather a parchment containing the name of war dead be somehow incorporated into the shrine.<sup>7</sup> By October it had been decided to defer the appeal due to 'the uncertain condition of market prospects and general financial stringency', but that a 'Back to Mitcham Camp' day would be held on January 25.<sup>8</sup> A fortnight later the back to Mitcham Camp Day was deferred until 25 February.<sup>9</sup> Newspapers contain no further reference to this day, and by December it had been decided to 'postpone active work' on the proposed war memorial, because of 'prevailing unemployment and the partial failure of the wheat and fruit crop'.<sup>10</sup>

In August 1929, the Colonel Light gardens sub-branch of the RSL, decided to 'revive the movement' to establish a memorial on the site, It was decided to erect a temporary memorial such as a tablet and to request the Garden Suburb Commissioner to beautify the site, which at the time was bare ground. At a later date, an effort would be made to raise funds for 'something more elaborate and fitting'.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps as a result of the request for beautification, In August 1930, children of Colonel Light Gardens Primary School planted trees and shrubs in gardens laid out in memory of the men of Mitcham camp<sup>12</sup> and plans for a memorial were raised again. These plans seem not to have progressed, but a successful Back to Mitcham Camp Day was held on Armistice Day, 1933 in Mortlock Park. Besides 12 horse-in-action events, the programme included an inspection of the 27<sup>th</sup> Battalion by Col. Dollman, a mock battle with a platoon attacking under a smokescreen, and 'humorous interludes of French and Egyptian origin'.

Evening attractions included a camp fire concert, a military ball, and a reunion dinner.<sup>13</sup> The old soldiers recalled their exploits. 'We donned khaki, threw imaginary bombs and learned something about the rifle' and 'their absence without leave and of their walks back to the camp after having tarried too long saying goodnight to the young woman in the suburbs to whom they promised to be true.'<sup>14</sup>

**NO NEED TO KEEP THE HOME FIRES BURNING—**  
**TOMORROW, SATURDAY, Nov. 11th, Armistice Day**  
**PACK UP YOUR TROUBLES AND COME!**  
**BACK TO MITCHAM CAMP**  
 on the original Camp site  
**MORTLOCK PARK, 2 P.M. :: Colonel Light Gardens**  
**25 ENTERTAINING - - - EVENTS 25**  
 BURLESQUE ——— NOVEL ——— UNIQUE  
 SOMETHING UNUSUAL ——— SOMETHING DIFFERENT  
 Arrival of Mademoiselle from Armentiers—What a Welcome  
 Inspection 27th Battalion, A.M.F., by Colonel W. Dollman, V.D.  
 Souvenirs de la Guerre, War Museum, Monster Reunion  
 Performing Dogs, Military Gymkhana, Horses In Action  
 Sham Fight—Platoon in Attack under cover of Smoke Screen.  
 CAMP FIRE CONCERT, MILITARY BALL, REUNION DINNER.  
 ADMISSION, 1/-, includes Afternoon CELEBRATIONS and CAMP FIRE CONCERT.  
 PROCEEDS IN AID OF LORD MAYOR'S FUND, Poppy Day Fund, COLONEL LIGHT GARDENS SUB-BRANCH R.S.A. BENEVOLENT FUND

Advertisement for Back to Mitcham Camp Day<sup>15</sup>

Fig. 38 Lt. Col. Dollman, 27th Battalion Commander In Mitcham Camp and Camp Commandant Dec. 1916- Jan.1919



## REMINDERS OF MITCHAM CAMP



Fig. 39 Gum in Doncaster Ave, the road into Mitcham Camp



Fig. 40 Stand of gums near CLG Primary School



Fig. 41. Cross of Remembrance in Reserve at end of Doncaster Ave.



Fig. 42 Hoops in gum tree

It was not until 1986 that the present memorial on the Doncaster Ave-Broadway site was unveiled.. The plaque on this memorial states that it was erected 'to commemorate the State 150 Jubilee Year and as a token of remembrance to all those who have served in the Armed Forces'. Although it is erected on the WWI Mitcham Camp War Memorial Site, this is not the focus of the memorial.



Fig 43

Also in 1986, a plaque was placed near the heritage listed 'hitching tree', and unveiled by a veteran of Mitcham camp. This is somewhat more informative



Fig.44

Today residents can only imagine, aided by a plan of the camp overlaid on a map of the suburb, and by photographs, what once happened where they now live. For me, there is a poignancy in knowing that young men, perhaps excitedly, perhaps anxiously preparing for war, charged along the bayonet run to impale straw dummies suspended from uprights in what is now my back yard in Eton St. What thoughts did they have as they did this? Could they imagine themselves doing this in real life, to real people? A few houses down Eton St was the NCO School.



Fig. 45 Bayonet attack from trench

The Camp Headquarters at the end of Doncaster Ave where it meets The Broadway was the hub of the Camp. Stretching east from the HQ until just before View St., was the accommodation area, two long rows of tents gradually replaced by open-sided huts, where the men slept. Parallel to the northern row of huts ran a long line of latrines. The recreation area with the Garrison Institute and the various YMCA buildings was south of Prince George Parade, between Dorset Avenue and East Parkway. Behind these buildings were the huts of the various religious denominations.

In the south east of the camp stretching south from King George Parade was the Light Horse Horse training area. The Goodwood Road-Grange road corner particularly the areas between Kandahar Crescent and West Parkway, and along Tidworth Crescent towards Ludgate Circus was the battlefield, festooned with trenching and barbed-wire, and the site of entrenchment exercises, trench clearing and bomb-throwing.

It is not only for memories of place that Mitcham Camp should not be forgotten. It is a reminder of a simpler time, a time when people were motivated by loyalty to King and Empire to volunteer for a war, when men were expendable for the greater cause, when men prepared for war by practising bayonet charges, when departing men were told that if they died, they would be honoured rather than mourned because no death could be more glorious than dying for a just cause, and when 'after tea, hundreds of men gather around the piano in the Garrison Institute, singing the great church hymns'<sup>16</sup>

Most importantly, knowledge of the Camp helps to preserve the memory of thousands of volunteers, individual men – sons, husbands, fathers, brothers, friends –who passed through it on their way to the the Great War, to the hell of the trenches on the Western Front. Today some can still put a name and face to one or more of these individuals. My grandfather in 1915, and, in 1917, my great-grandfather, no longer young but able to enlist because of the raising of the age limit to boost flagging recruitment, both passed through Mitcham Camp. But personal links aside, Mitcham Camp provides a common link to thousands of these individuals who put their lives on hold for the

duration of the War. Many were to die, some in unnecessary and futile battles, such as the men of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Battalion who, a few days after first arriving at the Front, lost 90% of their fighting strength at Fromelles. The men of Mitcham Camp should not be glorified, but the sacrifice of their lives, their health and their youth for the cause they were fighting for should not be forgotten.

As the centenary of the Mitcham Camp approaches, it is time that Colonel Dollman's call to remember the origins of Colonel Light Gardens is heeded, and that some permanent reminder, which informs, and attracts attention and interest, is put in place.

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40. *Gums near CLG Primary School* G. Scrimgeour
41. *Cross of Remembrance* G. Scrimgeour
42. *Hoops in Gum Tree* G. Scrimgeour
43. *Plaque on memorial* G. Scrimgeour
44. *Hitching post plaque* G. Scrimgeour
45. *Bayonet attack from trench* Colonel Light Gardens Historical Society
- End picture 1* Colonel Light Gardens Historical Society
- End Picture 2* Colonel Light Gardens Historical Society

## **MAPS**

*Plan of Camp overlay on Colonel Light Gardens Street Map* - Philip Knight, Colonel Light Gardens Historical Society