

INTRODUCTION

I can clearly remember being stunned when I first read Pompey Elliott's remarkable letters and diaries almost 40 years ago. They were so candid and vivid that they bowled me over. The aim of this book is to enable others to have a similar experience.

Pompey Elliott was Australia's most famous fighting general in World War I. A charismatic, controversial, and highly successful commander, he was exceptional in intellect, genuineness, and resolve. An accomplished tactician and astonishingly brave, he was renowned for never sending anyone anywhere he was not prepared to go himself. A fierce disciplinarian with an explosive temper, he was exuberant, wholehearted, and utterly dedicated. Pompey identified himself with the formations he commanded and the men he led. He formed a strong bond with them, and cared deeply about what happened to them.

Elliott went right through the war, and his leadership was compelling from the outset. He commanded the 7th Battalion at Gallipoli, where he was wounded at the landing, and under his vigorous front-line leadership four of his men were awarded the Victoria Cross for conspicuous courage at Lone Pine. He led the 15th Brigade at the Western Front, where he was prominent in notable battles such as Fromelles, Polygon Wood, and Villers-Bretonneux together with numerous other engagements, incidents, and controversies. No Australian general was more revered by those he led or more famous outside his own command.

It was not just his achievements, awards, and accolades that made Elliott special, though there were plenty of each. His fame had more to do with his character and personality — with the style of his leadership — than with its results. Pompey's tempestuousness generated a host

of anecdotes that amused his men and disconcerted his superiors. He was frank and forthright in speech and correspondence, not one for pretence or artifice (and he was no good at concealing his feelings anyway). This was not merely a characteristic, but a personal code of honour that was crucial to his self-respect.

Elliott's emotions are starkly evident in his wartime letters. He not only wrote frankly about what happened to him and the men he was commanding; he was also frank about what he *felt* about what happened to him and the men he was commanding. Pompey was adamant that the war had to be fought and had to be won, and he realised that casualties were inevitable, but again and again he became extremely upset when they eventuated. That these terrible losses had devastating consequences for Australia is frequently evident in his letters. He and his wife, Kate, arranged a mutual no-secrets pact for their correspondence before he left with the AIF in 1914, and he certainly adhered to that agreement (as she also did, although her correspondence has not survived).

Elliott wrote rapidly and fluently with fertile imagery, a flair for simile, and an engaging turn of phrase. 'These trench mortar boys are there night and day like a cat watching a mouse hole', he reported. 'The Turks' corpses were lying thick as dead leaves in autumn', he noted. When he proclaimed an order that the next officer caught looting would be summarily and publicly hanged, and looting ceased as a result, he concluded that none 'seemed inclined to make of themselves a test case'. After his machine-gunners broke up a German attack, 'the survivors of the column concluded that they had urgent business elsewhere'. When his men were victorious in another engagement, he noted that enemy infantry were heading 'for the skyline at a pace that suggested they were making straight for Berlin to tell the Kaiser about it'. Unimpressed by German tactics in 1918, he observed that 'the whole military ability of the Teutonic race has advanced no plan beyond ... the instinct of an infant grasshopper'. He sent an officer to a vital Lone Pine position with a memorable farewell: 'Goodbye Symons, I don't expect to see you again, but we must not lose that post!' Pompey would roar at incompetent officers: 'Call yourself a soldier, ... you're not even a wart on a soldier's arse!' And he would reassure Kate that he had stopped swearing: 'I would pass for a Sunday School teacher anywhere at present'.

His letters and diaries are lively and absorbing not only because of his turn of phrase, but also because he was so outspoken — especially in controversy, and Pompey was often in controversy. He declared after a stunningly successful counterattack that he ‘had to fight everybody to get permission to do it, and when it was done they were all breaking their necks to get or share the credit’. When he was accused of unduly vigorous conduct and he made a pointed counter-allegation, the initial accusation was ‘dropped like a hot spud’. Unwise British dispositions in a vital sector ‘forbade us to hope that any intelligent military action could reasonably be expected from any of them from the corps commander down’. Newly promoted to command a brigade, he was appalled by the calibre of his allotted battalion commanders: ‘do you desire an efficient brigade or will any old thing do?’ Moreover, he nailed General Birdwood as being ‘full of a pretended affability that he imagines deceives us’; when this mask disappeared during an argument, Elliott described how Birdwood ‘commenced to chatter and jibber ... like a demented monkey’ and then flounced out with a retinue of commanders ‘like a cock wren and his harem’.

‘The whole world is a wedding cake today with crisp frozen icing about six inches thick’, Pompey reported in mid-winter. He was a fine descriptive writer with a keen interest in plants and birdlife — his mother thought he could have become a naturalist — and he felt motivated to make his prolific correspondence to Kate as illuminating as possible about his experiences and emotions. This was important to them both: he wanted to tell Kate what he was going through, and she wanted to share his vicissitudes with him. Their no-secrets pact resulted from and reinforced this mutual priority.

Elliott yearned to stay connected to his wife and children. Maintaining a loving relationship with a spouse you don’t see for five years is no easy matter, especially when you spend much of that time distracted by danger and the acute awareness that you’re responsible for the lives of thousands. Elliott certainly tried his utmost. ‘Nearly half of our wedded life we will have been separated soon, dear’, he wrote in January 1918. ‘It is very sad what we have missed of each other’. And they were not to be reunited for another 18 months.

Pompey’s correspondence to his young children was extraordinary. Surely no general in any combatant nation in this war managed to turn

the conflict into a kind of bedtime story in the way that he regularly did in his letters to his children. He did his best to encourage them from afar to help Kate at home, to do well at school, and to get on better with each other.

Elliott was not the only AIF correspondent or diarist or memoirist to write with candour and descriptive flair. But what distinguished him from them was his rank. They tended, naturally, to write from the necessarily limited outlook of the average soldier; what they saw or experienced was inevitably a small part of a much bigger picture. Elliott, on the other hand, was a colonel at Gallipoli and a general at the Western Front; he was also a leader who ensured by frequent front-line visits — more than most (if not all) equivalent commanders — that he familiarised himself with what his men were enduring. Though not a top-level commander, he was a general, in charge of thousands of soldiers, and this endowed his frank observations with a broader and more informed perspective than the writings of AIF privates and corporals.

Unlike my 2002 biography, *Pompey Elliott*, a life-and-times story covering his whole life, this book is not a biography, it's not life and times, and not about his whole life. The focus is on this celebrated Australian's experience of World War I, in his own words — not only his wartime letters and diaries, but also his orders, messages, battle reports, and recommendations for awards. Moreover, this book includes not only what he wrote, but also what he said on various occasions when his remarks and speeches were documented.

Pompey Elliott was not only Australia's most famous fighting general. He was also notable as a recorder and interpreter of the AIF's history. His extensive writings and speeches about the AIF (including after the war, when he often reminisced in parliament about the conflict, and frequently corresponded with Charles Bean, the official historian) are, in aggregate, more historically significant — that is, to the history of the AIF — than the writings of any of his contemporaries except Bean. And his own words during the war constitute an important part of this distinctive material. Hundreds of personal narratives of World War I by Australians have been published — more than 500 in the four decades from 1970 — but none of them is comparable to the accumulated first-person content that Pompey Elliott created during the war.

Did his outspoken correspondence contravene the censorship rules? Elliott was a lawyer and, as a commander, a severe disciplinarian; he was not inclined to flout explicit rules routinely, and he treated the censorship regulations seriously. Many a time his letters confirmed compliance: ‘We are safely anchored off a beautiful little island whose name I must not mention’, he told Kate on 11 April 1915 in a typical example. ‘We had to march to this place whose name I must not tell you’, he affirmed a year later. Furthermore, on 7 June 1915 he even crossed out part of what he had written to her: ‘I have just looked through and censored my own letter as I find I had transgressed some of the rules.’ He understood, accepted, and obeyed the prohibition on divulging information about formations’ locations and future operations; this was the fundamental and clearly justifiable purpose of the censorship. But where the scope of the rules extended to other spheres — the bans on criticism of previous military operations, in particular, and on references to recent casualties or comments prejudicial to harmony with allies — Elliott’s compliance was less likely. Even so, other commanders, including Generals Monash and Birdwood, treated the censorship rules more cavalierly when writing home; Monash sent the plan for a notable AIF battle before it occurred to a brother-in-law who was then under surveillance by the authorities because of his German origins.

Pompey speculated in 1917 that his children and grandchildren might wish to read his wartime diaries some day. A decade after returning home, now Major-General Elliott and a senator in the Australian parliament, he had in mind creating a narrative based on a combination of his wartime letters and diaries. But he died less than two years later, and the idea never came to fruition. In these pages, a century after the events they describe, it has.