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## **Vigour, Rigour and Charisma: the Remarkable Pompey Elliott, Soldier and Senator\***

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Pompey Elliott was a remarkable character, a household name. Shortly after his return from the First World War he was elected to the Senate and remained there until his death. He contested two federal elections, in 1919 and 1925. Each time he was the first senator elected in Victoria. He was so famous during the 1920s that any Victorian schoolboy surnamed Elliott was liable to be nicknamed Pompey.

His remarkable reputation, which enabled him to top the Senate poll in 1919, was of course built during the tumultuous preceding years when he commanded the 7th Battalion at Gallipoli and the 15th Brigade at the Western Front. Pompey was a charismatic, controversial and outstandingly successful military leader. He was Australia's most famous fighting general, revered by his men and better known outside his own formation than any other Australian commander.

My aim today is to give you a glimpse of what was so special about him.

Imagine a big, hefty, fleshy bloke, 36 years of age in mid-1914, married with two kids. A solicitor, conscientious about his legal firm, but passionately interested in soldiering. Someone who was a fierce disciplinarian, who openly declared that he subjected his men to more rigorous and demanding training than any other battalion endured. Someone who

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\* This paper was presented as a lecture in the Department of the Senate Occasional Lecture Series at Parliament House on 11 October 2002.

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frequently roared at officers and men under his command because they weren't doing what he thought they ought to be doing. Someone who was frank, forthright, controversial, often in trouble with his superiors because he called a spade a bloody shovel.

And someone who, despite the best efforts of his wife and his staff, tended to look untidy, sloppy, dishevelled—the sort of commander who would be criticising the standard of some unfortunate private's buttons on parade while blissfully unaware that he had forgotten to hook up his own braces that were hanging down incongruously. Stylish dress was never a Pompey priority. At one stage when he was on leave in London, some military policemen concluded that there was no way such a scruffily dressed man could really be a brigadier, and he was arrested for impersonating an officer.

All this does not seem to be a promising basis for immense popularity. How, then, did he acquire such a revered reputation as a leader?

There are three key factors, it seems to me; the three Cs—courage, character, and capacity.

Taking the last one first, his capacity. Pompey was a brilliant tactician as well as a fierce fighter. For any private soldier, it's important to have faith in your superior's competence. If you are putting your life on the line, you obviously want to feel that you are being competently led while you are doing it. Pompey's men had that faith, which stemmed from the way he treated his responsibilities with passionate seriousness—they knew that he knew his stuff.

As for courage, Pompey was remarkably brave. He was Australia's most famous fighting general. He placed himself in perilous situations so often that his survival was one of the minor miracles of the war. His reputation for extraordinary courage was established early at Gallipoli, notably when he was notified that Turks had captured an Australian-held tunnel and he immediately went forward himself to investigate the situation and had a celebrated duel with a Turk in the tunnel. From that time on, it was an article of faith among his men that Pompey would never send anyone anywhere he was not prepared to go himself.

The second of those three Cs that had so much to do with the exceptional esteem, even reverence, that so many of his men regarded him with, was character. I mean character in both senses. His men knew that he would say what he thought about proposed operations, that if he thought his superiors had given his men an ill-conceived task that was an exercise in futility, he had the character to say so, he would object vehemently. And in the other sense of the word Pompey *was* a great character, a real character. Stories about him grew and grew, amusing his men and disconcerting his superiors.

Numerous commanders tried to be exacting disciplinarians during the Great War, and ended up being despised as callous, vindictive martinets. But there was nothing austere or aloof about Pompey. He was a larger-than-life character, full of exuberance and vitality, with idiosyncrasies that appealed to his men and boosted their anecdotal repertoire. In physique and demeanour he was the epitome of a fighting leader. His face often gave the impression that he was ready to wage war at a moment's notice, and he had that notorious

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habit of roaring indiscriminately at privates or company commanders if he felt they were performing inadequately.

The best known Pompey anecdote, which became the most famous AIF story of all, was the story of Pompey's hat. Pompey preferred the felt hat to be worn in the 7th Battalion, being unimpressed with alternatives like caps or the British-style pith-helmet. During one parade in Egypt he said so; and, even though felt hats were in short supply and hard to get, he went so far as to threaten that any 7th Battalion man without a felt hat at next parade would find himself cleaning sanitary pans. After that parade Pompey went off to lunch at the officers' mess, and put his hat underneath his chair as usual, but when at the end of the meal he reached underneath to retrieve it he was perturbed to discover it was no longer there. A series of searches undertaken at his instigation failed to locate the missing hat. Various versions of what happened have circulated in the years since. In my view the most likely explanation is that someone reached in under the edge of the officers' mess marquee, grabbed the hat, and then either buried it in the desert sand or handed it to a mate in another battalion. All Pompey could find in the way of a replacement at short notice was one that was too small and had an odd pinkish colour. At the next parade there was considerable suppressed merriment in the ranks when he struggled to retain his dignity wearing this peculiar ill-fitting substitute.

In due course Pompey came to appreciate the funny side of the hat story, but the incident that amused him most during the AIF's period in Egypt occurred when his battalion was marching near Cairo. The battalion happened to pass a group of hawkers and their tethered donkeys just as one of those animals, a male, was showing interest in a nearby female of the species. This male donkey's interest was conspicuous, very conspicuous indeed. The passing soldiers reacted to this spectacle with ribald laughter, which annoyed the owner of the amorously inclined donkey. He darted over to it and gave one of its ears a savage twist, whereupon the donkey's desire deflated quickly. Shortly afterwards the battalion's leading company, headed by its captain marching along in fine style with the senior sergeant just behind him, encountered a horse-drawn carriage containing two attractive women. One of them bowed and smiled to the captain, who gave an enthusiastic salute in return. Instantly a voice from the ranks was heard: 'Twist his ear, sergeant.'

Part of Pompey Elliott's distinctiveness was the mystique he created around his big black horse, Darkie. During inspections Darkie consistently seemed to demonstrate an astounding ability to detect even infinitesimal irregularities. He would draw the colonel's attention to unshavenness, unsteadiness or improper attire by stopping, throwing back his ears, and stretching out his neck. In fact it was Pompey, an accomplished horseman, who was directing his well-trained horse by subtly nudging Darkie's neck. He would then pretend that Darkie had spotted the irregularity. During my research I spoke to men who had served under Pompey and were still convinced that his horse had extraordinary powers.

Even before the Gallipoli landing, then, Pompey was establishing himself as one of the characters of the AIF. It was the combination of his wholeheartedness, his absolute dedication to duty, coupled with his tempestuous personality, that generated these anecdotes. And there was another ingredient too—his loyalty, his profound regard and commitment to the officers and men he led, the kind of devotion manifested in the way he spent his time on leave visiting hospitals to see those of his men who had been wounded, and how he never stopped trying to think of ways his men could be better looked after in

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or out of the trenches. Most of them came to realise that he had a genuine and profound regard for them despite his gruff, volatile exterior.

For example, J.D. Schroder was directed to report with his section to Pompey in Egypt. In Schroder's own words this is what happened:

[After journeying across the desert we] arrived at 3am in the morning, and naturally did not turn out for physical jerks that day. I was awakened from a very deep sleep by a roar which resembled that of a bull at large thirsting for gore. Standing in the doorway of the bell tent was a huge figure, riding breeches on, no leggings, boots unlaced, a flannel shirt with one brace over the shoulder and one dangling down the side. Not wishing to be outdone in the roaring line, I did a little myself, with the result that within five minutes I was sojourning in the guard-tent and my section was at physical jerks ... I was released later in the day ... and I realised that the tales of Pompey's exploits and discipline ... had not been overrated.

Despite such an inauspicious start to Lieutenant Schroder's relationship with his new commander, Schroder was later to write this assessment of Pompey: 'in my estimation no greater soldier or gentleman ever lived.' Schroder went right through the Western Front, survived the war, and lived a long, fulfilling life after it, so that's a big statement—'in my estimation no greater soldier or gentleman ever lived.'

After the Gallipoli evacuation, Pompey was promoted to command the 15th Brigade. He took that formation to the Western Front in mid-1916, and remained its commander for the rest of the war. Many of the best Pompey stories occurred while he was a brigadier, like the time he was wounded when well forward talking to the commander of a tank. He was positioned well forward, but the position of his wound was well behind—in his left buttock. It was uncomfortably sore but not a serious wound, and he was contemptuous of suggestions that he should be evacuated to the rear for treatment. He did allow his own rear to be attended to as long as it did not interfere with his direction of the fight. The upshot was an unforgettable spectacle—the brigadier perched on a prominent mound, surveying the battlefield intently and dictating messages uninhibitedly, with his trousers round his ankles and underlings fussing over his behind. Onlookers were appreciatively amused by this further confirmation of his wholehearted commitment; there were also ribald remarks about the massive magnitude of his posterior. According to one of his colonels, seeing 'Pompey with his tailboard down having his wound dressed' was one of the sights of the war.

Later in 1918, irrepressible as ever, he became frustrated that his men were not pursuing the Germans across the Somme vigorously enough, and went forward to invigorate his battalion commanders. But they were satisfied that all that could be done was being done. With a contemptuous snort, Pompey said 'Damn it, I'll take them over myself', and proceeded to hazard his way—under fire—across a damaged bridge that was no certainty to support his hefty frame. Sure enough, he eventually fell in with a spectacular splash. Signallers amused themselves spreading the diverting message far and wide that 'Pompey's fallen in the Somme' with such gusto that the entire Fifth Division communications were blocked. Once again there was a memorable sequel—the arresting sight of Pompey clad only in a shirt while his other clothes were drying, strutting about uninhibitedly, directing developments and dictating messages. Quite a character.

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After Pompey's promotion to the command of the 15th Brigade, he had just arrived at the Western Front when he experienced the catastrophe, the calamity, of Fromelles. In this disaster 5 533 Australians became casualties in one night. That is, in one night the Australian casualty toll was equivalent to the *combined* Australian casualties in the *whole* of the Boer War, the Korean War and Vietnam War *put together*. Astounding, isn't it? And about 1 800 of these Fromelles casualties were sustained in Pompey Elliott's brigade.

Pompey, as I've said, had only been at the Western Front five minutes when this hare-brained operation was foisted on him by his superiors. To his immense credit, he realised despite his inexperience of Western Front conditions that it was doomed to fail, and he tried to prevent it from proceeding. He even went so far as to get hold of a visiting staff officer from the Commander-in-Chief's headquarters, taking this officer forward and *showing* him why it was certain to fail. Having successfully persuaded this officer, Pompey urged him to go back to his chief, Sir Douglas Haig, and tell him. But whatever that staff officer did made no difference. The attack was not cancelled. Disaster loomed with a terrible inevitability.

This is what Lieutenant Schroder wrote about Pompey at Fromelles:

Pompey got tired of sitting in advanced brigade headquarters, and took me up the line with him. What had been ordinary sandbagged trenches were now heaps of debris, and it was impossible to walk far without falling over dead men. Although the Hun had a barrage down and there must have been dozens of [enemy] machine guns operating [as well], Pompey never thought of ducking, but went from battalion to company headquarters and so on right along the line. A word for a wounded man here, a pat of approbation to a bleary-eyed digger there, he missed nobody. He never spoke a word all the way back to advanced brigade [headquarters] but went straight inside, put his head in his hands, and sobbed his heart out.

In two other big Western Front battles, Polygon Wood and Villers-Bretonneux, the outcome was very different, and no-one was more instrumental in turning looming defeat into stunning victory, in both battles, than General Pompey Elliott. In these battles he was also distressed by the casualties in his brigade, but at least—unlike the fatuous folly of Fromelles—Polygon Wood and Villers-Bretonneux were important battles that he and his brigade ensured were victories when they looked for a while like anything but. And his outstanding leadership and tactical flair were crucial in each battle. Pompey was an outstanding tactician. Villers-Bretonneux was described by General Monash and others as the most brilliant feat that had been accomplished by soldiers from Australia or anywhere else.

Part of what makes Pompey a superb subject for a biographer is that he was such a vibrant character, and he expressed himself so vividly. He is irresistibly quotable. Take Lone Pine at Gallipoli for example. Pompey and his 7th Battalion were in the thick of it at Lone Pine, where the Turks attacked repeatedly. Amid savage fighting there were heavy casualties. No fewer than four of Pompey's men won the VC at Lone Pine, one after Pompey sent him to a vulnerable spot, where numerous others had been hit, with these heartfelt words: 'Goodbye Symons, I don't expect to see you again, but we must not lose

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that post.’ Symons and his men retained control of that post, Symons was awarded the VC, and Pompey did see him again because Symons survived Lone Pine, unlike many others in Pompey’s battalion.

Afterwards Pompey described what it was like to be at Lone Pine in a private letter to a friend:

The weather was hot and the flies pestilential. When anyone speaks to you of the glory of war, picture to yourself a narrow line of trenches two and sometimes three deep with bodies (and think too of your best friends, for that is what these boys become by long association with you) mangled and torn beyond description by the bombs, and bloated and blackened by decay and crawling with maggots. Live amongst this for days ... . This is war and such is glory—whatever the novelists may say.

In tackling Pompey’s biography I have always had multiple aims in mind. My main objective has been to tell the previously untold story of Pompey Elliott’s life as comprehensively, accurately and vividly as I could. But at the same time I also wanted to use Pompey’s story as a vehicle for telling the bigger collective story of how the Great War devastated Australia. And the story of Pompey, by virtue of his exceptional vibrancy, quotability and highs and lows, is a marvellous vehicle for telling the national story. There is a great deal of fresh material in the book about the impact on Australia of its participation in the Great War, including—and very much including—the aftermath period in the 1920s when Pompey was in the Senate.

And as far as Pompey himself is concerned, this is a whole-of-life study. I wanted to provide a well-rounded, comprehensive picture of him. Sometimes you come across unbalanced military biographies, where, if it concerned a World War I identity, you would typically find his ancestors, birth, upbringing, education, employment, marriage, parenting, militia involvement—half his life or more—covered in a brisk first chapter that takes the reader up to 1914 and then the war breaks out, the military sources open up, and you have chapter two covering six weeks training at Broadmeadows. That was the kind of unbalanced biography I wanted to avoid. In the book there is plenty of interesting material on him before 1914 as well as after 1918, when Pompey went into Parliament and fought the war all over again in the Senate in characteristically cantankerous and forthright fashion, and was right up there with Monash and Jacka VC as the three most famous AIF household names during the 1920s.

Another priority was that I wanted to write a book about Pompey that appealed to, or would be of interest to, the general reader, not just to military history buffs. I wanted to make the accounts of battles and other specialised stuff accessible to non-specialists, to make it flow smoothly for the general reader. Feedback about this aspect has been very pleasing.

And another facet I wanted to ensure there was appropriate coverage of was Pompey as a parent. His two children, Violet and Neil, were born in 1911 and 1912, so they were still toddlers when he went away to war. The remarkable letters Pompey wrote to his children underlined how unfortunate it was for them that he was not around for the next five years that were such crucial formative years for them. He had a marvellous talent for communicating with children, as shown by this letter I’m about to read, which he sent

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from the Western Front at the end of 1916 to Neil, who was then four years of age. In it he describes Western Front developments including the unveiling of the latest military novelty, the tank, and refers to himself as 'Dida', which his young children called him. Surely no commander in any combatant nation in this war regularly described military developments like this:

Since I wrote to you before we got a lot of big waggons like traction engines and put guns in them and ran them 'bumpety bump' up against the old Kaiser's wall and knocked a great big hole in it and caught thousands and thousands of the Kaiser's naughty soldier men and we killed a lot of them and more we put in jail so they couldn't be naughty any more, but then it started to rain and rain and snow and hail and the ground got all boggy and the waggons got stuck in the mud and the old Kaiser has such heaps and heaps of soldiers that he sent up a lot more and thinned them out where the wall wasn't broken and started to build another big wall to stop us going any further ... it is very very cold here and the Jack Frost here is not a nice Jack Frost who just pinches your fingers so you can run to a fire to warm them but a great big bitey Jack Frost and he pinches the toes and fingers of some of Dida's poor soldiers so terribly that he pinches them right off. Isn't that terrible ... And the naughty old Kaiser burnt down every little house all round here and Dida's soldiers have to sleep out in the mud or dig holes in the ground like rabbits to sleep in. And all the trees are blown to pieces by the big guns and there is no wood to make fires and Dida's soldiers have to make fires of coal and the waggons are all stuck in the mud so Dida's soldiers have to carry it through all the mud and everything they eat and wear has to be carried too. And Dida's soldiers get so dreadfully tired they can hardly work or walk at all. Isn't that old Kaiser a naughty old man to cause all this trouble. Now goodbye dear little laddie. Give dear old mum a kiss and tell her Dida's coming home soon and that you will grow up soon and you won't let any old Kaiser come near her ...

So much for the Western Front as bedtime story.

There's another remarkable letter that Pompey wrote to young Neil after the battle of Polygon Wood in 1917. Pompey was wrung out after this battle. Two of his relatives had been killed, he had received devastating news from home about his solicitors' practice, and he told his wife Kate he didn't feel like writing even to her. But he was sufficiently perturbed by something Kate had mentioned in a recent letter to scrawl this hasty note to Neil:

My dear little laddie, Mum has been telling me that you were so sorry for being naughty that you wished you were a little girl like [Violet]. But if you ever changed to a little girl Dida and Mum would not have any little boy at all. And Mum and Dida would be dreadfully sad if they had no dear wee mischiefy thing like our laddie. Dear little chap, Mum and Dida love you so much that they don't mind very much when you are naughty. Of course Mum has to [scold] you because if she didn't you wouldn't know what was naughty and wrong to do ... Dida was sad when he heard that the little lad wanted to be changed to a girl. He loves his little laddie so much that he was sorry the poor little chap was not happy. So don't you worry a bit old chap. You just

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try your best to be good and if you forget sometimes and Mum has to spank you, just be a soldier and try not to cry very much and you will know that Mum and Dida love you just the same even when they spank you. Spanking isn't so bad if you feel quite sure that dear old Mum loves you just the same. Dear little laddie, I wish I was with you now to take you up on my knee and comfort you and tell you Mum and Dida will always love you. You must be very good and loving now to dear Lyn and dear little Jacquelyn because dear Uncle Geordie their Dida was killed by the beastly old Kaiser's soldiers ... You must love and help dear old Mum and Belle and Nana very much too and cheer them such a lot. If you love them a lot that will cheer them.

A word on the *Australian Official History*. The quality of Charles Bean's epic *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18* has tended to inhibit reappraisal of the battles he chronicled in his innovative, painstakingly researched and unprecedentedly detailed volumes. Such was the excellence of his *History* that later writers have, in the main, concluded that re-examining Bean's interpretation of what occurred was not only difficult and time-consuming but also ultimately unnecessary. But I felt that kind of approach would have been inappropriate for a book on Pompey Elliott. Pompey was involved in so many controversies and had such forthright views about what happened and what should feature in the historical record that I felt that a biographer of Elliott would not be doing the task properly if he accepted Bean's findings with minimal scrutiny as given and proceeded from there. So what I did, and this was a big task, was to immerse myself in as many as possible of the vast array of sources that Bean used, together with, of course, other sources emerging more recently that were not available to him. Interesting reinterpretations have resulted.

I remain a firm admirer of Bean's idealism, his priorities and objectives as a historian, and the sustained quality of his work. However, I've ended up disagreeing with Bean on a number of issues. In fact, I don't know of any First World War biography or book of military history that has done more to overturn the accepted versions of events as handed down by Bean.

Pompey characteristically justified his actions in all these controversies with verve and conviction. Naturally I've quoted him freely in the book. What Pompey wrote in his wartime diaries and letters, and in his extensive postwar correspondence, and in various articles, and in his submissions to Bean for the *Official History*, and what he said in postwar lectures and in Parliament—all this in aggregate represents a more significant contribution to the history of the AIF than the writings of any of his contemporaries except Bean. Pompey is not only notable as a soldier and commander, but as a recorder and interpreter of the history of Australia in the Great War.

Pompey Elliott's political career had its genesis in the determination of Nationalist Party strategists, who were concerned about the volatility and disruptive tendencies of returned soldiers, to endorse a high-profile AIF commander on their Senate ticket in each state for the 1919 election. Pompey was an obvious recruit to approach. He had appropriately conservative political attitudes. His extraordinary popularity among returned soldiers and their families was underlined by the rapturous receptions he was given at welcome home functions.



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Pompey was flattered to be asked, but wary. He was confident he could make a worthwhile contribution in Parliament, but the way the party system required politicians to commit themselves in advance to numerous detailed policies was abhorrent to him. As he declared to one of his officers, 'if any one wants me to stand for Parliament, they must have sufficient confidence in me as an honest man to trust me to run straight without binding me or attempting to bind me body and soul.'

The Nationalist strategists were not deterred. He did create awkward moments for them during his political career with his frankness and maverick tendencies, which were intermittently evident on issues of concern to him such as defence policy and government policy relating to Canberra. But these difficulties were outweighed, as far as Nationalist powerbrokers were concerned, by the electoral advantages accruing from his remarkable popularity. He was in Parliament for over a decade and his party was in government for almost all that time, and he displayed legal skills and drafting flair in creatively amending bills before the Senate, but it's unlikely that he was ever seen as ministerial material because of his forthrightness and independent instincts.

At one stage Elliott was single-handedly responsible for a change in government policy. One memorable day he was hurrying across King's Hall when he happened to slip on the highly-polished jarrah floor. His burly frame executed a dramatic tumble, reputedly rocking the Parliament House foundations, and accomplished such a spectacular slide on his back that he ended up entering the Senate chamber in arrestingly horizontal style, feet first. This amusing incident led to a less zealous polishing regime, and a less costly one, which resulted in a distinctive newspaper headline trumpeting that 'Pompey Elliott's Slip May Save Australia Money'.

Elliott lost no time in living up to his pre-election assertions about his political independence. In July 1920, in only his second Senate speech, he called on the government to 'revise drastically' some of its proposals to overhaul public service administration. Elliott's independent approach became even more evident when he vigorously denounced the government's proposed expenditure on Canberra. Amid testy exchanges with Nationalist colleagues, Pompey denied that he had given any commitment, implicit or explicit, during the election campaign in favour of expenditure on Canberra, and declared that 'I feel so strongly upon this matter that I have no desire to sit behind the Ministry if they are going to incur this expenditure. I would rather form a party of my own.' Elliott did not carry out this threat, but did rapidly establish a reputation for outspokenness in Parliament.

He dramatically reinforced it the following year. In 1918 he had been intensely aggrieved when overlooked for promotion to one of three vacancies for divisional command straight after his Villers-Bretonneux triumph. The acute sense of grievance never left him, and was aggravated in 1921 when the postwar militia force was established and he was again passed over for a divisional vacancy.

Pompey responded by venting his spleen in a series of extraordinary Senate speeches. He repeatedly had other senators, who included several fellow generals, on the edge of their seats as he lifted the lid on numerous controversial anecdotes about his wartime experiences, and made remarkable allegations about AIF individuals and incidents. After yet another astounding Pompey outburst, a Labor senator observed that 'whoever is engaged in writing up the history of the war should be supplied with a special desk in this

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chamber and should be given a special invitation to be in regular attendance in the Senate, because matters of the greatest interest to them may crop up here at any time.’

A number of these exposés concerned events during March and April 1918, when the British and their allies were facing their biggest crisis of the whole war. In March 1918 the Germans launched an immense offensive that drove the British back no less than 40 miles. There was widespread genuine concern that after years of fierce fighting, awful hardships and frightful casualties, Britain and its allies might well lose the war.

Now I know it’s easy for us, and particularly for someone like me who has never been shot at—so far as I know, that is—to sound judgmental about exhausted men who had every reason to be frightened, and of course there were a lot of individual British soldiers who did resist tenaciously even if their unit collectively was unable to, and there were some British units who did resist tenaciously as units. But if we focus on the situation encountered by the Australians, like Pompey’s brigade, who were rushed to the rescue, what they found was much of the British retreating in disarray, and the pitiful sight of French civilians whose homes had been in the path of the German advance in terrified retreat as well, struggling along with whatever possessions they could gather or carry in the sudden crisis, typically elderly or women (because the French men were away in the army), often with a crying child clinging to mother’s skirts. And the situation is transformed by the arrival of the Australians like Pompey and his men, confident, unflustered by the dismay all around them, ready to do the business and stop the Germans. All these dismayed soldiers and civilians going one way, and a smaller number of Australians, undeterred, defiant, outwardly relaxed yet inwardly fiercely determined, going the other way towards the enemy.

Far too many Australians today know nothing at all about this. And they should know, they should know, because here we have some of the great moments of our history. Many of these retreating civilians recognise the Australian uniform, and they become exultant. They start raving about ‘*les Australiens merveilleux*’ [‘the marvellous Australians’], and many of them actually turn around and go back to their homes because they are so confident the AIF will stop the Germans. Some of the finest national declarations in Australia’s entire history are to be found here, like the reassuring words of some of these diggers to the distraught French women: ‘*Fini retreat madame, beaucoup Australiens ici*’ [‘No more retreat madame, many Australians here’]. That’s got to be one of the all-time great national statements, surely: ‘*Fini retreat madame, beaucoup Australiens ici.*’ It has also been recorded that at this critical time an ecstatic old Frenchman says ‘*Pas necessaire maintenant—vous les tiendrez, vous les tiendrez,*’ and a nearby digger asks someone for a translation. When this digger is told that the Frenchman was saying ‘No need to leave now, you’ll hold them, you’ll hold them’, the digger says ‘Well, we’ll just have to make sure the old bloke isn’t disappointed.’

At this critical time Pompey wrote that:

The AIF have hitherto accomplished nothing to be compared in importance with the work they have in hand just now.

I was never so proud of being an Australian as I am today ... The gallant bearing and joyous spirit of the men at the prospect of a fight thrills you through and through. You simply cannot despair or be downhearted.

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Whatever the odds against, you can feel their spirits rising the more the danger seems to threaten. It is glorious indeed to be with them.

In the book I say that what the Australian soldiers did in 1918—both in this period I'm describing, when they were prominent in the defence against the German onslaught, and also later that year, when they spearheaded the offensive that brought eventual victory—what the Australian soldiers did in 1918 prompts the conclusion that Australians were influencing the destiny of the world in 1918 more than Australians had ever done before and perhaps more than Australians have ever done since.

Pompey was well aware at the time that what was happening in March and April 1918 was the climax of the whole conflict, and he was tremendously fired up as his brigade was rushed here and there to fortify vulnerable sectors in the British defence. When he found that some undisciplined soldiers were concentrating less on resisting the oncoming Germans than on hopping into the grog left in the suddenly deserted estaminets and chateaux, he took characteristically assertive action. After a British officer was caught in the act, Pompey arranged for a notice to be issued declaring that the next officer caught looting would be summarily and publicly hanged, and his body would be left swinging as a deterrent. He knew this order might well be illegal, but desperate situations require desperate remedies.

There certainly was no more trouble with looting. As Pompey (who was a solicitor in civilian life) observed afterwards, 'no-one seemed inclined to make of themselves a test case under the circumstances.'

During this phase of desperate defence his men had to march all night to the village of Hedauville. He was assured they would find it vacated for them to occupy. When Pompey arrived with his men, tired and wet after marching all night, he called at the Hedauville chateau at 9.30am. As he told the Senate in 1921:

I found the chateau literally packed with [British] officers, all of whom were still in bed. ... [The] staff officer who appeared to be in command ... was still in a very undressed state, stated that he had no orders whatever about leaving, and until he did so he could not move ... By this officer not being ready to move out, [my] men were forced to halt in the fields, sodden with rain falling at the time, and await his convenience. Not wishing to appear the least unreasonable, I told him ... I would try to get a building for headquarters, and leave [my] men outside until midday, whilst he was getting orders.

Pompey then went on to tell the Senate that during the intervening hours he sent his intelligence officer out to try and make contact with the British division this detachment belonged to. This officer reported back to General Elliott that when he inquired about the detachment ensconced at Hedauville he was given unprintable replies about its performance. Pompey responded decisively. As he told the Senate,

I then sent for the [British] staff captain, and asked him had he received any orders yet. He replied that he had not. I asked why he had not telephoned or gone to [a nearby village] to find out. He replied that he had no telephone. I told him that I had a telephone he could use, and then, being irritated by his

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listless manner and want of interest, and by the fact that my men were being drenched to wait his convenience, I told him that I had formed a most unfavourable opinion from what I had heard of his division, and that his own want of energy and initiative were strong confirmation of what I had heard, and that unless he got orders and moved his men out of the village immediately, I would assume command and march them out of the village, if necessary, under arrest.

This assertiveness had the desired effect. Before long, this British detachment had moved out of Hedauville. As Pompey and his men were settling in, however, the situation changed dramatically once more. They were directed to move immediately to another vulnerable sector in the British defence about 20 miles away, and had to march all night again.

Pompey recalled this memorable night in a Senate speech in 1923:

I ... have seen them triumph in battles, and have greeted them beaten, but never disgraced, returning from a stricken field—they were proud moments; but I have never been prouder than when ... we marched, at night, 26 miles. ... When I arrived at General ... Monash's headquarters ... his staff officer said 'They will never get here'. But at the appointed hour the whole brigade marched in intact, in close and beautiful order ...

Now back to what Pompey was revealing in 1921:

Honourable senators will hardly believe the sequel, but this is what happened. Three weeks later General Hobbs [who was Pompey's immediate superior] called to see me. He said 'I want to speak to you privately', and took me out into the garden. He then said to me, 'General, I have instructions to tell you that ... you will receive no further promotion [because] of your conduct to [British] officers.' When he said that, I turned away rather dumbfounded, and he [patted] me on the back and said 'I have got to tell you that, but by God you were right.' It turned out that this staff officer [at Hedauville] was the son of a Duke, [and complained about] my conduct, and you see the result.

To appreciate what a bombshell this kind of speech was, you need to bear in mind the strict censorship that applied during the war period. These were extraordinary revelations, and there were a lot more of them with Pompey on the warpath fighting the war all over again in the Senate.

He was indeed a remarkable soldier and a remarkable senator.



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**Question** — On the question of the divisional command, there were three generals who were promoted. They were Glasgow, Rosenthal and Gellibrand. Which one of those should not have been promoted, or should Pompey have promoted in lieu of?

**Ross McMullin** — My view is that it was inappropriate to rule Pompey out. If he had not been ruled out by his superiors for perceived errors of judgement (and I stress ‘perceived’), like the one we just concluded with, then he should have been well in the running and I would have thought probably ahead of each of those three, on his record.

**Question** — Before coming along today, I had a quick dip into Les Carlyon’s book on Gallipoli and I was very disappointed to see so few references to Pompey Elliott in that book. Do you have any comments on that?

**Ross McMullin** — I was disappointed too. But bear in mind, my book wasn’t out when Les was producing his book. He is planning to do a book on the Western Front. So hopefully due to the fact that my book is now published, Pompey might get a better run in his next book.

**Question** — What led to your interest in this remarkable man? How did you find out about him and what led you to this wonderful journey that you have made into his life?

**Ross McMullin** — Basically, I was struck, when I first came across his remarkable letters, by the notion that there was a terrific story there. I first came across the letters in 1979 when I spent a year working here in Canberra as a post-graduate student. I found out about all these interesting people, Will Dyson—who ended up being the subject of my first book—Monash, Glasgow, and Pompey. I thought then that there was potentially a pretty good story there, and I felt that somewhere down the track I might end up telling it. As well, as I mentioned in the talk, it’s always been a two-pronged thing, the combination of the fantastic story around what happened to Pompey and how he expresses himself, and also the life and times. He’s a great vehicle for having a look at the wider issue of how World War I devastated Australia. Those two parts of the story have loomed large all the way through.

**Question** — I think you have made it clear how the British regarded him, but how did Monash relate to him? Did he protect him, as a mentor, could he save him from himself? One wonders if there was any notion of political support that could have helped him at that time.

**Ross McMullin** — The 1918 appointments, which Pompey had a great sense of grievance about, were made without consulting Monash. Birdwood and Brudenell White were still running the AIF at the time that those appointments were made. Pompey, at that time, felt strongly that he would have had a much better go under Monash. He admired Monash greatly, and felt that the fact that the AIF did better than ever in the second half of 1918 after Monash took over was no coincidence. That was in contrast to the previous regime, which he felt had given him a raw deal.

In relation to the 1921 appointments, Senator Pearce, then minister for Defence, told Pompey in Parliament that he was wrong to claim that Monash had not been consulted. Pearce added that he could produce Monash’s recommendations with Monash’s signature underneath. That has been in *Hansard* for decades. But in the Monash papers at the

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National Library I found a letter Monash wrote in 1921, complaining that the consultation he had been given about the 1921 appointments was token, and that really no notice had been taken of what he had said whatsoever.

If Monash had had sole say in the 1921 appointment would he have picked Pompey? I don't know. Pompey would have been convinced that, if that state of affairs had prevailed, Monash *would* have picked him. Maybe he would have.

**Question** — You made reference in your address to the strong feeling that Pompey had in Europe that a battle was futile and it shouldn't have proceeded. Presumably he had similar feelings at Gallipoli. Is there any evidence that he made similar recommendations there because of the huge loss of life, and was also ignored?

**Ross McMullin** — I think it was what happened at Fromelles that made him more energised about putting vigorous protests in, as and when he felt they were appropriate—and he felt that quite a few times. Before that, he definitely strongly felt that the Gallipoli landing itself was incredibly dangerous and he wasn't too keen on the strategy. But he was only a battalion commander and was not high enough to be making waves about having a Gallipoli landing or not. The absolutely idiotic, insane attack at Krithia a fortnight after the landing on 8 May 1915, when Elliott's brigade was moved down south temporarily to Helles where the British landed, to participate in this shocking exercise, he missed, by virtue of being wounded in the landing. He got a bullet in the foot on 25 April 1915 and he was away until June, so he missed the 8 May attack. He would have had strong views about that. There is another instance at Gallipoli. Pompey and his battalion were transferred to Lone Pine. The initial idea for them at the August offensive was to undertake an attack at Johnston's Jolly, which Pompey thought was really very, very stupid, and he was relieved when they were pulled away from there. He would have expressed his views about the proposed attack on Johnston's Jolly. I don't know that he did so as vehemently as he did at the Western Front ones post-Fromelles. He felt that what was initially planned for his 7th Battalion in the August offensive—the operation at Johnston's Jolly—was equivalently futile as what happened at the Nek.

**Question** — Do you think that Pompey's death came about because of his personality and his frustrations? Could you speak about the causes that led to him suiciding?

**Ross McMullin** — Pompey Elliott suicided in 1931. He was still a senator at the time. How did that come to happen? I think it could be said that by 1931 he had demonstrated that he had an obsessive personality and that he was prone to great troughs of depression—and, of course, during the war he had plenty to be depressed about. A psychiatrist professor told me that this sort of thing can run in families—profound depression leading to suicide. Pompey's elder sister suicided in Ballarat in 1894, Pompey's niece was to later suicide in the 1960s. As to why it happened in 1931 rather than at some other time, I think there are four possible factors.

The first is what he called his 'supersession grievance', being superseded both in 1918 and 1921 by those other generals. He felt that profoundly, and was still troubled by it greatly in the 1920s. A chapter title in my book comes from a letter that he wrote, in which he said that 'the injustice has actually coloured all my post-war life.' He really felt that acutely.

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Second, it was the time of the Great Depression, the great economic depression. For someone of his political views, it was as if the entire system was on the brink of imminent collapse. He died in March, and he was the third prominent Melbourne solicitor to suicide in 1931. The great upset, distress and turmoil of that time led to him feeling deluded even about his own personal finances. He was quite financially secure, but he didn't feel it.

Third of the four triggers was post-traumatic stress syndrome, as of course we call it today, though we didn't then. Pompey obviously had encountered terrible sights and horrors through being a front line commander and from being so prominently in the front line, even as a general. But this was not the only kind of thing that cropped up in his nightmares and flashbacks during the 1920s. There had also been times when he had to order subordinates to do particular tasks. Even though, when he had these flashbacks and went over it afterwards, he remained convinced that someone had to do them at the time and it was appropriate tactically, and that he had to, as a general, order someone to do them, he still terribly regretted the outcome of those instances where, of course, some of the men didn't come back.

The fourth trigger was that he'd had a severe bang on the head in a horse riding accident a few months before he died. As his relatives were piecing together the sequence of events afterwards, and trying to make sense of it all, they thought that that incident was perhaps more serious than they had thought at the time. Those four factors together influenced his suicide.