



Army Museum of Tasmania
Anglesea Barracks
HOBART

Information Sheet No 26

AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE UNIT COLOUR PATCHES

Over the centuries military forces have used various means to distinguish armies and units within those armies. To a large extent that was by way of a flag or Colour as it was known. Within the British Army this was usually the Sovereign's Flag and the Regimental Flag which were carried into battle by a Colour party. A unit which lost its Colours in battle was shamed by such an occurrence. Protection of the Colours was of high importance. During the first day of battle at Gettysburg in 1863 the 24th Michigan Regiment (Union Army) had 10 colour bearers killed and the 46th North Carolina Regiment (Confederate Army) 13 Colour bearers killed.

By the end of the 19th Century the nature of war had begun to change and the carrying of colours into battle all but ceased. When the Australian Military Forces were created in 1903 the Defence Act precluded Australians serving outside of Australia. With the advent of World War 1 an all volunteer force was authorised under Military Order 465/1914 to serve overseas. When the first troops left they all wore a 'Rising Sun' badge and the 'AUSTRALIA' metal title on the tunic epaulette. At this time numbers and letters on the epaulette might also indicate unit although these were not obvious at first glance.



8th Battery Field Artillery

As units were being raised for this Force a new means of distinguishing the units when in camp was approved on 5 September 1914 by General Bridges¹. A small flag was to be used to indicate units. The colours would at once indicate which brigade (infantry) and the number of the battalion in the brigade. Other Divisional units were allocated flags to indicate artillery, light horse etc. At this point in time there was only 1 Division.

When that division reached Egypt and camp was set up at Mena the lines were laid out so that there were “streets” by Brigade and Battalion. The size of the flags were increased from that initially approved.



12th Battalion, 3rd Brigade, 1 Division
971mm x 937mm
Imperial War Museum FLAG 2038

General Bridges at a conference with his senior staff in Mena suggested developing this system into a colour patch at the head of the sleeve on soldier’s tunics. This was adopted although there were some modifications as some colours were not available in Egypt.

As the AIF began to expand over the next few years a new shape was adopted to indicate which formation the wearer was in,

AIF Corps Head Quarters – Triangle and other shapes

- 1 Div – Rectangle)
- 2 Div – Diamond)
- 3 Div – Ellipse) Horizontally divided
- 4 Div – Circle)
- 5 Div - Vertical Rectangle) Vertically divided
- Light Horse – Rectangle) Diagonally divided

¹ AIFO 10/1914, Para46

Across the Divisions the upper colour for an infantry battalion indicated what numbered battalion in the brigade and the lower colour which brigade in the division.

Brigades

- 1st Brigade - Green
- 2nd Brigade - Red
- 3rd Brigade – Light Blue
- 4th Brigade – Dark Blue

e.g.

3rd Brigade 1 Division

- Brigade HQ - Light blue rectangle
- 1st Bn. (9th Bn.) – Black upper, light blue lower
- 2nd Bn. (10th Bn.) – Yellow upper, light blue lower
- 3rd Bn. (11th Bn.) – Purple upper, light blue lower
- 4th Bn. (12th Bn.) – White upper, light blue lower



3 Div., 2nd Bde., 40th Bn.

3 Div., 1st Bde., 36th Bn.

Both are the 4th Battalion in their Brigade

In effect at a glance a colour patch would inform a person which Division the wearer was in and in the case of Infantry which one of that Divisions 3 Brigades and which Battalion in that Brigade.



12th Battalion Colour Patch with Home Leave rosette

In 1917 all those members of the AIF who served on Gallipoli were entitled to wear a brass "A" on their colour patch to indicate that service. As the war progressed some of the original enlistees were granted home leave to Australia in 1918 and they were also provided a rosette to wear to indicate they were on leave.

Colour patches were very important to Australian soldiers as they signified who they were and when AIF Headquarters decided to create new divisions (4th and 5th) by splitting original battalions to form an experienced nucleus a great deal of angst was created among the troops who were leaving their mates and losing their colour patch.

The Colour patches may also be found on "Sweetheart" badges which women would wear to indicate a loved one was on active service. They were also worn by the members of the Associations that were created by the returned servicemen from the various battalions.



Two "Sweetheart" badges and an Association badge 40th Battalion
(actual size)

Post war a reorganization of the Australian Military Forces occurred and various State units were approved to wear the colour patch of the AIF unit raised in their region. For example the Derwent Infantry Regiment (AMF) adopted the 40th Bn. (AIF) colour patch and battalion number and became the 40th Battalion (Derwent Infantry Regiment) and the Launceston Infantry Regiment became the 12th Battalion (Launceston Infantry Regiment).

Where members of these AMF units had previous service in an AIF unit they were entitled to wear a miniature of their AIF colour patch above the unit colour patch. Examples may be found of uniforms in the period 1921 - 1943 with two colour patches that are the same (e.g. 40th Battalion, the upper being smaller than the lower)

Further Reading

Distinguishing Colour Patches of the Australian Military Forces 1915 – 1951, Keith Glyde 1999