



united service club

history & heritage notes

History and Heritage Series

Major General James Harold Cannan CB, CMG, DSO, VD

(29 August 1882 – 23 May 1976)

Based mainly on material sourced from various websites.



These Background Notes have been prepared as 'bite-sized' light reading for our Members. The intention is to broaden awareness and understanding of selected aspects of the Club's rich history and heritage, and the remarkable people who have contributed to its development over the years. They are based primarily on a number of websites, with specific additional information in places. We acknowledge that there are probably errors and omissions. **Please contact the Club if you have additional information or comments that will assist to improve these notes.**

We thank the History Interest Group and other volunteers who have researched and prepared these Notes. The series will be progressively expanded and developed over time. They are intended as casual reading, for private use by Members only, and as they lack the rigor, attributions, and acknowledgements required for academic or public use, Members are requested not to reproduce or distribute them outside of our membership.

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Summary

Major General James Harold Cannan, CB, CMG, DSO, VD (29 August 1882 – 23 May 1976) was a Queenslander by birth and a long-term Member of the United Service Club. He rose to brigadier general in the Great War and served as the Australian Army's Quartermaster General during the Second World War after which it was said that his *contribution to the defence of Australia was immense; his responsibility for supply, transport and works, a giant-sized burden; his acknowledgement—nil.*¹

Cannan was appointed Commanding Officer of the 15th Battalion in 1914 and landed with it at ANZAC Cove on the evening of 25 April 1915. The 15th Infantry Battalion later defended Quinn's Post, one of the most exposed parts of the Anzac perimeter, with Cannan as post commander. On the Western Front, Cannan was CO of 15th Battalion at the Battle of Pozzières and Battle of Mouquet Farm. He later commanded 11th Brigade at the Battle of Messines and the Battle of Broodseinde in 1917, and the Battle of Hamel and during the Hundred Days Offensive in 1918.

Between the wars Cannan worked in the insurance industry and remained active in the Militia until he was placed on the unattached list in 1925. He was also president of the Queensland branch of the Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia (now commonly known as the RSL) from 1920 to 1921 and became the first president of the Brisbane branch of Legacy in 1928.

During World War II Cannan served in the 2nd AIF as Quartermaster General and visited operational areas to prepare and plan the logistic support of operations. Despite his immense responsibility and achievements he received little recognition after the war. He retired in 1946 and was the last surviving Australian general of the Great War at the time of his death in 1976.

Early Life (Pre War)

James Harold Cannan was born in Townsville, Queensland on 29 August 1882, the sixth child of John Kearsey Cannan, a bank manager and his wife Elizabeth Christian (née Hodgson). The family moved around Queensland due to his father's career and the Cannan children were born in various locations (Roma, Warwick, Ipswich and Townsville). He was educated at Brisbane Central Boys' State School and Brisbane Grammar School.

¹ Horner, David (1978), *Crisis of Command: Australian Generalship and the Japanese Threat 1941–1943*

After completing his schooling James was employed by a firm of hardware merchants and later worked for seven years for New Zealand Insurance. He was chief agent at the Queensland branch of the Patriotic Assurance Company and then from 1910 was the state manager of the Insurance Office of Australia. Cannan married Eileen Clair Ranken on 12 December 1911. Their marriage produced no children.

Cannan was commissioned as a lieutenant in the 1st Queensland (Moreton) Regiment on 27 March 1903, transferred to the 9th Infantry Regiment on 1 July 1903, and was promoted to captain on 24 September 1907 and major on 14 August 1911. On 1 July 1912, he transferred to the 8th Infantry (Oxley Battalion) and was promoted to lieutenant colonel and appointed as Commanding Officer of the 8th Battalion on 9 May 1914. When war broke out, Cannan was appointed to command the Lytton Fixed Defences, holding this post from 5 to 31 August 1914.

Great War

He was appointed to the AIF on 23 September 1914 with the rank of lieutenant colonel, and assumed command of the 15th Battalion. This battalion comprised men from Queensland and Tasmania, and several Club Members were posted to the unit.

The photograph below taken at Enoggera Camp just prior to their embarkation shows the battalion's officers. Lt Col JH Cannan, the Commanding Officer, is seated in the centre of the second row. Those circled were USC Members who were killed at Gallipoli²:



Group portrait of officers of the 15th Battalion prior to embarkation overseas.
 Captain Quinn (later Major Quinn of Quinn's Post, Gallipoli), is second from right, third row.

Back Row, left to right: Second Lieutenant (2nd Lt) Francis Leofric Armstrong (KIA 10 May 1915); 2nd Lt John Anderson Good; 2nd Lt John Hill; 2nd Lt Thomas Robertson (KIA 27 April 1915); 2nd Lt Leo George Casey; 2nd Lt Leslie Norman Collin (KIA 9 May 1915); 2nd Lt Archibald Douglas.

Third Row: Captain (Capt) Douglas Herman Cannan (KIA 8 August 1915); Capt Cyril Frederick Corser; Lieutenant (Lt) Henry Charles Davies; Lt Nikolai Theodore Svensen; Capt John Foulkes Richardson; 2nd Lt Douglas Stephen Freeman; Capt John Francis Walsh (KIA 28 April 1915); Capt Hugh Quinn (KIA 29 May 1915); 2nd Lt George Frederick Dickinson.

Second Row: 2nd Lt Norman Dickson (died of wounds 27 April 1915); Maj Robert Eccles Snowden; Maj Hubert Reginald Carter; Lieutenant Colonel James Harold Cannan; Capt William Organ Willis (KIA 3 May 1915); Honorary Lt Frederick William Craig.

Front Row: 2nd Lt Cecil Edwin Snartt; 2nd Lt Samuel William Harry; Lt Harry Kessell; Lt Francis Moran (died of wounds 20 August 1915); Lt Leslie John Walters; 2nd Lt Nicholas O'Brien; 2nd Lt Arthur Gurr Hinman.

² They are: the adjutant, Captain W.O. Willis (next to the CO in the second row); Cannan's older brother, Captain D. H. Cannan at left in the third row; and Lt F.L. Armstrong, at the left in the rear row. The story of each is told in our History and Heritage Note: *The Men on the Board* (see: People. Honour Roll Great War).

The 15th Battalion embarked for the Middle East from Melbourne on the transport HMAT *Ceramic* on 22 December 1914, arriving at Alexandria on 31 January 1915 after which the 4th Brigade encamped at Heliopolis and resumed training.

Gallipoli

The 15th Battalion landed at ANZAC Cove on the evening of 25 April 1915. Cannan was sent with half of his battalion to fill the gap between the 2nd and 3rd Brigades. Moving in the dark through the thick scrub of the Razorback, the 15th found the empty positions in the scrub that it was sent to fill. The 15th Battalion was soon switched to Quinn's Post, one of the most exposed parts of the Anzac perimeter, and Cannan was appointed post commander. The 15th Battalion's War Diary for 3 May records: *The enemy made an attack upon our position early in the morning but was repulsed, we losing Capt. Willis killed.*³



Lt Col Cannan (second from left) at Quinn's Post, with Brigadier General Harry Chauvel (left) and Major General Alexander Godley (right).

In the Battle of Sari Bair on 8 August 1915, the 15th Battalion suffered heavily, having seven officers killed (including Cannan's older brother, Major D. H. Cannan⁴), and most of the rest were wounded. Cannan became ill and was evacuated from Anzac on 4 October 1915. He was transferred to hospitals on Lemnos and Malta, before being sent to the 3rd London General Hospital in England.

For *distinguished service in the field during operations in the Dardanelles*, Cannan was mentioned in despatches and made a Companion of the Order of the Bath on 5 November 1915.

By the time Cannan had recovered from his illness, the Australians had been evacuated from Gallipoli Peninsular and he resumed command of the 15th Battalion in Egypt on 21 January 1916.

2nd Division (of which 4th Brigade was part) was spared the disruptions caused by splitting battalions as occurred in 1st Division during the expansion of the AIF after the evacuation. 15th Battalion departed Alexandria for Marseilles on 1 June 1916, to move to the Western Front.

Western Front

Cannan led his battalion in the Battle of the Somme (at the Battle of Pozières and Battle of Mouquet Farm). On the night of 8 August 1916, the 15th Battalion launched an attack on the German trench in front of Mouquet Farm known as Park Lane. Cannan's men captured their objectives, and indeed went beyond them in some places. However, the battalion on his flank was mown down by German machine gun fire and Cannan was compelled to withdraw part of his force to a more defensible position.

On 30 August 1916 Cannan was appointed to command the 11th Brigade then training on the Salisbury Plain in England as part of 3rd Division (commanded by Major General Monash).

Cannan returned to France with the 11th Brigade in November 1916, and commanded it in the Battle of Messines in June 1917 and the Battle of Broodseinde in October 1917.

³ Capt 'Billy' Willis was the battalion's Adjutant and was also a Member of USC. His biography is included in our History and Heritage Note: *The Men on the Board* (see: People. Honour Roll Great War).

⁴ See Major Cannan's biography in our History and Heritage Note: *The Men on the Board* (see: People. Honour Roll Great War).

For these battles, Cannan was made a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George. His citation read:

Commander of the 11th Australian Infantry Brigade since September 1916. This officer has served continuously since the outbreak of war and received the CB upon the landing in Gallipoli. He commanded a battalion in Gallipoli, Egypt and France until September 1916. He had held a brigade command throughout the offensive period of 1917 taking part in the battle of Messines June 1917. Subsequently he commanded the series of operations which led to the capture of the Windmill on 31 July 1917 and also commanded the right brigade of this division in the highly successful battle for the Broodesinde Ridge on 4 October 1917, again taking part in the battle of 12 October 1917. His services as a brigade commander have throughout been extinguished [sic] by great energy, ability and leadership.

In the fighting in the 1918 German Spring Offensive, the 11th Brigade was the first to check the German advance towards Amiens in April. It was selected from the brigades of the 3rd Division to participate in the Battle of Hamel (4 July 1918). The 11th Brigade went on to participate in the Battle of Amiens and the Hundred Days Offensive.

For the battles of August and September, Cannan was awarded the Distinguished Service Order. His citation read:

For his very distinguished services in command of his brigade forming the right flank of the attack of the divisional attack at Bony on 29 September - 1 October 1918. His clear insight into an extremely difficult tactical situation, coupled with the energy and resolution with which he directed the operations of his brigade were of the greatest value in forcing the enemy to give up his hope of holding the Hindenburg Line.

General Cannan's conduct and skill throughout the last Somme campaign gave a conspicuous example of the soldierly merit to his brigade and to the division. The great difficulties in establishing and maintaining communications rendered the action at Bony a matter of personal leadership and in this General Cannan proved himself the right man in the right place.

For his services on the Western Front, Cannan was also awarded the Belgian Croix de Guerre, his citation noting his *tenacity, thoroughness and efficient organisation...his splendid qualities of leadership, and his personal gallantry*. He was mentioned in despatches another five times.

Between the Wars

Cannan studied insurance practice in London under the Army Education Scheme⁵ for two months before embarking for Australia on HMAT *Ancises* on 22 August 1919. He arrived back in Australia on 17 October 1919 and his appointment to the AIF was terminated on 13 December 1919.

Cannan had been made a brevet⁶ colonel in the Militia on 24 September 1917 but he was entitled to keep his AIF rank of brigadier general as an honorary rank.

Cannan returned to his old job at Insurance Office of Australia. He became manager of the Sydney office in 1932 and presided over the Insurance Institute of New South Wales from 1936 to 1937. He was also president of the Queensland branch of the Returned Soldiers' and Sailors' Imperial League of Australia (now commonly known as the RSL) from 1920 to 1921 and became the first president of the Brisbane branch of Legacy in 1928.

Cannan was appointed to command the 2/15 Infantry Battalion from 1 October 1918 to 30 June 1920 (but he did not actually take up command until 14 December 1919). On 1 July 1920, he became a substantive colonel (and still honorary brigadier general) on assuming command of the 2nd Infantry Brigade.

He commanded the 11th Mixed Brigade from 1 May 1921 to 30 April 1925, when he was transferred to the unattached list. Cannan was also aide de camp to the Governor General from 1 April 1920 to 21 March 1923 and honorary colonel of the 47th Infantry Battalion from 19 June 1930.

World War II

⁵ After the war, there were delays in returning the men to Australia, a key reason being a shortage of shipping and berths. Repatriation to Australia was organised on a first-in, first-out basis. During this period of limbo, the AIF instituted the Army Education Scheme, a range of education and lecture programs to train personnel in peacetime occupation skills. While awaiting transport, some men took advantage of the opportunity to travel around France and Britain- one of the incentives for enlisting in the first place.

⁶ A temporary authorisation for a person to hold a higher rank

On 27 May 1940, after over fifteen years on the unattached list, Cannan was appointed Inspector General of Administration at the Department of Defence Coordination. Although his tenure was brief, Cannan gained valuable experience working with the bureaucracy. On 7 July 1940 Cannan was promoted to temporary major general and took over command of the 2nd Division⁷ in succession to Major General Iven Mackay who had been appointed to command the 6th Division⁸.

Because most Australian soldiers were Militia, the government decided in 1940 that there should be direct Militia representation on the Military Board at Army Headquarters. The appointment of a Militia officer to the board was opposed by the Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General Vernon Sturdee, but when he was overruled by the Prime Minister (Robert Menzies) Sturdee offered the post to Cannan.

On 24 October 1940, Cannan became Quartermaster General and a member of the Military Board. His experience as a businessman gave him managerial skills that were to prove particularly useful. Cannan offered to resign in 1942 so that his post could be given to a regular officer, but General Sir Thomas Blamey refused to countenance it, and Cannan remained Quartermaster General⁹ until 31 December 1945. In 1942 the Military Board was abolished and Cannan then reported to the Lieutenant General Administration (Lieutenant General Henry Wynter¹⁰) instead. Cannan volunteered for the Second Australian Imperial Force¹¹ and was accepted on 2 September 1942.

As Quartermaster General, Cannan was responsible for the Australian Army's supply, transport and engineering services throughout Australia and the South West Pacific Area. It was the most important logistical command in Australian history. In carrying it out, he clashed repeatedly with the Department of Defence Coordination in its attempt to maintain peacetime financial controls.

Cannan had to work long hours and use all of his skills both as a soldier and a businessman. He had to attempt to keep ahead of the plans at General Headquarters in order to ensure that the required logistical support would be there on time. Colonel G Drake-Brockman considered Cannan *a man of great personality and charm with tremendous drive* whose administration was *outstanding*.

As well as supporting the Australian Army, Cannan was also responsible for providing a broad range of goods and services to the Americans. In no other theatre of war was local procurement of supplies by US forces as extensive or important as in the South West Pacific. Australian Reverse Lend Lease came to USD \$1.1 billion, representing 13% of all reciprocal aid to the United States. Cannan was responsible for rationing the American forces in Australia until the American Quartermaster Corps felt capable of taking over the function in 1943.

When requirements to support the British Pacific Fleet were added on top of American demands and an increasingly-tight Army manpower situation, Cannan protested the *lavishness and extravagance which characterised US demands whilst the Australian services' demands were being subjected to rigid scrutiny and economies*. He urged that economies be made on goods and services supplied to Allied countries.

However the government was reluctant to take any action that might not be welcomed by American military and political leaders. Nonetheless, Prime Minister (by now John Curtin) did successfully persuade General Douglas MacArthur to rationalise his use of Australian resources in order to accommodate support to the British Pacific Fleet.

⁷ 2nd Division was composed primarily of infantry units from New South Wales and was based initially in Sydney. When the war broke out in September 1939 the 2nd Division was partly mobilised although the Militia was barred from overseas service and as a result, many members joined the Second Australian Imperial Force.

⁸ The 6th Division was re-raised on the outbreak of World War II as a formation of the Second Australian Imperial Force (2nd AIF). In 1942 the division returned to Australia from the Middle East theatre and was subsequently committed to the New Guinea campaign.

⁹ A Quartermaster General is the staff officer in charge of supplies for a whole army.

¹⁰ Lieutenant General Wynter was also a Club member and he is the last entry on our WW2 Roll of Honour.

¹¹ In order to serve overseas, it was necessary to volunteer by enlisting in the Second Australian Imperial Force (Second AIF, or 2nd AIF). Under the Defence Act (1903) neither the part-time Militia nor the full-time Permanent Military Force could serve outside Australia or its territories unless they volunteered to do so.



From left to right: General Sir Thomas Blamey, GBE, KCB, CMG, DSO, ED, (Commander In Chief, Allied Land Forces, South West Pacific Area); Major General A.S. 'Tubby' Allen, CB, CBE, DSO, VD, (GOC Northern Territory Force) and Major General J.H. Cannan, CB, CMB, DSO, VD, (Quartermaster General) crossing a wooden bridge during the Commander In Chief's inspection of Berry Springs, NT on 21 August 1944

Cannan travelled widely in the combat areas to see conditions at first hand. He visited New Guinea in late 1943 and early 1944. In October 1944 Cannan travelled with General Blamey to visit General Douglas MacArthur in Hollandia (now Jayapura, the provincial capital of Indonesian Papua) in order to prepare for Philippines campaign. In the event, plans to employ Australian troops in the Philippines fell through and they were employed in the Borneo Campaign instead. Cannan visited New Britain, Lae, Hollandia, Bougainville and Aitape in February 1945 to help plan the final campaigns and Hollandia, Morotai, Labuan and Darwin in August 1945.



The Chief of the General Staff, Lieutenant General John Northcott (left) and the Quartermaster General, Major General JH Cannan (second from left) are greeted by GOC 6th Division, Major General JES Stevens (right) on their arrival at Tadjil Airstrip in PNG

Post War

Cannan received no honours for the Second World War. Blamey nominated him for a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire in September 1943, but it was refused, it not being the Labor government's policy to award knighthoods.

In November 1945, Blamey was abruptly dismissed by the government. Asked if he wanted any honours for himself, Blamey declined, instead requesting knighthoods for his generals, including Cannan. His request was refused.

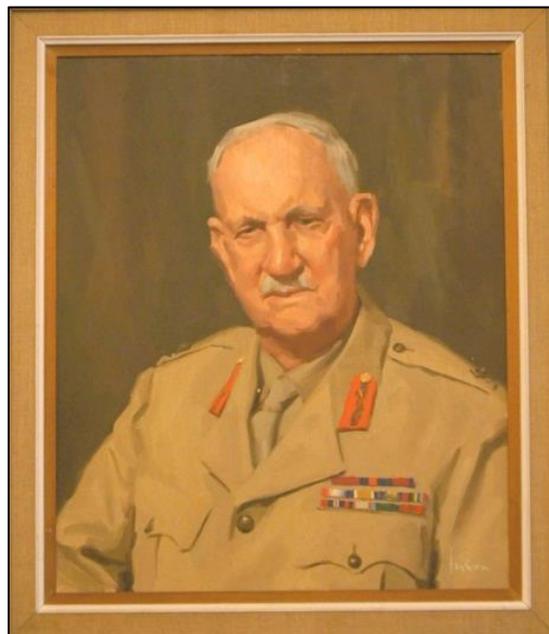
In December 1949, the government changed and Blamey wrote to the new Prime Minister (Robert Menzies) again recommending knighthoods for a number of his generals, including Cannan. All were accepted *except, for some inexplicable reason, for Cannan.*¹² Cannan relinquished his appointment as Quartermaster General on 31 December 1945 and retired as a major general the next day.

His abilities as an administrator were still in demand. He was Director of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration in the South West Pacific from 1946 to 1947, of the Queensland division of the Australian Red Cross from 1950 to 1951, and of the Services Canteens Trust from 1948 to 1957. He was also a director of several companies.

Cannan was the last of Australia's Great War generals to pass away when he died on 23 May 1976. He was cremated with full military honours and survived by his wife Eileen.

Club Portrait

A portrait of Major General Cannan was donated to the United Service Club by Dr Dinah Brockett, a Club Member and niece of General Cannon. It is an oil painting, 62cm x 52 cm, showing the General in uniform. The artist was Mr Graeme Inson from Sydney. A notation on the back of the painting reads: MAJOR-GENERAL J.H. Cannan and is signed Graeme Inson 1966.



It was hanging in the Reading Room until 2005 when the Committee of the time approved a request from Dr Brockett for the portrait to be returned to her on loan until her death. The portrait was returned to the Club in late 2014 and is proudly displayed in the Club once more (in the Reading Room at time of writing).

¹² Horner, David (1998), *Blamey: The Commander-in-Chief, Sydney*