



General Sir Cyril Brudenell Bingham WHITE KCB, KCMG, KCVO, DSO

[1876 – 1940]



*General Sir Cyril Brudenell Bingham White, KCB KCMG, KCVO, DSO.
(source: Australian War Memorial)*

‘Maker of the AIF’

General White is a Notable Member of the United Service Club.

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Cyril Brudenell Bingham White (1876-1940) was born in Victoria, seventh child of a stock agent and retired army officer, John Warren White, and his wife Maria, both Dublin born. The family moved to Queensland in 1881 and lived on pastoral stations in the Gympie, Charters Towers and Gladstone areas before settling at Clayfield, Brisbane. Although John was unsuccessful as a pastoralist, in 1885 he became president of the Brisbane Stock Exchange. Brudenell was educated at Brisbane Central Boys' School and for one year at Eton Preparatory School, Nundah.

He had wanted to be a barrister, like his grandfather, but at the age of 16 took a job as a bank clerk and studied in his spare time. While based at Gympie, he became friends with Bill Glasgow¹, a militia officer who worked in a rival bank in Gympie. Through this connection, and with the assistance of Captain CB Steele, White was provisionally commissioned in the 2nd Queensland (Wide Bay and Burnett) Regiment on 7 October 1896.



Lieutenant White as a young officer c1896.

White transferred to the permanent forces and on 7 June 1899 he was commissioned in the Queensland Regiment of the Royal Australian Artillery. He was stationed at Thursday Island in 1900-01 before returning to be based in Victoria Barracks in Brisbane and continued to serve in the Australian Military Forces.



The Main Guard at Victoria Barracks Brisbane, 9 February 1897. The Barracks were the HQ of A Battery, Queensland Permanent Artillery, with detachments at Fort Lytton, Kissing Point Townsville and Thursday Island.

¹ Later General The Honourable Sir Thomas William Glasgow, another Notable Member of the United Service Club

Late in the Boer War, he embarked (on 18 February 1902) for service in South Africa with the 1st Battalion, Australian Commonwealth Horse. The unit engaged in minor operations in the western Transvaal and Bechuanaland, but hostilities ended in June. White wrote: *'I would have liked to see a little fighting'*.

In January 1904 he was detached from his duties with the artillery in Victoria and appointed aide-de-camp to Major General Sir Edward Hutton, general officer commanding the Australian Military Forces. His one-year association with Hutton, during which the two formed a lasting friendship, marked the beginning of White's formative years as a staff officer.



Captain White as ADC, November 1904

Promoted temporary Captain, he travelled extensively with General Hutton and learned much about the state and organisation of the infant Australian Army.



White married Ethel Davidson on 15 November 1905 at Christ Church, South Yarra,

In 1906 he became the first Australian officer to attend the British Army Staff College, at Camberley, England. He began the course with relatively little regimental experience and limited active service, but he graduated well up in his class-list. This was testimony to his ability and capacity for hard work, traits which increasingly brought him to the notice of his superiors. Returning to Australia, he was promoted Captain and in March 1908 joined the staff of the Chief of Intelligence, Colonel (Sir) William Bridges, who shared many of his views.

By the end of the year White was again in Britain, serving on exchange at the War Office as a general staff officer, 3rd grade (GSO3). His attachment to the War Office gave him experience in handling large forces and developed his skills in planning and administration. It also introduced him to officers with whom he would later work and deepened his 'commitment to the British Empire'. He favoured bringing Australian forces under the British Army Act in time of war, and opposed the creation of an Australian navy.

The need for trained officers in Australia led to his recall and to his appointment on 1 January 1912 as Director of Military Operations at Army Headquarters, Melbourne. He had been promoted Major the previous year.

In his new post he was responsible for developing strategic policy and administering the military system recently formulated by Legge and Lord Kitchener. White maintained and updated Bridges' mobilisation plans for home defence and supported the concept of a citizen force. As the Great War loomed in August 1914 he was acting Chief of the General Staff, and was able to endorse (as a result of his earlier planning preparing specifications for raising, equipping, training and dispatching the Australian portion of a joint force with New Zealand) the government's offer to the United Kingdom of a force of 20,000 men to proceed overseas at short notice in the event of war.

White was appointed as Major General Bridge's chief of staff in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in August 1914.²

By December the first contingent of the AIF was training in Egypt. With Bridges, White planned the landing of the 1st Australian Division on the Gallipoli peninsula. He helped to pull together the disorganised threads of command and communications in the immediate aftermath of the landing and was 'the perfect complement to Bridges'. In June 1915 White was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his exceptional efforts as a staff officer.

Although Bridges was killed in May, White continued in this role until promoted to Brigadier-General on 1 October and appointed BGGs (Brigadier General, General Staff) at Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, with Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood who took permanent command of the AIF. This began his long partnership with Birdwood, one that would last until the end of the war in 1918.



White at Gallipoli: Left: With Colonel Howse (later VC). Right in his dug-out, May 1918

² The AIF was raised from volunteers to serve abroad as the Defence Act prevented militia forces or others who had not specifically volunteered for overseas actions to serve outside Australia.

White planned and supervised the evacuation of Anzac, the most successful operation of the campaign; the withdrawal was accomplished without incident or casualties.

In Egypt he had the principal role in implementing the expansion of the AIF to four divisions. One of the new divisional commands might have gone to him, but Birdwood chose to maintain continuity in the force's administration. He went to France as BGGs I Anzac Corps.

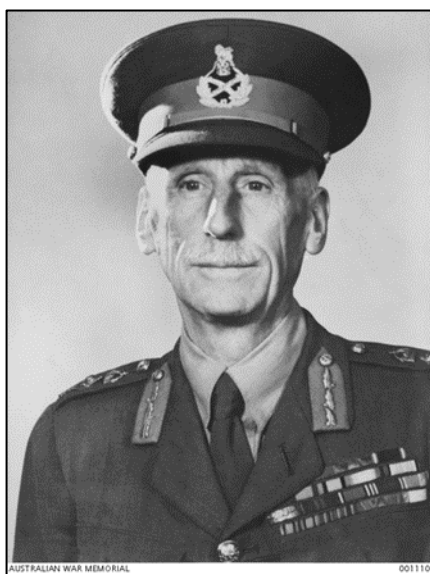
His authority over the AIF on the Western Front was pervasive. It was generally recognised that he was responsible for the detail of running the corps, while Birdwood exercised command through regular and direct contact with the men.³

Although concern had already been expressed that he was 'being kept back on account of his usefulness as a staff officer', Cyril was promoted temporary major general on 1 January 1917 and continued as Birdwood's chief of staff.

General Birdwood was selected as the GOC of the British Fifth Army and on 1 June 1918 White went with Birdwood to Fifth Army as Major General, General Staff (MGGS) Fifth Army, and had little further involvement in operations.

He was appointed KCMG on 1 January 1919. For his services after Gallipoli, he received five foreign decorations, was appointed aide-de-camp to King George V and mentioned in dispatches five times.

During his time on the Western Front, White encouraged others to refer to him by his second Christian name, Brudenall, rather than his first name of Cyril.



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He subsequently served as Chief of the General Staff over the period 1920-1923. Becoming Chief of the General Staff on 1 June 1920, he faced savage cuts in defence spending.

Retiring as CGS in June 1923, White was appointed chairman of the newly constituted Commonwealth Public Service Board.

Placed on the retired list in the rank of honorary Lieutenant-General in August 1939, White was recalled to be CGS on 15 March 1940 - even though at 63 years of age he believed himself to be out of date. His second term as CGS was too short to affect the course of Australia's effort in World War II.

³ Notwithstanding Birdwood's close relationship with 'his' Australians, Birdwood's administration and organization were weak, and his tactical acumen suspect. White more than compensated for these shortcomings.

He was tragically killed in an aircraft accident near Canberra on 13 August 1940 after a flight on an RAAF Hudson bomber from Melbourne. Also killed in the accident were Brigadier G A Street MC (Minister for the Army and Repatriation); J V Fairbairn (Minister for Air and Civil Aviation); Sir Henry Gullett (Minister for Scientific and Industrial Research); and six others.



Extract of the report in the 'Telegraph' on 14 August 1940.

White's greatest achievement had been in the previous conflict: one of the founders of the AIF, he had become its 'tactical and administrative commander in all but name'. A consummate chief of staff, his distinction in the role had denied him senior command and the public recognition that went with it.

Nevertheless, Bean described him as the greatest man he ever knew, and his judgement was shared by many. An extract of an article written by Bean for the RASSAILA magazine "Reveille" is overleaf.

White is known to have been a member of the Club from 1926 to 1940 when he was living in Melbourne, but he was very probably also a member when he was a young regular officer serving in Brisbane early in the first decade of the 20th century.

Celebrities of the A.I.F. (8) : Cyril Brudenell White The Maker of the A.I.F.

(By C. E. W. Bean)

There lives on a country property in Victoria the man who more than any other was the creator of the A.I.F.

He was only a young Major of our permanent artillery when war broke out, but his brilliant ability, his intense energy, and his attractive disposition had already put him in the position which counted most—that of Acting-Chief of the General Staff, and until the end of the war he remained the foremost staff officer in the Australian service.

In the last six months of the war he became, not by his own will for he wished to stay with the Australian corps, Chief of Staff of the Fifth Army, and there were many who believed that if the war had continued longer, it end would have found him Chief of Staff of the British Armies in France.

Like so many great soldiers in the history of the British race, Cyril Brudenell Bingham White has Irish blood in his veins; Celtic imagination and vitality have always found a special reward in the Army and Navy.

When White was chosen by General Bridges as his Chief-of-Staff in building up the A.I.F., as well as for the 1st Division, he immediately showed what Bridges had, perhaps, known before—that not only was he the most highly-trained soldier in Australia, but that his mental grasp was instant, his judgment sure, and his sense of proportion unerring.

Bridges, learned soldier and strong man that he was, had a difficult disposition. He inspired fear, but disliked anyone who was afraid of him, and was, therefore, by no means an easy Chief of Staff officer to serve. But White possessed not merely brains; he had a high degree of moral courage, and—what is perhaps even more rare among those who came to the forefront in war—a fine quality of unselfishness. With that courteous consideration for others, which struck everyone who met him, he could, more easily than most men, subordinate himself to the wishes of his Chief; but if he felt an adverse opinion should be stated, whether to Bridges or Birdwood (whom he served as Chief-of-Staff of the A.I.F. and of I. Anzac), or anyone else, nothing would prevent White from stating it.

There were few commanders in France who were not afraid of Haig. But when Haig visited Birdwood's headquarters, and in a lecture to Birdwood, showed that he misunderstood the situation, White stepped in front of him as he was leaving, and politely, but ruthlessly, told him precisely where he was wrong. Like Bridges, Haig really appreciated this sort of courage. "I dare say you're right, young man," he said, kindly, squeezing White's arm.



Major-General Sir Cyril Brudenell White.

The A.I.F.—the greatest achievement of Australia up to the present time—was far more the product of White's brain than of any other man's. When returned men meet together to renew that great comradeship, how many of them are aware that practically every regulation under which the A.I.F. was raised, every rule by which it was administered, every order by which its divisions were created, organised and re-organised, every circular of instructions under which, in the early days, it was trained, as well as the orders for the Landing and for the Evacuation of Anzac, were drawn up by this great soldier, now living quietly in Victoria?

The Evacuation was probably White's greatest tactical achievement; the whole principle of that movement was his devising, and he controlled it, day and night. The original creation of the A.I.F., and the creation of new divisions in Egypt, were his greatest works of organisation. He was never known to the Diggers, but that was through the action of his chiefs, not of himself; his dearest wish was to command an Australian division. On a few occasions at Mess, when he broke away from the office and got out among the troops, his illuminating comments on their exercises were eagerly absorbed, and are remembered to this day. But the chiefs simply could not spare him, and for the sake of the A.I.F., he had to let the dream of his life drift by.

And yet, during the winter on the Somme, when the difficulties were so frightful that impossibilities seemed to face commanders at every turn, White exercised an influence and control beyond that of any other leader of the A.I.F. When a thing could not be done the staff of every branch and of every division said: "Take it to White." Every "Comforts Fund" official,

Active Service Career

Major-General Sir C. B. White, K.C.B., K.C.M.G., M.C., D.S.O., was born at St Arnaud (Vic.), 1870. G.S.D., 1st Aust. Division; E.C.C.S., I. Anzac Corps; M.G.S.S. 3rd Army; Chief of Staff, A.I.F.

every chief engineer in desperate need for getting his burning material, or every D.A.Q.M.G. at his wits' end for fuel or canteen stores, would go straight to White's door; in spite of an overwhelming burden of work, it was never shut them. His imagination would devise the means; his tact and influence with Army or G.H.Q. would obtain the concession; his unselfishness would work on the problem until light appeared; his persistence would maintain constant pressure where needed until the obstacles began to give way.

White never commanded the A.I.F., but he was undoubtedly the greatest saviour of his country during the war, which is no mean title to recognition. And it should be an inspiration to every Australian boy and girl that the Australian who achieved all this was educated, mainly, at a State school; entered business life as a bank clerk; and, by study in his spare time and saving every spare penny of his small salary, not only helped to keep his mother and family, but paid a schoolmaster to teach him nightly until his military examinations were passed.

COME IN AND HELP IN THIS GREAT WORK. JOIN THE LEAGUE.

Extract of the RSSAILA's magazine "Reveille" 31 March 1931. Article written by Charles Bean.

Sources included:

- Australian Dictionary of Biography, Volume 11, (MUP), 1988
- Various web pages, eg <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/white-sir-cyril-brudenell-1032> , https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brudenell_White , <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10676756> , <https://anzaccenary.vic.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/General-Sir-Brudenell-White-By-Mark-Derham.pdf>
- *United Service Club, Queensland: The First Century, 1892-1992* by Flight Lieutenant Murray Adams and Lieutenant Colonel Peter Charlton
- Club Meeting Minutes, Annual Reports and sundry documents