

JILLIAN DURANCE

Too good to lose: the Showgrounds Camp Band 1915

A single black and white photograph tells the story of a significant event on the Australian home front during the Great War. The day is 2 September 1915, the place Swanston Street, Melbourne. The photograph is a window onto one moment of the funeral procession of Major General Sir William Throsby Bridges, who was mortally wounded at Gallipoli three months earlier.¹

This photograph, one of a series of five images recorded on glass plate negatives and taken by an unknown photographer, captures an image of a military brass band frozen in time. The bandmen, with instruments poised mid march, are dressed in the full khaki uniform and slouch hats of the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Three young men from country Victoria were members of the band on that day. The photograph links the death 'on active service' of Australia's highest ranking commander with the lives of these three, newly recruited Victorians: privates Herbert Godber, Percy Nash and Raymond Membrey, all members of the Showgrounds Camp Band.

At the time that the Showgrounds Camp Band was formed in August 1915, brass band music was popular throughout Australia. It was played by both civilian musicians and the military bands that had evolved out of the early regimental brass groups of the colonial period. The training camp and battalion bands were the 'descendants' of regimental bands formed after the passing of the volunteer Acts in Victoria and New South Wales in 1854

Bandmen (l-r) Percy Nash, Herbert Godber, Raymond Membrey,
before embarkation, January 1916. Durance family collection



during the Crimean War. Civilian bands originated from the British band culture that burgeoned in Australia in the wake of the population booms of the gold rush era, especially in Victoria. Civilian and regimental bands were characterised by the use of similar instruments (often a combination of reed and brass) and musical repertoires, which consistently included marches, the 'classics', hymns and popular airs. Regimental bands played for parades, military drills and marches. Even civilian bands were 'quasi-military' in their organisation, with a generally disciplined group of men dedicated to providing a high standard of music at various engagements. Both kinds of band would play at church services, concerts (often given for charitable causes) and at more formal ceremonies including funerals and national celebrations.

These existing regimental and brass band traditions in Australia prompted the decision to engage a military band to accompany Major General Bridges funeral procession. The same traditions shaped the role of the camp and battalion bands of the AIF during the Great War. This article aims to contribute to an understanding of how brass band culture linked the civilian and military worlds in the performance of public ceremonial functions, in the provision of a martial backdrop to recruiting drives, and in offering entertainment and solace to the sick and wounded of war. On a personal level it explores the experience of belonging to such a band and how that affected the perceptions of the individual bandsmen, many of whom had first played in civilian bands before their enlistment. The activities of the Showgrounds Camp Band in 1915 serve as a focus for examining the cultural transformation of peacetime bands into units that served the demands of the country at war.

The Showgrounds Camp Band is at the centre of the procession in the photograph of Major General Bridge's funeral. It follows the police escort as it moves steadily down Swanston Street. Behind the band come the officiating clergy, including the Archbishop of Melbourne, the Most Reverend Henry Lowther Clarke, and, behind them again, the horse-drawn gun carriage bearing the coffin of Major General Bridges.

Until the return of the Unknown Soldier for reburial at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, in 1993, Major General Bridges was the only Australian soldier to be repatriated in death and buried at home.² Accompanying the gun carriage are the pallbearers who, earlier, carried the coffin from the funeral service at St Paul's Cathedral to begin this solemn procession through city streets lined six-deep with grieving members of the public.

Among the official mourners were some of the most important men (and a few women) in the country, including the Governor-General of Australia, Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson; his wife Lady Helen; the Governor of Victoria,

Sir Arthur Stanley; the Prime Minister, Andrew Fisher; the Minister for Defence, Senator George Pearce; members of the Commonwealth and Victorian parliaments; Commonwealth and state government ministers; the Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Sir David Hennessey; members of the City Council and other prominent citizens; naval and military representatives; Commonwealth officers and representatives of other public institutions; and the Commandant of the Third Military District based in Melbourne.³ Bridges's wife, Lady Edith Bridges, was the chief mourner at the funeral.

By 2 September 1915, the day of Bridges's funeral, Australia had been at war exactly a year. The significance of Australia's engagement against the Ottoman Empire on the Gallipoli Peninsula was brought home in daily news items, mounting casualty lists and telegrams delivered to private addresses all over the country. None of the over 8000 killed or mortally wounded at the landing, or in the battles of Krithia, the Nek, Lone Pine and other engagements with the enemy, or those who died of disease, was returned home. The logistical difficulties of sending bodies the long distances home by ship were too great. Bridges's horse, Sandy, was also the only horse to be repatriated, but not until 1918. The horse that walked beside his coffin and was referred to as his 'charger' was not the animal that accompanied the commander to war.⁴

Scottish-born Major General Bridges had been a professional soldier since 1885, served in the Boer War and, from 1909, was Australia's first general chief of staff. In 1910, he helped to establish the Royal Military College at Duntroon near Canberra. At the time of his death, Bridges commanded the First Australian Division of the AIF. In fact, he had personally chosen the name for the newly raised army when it was proclaimed on 10 August 1914, 'with an eye on the initials which he knew would be used for its name'.⁵

On 15 May, while commanding the Australian troops in the area known as 'Anzac', Bridges was mortally wounded by a Turkish sniper's bullet in Monash Gully. The sandbag buttresses built at intervals across the valley bed did not protect the Australians from Turkish snipers, who fired at men moving from buttress to buttress. It is said that Bridges was shot in the upper part of the leg, severing the femoral artery. He was taken first to the safety of a trench on the beach and then conveyed to the hospital ship 'where surgeons were unable to stem the flow of blood'.⁶ He died soon afterwards on 18 May, at the age of 54, on board the hospital ship *Gascon* on its way to Alexandria.

Despite the fact that Bridges was first accorded a full military funeral and buried in Alexandria, his stature as Australia's first military commander to die 'on active service' influenced the decision to return his body for re-burial at home and to hold a state funeral in his honour. Melbourne, as the capital

of the Commonwealth since 1901 and the seat of national government, was the correct location for such a funeral, even though Bridges's body would be reinterred a few days later in the Duntroon Military College Grounds in Canberra.⁷ It was also the first time that an Australian cathedral was the scene of a national funeral service for an Australian general killed in war. The Showgrounds Camp Band was part of this historic moment and assisted in the process by which an established funerary tradition was given a new Australian context.

It was the role of the band to heighten the solemnity of the occasion. Military bands in Britain had long been engaged to add dignity to the funeral processions of respected or heroic figures such as monarchs, military and naval leaders, as well as government leaders. A well-disciplined band or two, playing a steady march could control the pace of the procession, contribute colour and define its structure. In Australia this tradition had already been 'adopted' when, nearly 60 years before, the band of the Castlemaine Volunteers had played at the funeral procession in January 1863 for inland explorers Robert O'Hara Burke and William John Wills, who had perished in the outback. The funeral procession of 'Victoria's first heroes' was characterised by many of the same rituals that featured in earlier British funerals and were later reinterpreted for Bridges's funeral in 1915. Again, the band and its music of mourning served to integrate the different strands of ceremony.

Many members of the Victorian public filed past Bridges's coffin as it lay in state for three hours before the funeral service at St Paul's. The band assembled outside the cathedral waiting to play its part. In the hours before the procession was due to begin at 4.30 pm, thousands of spectators and mourners lined the streets, several deep in places, to watch the coffin borne on the gun carriage toward Spencer Street Station, where Bridges would be transported to his final resting place in Canberra. 'Members of the expeditionary and citizen forces lined the whole route and mounted and foot constables had their work cut out to keep back the thousands who had come to honour the memory of this great soldier.'⁸ The Major General was great in their eyes because he had led Australian troops 'in their first serious attack upon a powerful enemy'.⁹ The presence and playing of the military band reinforced his status, 'sacrifice', heroism, and loss to the nation.

In addition to the participation of a military band, Bridges's funeral ceremony was rich in the established rituals and traditions of formal funeral procedure: the flags at half-mast, the coffin draped with the Union Jack and surmounted with Bridges's commander's helmet, his boots in reversed stirrups on the horse, the muffled tolling of the bells and the firing of a 13-gun salute



Major General Sir William Bridges's funeral procession, Swanston St, Melbourne, 2 September 1915. Note the photographer on the verandah roof and the casket being drawn by horses at left. State Library of Victoria Pictures Collection H92.330/176

as the cortege left the cathedral.¹⁰ The correspondent of the *Australasian* attempted, two days later, to encapsulate some of the emotion of the day:

The slow major of the Dead March of Handel came in bursts as the volume of the brass rose and failed. Women sobbed. Their own sons were at war where this gallant chieftain had met the death which most becomes a soldier, but which leaves hearts no less empty at home because it is death with honor.¹¹

The 'Dead march' was a popular choice of music that was almost compulsory at funerals of notable people. Composed by Handel in 1739 as part of his oratorio 'Saul', it evoked the sadness that King Saul felt at the death of Jonathan, his son. The piece was played at the funerals of Lord Nelson in 1806 and Edward VII in 1910. Originally arranged for a small orchestra, it was later scored for piano, organ and much larger orchestras but, with its slow and steady beat, measured phrases and resonance, it is an ideal piece for a full brass band. Scored for brass instruments, it is often called 'Dead march in Saul'. It was played often during the war, at home and abroad, notably at gravesides, funeral marches and performances 'in honor of the Anzac heroes'.¹²

While most onlookers were 'hushed', silent and in accord with the sadness of the occasion, some cheered the group of wounded soldiers who were part

of the procession. For the public at large, the Melbourne funeral was an extraordinary event, 'the greatest military funeral yet seen in her streets'.¹³ Archbishop Clarke highlighted its significance to the nation in his address; Australia had lost her 'bravest and best'. 'How many a heart has been saddened, how many at home made desolate by war?' Australia had known 'widespread loss which was felt by all because it was incurred for the benefit of all'.¹⁴ The meaning of 'sacrifice' had already begun to take hold on the common psyche, and awareness of the tragedies of war was present among onlookers in the heart of Melbourne that day. Bandsman Ray Membrey would recall the emotional power of the funeral procession throughout his long life. 'I still have a photo of the march', he wrote in his memoir in 1987, two years before he died at the age of 92.¹⁵ Whether it was a copy of the image in the State Library of Victoria's collection is unknown. There were several photographers at work as the procession wound its way through the city that day; the figure of one can be seen on the roof of the verandah close to the band.

Membrey joined up the moment he turned 18, and his arrival in Melbourne was the first time he had ever been to the city. It was 'an eye-opener' he recalled, and the fact that he was part of the band that was honoured to be chosen to play at this prestigious funeral was a lifelong source of personal pride.¹⁶ Membrey recalled that his brother, Harold, travelling from Stawell especially to see his younger brother, 'came into the city to see us march down Swanson St ... there were thousands of onlookers ... he was proud of me'.¹⁷

Membrey is visible in the photo as one of the trombone players in the front row. The photograph captures a moment in the music when the trombones were not required to play. Behind Membrey is a row of E flat bass players, one of them his friend Herbert Godber from Diamond Creek, Victoria.¹⁸ At the rear, behind the tenor horns, are the cornet players, including Percy Nash, another of Membrey's friends, recently from Skipton but, two years before, a recent immigrant from Limpley Stoke in Wiltshire, England, near Bath.¹⁹ The side drum at the rear and the kettle drum on the street edge of the band played an important role in keeping the beat as the band marched and played. None of the contemporary newspaper coverage is able to identify the band, other than calling it a 'military' one, or a band belonging to 'Australia's Expeditionary Forces'. It is only through Membrey's memoir that we learn that it was the Showgrounds Camp Band, based at one of the many training camps that were established throughout Victoria during 1915.

Membrey's memoir also reveals a personal but important perspective on the formation of the Showgrounds Camp Band and why it was deemed to be the best of the many that were available to perform at Major General Bridges's

funeral. Soon after the recruits arrived at the showgrounds in Ascot Vale, seven kilometres from the centre of Melbourne, they were billeted in the 'horse and cattle stalls' and, as they were being distributed with their 'rifles and uniforms etc.', 'over the loudspeakers came an appeal for bandsmen'.²⁰

We were a bit ragged for a start, so some were weeded out and new ones brought in. With lots of practice we became an A Grade band. We played at Reveille every morning at 6 am. Our sleeping quarters were all over the Showgrounds, not in a group and everyone in the band would start the music wherever they happened to be until we gradually got together, it was really funny.²¹

How could seemingly raw recruits become in such a short time 'an A grade band'? In the showgrounds camp by September 1915, there were 4509 volunteers.²² In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, bands were seen as a healthy form of recreation, for players and audience alike. Band music was a thriving community cultural pursuit, as well as part of the military tradition. At the new showgrounds camp, there would have been plenty of potential players to choose from. Hundreds of recruits in the AIF were already bandsmen. They came from country town bands, rural district bands, fire brigade bands, works bands, one or two orphanage bands, cadet bands and the strong city bands of Melbourne's suburbs. A 'Roll of Honor' that was published in a popular brass band magazine at the time hints at the overall number of bandsmen volunteers.²³

Many of the bandsmen volunteering for the Showgrounds Camp Band were already proficient musicians. Membrey, for example, had played in the Stawell Brass Band for six years, having taken up the slide trombone at the age of 12.²⁴ Those who had been playing for a few years were not only accomplished on their selected instrument, but also experienced in playing in a tightly structured and organised group. Apart from the expected home practice, they would also have participated in regular weekly band practice. The number of engagements for each band varied, depending on the season and their locality. The Stawell band was regularly hired to play at the local rollerskating rink, picnics, the Sunday concerts to raise money for the local hospital, and to perform at the Stawell Athletics Carnival.²⁵ A sense of civic duty combined with loyalty to the group were common tenets of the brass band ethos. And, while bandsmen were often paid a small fee for their services, very few were professional musicians, most belonging to a wide range of occupations and trades. Membrey was a wheelwright who worked for a coachbuilder in Stawell, Herbert Godber was an orchardist, and Percy Nash a gardener.²⁶

Many civilian bands had at least some experience of ceremonial occasions, such as the Eight Hour Day processions that were held in Melbourne, as well as the popular and exacting South Street competitions in Ballarat, where not only playing was important but also appearance, dress code and marching ability in the quickstep contests.²⁷ These activities required not only competence on an instrument but also discipline and respect for the authority of the bandmaster. While there was plenty of recognition for individual excellence in solo parts, the overriding responsibility of each player was to the overall sound and performance of the band. Each player would have known a wide and varied repertoire, from marches and hymns to popular 'airs', as well as operatic and classic selections, waltzes and other dance music. Once in training camp, such men had more opportunities for improvement with more regular practice under a good bandmaster and the expectation that the band would perform often in public. Moving from a civilian band into a military one would not have been a difficult transition for those bandsmen keen on their music.

The Showgrounds Camp Band had its first real test when, after only a few days practice, the entire camp of close to 5000 men was paraded before His Excellency the Governor-General of Australia, Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson. The troops impressed Sir Ronald, even though they had had only nine days of training. The band played the national anthem as the soldiers stood to attention. The recruits then processed past the Governor-General to their various company parade grounds throughout the showgrounds complex to the marching tune, 'The British Grenadiers'. The Governor-General 'complimented the band on their playing, being particularly pleased on hearing his old regimental march'.²⁸ Sir Ronald, 30 years before taking up his vice-regal post in February 1914, had served in the Grenadier Guards.²⁹

Apart from their camp duties, exercises and general instruction in the use of arms, training as ambulance bearers, drill, route marches and church parades, the band members were employed in recruiting drives 'all over the place as well'.³⁰ With the 'sudden first terrible casualty lists' of troops on Gallipoli, and the knowledge that the war was far from over, there was 'a flood of recruiting in Australia' in response to the pressing need for reinforcements. Energetic campaigns by local recruiting committees organised 'drives' that usually had as their centrepiece patriotic speeches by eminent citizens or politicians. The playing of the band was thought to draw a crowd, to stir patriotic feelings in the onlookers and to inspire new recruits to come forward. A few days after a recruiting event in Stawell at which the Stawell Brass Band had played, band member Ray Membrey himself joined up. Martial and patriotic music was thought to be hard to resist.

In his memoir, Membrey recalls that, on one occasion, the band played on the balcony of the Melbourne Town Hall in Swanston Street. It was 'a top spot', he wrote, 'as we were out of the wind and rain there'.³¹ When the recruitment drive took place, it was winter in Victoria. The brass instruments could still of course be played in the bad weather, but it was much more congenial for the players to be in a place out of the worst of the wind and rain, with an audience at one's feet. While Membrey's memoir does not describe the music played on these recruiting engagements, we do know from other sources that the 'popular airs' included 'Australia will be there' and 'Tipperary'.³²

Two weeks after their impressive performance at Major General Bridges's funeral, the Showgrounds Camp Band was once again congratulated in the press for its achievements. While wet, cold weather and difficult camp conditions had exacerbated the outbreaks of colds, influenza and cerebro-meningitis, and camp rearrangements had disrupted friendships, the band continued to prosper with an expanding library of music and an increasing number of players. 'Among the men are many crack musicians,' the *Flemington Spectator* reported and 'their selections are most creditably rendered'.³³

A few weeks later, on 21 October 1915, the band was engaged to play at a garden party for sick and wounded soldiers who were among the first to return to Australia to recuperate. These were the soldiers who had taken part in the landings on the Gallipoli Peninsula on 25 April and in the fighting in the months afterwards. They were hosted at 'Rupertswood', Sunbury, then a rural village outside Melbourne, the mansion and surrounding farmland owned by the Hon. William Lionel Russell Clarke, whose staff served refreshments on the lawn after a 'splendid programme of items'.³⁴

Despite the fact that the Showgrounds Band had the opportunity to be out of the camp and to be engaged in an activity more pleasant than the usual training regime, the players on this occasion at Rupertswood would have been directly confronted with the reality of the war in which they too were soon to engage. At one point, the band paraded 'at the head of the soldiers in 16 motor cars'. The contrast between the marching bandsmen and those seated, disabled soldiers could not have been more stark. There was a photographer on hand to record the event in black and white. A copy of the photograph remained with Herbert Godber for the rest of his life, a special reminder of his time in the Showgrounds Camp Band.

The triumphs of the Showgrounds Band were to be short lived, however, at least in a practical sense. Some weeks after the band's engagement to play at the funeral procession of Major General Bridges, and towards the end of October 1915, 'disaster struck', as Ray Membrey later wrote in his memoir:

The powers that be decided to make us a Depot Band, we were too good to lose. I promptly resigned, with others. I did not join the AIF to be [a] bandsman at home. We were sent to Broadmeadows for further training. Five weeks later we were on a troopship sailing for overseas.³⁵

For all their love of music and pride in their band work, Ray Membrey, Herbert Godber and Percy Nash were among the many driven by patriotic fervour and a sense of honour to choose combat duties over ceremonial ones. While the three friends finished their military training at the Broadmeadows Camp, the AIF's fighting against the Turkish army came to an end with the evacuation of the troops in December 1915.³⁶ On 8 February 1916, Membrey, Godber and Nash sailed aboard the troopship *Warilda* toward a different battlefield, the Western Front, as members of the 21st Battalion.³⁷ There they joined the 21st Battalion Band, for which their playing experience with the Showgrounds Camp Band would stand them in good stead. Before they embarked they had a photograph taken together and, like so many other soldiers, they wrote their names and addresses on the back. The photograph was one of Godber's precious mementos that, together with other photographs of the 21st Battalion Band in France, he kept until he died in 1980, at the age of 87. Likewise, Nash kept his copy of the same band photographs.³⁸

The three friends all survived the Great War. During the years away, Nash and Godber both had many playing engagements with the 21st Battalion Band: YMCA concerts, church parades, burial parties, investitures, ceremonies for presentation of medals, route marches, and concerts for the troops and French civilians.³⁹ Membrey, however, was wounded during the battle for Mouquet Farm, near the Somme village of Pozières in August 1916.⁴⁰ According to his memoir, he lay for five days in No Man's Land, catching water to drink in his army helmet, but his 'slide arm' was left 'just hanging by the flesh'. On the fifth morning,

I was only semi-conscious, but I heard some noise and looked up to see a big German with a revolver at my head. One of them yelled out: 'Don't shoot, he's just a boy'. I was only semi-conscious, but. I learnt this later because I do not know the German language. They dragged me out of my [shell] hole and had to carry me because I was too weak to walk and then finally dumped me at the back of the lines near a horse trough. I crawled to it and I reckon I drank a gallon of dirty water.⁴¹

Ten days later, in the Gottingen Prisoner of War Camp, a doctor amputated his damaged arm 'with scissors, no anaesthetic'. The operation saved his life but it put an end to his trombone-playing days. Ray was 'exchanged' in 1918



The Showgrounds Camp Band playing for sick and wounded soldiers at 'Rupertswood', Sunbury, October 1915. Durance family collection

for a German prisoner of the Allies. On his return home, he continued his band playing with the Richmond City Band, now playing a euphonium, an instrument more suited to a one-armed bandsman.⁴²

The significance of Major General Bridges's funeral on 2 September 1915 would soon be overshadowed by the overwhelming casualties of the war. But, on that day, the eyes of thousands of Victorians on the home front and the lens of at least one photographer were trained upon the Showgrounds Camp Band. For a lifetime after the war, bandsmen Herbert, Ray and Percy kept in touch, especially at the Anzac Day marches and reunions of their old battalion. They all told stories of their band experiences and kept the memorabilia that connected them to the band. The record of their experience opens up a largely unexplored aspect of war service and the role of military bands, both on the home front and at war. At most there were only 2000 or so bandsmen during the Great War, but the training camp and battalion bands in which they played contributed a great deal to the morale and well being of the troops. For the public at large, bands heightened the sense of patriotism and purpose, and allowed 'a public expression of private grief'. The State Library of Victoria photograph helps to illuminate one moment out of many in the life of one band. The band that was 'too good to lose' made a significant contribution to a national event and its bandsmen went on to serve in the many bands abroad, bands that were often described as 'the soul of the battalion'.