

## DIGGERS

**Year of release: 1931 • Screenplay: Pat Hanna and Eric Donaldson**

A battalion dinner precipitates a series of flashbacks of war time experiences primarily based around the adventures of two Australian 'cobbers,' Chic Williams (Pat Hanna) and Joe Mulga (George Moon), who served in the A.I.F. in France during 1918. Much of the narrative is based on three of the Famous Diggers' more popular live sketches: namely, an incident involving the stealing of some rum (*Rum Doings*), the hospital scene where Chic and Joe feign illness (*Chic and Joe in Hospital*), and a scene set in a French estaminet (*Mademoiselle from Armentieres*). An unidentified Brisbane review held in the Pat Hanna Collection (Performing Arts Centre, Melbourne) records, for example, that "*Diggers* made its Brisbane premiere at the Regent Theatre on Saturday. Many of the incidents have been played by Pat on the Brisbane stage, but they are worth repetition... There was a laugh when Pat feigns deafness in hospital so that he will not be sent to the front lines. He even remains motionless when a revolver is fired next to his ear, but when a champagne cork pops from the bottle it is too much and he reveals the sham" (n. pag.).

In the first sketch, Chic and Joe, who are typically anti-authoritarian, convince a fellow digger, Bluey, to help them steal some rum from the Quartermaster's store. The second sketch is played out in hospital, where Chic, Joe, and Fatty feign battle fatigue and illness in order to avoid being set back up the line. They are questioned by a medical officer who finds all but Chic to be malingerers. Although he successfully convinces the Medical Officer (MO) that he is the only genuine case (even when a pistol is fired behind his head), Chic later gives himself away by reacting to the pop of a champagne cork. The final sketch is based on the Famous Diggers' theatrical rendition of the song 'Mademoiselle from Armentieres.' Combining a mixture of romance and pathos, the narrative concerns a young French girl and her Australian lover shortly before he returns to the front. She later learns that he has been killed.

The musical score comes from a variety of sources. These include several popular military marches (one is played over the opening credits and another as the diggers march off to war). There are also some sing-along songs. The most important musical number, however, is "Mademoiselle from Armentieres," which is performed during the concluding scenes.

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with GEORGE MOON in  
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*Advertiser (Adelaide) 25 Apr. 1932, 2.*



(L-R) George Moon Snr and Norman French



An Australian soldier says goodbye to his French sweetheart (Eugenie Prescott).

Source: *Australian Screen*

Although critical responses to the film were largely positive, producer/director Frank Thring's insistence on ending the film with the slow-paced emotional farewell scene proved to be a mistake. *Diggers* did poor business at the box office in all but a number of regional centres. A good deal of animosity arose between Hanna and Thring over this decision and led to them falling out. The primary issue was the producer's insistence that the three sketches be linked as

described in the abstract above. Hanna, whose entertainment philosophy had long been "leave them laughing," wanted the order to be changed to the way he had written the screenplay, allowing the hospital scene to close the film. After being overruled by Thring Hanna vowed never to work for him again. Although he used the [Efftee Film Productions'](#) facilities for the sequel *Diggers in Blighty*, that film (along with *Waltzing Matilda*) was produced by his own company, Pat Hanna Productions.



**Chic (Pat Hanna) pretends to be deaf, to avoid returning to the front. The medical officer (Norman French) tries to outsmart him, but Chic's act is too convincing.**

Source: *Australian Screen*

Paul Byrnes (*Australian Screen*) suggests that the final scene appears "calculated to show [Thring's] skills and build up the film's patriotic appeal (even though it was 13 years after the war had been won)." He further points out the problematic with the ending, noting that the farewell between a soldier and his sweetheart were new characters in the film, and that although stirring the ending does not include Chic and Joe - the chief characters in the story. Among the responses following the openings around the country were the following:

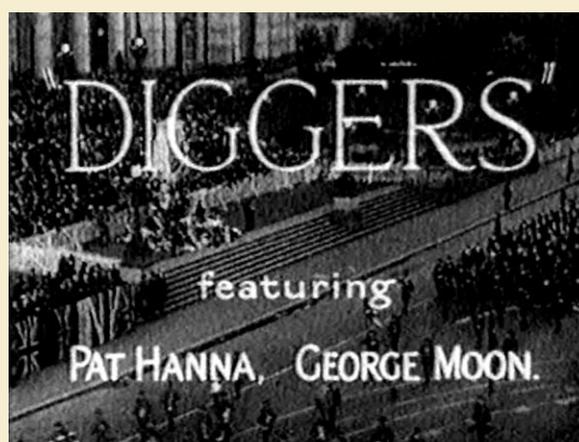
Though much had been expected from Efftee Film Productions, the excellence of the firm's first programme surprised a most enthusiastic audience. Technically none of the films was in any way inferior to American "talkies," and their other qualities made those who saw them wish to see more from the same studio... The principal film, "Diggers," a war-time farce, by Pat Hanna, with a note of tragedy towards the end, reflected the highest credit both upon the performers and upon its director, Mr. Thring. "Diggers" is an excellent comedy of a simple type of wide appeal, and its closing scenes show that equally good work may be expected from the firm in more dramatic films ("[Australian Talkies: Highly Praised in Melbourne.](#)" *West Australian* 20 Nov. 1931, 2).

The world-premiere of *Diggers* and *The Co-Respondent's Course*, two Australian talkies from the local Efftee Studios, was received with enthusiasm by a large audience at The Plaza on Friday night... The better of the two feature pictures was *Diggers*, which revealed the lighter side of the war—with an artistic little bit of its serious side at the conclusion—as provided by those two well known comedians, Pat Hanna and George Moon. Both of these gentlemen should do really well in talkies; they certainly raised many laughs on Friday ("[Diggers.](#)" *Table Talk* 12 Nov. 1931, 18).

So far as the technique of the talkies is concerned, "Diggers" may challenge comparison with any imported film. Its photography is admirably clear and well defined; the sound-recording is excellent, and the acting is natural and convincing. Possibly in due course, when Australian scenario-writers receive fuller encouragement, there will be better material in the stories ("[New Films: An Australian Talkie.](#)" *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 Nov. 1931, 4).

This is Australia's first full length talkie-comedy, and it has set a standard, to surpass which must bring credit to future productions. Mr. Thring has captured some of the farcical interludes of the Great War; or rather, Pat Hanna and George Moon have captured the spirit for him, and he has recorded it for the amusement of the nation ("[New Shows: Fun with Diggers.](#)" *Advertiser* 25 Apr. 1932, 11).

*Diggers* was filmed in and around Melbourne, with indoors scenes shot at F. W. Thring's Efftee Studios, which had been established inside the partly burnt-out Her Majesty's Theatre.



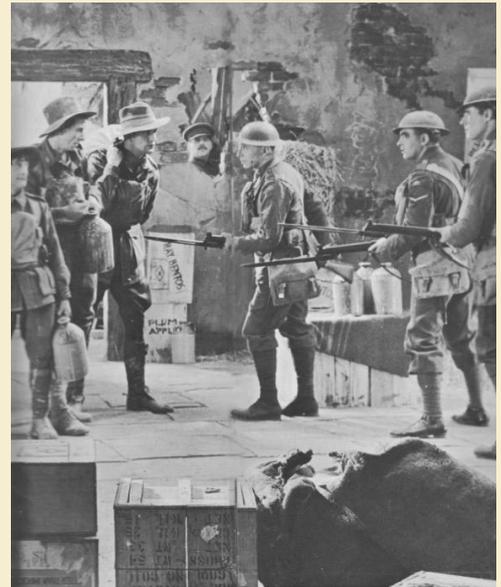
**1931:** Plaza Theatre, Melbourne; 6 Nov. -  
 - 58 min.; black and white; sound.  
 - **Dir/Prod.** F.W. Thring (Efftee Film Productions); **Dir of Ph.** Arthur Higgins; **Des.** W. R. Coleman.  
 - **Cast incl.** Pat Hanna (Chic Williams), **George Moon** (Joe Mulga), **Edmund Warrington** (Fatty), Cecil Scott (Bluey), **Joe Valli** (Corporal McTavish), Norman French (Medical Officer), Guy Hastings (Q.M. Sergeant), Eugenie Prescott (Mademoiselle), A.F. Becker (Estaminet Proprietor), John Henry (a "Tommy"), Rutland Beckett (S.M. - Hospital), Harry McClelland (Sgt -Major Blood), Donovan Joynt (Platoon Commander), John Cameron (Padre), **Nell Fleming** (Liz), Mabel Gibson (Sister), Leal Douglas (Matron), Patricia Minchin (Nurse).

**SEE ALSO**

**Famous Diggers** • **Pat Hanna** • **Chic and Joe** • *Diggers in Blighty* (1933) • **Frank Thring**



Eric Reade. *Australian Screen*. (1975), 149.



Eric Reade. *Australian Screen*. (1975), 151-52.

**FURTHER REFERENCE**

"*Australian Talkie, An.*" *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 Nov. 1931, 4.  
 "*Australian Talkies: Highly Praised in Melbourne.*" *West Australian* (Perth) 20 Nov. 1931, 2.  
 "*Diggers.*" (m/s) Pat Hanna Collection. Performing Arts Museum Research Library (Melbourne). [No: 2001.025, 1931]  
 "*Diggers.*" (copyright registration) . National Archives of Australia. Id No: A1336 21189. [Application by F. W. William Thring, dated 28 May 1931. Registered 20 June 1931).  
 "*Diggers.*" *OzMovies* [sighted 11/03/2015 - incl. storyline synopsis]  
 "*Diggers (The Plaza).*" *Table Talk* (Melbourne) 12 Nov. 1931, 18.  
 "*Fun with Diggers: Aussie Programme Scores Hit at Regent.*" *Advertiser* (Adelaide) 25 Apr. 1932, 11.  
 Pike, Andrew, and Ross Cooper. *Australian Film 1900-1977: A Guide to Feature Film Production*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, in assoc. with the Australian Film Institute, 1998, 154-156.

**NB:** A sketch believed to have been written for the film, titled "Old Soldiers Never Die," is held in the Pat Hanna Collection (Victorian Performing Arts Centre). A copyright registration script is also held in the National Archives of Australia. It has not yet been ascertained if the sketch was included in the final version of the film. The sketch, which also involves a hospital scene, is set in 1931 at the Old Battalion Annual Reunion.

► *Diggers* (1933) *Australian Screen*. 3 clips from the original motion picture

Table Talk (Melbourne) 12 Nov. 1931, 20