

THE ANZAC COVES

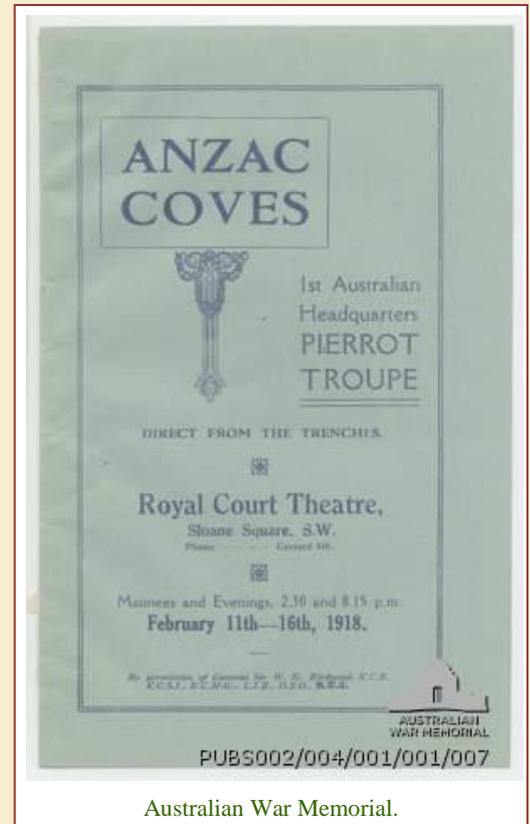
The first field theatre troupe to be established in the Australian Imperial Forces, the Anzac Coves was originally financed by the Australian Comforts Funds and comprised soldiers from all divisions. The troupe's immediate success led to other concert parties being quickly formed throughout the A.I.F. Among the best known professional entertainers to be associated with the Anzac Coves were Harry Ross [1] and Ralph Sawyer.

The first field theatre troupe to be established in the Australian Imperial Forces (A.I.F.), the Anzac Coves was originally financed by the Australian Comforts Funds (A.C.F.) and comprised soldiers from different military divisions. According to *Aussie* magazine, the profits made from their numerous performances, which by mid-1918 had become a considerable amount, went back to A.C.F. for the purpose of purchasing comforts for Australian soldiers in France.¹ The troupe's immediate success subsequently led to other concert parties being quickly formed within most A.I.F. Divisions.

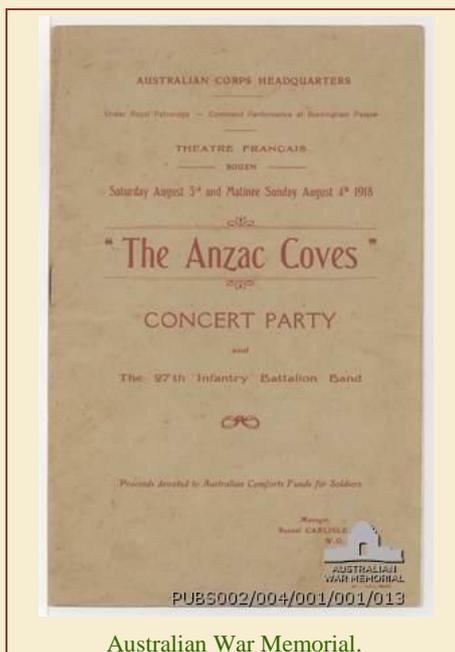
Aussie records that the Coves repertoire had by 1918 expanded to 35 different variety programs, along with five small revues and a pantomime. Many of the songs, jokes and sketches were written by the various members of the troupe, which over time saw a number of line-up changes as some members returned home and others were brought into the troupe. All the scenery, props and costumes were also designed and made by the Coves. "On one occasion," records *Aussie*, "one of them did a turn in a suit of armour made out of biscuit tins - and he looked the genuine goods in hi 'Anzac Wafers' wrapper."²

Aussie was clearly impressed by the quality of the performers and varied programmes it staged, with the writer (possibly editor Phillip K. Harris) pointing to previous experience of the members being a significant reason for the high level of amusement and interest presented. There was some criticism levelled against the overall content of the shows put on by the Coves and other concert parties, however:

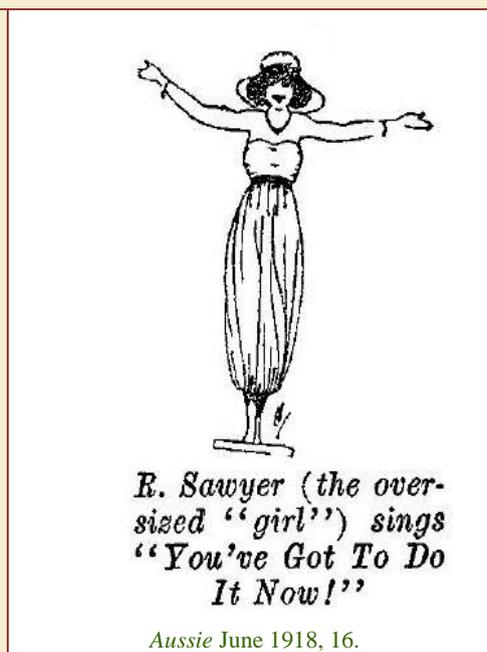
While the programmes presented by the Coves, like most of our Field Theatres, are very attractive and highly appreciated, a few more typically Australian items would make them still more acceptable. *Aussie* feels that the wish of the majority of the members of this Aussie Army of ours is being expressed when the suggestion is made to our Field Shows to try to create a strong Australian atmosphere in their programmes by the inclusion of songs, recitations etc of Australian origin (16).



Australian War Memorial.



Australian War Memorial.



Aussie June 1918, 16.



Australian War Memorial

¹ "Aussie Field Theatres," 16.

² Ibid, 16.

As with the other ANZAC concert parties, the Coves' shows were staged either for soldiers at the front or for those resting or conducting their duties in towns behind the lines. They also made appearances outside of France, including in early 1918 shows in London and the English provinces. The tour reportedly raised several thousand pounds which for the Australian Comforts Funds. The highlight of the tour was a Royal Command performance at Buckingham Palace on 18 February, where the troupe presented a 40 minutes programme before the Royal family. *Aussie* records that the members were personally thanked by the King after the show.³

SEE ALSO

- [Harry Ross \[1\]](#)
- [Ralph Sawyer \(Smart Set Diggers\)](#)

PERSONNEL

The length of time each artist was associated with the company is presently unknown.

1. **Troupe members:** Incl. L/Cpl. Frank Crossley, Sgt. Jack Davey, Pte. B. Davies, Dvr. F. Donovan, Sgt. Hugh Gannon, Pte. James Gibb, Pte. Fred Reade, Pte. A. (Bobbie) Roberts, Pte. Harry Ross, Pte. Ralph Sawyer, Cpl. Hugh J. Shaw, Gunner Les Williams, Alec St Leon,
2. **Associated Practitioners:** C. Bower (mechanic), J. Rannall Carlisle (manager), Gervais Cooper (scenic artist), Cyril Jessop (treasurer), W. Luxford (electrician), A. Quilter (attendant), Dvr. W. Smith (engineer).
3. **Additional notes and/or historical clarification:**
 - **Frank Crossley:** Comedian and raconteur.
 - **Jack Davey:** Baritone.
 - **Ben Davies:** Tenor.
 - **F. Donovan:** Pianist.
 - **Hugh Gannon:** Ragtime and light comedian.
 - **J. Gibb:** Monologist.
 - **Fred Reade:** Light comedian and dancer/choreographer..
 - **Bobbie Roberts:** Female impersonator.
 - **Harry Ross:** Tenor. This Harry Ross is identified in the AVTA as Harry Ross [I].
 - **Ralph Sawyer:** Female impersonator.
 - **H. J. Shaw:** Comedian/cinema operator.
 - **Les Williams:** Basso.



H. Ross, L. Williams, J. Davey and F. Crossley sing about the troubles of "The Ruddy Platoon."
*"And what with the mice and what with the rats,
And what with the flies and the fleas and the chats,
We shall run out of Keatings I know very soon
And that will be an end to the ruddy platoon!"*

Aussie June 1918, 16.

FURTHER REFERENCE

"Aussie Field Theatres: V. The Smart Set." *Aussie: The Australian Soldiers' Magazine* June 1918, 16.

"Concert and Theatre Programs Collection - First World War 1914-1918, Series 4, Sub-series 1, File 1: Formation Headquarters, 1915-1919 " *Australian War Memorial*. [sighted 9/07/2017]

³ Ibid, 16.