Lessons Learnt: Fanny Marion Higgens, Military School of Cookery, Alexandria, Egypt, 1915–1918

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I wish all the fighting boys both in New Zealand and in England had received cookery training before going into the field. What a number of lives it would have saved because the rations issued are plentiful and of splendid quality if only cooked properly, but alas if a man is no good at anything else they say “Oh” send him along to the cook house. And many of those men who know something about the principles of cookery are too lazy or indifferent to practise their knowledge, and so their comrades suffer. Marion Higgens, October, 1916 (Fig. 1).

As a British colony, New Zealand had been predominately settled by Protestant immigrants from the South of England and Scotland (less than 2% of immigrants were from Ireland). At the turn of the 20th century most European New Zealanders still considered England to be ‘home’. New Zealand became a Dominion within the British Empire in 1907. Although virtually independent, its head of state remained the British Monarch, represented by a Governor General, and defence and constitutional amendments, and to some extent foreign affairs remained in the control of the British government. When Great Britain declared war on Germany on the 4th August 1914, New Zealanders did not hesitate to respond to the call to support ‘Mother England’.

Within weeks of the declaration of war, sporadic military training camps were set up throughout New Zealand - those set up in the lower North Island of New Zealand, at Trentham and Featherston, eventually became the main training camps. Trentham was a ‘canvas camp’ and, theoretically, limited to 5000 men. However, by May 1915, the numbers had increased dangerously to 7000 men resulting in a serious epidemic of measles, influenza, cerebro-spinal meningitis, and an alarming number of deaths from pneumonia. The management of Trentham camp came under severe criticism and a formal government inquiry was convened to examine the medical treatment of patients, hospital accommodation and the apparent lack of qualified medical staff.

In July 1915 the New Zealand Volunteer Sister Society was formed. Also known as the New Zealand Volunteer Sisterhood, its intent was to assist with the epidemics at Trentham camp. Recruited by Ettie Rout, who would later become (in)famous for her WW1 safe-sex campaigns – with the issue of prophylactic kits to troops and the establishment of inspected brothels – women between 30 and 50 years of age were encouraged to volunteer as probationers for clerical, laundry, culinary, and domestic duties. Women under thirty were only accepted as members if they were registered nurses. It was hoped that, after proving themselves useful at the Trentham camp, members of the Volunteer Sisterhood would be sanctioned to serve in military hospitals in Egypt, despite the Imperial Government’s order that ‘NO’ women except for trained nurses would be sent abroad. The editor of the Christchurch Press felt that the idea of untrained nursing staff serving in military hospitals was preposterous. It was not their lack of training that perturbed the editor but more a question of whether ‘white’ New Zealand women were suitable to carry out the tasks ‘better’ performed by native labour.

It would be a crime against ‘sick and wounded lads’ if such an arrangement were sanctioned by military authorities... Egypt is a land of cheap and well-trained native labour, (and) it would never do to set white women to perform the tasks that can be better performed by Egyptian orderlies and servants. (Papers Past).

There was much controversy over the Volunteer Sisterhood’s plans to embark to Egypt and the organisation was accused of misleading the public over funding. The suggestion that untrained nurses should have priority over ‘properly’ trained nurses did not fit well with public opinion, and authorities in Egypt had clearly stated that untrained women were not required, and would be an embarrassment to hospital authorities should they undertake orderly duties. The editor of the Christchurch...
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A Soldier's Sister, October 30th, 1915 (Papers Past).

Press suggested that the volunteers, however well meaning, had been misled and would regret their actions. Undeterred, Ettie Rout raised over £1000 and the first contingent of twelve Volunteer Sisters left New Zealand en route for Egypt in late October, 1915 (Fig. 2).

Sir – Allow me through the medium of your paper, to appeal to the above Women. Unless you are strong, sensible, thoroughly trained and certificated nurses please keep away from Egypt and all other zones of war. Do not let it be said as it was after the African war: ‘The plague of women was worse than the plague of flies’. If you wish to help our wounded heroes remember charity begins at home. Yours, etc.

A Soldier's Sister, October 30th, 1915 (Papers Past).

Fig. 2. Formal portrait of Ettie Rout and the first group of her New Zealand Volunteer Sisterhood to go overseas. 1915. (Alexander Turnbull Library)

Acting as the group's matron was Fanny Marion Higgens, domestic science instructor of Gisborne Technical School. Known as Miss Marion Higgens, she had graduated from the National School of Cookery in London, a school for training students to become teachers of cookery. In addition she had been awarded a certificate of merit at the London Universal Cookery and Food Exhibition in 1906; this was held annually, in association with the National School of Cookery. Presumably Miss Higgens would have been a woman of independent means since the fee for the twelve month course was £30, almost equivalent to £3300 (£4200) today, plus boarding expenses and the purchase of text books. Students began their study with scullery work before passing to the 'Artisan' kitchen, where 'plain' class cookery dishes were prepared for fourteen weeks, before students sat a practical examination. Students then progressed to the 'Plain' kitchen, where slightly more advanced dishes were cooked, before undergoing another practical examination. Having passed this examination, they would advance to the 'High Class Cookery Kitchen' where elaborate dishes, such as clear soups, ices, and sauces of every description, were prepared. In the final term of tuition students were required to undergo theory examinations on 'high class cookery, chemistry, the theory of education, and hygiene etc., plus cook an examination dinner of seven courses in four hours' (GOP1900, p. 443). Throughout her teaching career Miss Higgens applied the same principles to her tuition and examinations.

On arrival in New Zealand, in 1907, she settled in the rural town of Feilding and began instructing plain and advanced cookery at the Feilding Technical School, as well as overseeing the management and catering for the newly renovated York Tea Rooms, which specialised in 'daintily served morning and afternoon Teas and Luncheons.' In 1908 she moved north to the Hawkes' Bay region and instructed cookery and dressmaking at Napier and Hastings Technical Schools, before being appointed as a cookery instructress for the Poverty Bay Education Board in the township of Gisborne. At the request of the Gisborne Hospital Board Miss Higgens was approved to instruct nurses in invalid cookery, a proficiency that was newly required as a requisite to issuing a nursing certificate. On the eve of the Volunteer Sisterhood's departure for Egypt, New Zealand newspapers noted that:

Miss Higgens had made a 'special study' of invalid diets, and had successfully taught cookery and domestic science for a number of years as well as instructing classes in invalid cookery for nurses at the Gisborne Public Hospital – surely her knowledge of invalid cookery will be of the utmost value to help in winning the wounded sick back to health. (Papers Past).

Despite the prior warnings, those arriving in Cairo and not registered as nurses, including Miss Higgens, were unable to obtain work in military hospitals, and were assigned to the Y.M.C.A refreshment garden, in the centre of Cairo. The gardens not only provided a meeting place for men away from the 'evils of the vile city', but also concerts, boxing matches, picture shows, a refreshment buffet, and a roller skating rink that could accommodate 1500 skaters. The work, wrote Miss Higgens:

... is not what we expected to do (but) it is just as useful. I spend my time making gallons of tea, coffee, and cocoa, beef rolls, or sandwiches, or scones and such like. If you were to hear how grateful the men are to us for doing this you would think it worthwhile.

The soldiers come in at all times in hundreds, from three to nine, and they make the tea their proper meal. Numbers of them say how much they enjoy seeing white women, and the ones just back from the Dardanelles especially enjoy it. It seems to be a thing they cannot see enough of. (Papers Past).

In March 1916 Lady Godley, wife of the commander of the New Zealand Expeditionary Forces, and Lady...
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Carnarvon, the Rothschild heiress, lobbied military authorities to provide cookery lessons for soldiers. Many of the trained army cooks had been killed on the battlefields of the Western Front as the need to cook food nearer to the frontlines increased.

The men get their rations, but do not know how to make the best of them.

The rations are of splendid quality and if we can only induce these men to see the necessity of careful cooking on scientific principles, the health of our troops will be vastly benefitted. I am sure, and there will less dysentery and typhoid. (Papers Past).

The rations had already proved unsuitable for New Zealand troops at Anzac Cove on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey. The bully beef, bacon and cheese deteriorated rapidly in the tropical heat, water was scarce, the bacon was too salty and was often rendered down to make slush lights, the fresh meat issue quickly putrefied and was too large for the cooking equipment supplied, and the men had difficulty in swallowing the food before the flies attacked it. In fact the rations had changed little from those supplied to troops in the Boer War, apart from an increase in the vegetable content, where they had again proved unsuitable for the climate, were monotonous, and the supply columns irregular (Clayton 2013, Chapter 2).

As a result of Lady Godley and Lady Carnarvon’s lobbying the British Government established a school of cookery at Carlton camp and engaged Miss Higgens as an instructor where she was provided with accommodation and transport, and volunteered her services. Initial lessons were conducted in wooden army huts with coal cooking ranges and rudimentary utensils such as dixies, service mugs, frying pans, enamel plates and bottles for rolling pins. (Fig. 3). The first student intake consisted of 53 men selected from different regiments, the intention being that after a three week course of three lessons a day the men would return to their regiments and pass on their knowledge. Due to the extreme heat, lessons began at 0700 hrs, breaking at 1300 hrs with the men then having dinner before attending a swimming parade and marching to a beach situated 5 minutes from the camp.

They seem a very nice lot of men, and today, between lessons, they have been naming their tents; that is, making little banks round them and putting the name on the bank in white stones. For instance, one they have called ‘Stockport Villa,’ another ‘Anzac,’ another ‘Advance Australia,’ another ‘Scotland for Ever,’ and so on.’ (Fig. 4).

The good living, etc., always improves the physical condition of the men and at the end of the month they are one and all frightfully sorry to leave. (Papers Past).

As well as supervising practical lessons, Miss Higgens lectured on food values, principles of cookery methods, food hygiene, culinary physiology, digestion, and economy. A Sergeant and a Corporal, who had both attended the

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British Daily Ration, 1914

1 ¼ lb. fresh or frozen meat, or 1 lb. preserved or salt meat; 1 ½ lb. bread, or 1 lb. biscuit or flour; 4 oz. bacon; 3 oz. cheese; ½ oz. tea; 4 oz. jam; 3 oz. sugar; ½ oz. salt; ½ oz. pepper; ½ oz. mustard; 8 oz. fresh or 2 oz. dried vegetables; ½ gill lime juice if fresh vegetables not issued;* ½ gill rum; *not exceeding 2 oz. tobacco per week.

*(At the discretion of the commanding general).

The following substitutions are permitted if necessary:

4 oz. oatmeal or rice instead of 4 oz. bread or biscuit; ½ oz. chocolate instead of ½ oz. tea; 1 pint porter instead of 1 ration spirit; 4 oz. dried fruit instead of 4 oz. jam; 4 oz. butter, lard or margarine, or ½ gill oil, instead of 4 oz. bacon.

British Iron Ration, carried in the field:

1 lb. preserved meat; 12 oz. biscuit; ½ oz. tea; 2 oz. sugar; ½ oz. salt; 3 oz. cheese; 1 oz. meat extract (2 cubes).
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number of men and the drawing of rations. (Fig. 5, Fig. 6, Fig. 7). The men then attended Miss Higgens’ classes and learnt how to turn these same rations into ‘daintier’ dishes suitable for the officers’ mess or, in her words, to be ‘polished off.’ A certificate was not awarded unless the men had passed both a theory and practical assessment.

The first day the sergeants came into the class room they looked rather bored with a sort of air of ‘she-thinks-she-can-teach-us-something-but-we-know-she-can’t-because-the-years-we’ve-been-cooking-we-know-all-there-is-to-know-about-cooking-for-Tommy-Atkins’.

BUT After I began to speak they got more and more interested and here and there a head wagged in approval until after a fully hour’s lecture they felt they had heard things about food they had never heard before. (Papers Past).

By July 1916 up to 100 men were being accepted for each course. The kitchens were now fully equipped with cooking utensils and aprons, and a vegetable and herb garden had been planted. (Fig. 8, Fig. 9). In March 1917 the school came under the control of the British War Office and was then known as the Military School of Cookery, Alexandria. (Fig. 10). In September of that year the kitchen was again enlarged and the school offered the first Advanced Cookery Class, specifically aimed at catering for Officer and Sergeant messes. Unsurprisingly the school was inundated with applications from OC’s (Officer Commanding) wanting to send their cooks for training. Again, the Advanced Cookery Class required the men to pass a theory examination before completing a practical assessment which consisted of cooking

Sample Examination Dinner
Gravy Soup Celery Soup.
Fried Fish.
Tomato Farces.
Roast Beef and Yorkshire Pudding.
Roast Chicken - Bread Sauce.
Potatoes Roast and Boiled.
Cauliflower.
Peas.
Fruit Tart and Custard.
Sponge Trifle.
Cheese Straws.
Dessert.
Coffee.

Aldershot School of Military Cookery, taught the soldiers field and meat cookery, including the building of Aldershot and improvised ovens, biscuit and kerosene tin cookery, trench cooking, the filling out of diet sheets for any
wear the W.A.A.C. uniform, and eventually obtained the rank of Captain. The school ran continuously until the Armistice, training almost 5000 men in three and a half years. Miss Higgens’ service was recognised by the British War Council and mentioned in dispatches by General Murray and General Allenby. Despite being offered employment at a new Military Cookery School being established in Cairo, after the Armistice, Captain Marion Higgens returned from Egypt and resettled briefly in Gisborne, New Zealand.

She then applied and was accepted, under the Repatriation Act, 1918, to the Ruakura State Farm (now the Te Kauwhata Research Station) to study poultry and beekeeping. In 1921, the Crown Solicitor ruled that Marion Higgens was eligible for assistance, which she accepted, under The Discharged Soldiers Settlement Amendment Act, 1917 (Gould 1992, p.331). Under this act, advances were made to soldiers to assist with the purchase of rural land suitable for dairy and general farming, and small areas close to towns suitable for poultry, bee-culture, and market gardening etc. Additionally, owners or lessees of land could apply for advances for the purpose of improvements, and the purchase of stock. Unfortunately her personal file does not survive in full and it is unknown under what section of the Act she qualified (Gould 1992, p.331).

Fanny Marion Higgens died, and was cremated, in 1940, aged 77 years, in Christchurch, New Zealand. She had spent the last 10 years of her life living at ‘Quamby’, a charitable home set up in 1907 for women of refinement and education in reduced or straitened circumstances.

The primary source for this paper was correspondence written by Miss Marion Higgens and syndicated by The Poverty Bay Press. The correspondence as a whole should, however, be largely regarded as patriotic propaganda as the reluctance of the New Zealand and Imperial governments to allow The New Zealand Volunteer Sisterhood to volunteer in Egypt needed to be vindicated and the correspondence fails to disseminate the appalling hardships that we now know Allied and British troops suffered.

There was no escape from the smell of death, which clung to the men’s clothing, and even seemed to permeate the biscuits which, with bully beef and jam, formed the staple ration. Another horror was the flies, which swarmed in myriads in the trenches, preventing men from snatching a little much-needed sleep when the opportunity offered in the daytime, and making eating a misery. It was impossible to leave food exposed, and the only time that the ‘billies’ of bully and biscuit stew were free from flies was when they were on the little smoky fireplaces in recesses of the communication trenches. There was no regimental cooking, of course, rations being issued to sections (four men), who could eat them when and how they liked.

Fig. 8. Students at work in the kitchen at the Carlton Military School of Cookery in Alexandria, 1917. (Imperial War Museum)

Fig. 9. Part of the dining hut of the Carlton Military School of Cookery in Alexandria, Egypt, 1917. (Imperial War Museum)

Fig. 10. Students of the Carlton Military School of Cookery in Alexandria, Egypt, 1917. (Imperial War Museum)
Owing to the annoyance of the flies some sections did not eat anything but a dry biscuit during the daytime. To eat biscuit and jam in the daytime a man had to keep moving the hand that held the food (Nicol 1921, p. 37).

The bully beef was always salt and stringy; the biscuits were like armour plate bruising, rasping and scraping along the tender gums, smashing gold crowns and splintering plates. Nothing mattered. One thing was just as bad as another and nothing could be worse than some of the things that had gone before. This strain and weariness reacted upon the mental tone. The bad food, the tropical heat, the flies, the smell, wore down the physical condition. Then came the spectre of disease. In June scores of men were going down with diarrhoea, dysentery and enteric; in July they were being evacuated in hundreds (Burton 1935, p. 86).

I’ve seen men literally dying on the latrines. They crawled to the latrines, they couldn’t get anyone to carry them to the latrines... they died on the latrines and were buried anywhere about. (Nicol 1921, p. 37).

One half of the present bully beef would be ample; much of it is thrown away. The fresh meat issue is too large; with the cooking utensils [the mess tins only] available, the meat cannot be used before putrefaction sets in.’ (The meat becomes fly-blown by ‘green bottle’ flies)... Bacon, cheese and jam are plentiful, and much appreciated, but the bacon is too salty and there is no water available for soaking (Carbery 1924, p. 62).

Works cited

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