How maps won the Great War

At the outbreak of the First World War, the newspaper map, or newsmap, became the window through which readers in Australia and across the British Empire read the war, writes MARTIN WOODS.

Maps conveying news of war are as old as Ptolemy. In the second century AD, his map of the Middle East spread the news across the Empire of victory over the Judeans, and the redrawing of boundaries for the new Roman province of Syria Palestina. The map was part of an ancient media campaign to quell any similar unrest.

Over many centuries since, maps have led the public war story, bringing a sense of order at home while the situation in the field was anything but. At the outbreak of the First World War, the newspaper map, or newsmap, became the window through which readers in Australia and across the British Empire read the war. Once limited to learned chronicles and soldier’s memoirs, thanks to unprecedented news packaging the cartography of catastrophe was now available to all.

Re-reading the news of 100 years ago, it struck me just how many maps there were in the press in the opening days of the war. How different the war story was, compared to what we have learnt since, with so many places forgotten and names lost – today’s remembrance reduced to a favoured few. I also began to understand how maps were part of everyday life then, and how central they became to the effort of fighting the war itself. In the early part of the war, the storm in the Balkans seemed part of a European game with ancient origins. Readers were encouraged to get a good map and follow the war while it lasted. As one writer to Melbourne’s The Bowen Independent rhymed it, “When the Kaiser with Russia decided to scrap, The Man in the Street went and purchased a map”. In early 1915, a war game fad marketed by news publishers and manufacturers of tea and coffee, led readers to advance their own flags to Constantinople.

“Our boys” were in Egypt, Palestine, Gallipoli, Belgium, Germany and France, and in places most people had never heard of. As the Anzacs took up arms, the war’s many towns, rivers and villages were closely studied. Whether mass produced by press barons, specialist cartographers or local newspapers and businesses, maps created an alternate fighting landscape for public consumption. People were keen to know the whereabouts of the Australians and the progress of the Allied front line. At times it seemed the enemy would prevail. Fronts and salients were hurriedly consulted at home, in...
pubs and churches, or at large gatherings outside news offices.

War was always newsworthy, and war maps often the easiest way in to the story. Long before maps were available to newspaper readers, graphics showing “current” events were not so uncommon as we might think. In the early 1600s the English cartographer John Speed produced The Invasions of England and Ireland, with all their Civil wars since the Conquest. One of the most popular printed maps of its day (and often updated), it showed the various invasions and domestic wars from the Norman invasion in 1066 to Tyrone’s Rebellion in Ireland. The point of maps like this was to encourage support in the populace, and journalist cartographers used a range of pictorial devices to evoke the urgent need facing the nation. The message – dangers were all around us and larger than life.

The war produced more cartography than any time before in history, along the way giving us some of the most beautiful, and misleading, of maps. At the time of the fighting and for months afterwards, the Pozieres of July 1916 that we know today as a calamity was a great victory for the Anzacs. Just as the war narrative immortalised successes and ignored disasters, maps introduced strategic formations and aerial views drawn from medieval military surveys, which made the enemy seem smaller or more vulnerable. Maps could disguise the terrain over which our boys marched, widen roads, shorten distance, broaden straits, smooth or elevate mountains. The Western Front landscape remained beautiful to the end, despite the accounts of returned soldiers. It seemed that readers held the high ground that on paper, at least, assured victory.

To me, the biggest discovery was how different was the virtual war our grandparents or great-grandparents were asked to believe. Many of the terms and even the iconic place names we now take for granted were almost entirely absent from the news everybody was talking about or following on their maps. Partly as a result of censorship, partly because the story we read was a more British war than we know about today, and for other reasons. Battles such as Dernancourt and Villers-Bretonneux were read as part of a larger campaign. Lone Pine and Pozieres were promoted to readers as victories, the losses glossed over even while people were getting bad news through casualty lists and in other ways.

On a different level, in the days when people were eagerly absorbing news about the first landings on Gallipoli, very little information or mapping came through for weeks and commentators and readers were left to guess. At one point Anzac Cove was called Motor Launch Bay, a name which fortunately never stuck. Nevertheless, people were proud to have acquired a part of the Dardanelles and renamed it, at least for a time. But you could sense how readers felt cheated. After all, the maps had painted a bird’s-eye view which smoothed the terrain over which our boys marched, widened roads, shortened distance, broadened straits.

Many fictitious maps were prized by the relatives of those fighting, and marked up with scraps of information to hand. It is not difficult to understand how those at home must have felt as the war dragged on. Day by day, for every campaign and battle, from ‘Lonesome Pine’ to eventual victory in Europe, readers followed with tense preoccupation the exploits, successes and, sometimes, disasters that befell the Allies. Not until after the war could they get close to the action, when more maps were needed to understand the conflict and to take in the great costs.

Martin Woods is curator of maps at the National Library of Australia. His book, Where Are Our Boys? How Newsmaps Won the Great War, will be officially launched on August 26 at 3pm at the National Library of Australia, as part of the Canberra Writers Festival. Visit canberrawritersfestival.com.au for more information.
Maps have long led the public war story: Fred W. Rose's Serio-comic war map of 1877, above: Turkey in Asia (1915-1920); and a detail of L. F. S. Hore's Anzac Panorama, August 7, 1915.

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