



Beneath Hill 60 costume designer Ian Sparke
Photo: MEGAN BRAYLEY

Slouch sacred

The Government has opened the door to the offshore production of an Australian icon, the slouch hat, but it can expect a battle. By IAN FRAZER

SLOUCH hats recur in the mass of Great War pictures covering a wall of Ian Sparke's makeshift design room.

Mr Sparke, costume designer for the movie *Beneath Hill 60*, now in pre-production in Townsville, says he has sifted through 110 World War I books to supply the cast with historically accurate uniforms.

He owns the largest wardrobe of military uniforms and props in Australia, recently used by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks during production of their forthcoming TV mini series *The Pacific*.

His collage of Western Front pictures shows soldiers from Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Germany involved in the battle for Messines Ridge in June 1917.

Beneath Hill 60 focuses on a group of Australian miners turned tunnellers and their mission to blow up the hill, a key German stronghold on the Ypres Salient in Belgium.

The \$8 million movie starring Hugo Weaving and Brendan Cowell is a by-product of a campaign by retired Charters Towers mines inspector Ross Thomas to commemorate the obscure 1st Australian Tunnelling Division.

Mr Sparke confessed on Wednesday that he had barely heard of the division before meeting Mr Thomas, the executive producer of *Beneath Hill 60*.

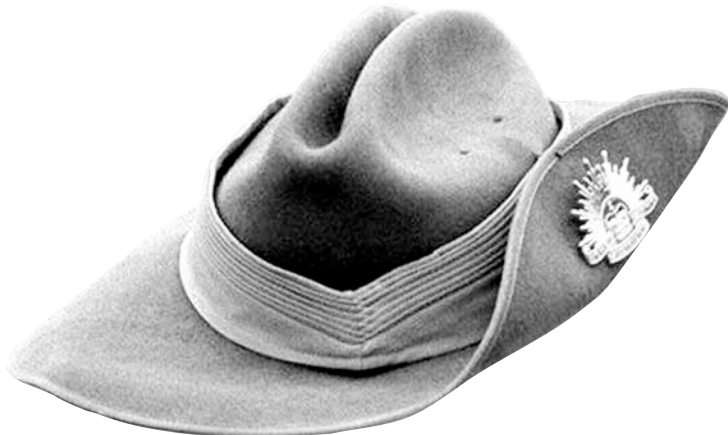
"I have studied the Great War and I knew of the tunnellers, but I know a lot more now from Ross Thomas," he said. "By the time we finish I will know a lot more."

The *Townsville Bulletin* contacted Mr Sparke after hearing he opposes any move to import slouch hats as a result of recent changes to Defence Department purchasing policies.

In March, the *Bulletin* challenged politicians to do everything in their power to make sure production of the Aussie slouch hat was not shipped to China. "The slouch hat is as synonymous with Australia as kangaroos and meat pies," we said.

Mr Sparke's pictures from the Western Front show Diggers with soaked and stretched slouch hats, some with downcast brims and lumpy crowns, others dapper and carefully moulded.

None that I saw had the left-side brim folded up in the style prescribed by the army for parades today. "On the Western Front, if there was any time they



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could take their steel helmets off they would put their slouches on," Mr Sparke said.

"Each soldier did his own bash, some in World War I would have had theirs rounded. The slouch hat has heritage and history — you can see that in the pictures.

"A lot of things are supposed to be icons, but the slouch hat is nearly at the top of the list."

A spokesman for the Department of Defence said this week that open and effective competition was the best way to achieve value for money and the best chance for Australian companies to offer their products.

The Government planned to streamline purchasing of clothing by subcontracting the process to private companies.

A short-list of companies had been invited to tender for three separate five-year contracts, covering non-combat clothing — such as slouch hats, protective clothing and sports wear.

The short-listed companies had been told that Akubra Pty Ltd, of Kempsey, was the present supplier of Navy and RAAF slouch hats and was 'very capable' of supporting future requirements.

This firm had supplied navy and RAAF slouch hats since June 2003 and had a contract until June 2011.

Akubra would deliver 2930 hats in 2008-09 valued at \$185,365.

Brisbane company Mountcastle Pty Ltd had been supplying the army with slouch hats since June 2003 and would deliver 11,100 this financial year valued at \$610,000.

Akubra company secretary

Roy Wilkinson told the *Townsville Bulletin* this week that his firm began making slouch hats for the army in World War I, using rabbit fur.

He said defence contracts accounted for three to five per cent of annual production of about 200,000 hats.

Ten per cent were exported.

Despite declining tariff protection during the past 20 years, Akubra had no plans to move production offshore.

"The industry is sound, we have a very strong brand," he said. He conceded the government could balk at demanding purchase of Australian-made products, given Australia's reliance on exporting raw materials.

However, overseas competitors could undercut Australian manufacturers on labour costs and less stringent workplace health and safety regulations. "If we are going to compete on price we need a level playing field," he said.

Mountcastle national sales and marketing manager Larry Gould said yesterday he doubted if any Australian government would allow manufacture of slouch hats to go offshore.

"The Australian army uniform has changed probably 50 times in the past century, but the slouch hat has never changed, I don't think any government would have the nerve to have them made offshore," he said.

He said his firm imported rabbit fur hoods because of a rabbit drought in Australia because of myxomatosis and the calicivirus.