

CHAPTER XXVI

WINTER

THE close of the Somme battle left the four divisions of the I Anzac Corps facing the winter, sharing with the army corps on their left and right admittedly the worst sector of the sodden front. Forty-five miles to the north a new Australian division, the 3rd, after winning very high praise from the great training and inspecting organisation in England, reached on November 22nd its allotted corps—II Anzac—and was sent immediately into the quiet line at Armentières.¹ Even in those long-established trenches winter service was harsh enough; but on the Somme the sentries, standing steadfastly along their muddy ditches, might have been looking out on the dawn of the world; a region colourless except for the grey-blue sky and the bare brown wilderness of formless mud—mud resembling that of some sea-bed newly upheaved—with here and there a derelict tank stranded like some dead sea-monster on the drenched surface.² It was seldom that anything stirred, except the tattered clouds and the shell-burst minute by minute in Gueudecourt. Most of the trenches, mere ditches in the slime, were invisible except from a few yards, and it many times happened that a man going up to the foremost line, after crossing several empty and apparently unused saps, found himself looking down into a trench occupied by a few figures in grey, and realised that he had wandered to the enemy's line.³ On December 11th

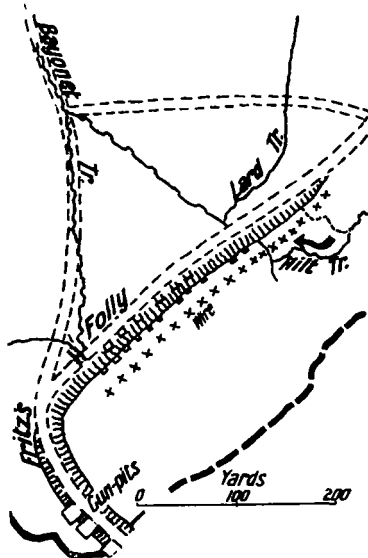
¹ The 3rd Division had been inspected by the King on September 27. After two divisional exercises, on November 16 and 17, its training closed, and its troops began to leave for France on the 21st. They relieved Franks' Force, which had been reconstituted to hold part of the II Anzac sector, the 33rd and 34th Battalions (9th Brigade, N.S.W.) moving straight into the line on November 22, and Major-General Monash taking over command from Brigadier-General E. W. M. Powell (of Lyndhurst, Hampshire, Eng.) on the 24th.

² The Australian War Memorial contains a model of one such actual scene (the sculpture by Lieutenant W. W. Anderson and painting by Lieutenant L. F. McCubbin, both of whom served in France). This represents the conditions more clearly than any other record.

³ This happened to Colonel Heane of the 1st Battalion, who was severely wounded before he regained the Australian line; the same thing very nearly occurred to Brigadier-General Elliott, who proposed to walk across from his front line to the flank trench of the neighbouring brigade. Lieutenant R. H. Knyvett, the intelligence officer, persuaded the general to let him go first. Knyvett came upon a sentry, and said: "I am the intelligence officer of the 15th Brigade." The man challenged in German. Knyvett was fired on and wounded with a bomb, but succeeded in getting back.

a party of fourteen, carrying up the morning rations of the 12th Battalion, found itself on the enemy's parapet, dropped the rations, and bolted back under fire to the Australian lines, which eight survivors eventually reached.⁴ It is to be noted that Australian soldiers caught in this predicament almost always made the attempt, however desperate, to escape.

Fighting was now rare, but the I Anzac Corps was still charged with the task of securing the sunken road north of Gueudecourt. The attack upon this salient, now known as "Fritz's Folly,"⁵ had been renewed on November 11th, when two bombing sections of the 6th Battalion under Sergeant Clark⁶ attempted to enter it from "Hilt Trench." Delayed by the heavy ground, the party was caught by machine-guns just after passing the German wire. The gallant Clark and six others were killed, and the remainder repulsed. Birdwood's artillery commander, Brigadier-General Napier, learning of this result, wrote to General White that he "felt very strongly" that, with the supply of heavy shells now almost unlimited, such loss of life on the part of the infantry should be unnecessary. He



proposed to bombard the small salient with six siege batteries for three hours and then place a barrage beyond it. The infantry would then find "nothing living in the area." The

⁴ They had passed over their own front line (in an unoccupied waterlogged sector) without knowing it. To prevent the recurrence of this mistake, a wire was afterwards stretched across the gap. In attempting to get back, Privates G. A. Nightingale (of Queenstown, Tas.) and J. Knight (of Deloraine, Tas.) were killed and two others wounded. Corporal F. G. Nicholson (of Hobart), in charge of the party, went back for one of the wounded, and was himself killed.

⁵ See Vol. XII, plate 269.

⁶ Sgt. A. A. Clark (No. 774; 6th Bn.). Carpenter; of Mackay, Q'land; b. Brisbane, 19 April, 1887. Killed in action, 11 Nov., 1916.

suggestion was not adopted, possibly because it would discard the element of surprise, but plans for an attack under a sharp progressive barrage were worked out.

The intended operation, deferred through rain, was shortly to have been carried out, when on December 1st an extraordinary situation supervened. On the afternoon of that day the commander of the 14th Battalion sent the plans to his forward company commanders for their perusal. The messenger reached these officers, but, when returning with all the papers, lost his way in the sunken road, and was captured by the enemy. The officer responsible for sending forward the documents was relieved of his command; but already there had been received evidence that the Germans were impressed by the danger of continuing to hold this sharp salient ("The Nose," as they called it), and were planning to withdraw from it. The staff of the Guard Reserve Corps had long since proposed to carry this out as soon as the troops should have completed a trench farther back (the Nasen Riegel—"Nose Switch") to cover the gap. The staff of the 23rd Reserve Division were strongly opposed, as the troops liked being in this salient, where they were too close to the British lines to receive constant bombardment, but the Corps was resolute. Accordingly, the battalion on the spot was asked its opinion as to the position of the suggested switch; and the battalion forwarded a letter of inquiry—and map—to the commander of the platoon holding the salient. He sent back the papers with his objections endorsed on them; but the messenger carrying these plans lost his way, was fired at from "Goodwin's Post"⁷ and by his own side, and finally wandered into the Australian end of the sunken road, and was captured within a few yards of the place where fourteen hours later the runner with the Australian plans walked into the Germans.

The plans of each side were thus, by an extraordinary balance of accidents, delivered to their opponents; but it is doubtful if the Australian garrison in the sector was kept fully informed. It is true they noted on December 6th that

⁷ Goodwin's Post was in the advanced trench dug by the 3rd Battalion on the night of November 4, and afterwards abandoned. It was reoccupied soon afterwards by Lieutenant Goodwin of the 8th Battalion (the same who, as sergeant-major, had on July 25 reconnoitred Mouquet Farm).



72 AUSTRALIAN FRONT LINE (" BISCUIT TRENCH ") NEAR GUEUDECOURT

Photographed on 10th December, 1916, after the improvements to the front line had begun. The officer is Lieutenant A. D. Temple, 8th Battalion. The private (J. A. Hawkins, killed in 1918) has sandbags tied round his shins. Note also his sheepskin vest, and gas mask worn in the "ready" position.

Aust War Memorial Official Photo No E104



73. A MAN OF THE 39TH BATTALION (3RD DIVISION) IN THE TRENCHES AT HOUPLINES, 8TH DECEMBER, 1916

An illustration of winter conditions in the old line near Armentières.

Aust War Memorial Official Photo No ES4

To face p 952.



74. INFANTRY NEAR "WILLOW SIDINGS," FRICOURT, ON THE WAY TO THE FRONT

One of the main dépôts for road-stone and other stores lay beside the railway at the right of the picture.

*Aust War Memorial Official Photo, No E148
Taken in January 1917*



75. "THE SHRAPNELS"

An Australian concert party in the barn at Maricourt hired by the Australian Comforts Fund, winter of 1916-17.

Aust War Memorial Official Photo No E99

To face p 953

the enemy was shelling Fritz's Folly, but patrols, ordered to investigate, reported that the Germans were still there. The 4th Brigade was relieved that day by the 2nd, and it was not until December 10th that signs were observed that the place might be less strongly held. On the 12th Captain Taylor⁸ of the 6th Battalion, taking Lieutenant Bill,⁹ walked down the gun-pits road into the enemy strong-point and found it abandoned. He was joined there by Lieutenant Rogers, the battalion intelligence officer. The 6th Battalion bombers were next brought up, and the trenches and dugouts searched and before nightfall occupied. The enemy, who through the misty drizzle had seen some movement, now heavily shelled the sunken road, but inflicted only slight damage. A mine had been laid beneath the stairway of one of the dugouts, but was discovered in time.

German records show that the salient had actually been abandoned by the 101st R.I.R. early on December 6. As a precaution against the expected attack, the German artillery had kept the ground in front of it under heavy fire throughout December 3. The German records note that the Australians had not observed the evacuation up to the evening of the 6th. Actually they did not discover it until the 12th.

With the exception of a somewhat disastrous raid against Finch Trench, undertaken on December 8th by the 5th Division¹⁰ without the previous consent or knowledge of the corps commander—from whom censure was incurred by the omission—this was the only active operation of the I Anzac Corps between November 16th and the close of the year. On both sides the battle was now against the conditions of winter—a campaign which at last had a chance of making headway. To give the roadmakers a better opportunity, the army commander on November 17th temporarily stopped all automobile traffic forward of Fricourt, forcing the corps

⁸ Major C. H. Taylor, M.C.; 6th Bn. Clerk; of Kensington, Vic; b. South Melbourne, 2 April, 1894. Died of wounds, 12 Oct., 1917.

⁹ Lieut. A. G. Bill, Aust. Flying Corps Surveyor and engineer; of Melbourne, b. Armadale, Vic., 16 Nov., 1892. (See Vol. VIII, p. 182.)

¹⁰ A platoon of the 32nd Battalion formed the raiding party. The artillery had been unable to register the range of the trench by observation, and therefore fired only by "calculation." The result was that they fired on their own men. Lieutenant H. T. Cram (of Subiaco, W. Aust.) accordingly led his men round the edge of the barrage into the enemy trench, which they entered and searched. Several men, however, were hit by their own artillery, and twelve lost their way and were captured. Reports of the operation were tardy and inaccurate. The first news of the capture of prisoners reached the staff in the German *communiqué*.

suddenly to convert part of its horse-transport into a "siege-train" for carrying heavy shells.¹¹ Both roads and railways began, first, to fit themselves better for their functions, and then to furnish in increasing amounts the material required for improving the front. "Nissen bow huts," made of galvanised iron rolled in semicircular sheets, were forwarded in large quantities; the several brigade camps behind the ridge were completed, and from this area long pathways of duckboards were laid—two in each divisional sector and a fifth between them—over the long slope down to the front line.¹² These duckboard tracks were entirely open to enemy fire, and were frequently barraged with shrapnel,¹³ but they afforded an incalculable relief to the troops; and over them at last began to come the duckboards and material for the front trenches, which thenceforth slowly improved.¹⁴ The work was hampered about November 21st by a slight shifting of the Fourth Army to its right; the I Anzac Corps gave up its left sector to the 1st British Division, and took over from the Guards Division the sector next on the south, in which the forward communications were more open to the enemy and much work remained to be done.¹⁵ The suffering both of men and animals was still acute. Snow on November 17th followed by a thaw produced "about the worst night . . . experienced."¹⁶ But suitable apparel and heating

¹¹ For this purpose sixty general service waggons were drawn from the 4th and 5th Divisional Trains. A wagon could carry eight 9.2-inch shells.

¹² See Vol. XII, plates 282-3

¹³ Colonel A. W. Leane of the 28th was one of those killed while going along them.

¹⁴ See Vol. XII, plates 284-5.

¹⁵ This was followed by a great increase in the number of "trench-feet" cases, the 5th Division, which took over from the Guards, reporting 690 in the week ending on December 2—far exceeding the figures for any other division. (The 48th came next with 153, and the 29th with 152.) The excess was partly due to the fact that one brigade of Guards, instead of handing over its rubber boots, took them away with it, and partly to an onset of colder weather. The front "trenches" were in many parts only shell-holes, in which men had to sit all day, and they were unapproachable in daylight. Occupying the same trenches the previous week, the Guards Division had only 67 cases. The difference was probably due in part to better precautions taken in that division. Yet in the third week of December the Guards had 363 cases and the 20th Division 870; and, in the second week of the month, all figures for the year were surpassed by those of the 4th British Division, which, after taking over a "shell-hole" front from the French, reported 1,043 cases. About the same time the D.G.M.S. at G.H.Q. remarked that the figures for the 4th Australian Division were creditably low. The rate of sickness among Australians was, however, increased, as always, by prevalence of "childish" complaints such as mumps. Some dysentery was also occurring throughout the Somme area—probably due to troops drinking water from shell-holes in which men had at some previous time performed the offices of nature.

¹⁶ From 18th Battalion war diary, November 21. The battalion was being relieved by part of the 1st British Division. "Men utterly exhausted when they arrived (at Carlton Camp). Night was foggy, and the mud was always ankle-deep—and sometimes knee-deep—all the way (about 3½ miles)."

appliances, previously asked for but often unobtainable, were now coming through. The 65,000 sheepskin jackets sent by Australia for her troops, as well as consignments of the leather waistcoats, fur jerkins, and worsted gloves used by the British; "gum" boots reaching to the thigh;¹⁷ tins of solidified alcohol (known as "Tommy Cookers"), the only fuel allowed in the front line; hot-food containers, on the principle of "Thermos" flasks, in which meals could be brought hot from the "cookers" near Flers—all these formed an important part of the provision. But in addition every means that suggested itself of refreshing the men was now attempted, largely through the personal effort of General White, who had been deeply shocked by the death of his close friend General Glasfurd after a stretcher journey lasting ten hours between the front line and the advanced dressing-station.¹⁸ Thus canteen stores, till then withheld by the higher authorities through shortage of transport, were forwarded to Albert;¹⁹ the supply of firewood also was improved. The regimental brass bands were generally revived. In one of the nearest villages, Maricourt, a large barn was hired by the officials of the Australian Comforts Fund and concerts were arranged;²⁰ a small cinema show for the advanced camps was organised by Padre Dexter;²¹ and a miniature newspaper, *The Rising Sun*, containing cables from Australia was circulated.²² But far more welcome than any other such provision, the Comforts Fund established beside the duckwalks near Longueval a coffee-stall, at which the exhausted troops on their way into or out of the line obtained hot coffee or cocoa—served in jam-tins with the lids bent back for handles.²³

While all this was the beginning of a lasting effort by the higher staff of the A.I.F., there dates also from this time

¹⁷ Those reaching to the knee were useless on the Somme, the mud and water often coming in over the tops.

¹⁸ On November 12 Glasfurd was wounded by a shell in "Cheese Road" (see *Vol. XII, plate 271*) while inspecting the line into which his brigade was about to move.

¹⁹ On the day on which these stores arrived, one brigade, the 4th, purchased nearly £400 worth.

²⁰ Some of the other corps had already regularly established concert parties.

²¹ Chaplain the Rev. W. E. Dexter, D.S.O., M.C., D.C.M. Of Montague, Vic.; b. Birkenhead, Eng., 31 Aug., 1873.

²² The issue of this paper was suggested to White by Colonel W. H. Tunbridge, and it was printed on the presses of the Anzac Ammunition Park. The cabled news was obtained through the High Commissioner.

²³ See *Vol. XII, plate 275*. Pannikins would quickly have vanished

a marked increase in the personal attention given by the younger officers to the comfort of their men. On November 11th, when "trench feet" was at its worst, Birdwood issued to the junior officers a circular stating that he had recently observed instances of lack of care for their men and appealing to every young officer

to realise that it was up to him . . . to put all thoughts for himself, his comfort, and well-being, far in the background, and to determine that his thoughts and efforts should always be to look after his men first and foremost and sacrifice himself completely.

This reminder, though the feelings of many young officers of fine mettle were deeply hurt thereby,²⁴ was much to the benefit of the force. The realisation that the Australian soldier resented "mothering" had in many units rendered officers averse from appearing to interfere unduly in the private lives of their men. But, under conditions such as those of warfare on the Western Front, this attitude was really untenable; the only course compatible with efficiency was to take intimate care of the men whether they resented it or not. When it came to the test, they did not resent it; and the practice gradually grew stronger, with the best results for the A.I.F.

On the German side (according to the available records) until November 24 the staff still expected the British to attack Le Transloy, and indeed practised a barrage to be instantly put down on the call "Transloy" being given. But on that date it was reported from several sectors that the British were fortifying their lines with wire-entanglements. This was taken as evidence that the offensive had been abandoned, and the troops were so informed in an order issued by the Guard Reserve Corps on December 7. The German staff correctly anticipated that the British intended to renew the attack on the Somme in the spring.²⁵ The preparations anticipating that offensive will be related in the next volume. The 23rd Reserve Division (retained till the trenches in rear of Fritz's Folly were complete) was relieved by the 214th Division, but the Guard Reserve Corps was kept astride of the Bapaume road, rest being given to its troops by the attachment of the Marine Infantry Brigade. The 4th Guard Division was given the 2nd and 3rd Marine Regiments, and the 1st Guards Reserve Division the 1st Marine Regiment. Thus each battalion of the 4th Guard Division was enabled to spend three-quarters of its time out of the front line, and each battalion of the 1st Guard

²⁴ The wording of parts of this circular contrasted them with their seniors, who were probably no less responsible. Moreover, its issue naturally became known to NCO's and men, and was therefore somewhat in the nature of a reprimand inflicted on young officers in their men's presence

²⁵ A German order to this effect was issued on 31 Dec., 1916

Reserve Division two-thirds. To this and to the organisation of bathing, cinema shows, and other necessary recreation, these divisions attributed the maintenance of their morale during their winter service. On November 30 an order from the First Army directed the corps to destroy the British trench-railways which now obtruded themselves, and long-range guns were brought up and "shoots" carried out for that purpose.

On the Australian troops also the active measures to remedy winter conditions began slowly but surely to exercise their effect. The same diarist who had watched an exhausted Battalion trail past on November 14th²⁶ notes on December 16th:

I saw the 4th Bde., 13th Bn., coming out today looking tremendously fit and very pleased with themselves. "Put up a record in the way of health," little Locke²⁷ explained to me.

The bottom of the curve was past. The measure of the Australian mettle was this—that throughout the winter, even during the dreadful fighting of November, the I Anzac Corps functioned as smoothly as others on that front. It is true that, provided their guns or waggons were fit for any action (as they usually were), Australian artillerymen or transport drivers were averse from spending hours in ensuring that hubs and chains should be sparkling or martingales pipe-clayed. Officers of the infantry, who would untiringly train their platoons to march, manoeuvre, and fight, were not insistent on the perfect cleaning of uniforms or polishing of boots. Doubtless in certain cases more care for appearance would have induced greater pride in the unit—high though that usually was—and better upkeep of material. Nevertheless a definite standard, of cleanliness rather than of neatness, was maintained. The problem was simply one of compromise between the value—for Australian morale—of neatness and that of rest. If Australian transport drivers at this period were untidy and their waggons often dirty, with broken tail-boards, their horses were strangely sleek;²⁸ and, when Australian infantry met other troops on ceremonial occasions, its accoutrements shone and it drilled like the Guards. What sustained the Australian

²⁶ See p 941.

²⁷ Major W. J. M. Locke. The diarist adds: "Somehow I think that Durrant, their always cheerful colonel, may have given them something of his optimism . . ."

²⁸ These points were noted by the D.D. of S. T., Fourth Army, who inspected them.

divisions in these conditions was a determination that no one should hold them inferior to those around them, even though, at different times during this winter, they had the Guards on one side and a Scottish division on the other. Animated by this determination, they more than held their own throughout the winter in offence, defence, and the improvement of their area. Their works policy was as vigorous as that of any corps, their camps as clean, their roads as well kept, their railways as extensive, their trenches as strong. Their training and staff work—admittedly imperfect in 1916²⁹—were improved. From the valley of that shadow they slowly emerged, recovering in numbers, health, and spirit, their area one of the best furnished, and their corps recognised as among the finest fighting machines at the disposal of the British command.

²⁹ This was, however, the case with the whole British army