

**THE OFFICIAL HISTORY OF
AUSTRALIA IN THE WAR
OF 1914-1918**

**VOLUME IV
THE A.I.F. IN FRANCE:
1917**

Printed and Bound in Australia by
Halstead Press Pty Limited,
9-19 Nickson Street, Sydney.

Registered at the General Post Office, Melbourne, for
transmission through the post as a book.

Obtainable in Great Britain at Australia House and from all
booksellers (sole agent for wholesale distribution—The Official
Secretary for the Commonwealth of Australia, Australia House,
Strand, London, W.C 2); in Canada from the Australian Trade
Commissioner, 15 King Street West, Toronto; in the United
States from the Australian Government Trade Commissioner,
International Building, 630 Fifth Avenue, New York, and in New
Zealand from the Australian Trade Commissioner, D.I.C. Building,
Wellington.

<i>First Edition</i>	- - - - -	1933
<i>Second Edition</i>	- - - - -	1935
<i>Third Edition</i>	- - - - -	1935
<i>Fourth Edition</i>	- - - - -	1936
<i>Fifth Edition</i>	- - - - -	1937
<i>Sixth Edition</i>	- - - - -	1938
<i>Seventh Edition</i>	- - - - -	1938
<i>Eighth Edition</i>	- - - - -	1939
<i>Ninth Edition</i>	- - - - -	1939
<i>Tenth Edition</i>	- - - - -	1940
<i>Eleventh Edition</i>	- - - - -	1941

THE
AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE
IN FRANCE

1917

BY
C. E. W. BEAN

With 423 illustrations and maps

ELEVENTH EDITION

AUSTRALIA
ANGUS AND ROBERTSON LTD

89 CASTLEREAGH STREET, SYDNEY

1941

PREFACE

THIS volume discovers four of the five Australian infantry divisions expecting relief after their most depressing experience, the winter of 1916-17 on the Somme. It next tells how, before that relief came, the Germans carried out, under the eyes of two British armies, an evacuation more extensive, if much less dangerous, than that executed by the Australian and other forces in Gallipoli. This episode is closely traced in the narrative, since the Australians for nearly a month were responsible for about half the front affected, and it is possible, for once, to prove from the records of the actual scouts, how difficult it is, even with the most vigilant reconnaissance, to prevent the orderly withdrawal of a well-organised modern army. There follow the "pursuit" of the enemy by two small columns and three weeks' village-fighting under conditions of semi-open warfare; then, on arrival at the Hindenburg Line, the two terrible attempts to force that line at Bullecourt, one of these being the first experiment with massed tanks, and each involving a "soldiers' battle" of extraordinary interest, fought under highly adverse conditions. After these there comes at last, for most of the Australian infantry, its promised rest, generous beyond all hopes, while the hardest grained of the divisions, the 4th, together with the youngest and least tried, the 3rd, engages in an offensive very differently conducted from any within previous experience of the Australian infantry in France, the Battle of Messines. The volume ends with the participation of the two Anzac corps as the central striking force in the second of the three phases of what is popularly known as the "Battle of Passchendaele." The world has forgotten, if indeed it ever realised, that the story of this phase was for the most part one of unimpeded success. An endeavour is here made to show the reason, which is not, it is contended, to be found merely in the fine weather or the effectiveness of the two Anzac corps, although they now formed a highly expert and formidable force.

In all this severe fighting the Australian divisions lost heavily. As only small reinforcements were now arriving from Australia, a serious problem of maintenance lay ahead;

and the volume ends with the necessary withdrawal of the divisions to a quiet front.

The discrepancy between the developments of battle as described in the higher official reports, and as they appear actually to have occurred, has never been more deeply impressed upon the writer than in the present compilation. Perhaps the most striking example is afforded by the reference of the Commander-in-Chief to the First Battle of Bullecourt, quoted on *pages 351-2*; but at Messines and Polygon Wood also the leaders were unaware, both at the time and afterwards, of certain critical situations. The fact that, at a crucial moment at Messines, the 13th Australian Infantry Brigade extended the Australian line to cover nearly half the entire battle-front, and so filled a vital gap, is witnessed in the records of the 57th British Brigade, which was beyond the gap, and which says that it met the Australian flank that night; and in the records of the troops that were to have intervened, who state that they saw Australians and 57th Brigade closing in in front of them; and in the records of the 52nd Australian Battalion, which filled the gap and was thereafter reinforced by the gradual arrival of the intervening brigade. But the truth appears to have been totally unknown to the higher staffs, and even the commander of one of the brigades concerned expressed himself as "simply astounded" when the present narrative was submitted to him.

The writer is indebted to innumerable officers and men, both Australian and British, for their generous help. The British Official Historian, Sir James Edmonds, has given most valuable advice, and the Australian War Memorial, the Canadian Historical Section, the Historical Section of the French Ministry of War, and the German *Reichsarchiv* have courteously responded to all requests for assistance.

C. E. W. B.

SYDNEY.

28th September, 1932.

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CHRONOLOGY FOR 1917

(*Italic type indicates events dealt with in this volume.*)

- Jan. 9—Raid on Rafa in Sinai.
" 31—Germany announces commencement (on Feb. 1) of unrestricted submarine campaign.
- Feb. 24—*German withdrawal on the Somme discovered.*
- March 11—British occupy Baghdad. Allies attack in Macedonia
" 12—Russian revolution begins.
" 26—First Battle of Gaza.
- April 6—United States declare war on Germany.
" 9—*Battle of Arras begins.*
" 11—*First attack at Bullecourt.*
" 16—French offensive (Nivelle's) on the Aisne.
" 28—Congress of United States adopts conscription.
- May 3—*Second attack at Bullecourt.*
" 15—Pétain succeeds Nivelle.
" 23—Italian offensive in Carso.
- June 3—Austrian counter-offensive in Carso.
" 7—*Battle of Messines begins.*
" 25—American troops begin to land in France.
- July 1—Russian offensive under Brusilov begins.
" 10—*Germans attack at Nieuport.*
" 14—German Chancellor (Bethmann Hollweg) resigns.
" 31—*Third Battle of Ypres begins.*
- Aug. 15—*British diverting attack at Lens.*
" 19—Italian attack in Carso.
- Sept. 1—German attack on Riga (town falls on Sept. 3).
" 4—Great aeroplane raid on London.
" 10—Kerensky declares himself dictator.
" 20—*Renewed effort at Ypres begins (Battle of Menin Road).*
" 24—Second great aeroplane raid on London.
- Oct. 19—Last great Zeppelin raid on England (5 of 13 Zeppelins lost)
" 21—Americans take over part of the French line in France.
" 24—Austrians break through Italians at Caporetto.
" 31—Third Battle of Gaza.
- Nov. 8—Kerensky deposed by Bolsheviks under Lenin.
" 15—Clemenceau becomes Premier of the French Republic.
" 20—British attack at Cambrai.
" 30—German counter-attack at Cambrai.
- Dec. 1—German East Africa cleared of enemy.
" 9—Jerusalem taken.
" 12—Roumania agrees to armistice.
" 15—Russians sign armistice terms at Brest-Litovsk.
" 20—Australia rejects conscription (second referendum).

