

THE BATTLES FOR BULLECCOURT

Eighty-five years ago, Australian soldiers began a terrible struggle in France.

By Peter Burness



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Left: A revealing study of the squalid condition of First World War trenches. An Australian sleeps in a trench shelter in the second line of trenches before Riencourt. AWM E00455

Facing page: An Australian 18-pounder in action during the fight for Bullecourt. AWM E00600

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Above: War-damaged Quéant, France, in 1918. AWM H09434

Facing page: A small section of barbed wire in front of the Hindenburg Line at Quéant. AWM H09435

It is possible that no Australian ever visited the small village of Bullecourt in northern France before the First World War. Today it is a site of Australian war pilgrimage and a focal point for commemorative ceremonies on ANZAC Day. Each year hundreds of Australians converge on the village to join locals in wreath-layings, speeches and toasts that recall a long association. Bullecourt entered Australian history because of battles fought there by the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) in April and May 1917.

Bullecourt is less than 10 kilometres from the city of Arras. It is prime agricultural country in an ancient region where long established small farming villages sit close together. Few of these villages have grown much in the past century and some had to be totally rebuilt after the destruction of the war. Between the villages lie unfenced rich fields of crops that have sustained the locals, and a wider community, for generations.

When the Australians were there in 1917 they fought in the fields between the villages of Bullecourt, Riencourt,

Hendecourt, and Quéant. War memorials recalling the Australian presence are now to be seen in Bullecourt village and in the adjoining fields. The most prominent is the bronze sculpture, *The digger*, by Melbourne artist Peter Corlett, unveiled in 1993.

There are no large war cemeteries in the immediate vicinity, such as there are at the centre of most battle sites. This is a reflection of the fighting in the area: There are cemeteries, but they stand a few kilometres from the killing fields, which had remained a no-man's-land throughout the war. Perhaps the most poignant is Quéant Road Cemetery near Buissy. Almost 1,000 graves are known to contain Australians, but for 700 the identity of the actual soldier is unknown.

Quéant Road also contains the grave of Sergeant Jack White. The long-delayed burial of this soldier briefly held the media's interest in late 1995. White had been killed in the fighting at Bullecourt on 3 May 1917 and his body was not recovered, at least not until a local uncovered the remains 77 years later. He was finally laid to rest with a large



military funeral attended by various dignitaries, an honour guard, local residents, and his daughter, whom he had seen only as a baby.

For those who survived the fighting at Bullecourt, it was an experience of horror and devastation they could never forget. Their battalions had already endured the terrible 1916–17 winter, with the opposing armies facing each other across desolate fields of frozen mud. The Germans had used the time to build a great defensive line a few kilometres behind their front, which the allies called the Hindenburg Line.

Early in 1917, once the weather had improved, the Germans staged a fighting withdrawal to their new line. For the allied troops the sudden advance across open fields gave them a false hope that victory could soon be at hand. Their advance continued up to the Hindenburg Line.

Belief in an early victory was soon cast aside. As a part of a fresh British-French Arras Offensive, the Australian 4th Division was ordered to assault the Hindenburg Line to the right of Bullecourt village in the early

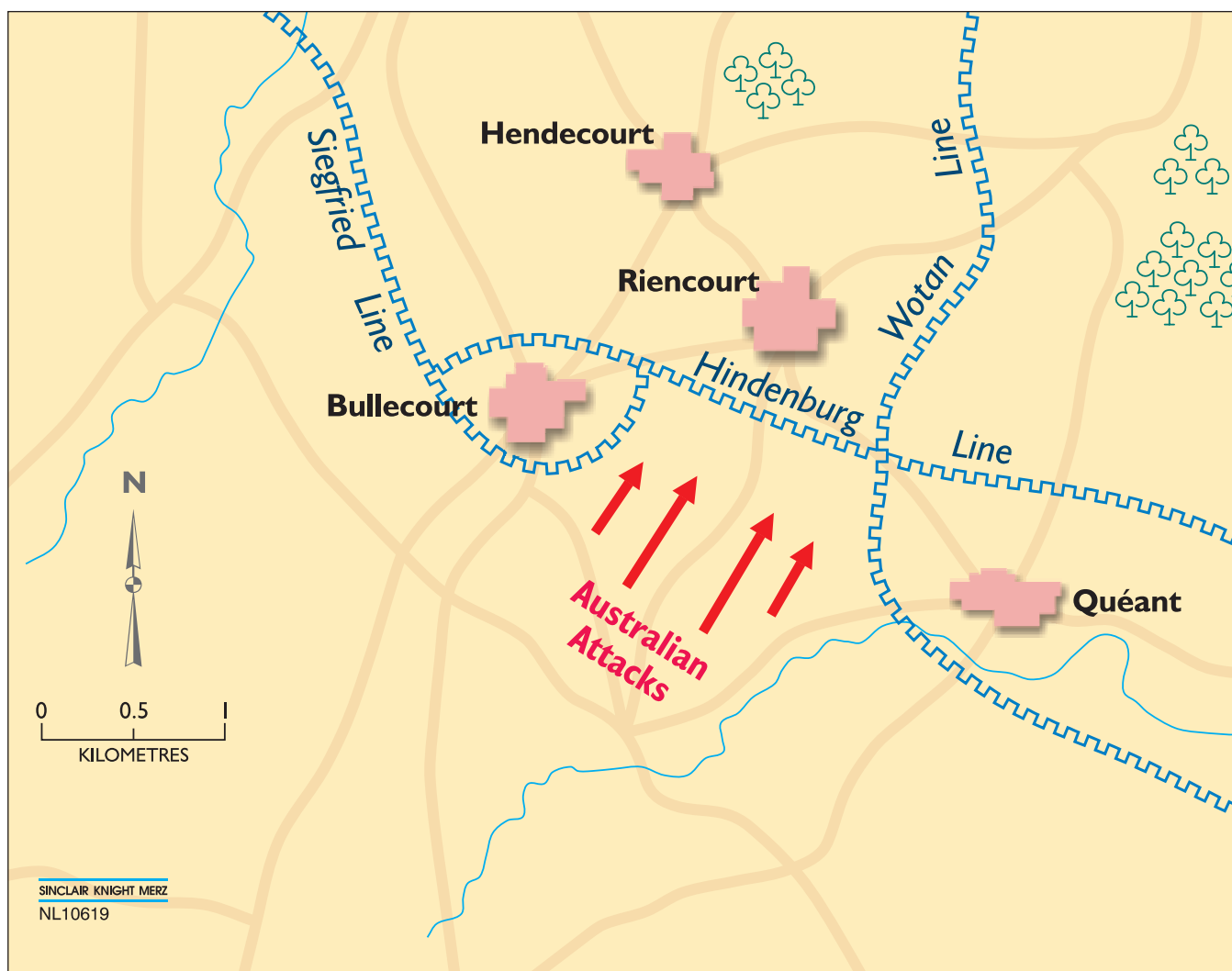
morning of 11 April 1917. The enemy defences consisted of deep trenches, dugouts and pillboxes, protected by wide belts of barbed-wire and cleverly sited machine-guns. A feature of the attack was the provision of a dozen tanks to support the leading infantry from the 4th and 12th Brigades.

Bullecourt had again shown the bravery of Australian troops in attack, and added another hard-earned battle honour to the AIF's list.

The attack was a disaster. Despite their crews' bravery, the tanks performed poorly and were soon burning wrecks. Fighting desperately, the Australian infantry managed to gain a brief hold on the German line but were driven out by fierce counter-attacks.

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forced to withdraw, while the British 62nd Division fighting alongside was also exposed and suffered losses. The Australian division lost 3,000 officers and men, killed and wounded, and 1,170 who became prisoners of war. The 4th Brigade suffered most, losing 2,339 men from a strength of 3,000!

A survivor from one of the 4th Brigade battalions later wrote:

A pitifully weak company was all that remained of the proud, strong unit that had marched that way a few days ago. The other battalions of the brigade cheered us as we marched. That night in Bapaume we sat through a picture-show. It was strange and unreal to watch slapstick comedies with minds not yet detuned from battle. A few days later we stood on parade while "Birdy" (General Birdwood) delivered some of his "usual". Then

he spoke of our losses. Officers – hard-faced, hard-swearing men broke down. From the silent other ranks came a deep feeling of warmth and sympathy, a feeling that endured as long as the flame-racked years, and beyond.

Despite this local repulse, the offensive continued and again, on 3 May, the Australians were made to attack over the same ground. Now the task was given to the 2nd Division. This time the planning was better. Proper artillery support was to be available and there would be no tanks operating with the diggers. The Australians no longer trusted tanks. (Their faith in them would not be restored until the successful battle of Hamel in July the following year. By that time, a much improved version of the tank was available and employed in large numbers.)

The fighting over the next days was furious, with the Australians getting a grip on the Hindenburg Line and repelling wild counter-attacks that sometimes included flame-throwers. The 1st Australian Division then took over and went into the

FURTHER READING

C. E. W. Bean, *Official history of the war of 1914–18, vol. IV: The AIF in France 1917*, (St Lucia, Qld, 1982)

Chris Coulthard-Clark, *The encyclopaedia of Australia's battles*, (Sydney, 2001)

Jonathan Walker, *The blood tub*, (Staplehurst, Kent, 2000)



fight. On 7 May British troops captured part of the ruins of Bullecourt village; on the same day the Australian 5th Division resting near Albert was told to prepare for action. The second battle, which was intended to engage one Australian division, had now drawn in three. The British 62nd Division was similarly replaced. Finally, the Germans gave Bullecourt away and on 20 May the fighting closed.


The Australian and British troops, fighting under frightful conditions, had captured a small part of the Hindenburg Line and held it, but this could not be exploited; there was to be no breakthrough. The offensive closed and the British turned their attention to the fighting in Flanders. The second battle of Bullecourt caused a further 7,000 Australian casualties, from which the AIF never fully recovered.

The losses meant that plans for a sixth division were dropped and they contributed to another unsuccessful attempt at home to introduce conscription. The tired and depleted troops moved into rest areas for the longest break from fighting they had seen since arriving in France.

The battles of Bullecourt continue to interest historians. Deficiencies in

command, from the senior British level to the Australian staff officers and operational commanders, and even the location of the attack, have been examined. In particular, some believe failure to cover the right flank left troops dangerously exposed to heavy enfilading fire. Under this fire, the 5th Brigade faltered on the first day of the second battle, leaving many of its dead hanging on the wire.

Bullecourt had again shown the bravery of Australian troops in attack, and added another hard-earned battle honour to the AIF's list. The opposing soldiers, men of the 27th Württemberg Division, may well have been the toughest fighters the Australians encountered during the war. Still, the heavy losses, for so little gain, was part of the reason that 1917 was to be remembered as a year of disasters.

There would be further fighting by British divisions around Bullecourt, but the Australian troops did not come back. Their main areas of future operations were to be Flanders and the Somme. It is Australians of later generations who come to the place today to remember the sacrifice that took place during the terrible struggle of those fatal weeks of April and May 1917. 

Australian visitors and French locals

walk from the village to the memorial park at Bullecourt during the annual ANZAC Day ceremony. Corlett's sculpture can be seen to the right of the flagpoles. (Photo courtesy of the author)