BAPAUME AND BULLECOURT
AUSTRALIANS ON THE WESTERN FRONT – 1917
Front Cover: Months after the fighting in the area, the German barbed-wire defences erected at Lagnicourt still stand, September 1917. (Australian War Memorial [AWM] E01014)

Back Cover: During a break in the action an exhausted Australian grabs the chance for a sleep in a dugout in one of the trenches captured from the Germans at Bullecourt, May 1917. (AWM E00455)


ISBN 978 1 920720 87 2


This work is copyright. Permission is given by the Commonwealth for this publication to be copied royalty free within Australia for non-commercial educational and research purposes. Apart from any use as permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced for commercial purposes. Requests and enquiries concerning the content of this publication should be addressed to:
Commemorations Branch
Department of Veterans’ Affairs
GPO Box 9998
Canberra ACT 2601
Phone: 02 6289 1111
e-mail: commemorations@dva.gov.au

Published by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, 2007.
Reprinted, 2010

Researched and written by Peter Burness
Text and photo editing by Courtney Page-Allen
Commissioning editor Kerry Blackburn
Concept design and layout by Rosanna Horn

P01509 May 2010
In Australia’s war history there is no year more tragic than 1917. In the story of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) on the Western Front, that period falls into two distinct parts; each became notorious for the futility of the battles fought and the waste of soldiers’ lives. In the first half of the year the heaviest fighting took place mostly in France between Bapaume and Bullecourt, in the region just beyond the recent Somme battlefields, while for the second half the important battles were fought in Flanders, in front of the ruined historic town of Ypres (Ieper). For those involved, the year began in the muddy frozen trenches of the Somme and ended in the slimy bog leading up to the Belgian village of Passchendaele. Many did not survive; there were 20,000 dead among the 77,000 Australians who became casualties.

The preceding year had already been one of heavy sacrifice. A few months after the Australians arrived in France they had entered one of the greatest British battles in history—The First Battle of the Somme. From 23 July 1916, three Australian divisions of I ANZAC Corps serving in General Sir Hubert Gough’s Reserve Army (later renamed Fifth Army) took their turns in the costly fighting around Pozières. Only days earlier, on 19 July, the 5th Division, which had remained in French Flanders, had suffered crippling losses in a diversionary attack over open fields at Fromelles. All these losses—28,000 men in seven weeks—were more than could be reasonably sustained. At home the failure of a referendum later in the year (and another in 1917) proposing the introduction of conscription meant that the AIF would have to rely upon a dwindling stream of volunteer reinforcements for the duration of the war.

The 1916 Somme offensive came to an end in mid November as the bitter European winter approached. The men of I ANZAC Corps spent the next three months in frozen or mud-filled trenches. Meanwhile the 3rd Australian Division arrived in France from England and joined II ANZAC Corps in Flanders during December. No significant advances were possible in the winter. The rain turned the ground into a sticky stinking bog in which armies could not move. The weather also affected the accuracy of artillery; aircraft were often grounded; in fog, observation was almost impossible; and men, animals and vehicles slid on stone-cobbles or plank roadways, or sunk in the mud when they left them. The movement of supplies to the forward positions came under enormous strain, while the carriage of the sick and wounded was a long and harrowing ordeal. Kilometres of ‘duckboards’—timber slat bridges or paths—allowed the slow movement of men across the soft ground and were essential for lining the bottoms of trenches. Often these too were swallowed by the mud.
In these wretched conditions the only aggressive action possible was to keep pressure on the enemy by small attacks, raids, and shelling while the generals planned for the forthcoming spring. The Germans did the same. In January and February the wet gave way to extremes of cold. At least now the ground became hard. An officer of the 17th Battalion, Lieutenant Charles Maynard, wrote:

“This land in winter alternates between hard frost and mud. For three weeks we have continuous frosts, during which the ground is so hard as to defy the men’s efforts to dig trenches. All food is frozen, including bread. Then suddenly, a thaw sets in and the country in one day is transformed into a sea of mud.

Diseases, particularly respiratory ones, spread through the armies. ‘Everyone had a cold, some developed bronchitis. Rheumatism was as common as iron rations.’ In addition there was ‘trench foot’ caused by standing in the cold and wet for long periods. At worst, this serious affliction could become gangrenous and result in amputation. An Australian doctor who handled numerous cases later said that he had seen men suffer silently with battle wounds but with this ailment they ‘groaned and wept as children’. He added: ‘To me it was perhaps the most harrowing scene of the war’.

Throughout this time there were small operations to keep the enemy off balance or to take ground. In one of these, the 15th Battalion attacked at a place called Stormy Trench on 1 February, but was driven back with heavy losses. Lessons were learned and the 13th Battalion, this time with strong artillery support and large stocks of bombs (grenades), made a fresh attempt three nights later. Captain Harry Murray, an officer who was revered by his men, led one of the companies in the assault. He was ill with influenza and the battalion doctor tried to have him evacuated, to which he responded in typical style: ‘I tell you I’m going to take Stormy Trench; and what’s more, let me tell you, I’m going to keep it’. He did—and he was awarded the Victoria Cross for his extraordinary bravery.

With a fresh year and the prospect of spring before them, the fate of the soldiers on both sides lay in the hands of their political and military leaders. By now the war had taken such a toll that many felt that the fighting nations could not continue beyond 1917. The French had already replaced their commander-in-chief with General Robert Nivelle, who had impressed all, including the new British Prime Minister, with his aggressive optimism. Nivelle put forward his own plan for an Allied breakthrough in April. He seemed to have
the answers. The battles so far had left the Germans with a large bulge along part of their main front. This stretched from the region near Rheims to the British-held city of Arras. Nivelle proposed to launch heavy attacks at each end of this bulge, with the French in the south making the major contribution. He would have the overall Allied command.

While the French and British planned, so did the Germans. They were building too. Through the winter they had been constructing a deep and extensive rear defensive zone, which the British dubbed ‘the Hindenburg Line’. Here they had strong positions behind deep belts of barbed-wire which were protected by well-located machine-gun posts. Many strong-points were built of reinforced concrete. The German plan was to withdraw to the Hindenburg Line, destroying everything behind them. This would considerably shorten their frontage and release a dozen infantry divisions. It gave them better ground to defend, and it removed the bulge around which Nivelle was planning to attack.

The Germans’ initial movement began in February. With the weather beginning to improve, they fell back along a wide front. The withdrawal came as a surprise for the Australians. Corporal Roy Denning of the engineers recalled:

At this time [it] was very foggy, making the German line, although quite close, invisible. Patrols had gone out and found his trenches unoccupied except for booby traps. The German front line … was unoccupied except for a few dead of both sides.

The news of the pull-out was a tonic for the troops—but as the Australians advanced, they discovered that the enemy was not in retreat, but was improving his position. At least the men were now free of the foul bog and icy trenches in which they had spent the recent months. Soon they were able to take possession of Bapaume, a large battered town that had stood just beyond the reach of the recent Somme operations. Here the enemy had destroyed everything of any use and left behind time-bombs and booby-traps. But the soldiers’ heightened spirits were demonstrated on 19 March by the band of the 5th Australian Brigade playing amid the ruins as they marched into the old town square.

Between Bapaume and the Hindenburg Line was a scattering of villages that the Germans had formed into a network of defended outposts. The fighting across open fields or to take each village was often sharp and heavy. Most villages were left ruined and burning as the Germans abandoned them. Two solid brigades under Brigadier Generals John Gellibrand and HE ‘Pompey’ Elliott were in the forefront of the
Australians’ advance. The villages of Vaulx-Vraucourt and Morchies were quickly taken. By the morning of 21 March Beaumetz was in Australian hands, and Elliott had to be ordered to slow down. But resistance stiffened as the advance progressed, and Lagnicourt, Noreuil and Hermies were among those strongly held by the Germans’ rear-guard. An initial attack on Noreuil was repulsed. Finally these places were captured, and by 9 April the British and Australians were fronting the Hindenburg Line.

Behind the advance, Bapaume had become a busy thoroughfare. On the night before Lagnicourt was captured, a bomb with a chemical fuse blew up the town hall, killing many who were sleeping there. The incident was widely reported and loudly condemned. However, the Australian official historian, Charles Bean, noted that earlier, during the evacuation of Gallipoli, the ‘Australians had left at Anzac many similar surprises for the Turks’.

The Hindenburg Line, with its acres of barbed-wire entanglements, deep trenches and machine-gun posts, now stood before the Australians. The defences were ‘known to be the most formidable ever constructed’, wrote Charles Bean. The trenches facing them, although not yet fully developed, were in two rows and were well made, with deep shelters, tunnels and dugouts. The German withdrawal had disrupted the Allies’ plans for the spring. However, the French commander, General Nivelle, still insisted on his large-scale offensive. This would commence with British operations entrusted mainly to the Third Army near Arras under the command of General Sir Edmund Allenby, under whom Australian light horse regiments would successfully serve in Palestine later in the year. The adjoining British First Army would also attack at Vimy.

Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood’s I ANZAC Corps, now containing the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Australian Divisions, was once more part of General Gough’s Fifth Army. The general, inspired by the recent advances, was anxious to be involved in the forthcoming big offensive and proposed an attack on his front too. The plan was to assault around the ruined village of Bullecourt, which stood astride the Hindenburg Line. The British commander-in-chief, General Sir Douglas Haig, saw this as a chance to have the cavalry follow through any breach there to link up with Allenby’s advance. Gough was an aggressive leader and was young for an officer of such high rank. He was also a rival of Allenby. He wanted to attack
quickly at Bullecourt. However, prolonged artillery shelling would be necessary to destroy the enemy’s barbed-wire and there were delays in bringing up enough guns. He would have to wait.

Finally, on 9 April, according to plan, and preceded by a bombardment greater than anything yet achieved by the British artillery, the main Arras offensive to the north went forward. It initially met with success. Gough’s anxiety to be involved only increased as the news came through of Allenby’s early progress. That afternoon he listened as an officer of the tank company explained what his armoured vehicles could add to any forthcoming battle. Here it seemed was the answer for the lack of artillery. A plan for the tanks to lead the infantry through the barbed-wire was hatched. From that moment things moved quickly. Lieutenant Colonel J Hardress Lloyd of the tanks later wrote:

*General Gough received [the plan] with favour, and decided to attack at dawn on the following morning. The idea of an attack within twenty-four hours was a little startling. We drove at breakneck speed to the chateau … occupied by the Australian corps, and were left by General Gough to work out the details with the Brigadier-General of the Staff Corps.*

The plan took both Birdwood and his staff by surprise. They expressed misgivings, but the scene was already set for disaster. In all of the discussions too much was being claimed for the tanks’ unproven ability to precede the infantry through the wire entanglements without adequate artillery support. Tanks had only been used for the first time several months earlier on the Somme, with very limited success. The types presently available were the unreliable Mark I and Mark II models, and only a dozen had been allocated to the Fifth Army. Most of the crews were inexperienced and the Australians had not operated with tanks before and knew little about them.

The attack at Bullecourt was set for 4.30 am on 10 April, and would have battalions from the 4th and the 12th Brigades of Major General William Holmes’s 4th Division advance over open fields alongside the ruins of Bullecourt and towards the nearby villages of Hendecourt and Reincourt. Gough seemed to think that the Germans might not have much fight in them. Critical to the plan were the tanks, which were to provide an element of surprise and the means of crushing the barbed-wire. On the left the British 62nd Division would attack Bullecourt village, while the cavalry would stand by to exploit the gaps in the Germans’ line. The Australians’ attack would be on a narrow front and between two enemy bastions formed by the villages of Bullecourt and Quéant. Unwittingly a
trap had been prepared, but it was of Gough’s making and he would be driving the men into it.

The assaulting battalions were hurriedly ordered into position; for some it meant a long march up from Favreuil, near Bapaume. In front of them the battlefield was a gently undulating arena of abandoned open fields crossed by a few old farm tracks. The two Australian brigades would advance with the British on their left, but once they had reached the enemy trenches they could expect to have the Germans on three sides. They would start from a low embankment that had carried a peacetime railway. The night was described as ‘wild and bitterly cold with a fierce wind and occasional sleet and snow’. In the darkness most of the troops quietly moved out in front of the embankment and lay for hours on the frozen ground in readiness for the order to advance.

In the early hours, as the attack was due to commence, no tanks appeared. They had all been held up by the weather or had broken down. Holmes, finding his men unsupported and increasingly exposed, promptly called off the attack and ordered a withdrawal. The Australians departed, protected only by the dull dawn and screened by a light snow squall. However, the British division on the left, not informed of what had happened, sent out its patrols, which came under fire and suffered casualties.

If the troops felt any relief after the battle’s cancellation, it was to be short lived. Rather than abandon the whole wild idea, Gough decided to renew the attack next morning at the same time. Meanwhile, most of the men had moved back near Noreuil. Others had to march to Favreuil, where they finally threw themselves down, desperate for sleep. Then came the news that they had to go back!

Once more the Australians got into position to attack, in the early hours of 11 April. In the dim light the snow-dusted landscape looked like a Christmas card scene. However, it was a cold and windy night that held no joy. The men lay out in a trench or along a road and well out in front, while others were behind them to the railway embankment. On the left, in the 12th Brigade, the 46th Battalion would lead and the 48th would follow through. Their orders were to take the two German lines and then form a protective flank. On the right of the attack were the 4th Brigade’s four battalions, all glad to be involved together. Out in front the 14th Battalion was on the left and the 16th Battalion on the right. The 15th and 13th Battalions were behind them. This stronger force was to capture
the German lines and then push on towards Riencourt. Both brigades would be preceded by six tanks.

Again the Australian infantrymen waited anxiously in the snow for the tanks to arrive. At 4.30 am only three of the lumbering vehicles were in position in front of the 4th Brigade, and only one other appeared to be anywhere near the 46th Battalion. While waiting, Major Percy Black, a battle veteran, told his commanding officer: ‘I mayn’t come back but we’ll get the Hindenburg Line’.

At 4.45 am the advance began, with only the 4th Brigade moving off. Men stiff from the cold clambered to their feet and moved forward, hoping to gain precious metres while there was still only a little light. The historian of the 14th Battalion recalled:

*It was thrilling to see platoon after platoon in perfect order, and cheerful, climb out of the cutting, hitch rifles over shoulders and disappear into the dimness.*

German machine-guns and artillery opened up on them and soon all hell broke loose. The leading battalions went on across the fire-swept ground with the other two coming along behind. The tanks were of little use and the infantrymen soon left them. The nearest German trench (called ‘OG1’) could only be seen when the troops were half way there. By this time the enemy fire, some of it from Quéant and Bullecourt, was intense and men were dropping thickly.

Meanwhile, still without its tanks, the 12th Brigade waited, and when the order to advance finally came, its sister brigade was already at the enemy’s barbed-wire. They were clambering their way through or looking for passages; some had already got into the trenches. All the while, machine-gun fire was cutting through them. This was so heavy that ‘the wire seemed to swarm with fireflies’ as the rounds struck sparks from it. Heavy fire from Quéant tore through the 16th Battalion. Behind came the 13th Battalion, whose Captain Tom White later wrote:

*So frightfully had the 16th suffered that they became too weak by the time they reached a belt of heavy wire to attack across it as a body. The 13th saw the 16th in this belt [where] great gaps were being torn in the gallant lines.*

Percy Black, described by the official historian as ‘one of the most famous fighting leaders of the AIF’, was among those who reached the second line of wire, and was directing his men through the openings when he was killed. His loss was keenly felt throughout the division. His close mate Harry Murray searched for his body, and only when it was found did he accept that the legendary Black was dead.
After starting late, and without any worthwhile tank support, the 12th Brigade also reached the barbed wire. A corporal in the 48th Battalion later wrote:

*The air was dense with crackling bullets, and thick with the blood-chilling stink of explosives. The plain was carpeted with bodies, mostly lying still, but some crawling laggingly for cover. A man cannoned into me and fell, leaving a bloody patch on my shoulder. But there was no sound of human voice in all the storm. Carefully I picked my way through the wire and the limp forms that dangled over it. Sometimes I was hooked up.*

Once into the German lines, the troops set about driving the enemy out in close fighting with bayonets and bombs, setting up trench blockages, cutting fire-steps into the walls to make the trenches face the other way, and attending to the wounded. All the time there remained a dangerous gap between the two brigades, which the tanks had been expected to take care of. With many men killed and supplies of ammunition dwindling, it was obvious that further progress was impossible. By 7am the Australians were holding part of the Hindenburg Line, but they were terribly exposed. With more Germans coming up, the problem now was to retain the ground against their counter-attacks. Meanwhile tanks stood blazing on the battlefield behind them.

The experiment with tanks had failed. Eventually eleven of them entered the battle, but they were easy targets and little help. Only a few even reached the enemy’s wire. Further back, the artillery was getting confused reports from the battle and lost several opportunities to provide vital supporting fire. In the captured trenches, held desperately by dwindling groups of men, the casualties were mounting alarmingly; dead and wounded of both sides lay all around. Small groups of men that had rallied and tried to advance further had simply disappeared. At his headquarters, the optimistic Gough was buoyed by some inaccurate reports of success, so he ordered his cavalry forward to exploit the imagined gap. The horsemen briefly entered upon the battlefield, quickly assessed the hopelessness of it all, and withdrew.

The Australians in the captured trenches were exposed on both flanks and could not help the British on the left. The German troops, the Wurttembergers of the 27th Division, were possibly the toughest encountered during the war. Now their counter-attacks came, feeding into the trenches through the sides and the centre and out of deep shelters. Increasingly groups of Australians became cut off. Second Lieutenant Henry Eibel, a Gallipoli veteran, was in the thick of the fighting. At last he told a runner to deliver his papers
They could only thank their good luck. Charles Bean described the final withdrawal of the last organised group:

At 12.25, a full hour after the other troops—with proud deliberation, under heavy fire, picking its way calmly through the wire, helping the walking wounded, its officers bringing up the rear—the 48th Battalion came out.

The battle was over but the brave stretcher bearers still had to risk their lives to find men desperate for help. Fortunately most of the enemy held their fire and in some places men owed their survival to the Germans who attended them in shell-holes or placed them where they could be reached. Others became prisoners, and some of these later complained of rough treatment. Finally at 6 pm the Germans shouted ‘finish hospital’ and both sides withdrew.

After the survivors had gathered behind the railway embankment, stunned and exhausted, they could see that the battalions’ losses had been great. These men had fought well, capturing for a while part of the Hindenburg Line without an artillery barrage; but it had been a hopeless task. A tragic picture emerged as the losses were counted. The 4th Brigade lost 2339 men out of 3000. The 12th lost 950 from less than 2000. Among the casualties were 1170 Australians who were prisoners of war. The battle-torn battalions were
ordered to the rear. In one, ‘the depleted ranks were a pitiful sight as the unit trailed through the snow to battalion headquarters … led by their colonel’. The 48th Battalion had been reduced to just a company. Corporal Mitchell recalled that ‘the other battalions of the brigade cheered as we marched’.

The 4th Division was shattered. Courage and determination had failed to win the day and it was clear that the blame lay with the commanders and their ambitious plan. General Birdwood visited the thin battalions to express his sympathy and to heap praise. However, the reaction within the 15th Battalion was typical. Their historian noted: ‘But no amount of words could offset the bitterness that prevailed throughout all ranks’.

The Germans had suffered losses too. However, they had withstood the attack and, knowing that the Australians were now weak and thinly spread, with their artillery well forward, they soon retaliated. Their units were always capable of delivering heavy counter-blows. Suddenly, on 15 April, they launched an assault on a wide frontage from both sides of Quéant. The tables were totally turned. All the sparsely placed posts of the 1st Australian Division, and part of the 2nd Division near Noreuil, came under immediate threat.

The enemy penetrated deeply and the Australian infantry had to rapidly fall back from their scattered positions. In the face of this oncoming assault the artillerymen soon too became exposed and they quickly withdrew, abandoning their guns but carrying with them the breech-blocks and dial sights.

The Germans overran Lagnicourt and captured twenty-one field guns. However, once the Australians had absorbed the initial thrust and were able to take a stand, joined by the battalions in support, with Lewis guns doing deadly work, the Germans fell back. The ground and the guns were recovered. But it had been a heavy blow, and a severe shock. Lagnicourt was long afterwards remembered as a tragic and desperate action in which a thousand men were killed or wounded.

The day after the battle of Lagnicourt, away on the French front, General Nivelle’s great offensive began. So much had been promised. However, the Germans were ready and progress was disappointing. The French troops were brave, but the general was asking too much, and their casualties mounted alarmingly. There was to be no quick result, just more deaths. The soldiers felt betrayed, and so too did the public. Nivelle’s reputation went into freefall, and there was
simmering ferment in the French army. Still, it was decided that the joint offensive must continue and so a new series of wide-spread British assaults near Arras was ordered. The French offensive was supposed to resume on 4 May. Once again Gough’s I ANZAC Corps was given the task of attacking at the southern end of the British line at Bullecourt. The original April battle, intended to capitalise on success, was now to be followed by another over the same ground, that would try to contain disaster.

This time Gough would use the 5th and 6th Brigades from the 2nd Australian Division, with the British 62nd Division alongside once again. The troops would attack after a long artillery preparation and behind a creeping barrage. Only the British division would have tanks. Orders were widely distributed and explained, and some tasks were well rehearsed. A supply of Stokes mortars and Vickers machine-guns would accompany the assault. Special provision was made to ensure that ammunition supplies would reach the forward troops throughout the day; many felt that this had been the most critical failure of the first battle. Each brigade would have two battalions forward; on the left were the 22nd and 24th Battalions (6th Brigade) and on the right, the 17th and 19th Battalions (5th Brigade). Behind these were the 21st and 23rd and the 18th and 20th Battalions respectively. The 7th Brigade was in reserve. The attackers were arranged in eight waves. The rear battalions were to push beyond the captured trenches to occupy Reincourt.

At 3.45 am on 3 May, the second battle of Bullecourt began, as on the signal the Australians started to advance from the positions that had been used a month before. This time the weather was good. The first waves went forward quickly with two or three metres between each man. The 6th Brigade took heavy fire from its left but continued on behind the curtain of shell-bursts set down by the artillery. The troops gamely fought their way through the gaps in the barbed-wire and got into the German trenches. In many places the wire had been broken down by the artillery, while elsewhere it stood intact with some of the earlier dead still hanging there. But over on the right things began to go wrong. The 5th Brigade was in serious trouble, with men falling thickly under artillery and machine-gun fire from the front and from the direction of Quéant. The leading waves faltered on reaching the barbed-wire. Losses were heavy among the officers and NCOs, and without strong leadership the attack broke down. Meanwhile the British troops, without enough support and suffering heavily, were unable to take Bullecourt and link with the Australians.
The artillery plan had failed to properly suppress the enemy fire from the Quéant flank, and the inability of the 5th Brigade to make any progress in the first hour threatened the Australian operation. Men were falling back to the railway embankment. Seeing those in front withdrawing, many others turned back before they had gone very far. Fearing a rout, Gellibrand’s 6th Brigade headquarters, because it was the closest, tried to take control. A couple of young officers, including Captain Walter Gilchrist, gathered some stragglers and led them back into action. Parts of the 7th Brigade also joined the battle.

Gilchrist was an engineer officer on Gellibrand’s staff. A bold and natural leader who was always ready for any task, he already held the Military Cross. Now, in the maelstrom, he was heard to say: ‘These men are all right. All they want is a leader’. He inspired men to come with him in bombing attacks into the German trenches. The official historian recorded:

None of the other officers and men present knew whose leader was, but for half an hour or more he would be seen, bareheaded, tunicl ess, in grey woollen cardigan, his curly hair ruffled with exertion, continually climbing out of the trench to throw bombs or to call to the men in shell-holes, begging them to charge. But at some stage—the grey cardigan and curly head were missed, they were never seen or heard of again.

Private Frank Fitzpatrick of the 6th Machine-Gun Company was inspired by the arrival of some of the 7th Brigade as they came into action. He later wrote:

… the ground they had to traverse was a regular inferno of bursting shells, and swept by Fritz’s machine-gun fire, but the magnificently steady and determined way in which those men moved through the welter to aid their comrades was something to remember. [W]e were all Australians that day!

All day the fighting went on. However, the Australians could only get a grip on the left of the enemy lines. At times the German shells swept down like a storm. Smoke and acrid fumes hung over the cratered ground where eruptions of dirt were thrown up by machine-gun fire. The enemy resisted strongly and made heavy counter-attacks. The fighting was brutal, with bombs being exchanged at close range.

Still the 6th Brigade survivors held on grimly to 400 metres of the front and second lines, holding back the Germans for hour after hour until darkness began to fall. They succeeded but were exposed on both flanks, and any idea of attacking Reincourt was quickly abandoned. By 11 pm the artillery fire of both sides had died down. Finally, at 1 am on 4 May, in the darkness, battalions of the 1st Brigade (1st Division) began to relieve the remnants of the gallant 6th.
It was now the 1st Division’s turn to join the mêlée. Afterwards, the historian of the 3rd Battalion recalled its arrival at the front line:

*Mere words could not express the admiration … for the magnificent effort of the tired but indomitable Victorians. The 6th Brigade had been reduced to the strength of a single battalion. Evidence of the terrific struggle could be seen in the many dead and wounded who lay around.*

The fresh battalions had a tough job facing them and it was not certain if they would be able to hold on or link up with the British attacks on the left. However, over the following days the new troops, with bombs, bayonets and trench mortars, were able to extend the Australian frontage. Their position had been greatly improved by the pioneers who had already dug a long communications trench to the front line, and vital supplies and ammunition were getting through. Stretcher-bearers could also take out some of the wounded.

In the early morning of 6 May, as the fighting flowed and ebbed, a strong German counter-attack retook part of a trench. Responding boldly, Corporal GJ ‘Snowy’ Howell, a 1st Battalion veteran, drove the enemy off until he was badly wounded. He later received the Victoria Cross. The next day troops from the British 7th Division captured parts of the ruins of Bullecourt and were able to join up with some of the Australians. But the Germans were not giving up. They brought in reinforcements and continued to make attacks. Their artillery fire never ceased and rounds constantly fell, blowing away sections of trenches or folding them in. Shrapnel pellets beat down in a murderous rain. This prolonged shelling was said by some to be ‘perhaps worse than Pozières’. At times the Germans advanced with terrifying flame-throwers. The battle of Bullecourt represented the clash of some of the toughest troops on both sides and the action there was described as ‘berserk’.

The fighting, digging, and carrying now brought the men of the 1st Division close to exhaustion. In addition to the drain on their physical strength was the constant strain of the shelling. After five days of continuous action the division needed to be relieved, and so the 5th Division took over. Lieutenant Wilfred Barlow was one of the officers who arrived with the 58th Battalion. In peacetime he had been a school-teacher. Although almost thirty years old, and married with four children, he felt compelled to enlist. At Bullecourt on 12 May eyewitnesses saw him hit by a shell and virtually ‘blown to pieces’. Several weeks earlier he had written: ‘I hope the war will soon stop for it is sapping out the best of men and all that is beautiful in civilized life’.
Elsewhere that day another officer in the battalion, Lieutenant RV ‘Mick’ Moon, led a party to capture a further section of trench. In the fierce fighting that followed there were many casualties and Moon, who showed outstanding leadership and courage, was shot four times before he was finally convinced to get treatment. He was later awarded Australia’s second Bullecourt Victoria Cross.

The 5th Division took some more ground, but in the next days it was evident that there was little further to be gained from this drawn-out battle. It was now a case of turning over to the defensive and holding on. The Germans too felt that there was no need to retake their lost lines and were satisfied that they had prevented any British breakthrough. On 15 May, the Australians withstood the last heavy counter-attack. Finally the enemy gave up this small area of blood-soaked ground.

The whole Arras offensive was winding to an end. It had been a series of gallant efforts, but sadly for those involved only the Canadians’ earlier gains at Vimy had been of any great strategic value. The second battle of Bullecourt had lasted more than two weeks and cost the Australians a further 7000 casualties; the British suffered similarly. The only important thing the Australians gained, once they were withdrawn, was a long rest.

Charles Bean summed up the second battle of Bullecourt as, ‘in some ways, the stoutest achievements of the Australian soldier in France, carried through against the stubbornest enemy that ever faced him there’. No one could ever deny that it had taken exceptional bravery, and great sacrifice, to break into the Hindenburg Line and hold on to a section of it. However, in the end this fighting had been for the possession of a ruined village and empty fields. The grander scheme, devised by the French and British commanders, had failed.

The loss of so many good and brave men shook the Australians and left the four divisions heavily depleted. Losses had not only been heavy among the officers and NCOs but also those with experience and training who could have replaced them. Bean further commented:

*Bullecourt, more than any other battle, shook the confidence of Australian soldiers in the capacity of the British command; the errors, especially on April 10th and 11th, were obvious to almost everyone.*

He also could have mentioned that there had been deficiencies in some Australian leadership and staff work. One general who did enhance his reputation was John Gellibrand. However, after the battle he resigned his command and took up a training position.
in England; he eventually returned to France to command the 3rd Australian Division in 1918.

Elsewhere, serious mutinies developed in the French army. General Nivelle was sacked and replaced by a more enlightened rival, General Philippe Pétain. With the French army seriously weakened by the whole sad misadventure, the Allies were in crisis. Through the rest of 1917, Britain would have to play the main role on the Western Front. With a greater responsibility now passed to him, Sir Douglas Haig at last would get the chance to conduct the big offensive that he had longed for. This would culminate in the Third Battle of Ypres in July–November 1917, in which those Australian divisions that had already fought at Bullecourt, now joined by the 3rd Division, would take part in some of the heaviest action. Thousands more of them would die there.

With the Australians’ departure from Bullecourt, British troops took over. In 1918 the Germans would take the ground back, only to lose it once more as the Allies finally gained the ascendancy that led to victory. The area also stood beside the shoulder of a great British battle—the Battle of Cambrai—fought late in 1917, in which tanks and artillery this time made a vital contribution. However, Bullecourt remains best remembered for the two battles fought when the Australians were there during April and May 1917.

After the war Bullecourt was rebuilt and the surrounding battlefields were returned to agriculture. Today the local community hosts a widely attended annual Anzac Day service, and there are memorials in front of the local church and along the adjoining fields. On Anzac Day 1993 an imposing sculpture, ‘Digger’, by the Melbourne sculptor Peter Corlett was unveiled on a site that once saw some of the worst fighting. Since then it has become the focus of many Australians’ visits and a symbol that the diggers who fought there ninety years ago are not forgotten.
### Australians on the Western Front 1917

#### Australian Victoria Cross Awards 1917
**FEBRUARY–MAY 1917**

- **Captain HW Murray,**
  Stormy Trench, 4–5 February 1917
- **Captain PH Cherry**
  Lagnicourt, 26 March 1917, posthumous
- **Private JC Jensen**
  Noreuil, 2 April 1917
- **Captain JE Newland**
  Boursies–Lagnicourt, 8 & 15 April 1917
- **Private TJB Kenny**
  Hermies, 9 April 1917
- **Sergeant JW Whittle**
  Boursies, 8 & 15 April 1917
- **Lieutenant C Pope**
  Louverval, 15 April 1917, posthumous
- **Corporal GJ Howell**
  Bullecourt, 6 May 1917
- **Lieutenant RV Moon**
  Bullecourt, 12 May 1917

#### Infantry units

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Brigade</th>
<th>Battalions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st Division</td>
<td>1 Bde</td>
<td>1–4 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2 Bde</td>
<td>5–8 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Bde</td>
<td>9–12 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Division</td>
<td>5 Bde</td>
<td>17–20 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 Bde</td>
<td>21–24 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Bde</td>
<td>25–28 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd Division</td>
<td>9 Bde</td>
<td>33–36 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[Serving in Flanders]</td>
<td>10 Bde</td>
<td>37–40 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 Bde</td>
<td>41–44 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th Division</td>
<td>4 Bde</td>
<td>13–16 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>12 Bde</td>
<td>45–48 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>13 Bde</td>
<td>49–52 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th Division</td>
<td>8 Bde</td>
<td>29–32 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14 Bde</td>
<td>53–56 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15 Bde</td>
<td>57–60 Battalions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_NB: Commanders shown are those holding appointments between March and June 1917_
On Anzac Day 1993 an imposing sculpture, ‘Digger’, by the Melbourne sculptor Peter Corlett was unveiled at Bullecourt, a site that once saw some of the worst fighting during WWI.
Sister Martha King, France, 1917. Australian nurses worked in the hospitals and casualty clearing stations treating the sick, wounded and dying on the Western Front. Sister Martha King served from 1915, and in France was mostly with No. 3 Australian General Hospital. (AWM P01058.002)
An Australian infantry billet of the 2nd Australian Battalion at Flesselles during the winter of 1916–17. (AWM E00027)
An Australian buys winkles (molluscs) from a hawker in a French village in the winter of 1916–17. Local cottages, barns and lofts often became home to men resting away from front-line duty. With their own young men at the war, many villagers became good friends of the diggers. (AWM E00048)
Behind the lines, an Australian attends to his motorcycle on the muddy winter road near his billet in a Somme village, in the winter of 1916–17. (AWM E00047)
Men of the 5th Australian Division make their way along a track near Longueval in January 1917. This route carried troops going to and from the winter front line trenches. (AWM E00136)
Weary, wet and miserable, Australian troops coming out of the front line for a rest pass along a duckboard track behind Delville Wood, January 1917. (AWM E00138)
Australian soldiers have some fun for the camera around a frozen water tank at Contalmaison behind the Somme winter trenches during January 1917. (AWM E00169)
Troops move across the frozen Somme battlefield near Mametz, where there had been fighting during the summer. The front line was several kilometres away. (AWM E00151)
Major HW ‘Harry’ Murray received the Victoria Cross for his gallantry at Stormy Trench on 4–5 February 1917. By the end of the war he was the AIF’s most highly decorated officer. (AWM P02939.053)
Australians stand guard over German prisoners taken during the attack on Stormy Trench on 5 February 1917.

(AWM E00183)
An Australian brought to a dressing station at Contalmaison, several kilometres behind the front line, is transferred to a motor ambulance, 12 February 1917. The extreme weather conditions contributed to the casualty toll. (AWM E00185)
Troops destined for the Western Front embark at Melbourne on 19 February 1917. The failure of a referendum in 1916, and another in 1917, proposing conscription meant that the AIF had to rely upon a dwindling pool of volunteers until the end of the war. (AWM PB0215)
Men of the 10th Battalion enjoy a hot meal in the trenches, February 1917. The Germans opposing them had commenced their withdrawal towards the Hindenburg Line. (AWM E00232)
Troops assist the artillery along the rough roadways while advancing behind the German withdrawal, February 1917. The difficulty of movement across the recent battlefields, and along routes destroyed by the enemy, delayed the guns and other vital supplies. (AWM E00207)
The graves of two officers of the 55th Battalion in Bernafray Wood Cemetery, at Montauban, France. Captain Herbert Palmer was killed by a German mortar shell south of Bapaume on 11 March 1917. Captain Percy Chapman replaced him but was killed the following day. (AWM P03788.004)
Members of the 30th Battalion take a rest from the action around Bapaume shortly before the battalion entered the town on 17 March 1917. (AWM E00345)
A wounded British airman is evacuated along the Bapaume Road towards Le Sars in March 1917, past members of the 2nd Pioneers working to provide a route to assist the Australian advance. (AWM E00360)
Australian infantrymen cautiously make their way along a street of burning ruins as they enter Bapaume on 17 March 1917. (AWM E00371)
A group of Australians pose for the camera in a main street in Bapaume on 17 March 1917. Much of the town was left in ruins by the retreating Germans. (AWM E00361)
In this widely distributed wartime photograph, the band of the 5th Infantry Brigade enter the town square of Bapaume on 19 March 1917. The capture of the town was a bright moment after a dismal winter. (AWM E00426)
Three members of the 2nd Australian Division stand under the arches of the Bapaume town hall, which was relatively intact after shelling had reduced much of the town to rubble. Six nights later several men sleeping inside were killed when the building was destroyed by a delayed-action bomb that had been left behind by the retreating Germans. (AWM E00393)
An Australian field artillery battery in position south-west of Vaulx-Vraucourt prepares to register its 18-pounder guns upon Lagnicourt on 20 March 1917. *(AWM E00430)*
Men of the 22nd Battalion remove rubble following the destruction of the Bapaume town hall by a delayed-action bomb, 25 March 1917. (AWM E02005)
The isolated grave of Private Frank Aylett of 27th Battalion, formerly a blacksmith, who was killed by an enemy shell near Lagnicourt on 26 March 1917. After the war his body was moved to the large Quéant Road British Cemetery.

(AWM J00038)
German troops withdrawing to their Hindenburg Line pass a crater blown to destroy a road, March 1917.  
(AWM H13130)
Engineers from the 2nd Australian Division salvage parts from abandoned light railway engines during the German retreat in March 1917. (AWM E00357)
Members of the 13th Battalion open packages from the Australian Comforts Fund at Ribemont in March 1917. Many Australians were billeted in this and other small villages behind the front line. (AWM E00403)
Transport wagons slowly pass along a newly made roadway near Bapaume, watched by a working party from the 2nd Australian Division, March 1917. (E00397)
Five brothers of the Leane family serving in the AIF, (left to right): Benjamin, Thomas, Raymond, Allan and Ernest. Lieutenant Colonel Allan Leane was killed by shrapnel during the Somme winter; Major Ben Leane died at Bullecourt where his brother, Lieutenant Colonel Ray Leane, commanded the 48th Battalion. (AWM P02136.001)
Percy Black shortly after he enlisted in 1914. A natural soldier, he rose through the ranks to become a major in the 16th Battalion and was renowned for his courage; he died leading his men at Bullecourt. (AWM J00369)
Albert Mullett, the Government Printer, and his wife Alice with their children shortly before son Leslie (top right) left to go to war. The young second-lieutenant was killed leading his platoon at Bullecourt on 11 April 1917.

(AWM P04852.001)
A group of Australians and the family with whom they were billeted pose for a local photographer. The Australian wartime presence is still fondly remembered in some of the French villages. (AWM H12920)
Lagnicourt stands cratered and in ruins following the battles fought in 1917. It had originally been captured by the Australians on 26 March, and was then lost and recaptured on 15 April. (AWM E01016)
Australians stand among the ruins of Lagnicourt, April 1917. The village had been badly damaged by the retreating Germans in March, and heavy fighting again took place when the enemy made an attack around there a month later.

(AWM C00470)
An Australian chaplain stands amid the ruins of a church at Vaulx-Vraucourt, an important village along the Australian advance towards the Hindenburg Line, April 1917. (E00467)
An Australian cookhouse set up in Vaulx-Vraucourt was given the name ‘the Vaulx Arms Hotel’. It stood among other temporary buildings erected as shelters, headquarters and signal offices. (AWM E02008)
A small group of Australians play ‘two-up’ on the sunken road leading from Noreuil towards the Hindenburg Line, 20 April 1917. This became a main route towards the front line at Bullecourt. (AWM E00453)
Australians move back through Vaulx-Vraucourt on 20 April 1917 in the period between the two battles at nearby Bullecourt. (AWM E00589)
Australians haul a field gun into position near Beaumetz, one of the villages captured during the Australian advance towards the Hindenburg Line, April 1917. (AWM E00463)
A Vickers machine-gun section of the 22nd Machine Gun Company, in the Norcuil Valley, fires at a German aircraft flying over Bullecourt on 23 April 1917. (AWM E00458)
An Australian machine-gun company officer, Lieutenant Walter Shelley, looks through his binoculars towards the Hindenburg Line following the first battle of Bullecourt, 23 April 1917. (AWM E00603)
A band plays as Allied soldiers gather in the city square of Arras, 30 April 1917. The city square had been heavily damaged by German shelling. The British-held French city gave its name to the British offensive fought nearby during April–May 1917. (AWM H15939)
The trenches of the German Hindenburg Line close by Bullecourt, c1917. The village was later destroyed by the artillery supporting British and Australian attacks. *(AWM H12360)*
Brigadier General John Gellibrand of the 6th Australian Brigade had to take control of much of the action on 3 May 1917. (AWM P01489.001)
Back near Vaulx-Vraucourt, behind the battle taking place at Bullecourt on 3 May, Germans prisoners of war are moved aside to allow an ambulance to pass. (AWM E00491)
Sergeant GJ ‘Snowy’ Howell’s uniform displays his Victoria Cross and Military Medal and three wound stripes. He was awarded the VC for his attack with bombs and bayonet against a German counter-attack at Bullecourt on 6 May 1917.

(AWM P02939.019)
The view across the Bullecourt battlefield showing the exposed ground over which the Australians advanced towards Reincourt, on the horizon, May 1917. Thousands of men died in these fields. (AWM E00444)
The railway embankment provided shelter during the Australian attacks at Bullecourt in April and May 1917. On the horizon (left) is the wreck of one of the British tanks abandoned on 11 April. (AWM E01408)
Members of the 2nd Australian Light Trench Mortar Battery prepare bombs for their Stokes mortar, which is covered by a German groundsheet, in the remains of a captured Germans trench at Bullecourt on 8 May 1917. (AWM E00457)
Lieutenant RV ‘Mick’ Moon was awarded the Victoria Cross for bravely leading an assault at Bullecourt on 12 May 1917 during which he was repeatedly wounded. (AWM A02592A)
Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood presents Captain Albert Jacka with a bar to his Military Cross, 12 May 1917. Already a national hero and recipient of the Victoria Cross, Albert Jacka was awarded a bar to the MC for his work patrolling the battlefield, laying guide tapes and directing the tanks for the battle on 11 April 1917. (AWM E00438)
Lieutenant General Sir William Birdwood takes the salute of the 4th Australian Division following the battle of Bullecourt, 12 May 1917. He presented awards and praised the troops for their part in the disastrous action. However, many resented the manner in which they had been used. (AWM E00448)
General Sir Hubert Gough, of the British Fifth Army, shows the Belgian King over the old battlefields of the Somme, 16 May 1917. Men of I ANZAC Corps suffered heavy losses while under Gough’s command during the Bullecourt operations. (AWM H12215)
Sir William Birdwood (left) and his Chief of Staff, Major General Brudenell White, (alongside) and other staff officers of I ANZAC Corps. Birdwood and White had opposed General Gough’s Bullecourt plan, but they were also criticised for the way it was conducted. (AWM H08754)
Sir William Birdwood inspects a cookhouse while visiting the Australian positions at Noreuil, only a few kilometres behind Bullecourt, May 1917. (AWM E02000)
Members of the 6th Brigade bring up a field kitchen in the Noreuil Valley close to the Australian positions behind Bullecourt, May 1917. (AWM E00437)
Pioneers of the 5th Australian Division construct a light railway in the Noreuil Valley, the main thoroughfare up to the Bullecourt battlefield, where fighting is underway, during May 1917. (AWM E01994)
An Australian 18-pounder field gun fires on Bullecourt from the Noreuil Valley during the second battle in May 1917.

(AWM E00600)
Men of the 2nd Australian Division at a supply dump near Iggery Corner, between Noreuil and Bullecourt, during the fighting in May 1917. (AWM E00436)
Stretcher bearers of the 8th Battalion, 1st Australian Division, in the trenches captured from the Germans a few days earlier, carry out one of their wounded, May 1917. (AWM E00440)
Sentries peer from one of the trenches occupied by the 1st Division during a lull in the fighting at Bullecourt, May 1917.

(AWM E00439)
During a break in the action an exhausted Australian grabs the chance for a sleep in a dugout in one of the trenches captured from the Germans at Bullecourt, May 1917. (AWM E00455)
Australians outside one of the deep German dugouts in a captured part of the Hindenburg Line during the second battle of Bullecourt in May 1917. (AWM E00518)
Alert for a German counter-attack, Australians clean their rifles in a captured trench at Bullecourt, May 1917.

(AWM E00454)
On 19 May 1917, as the second battle of Bullecourt draws to a close, men of the 5th Australian Division heat tea over a candle in one of the captured trenches. (AWM E00456)
Australian nurses outside their tent at No. 3 Australian General Hospital at Abbeville, most likely in June 1917. This large medical facility stood behind the main front line and along an evacuation route to England for the seriously wounded.

(AWM H16063)
Months after the fighting in the area, the German barbed-wire defences erected at Lagnicourt still stand, September 1917. (AWM E01014)