

THE BRIBIE "BUGLE"

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In this edition—The Fighting 9th cont.

As mentioned in the previous edition, the 9th Battalion was assigned to the defence of the Suez Canal which began in early **January 1916**. Most of their time was spent sand-bagging and building trenches in the shifting desert sands. Mid **February** saw the formation of two new Australian Divisions, (the 4th and 5th). This was achieved by halving the numbers of the 16 existing AIF battalions and then building their strength back up with reinforcements. The division of the 9th Battalion created the 49th Battalion which became part of the 13th Brigade of the new 4th Division. Together with the 50th, 51st and 52nd Battalions they later covered themselves with glory at the victorious battle for Villers-Bretonneux.

By mid March the Battalion had been relieved from their forward defence positions and were returned to the Canal area where general training continued. During this period several structural changes occurred which were to have a major impact on the performance of the AIF Divisions. Firstly, Pioneer Battalions were formed to carry out engineering tasks which were outside the scope of the infantry Battalions. Secondly, Machine Gun Companies were formed to handle the heavier Vickers guns and the Infantry Battalions were then issued with the new Lewis Light Machine Gun. The Lewis gun was to prove its worth over and over again as the Australian Divisions battled their way across the Western Front to the Hindenburg Line. Also at this time the Mk. III Le Enfield rifles were replaced by the Mk. IV. Finally, after not sighting nor engaging the enemy in the Suez Canal defence action, the Battalion boarded the Cunard liner, *Saxonia* on the **27th of March 1916** and sailed for Marseilles arriving on the **2nd of April**. A scenic train journey along the Rhone Valley delivered the 9th Battalion to Godewaersvelde near Ypres, on the **5th of April**, and so **their French campaign began in earnest**.

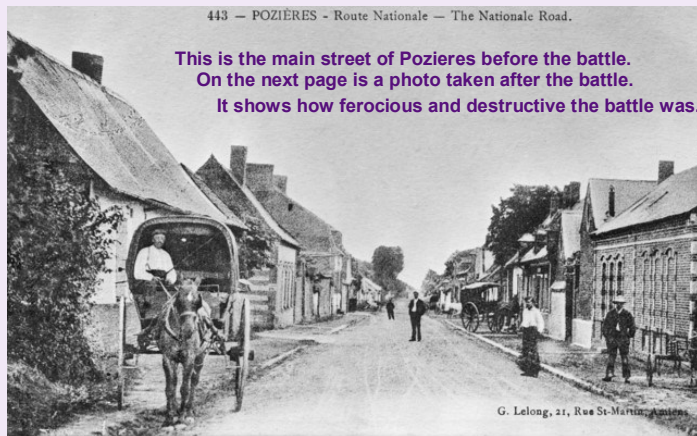
On the **20th of April** the Battalion experienced the power of the Germany artillery for the first time when their farm billets at Rouge de Rout, near Armentieres, were shelled for an hour by a German howitzer battery. C Company took the brunt of the shelling and when it ceased 25 men lay dead and another 49 were wounded. On only a couple other occasions during the war did the AIF suffer such casualties, through shelling of billets. Being billeted in a farm building on the Western Front was definitely a very strange experience for the Australians compared to the conditions at Anzac and in the deserts of Egypt.

The following is an extract from the book by C.W. Wrench MC, *"Campaigning with The Fighting 9th"*. "To be billeted in the half-ruined Fleurbaix within 2 miles of the front line, yet with a remnant of the inhabitants still living among them and selling them eggs or champagne at 5 francs a bottle to step out at the beginning of a communication trench and stroll across a field to "Spy Farm" sheltered by the trees only 800 yards from the line, where the old proprietor and his wife sold them beer as they sat around tables in the farm court-yard; to visit the tea rooms well kept by a lady of Armentieres or even the comfortably furnished reading or writing huts of the Church Army or YMCA near the Sailly Road; to buy at the Army Canteens any quantity of groceries, tobacco or even clothing at prices below those of peace time, to find a French newsboy calling the *Paris Daily Mail* (with special items for Anzac troops) down a country lane within sight of the communication trenches; to be ordered occasionally as a military fatigue to help the French people with the work on their farms, to be able after work to walk up the road and buy champagne at the nearest estaminet".

The Somme Campaign: In early **July** the Australian Divisions of the First Australian Corps made their way down from Flanders to the Somme. The Somme offensive was already in progress and the British 4th and 5th Armies had failed in 3 attempts to capture the town of Pozieres. As a consequence, the Australian Corps was allotted to the British Army commanded by General Gough. General Walker, the 1st Division commander chose to the 3rd Brigade to head up the planned assault on Pozieres. (shades of the Gallipoli landing allotted task).

443 — POZIERES - Route Nationale — The Nationale Road.

This is the main street of Pozieres before the battle.
On the next page is a photo taken after the battle.
It shows how ferocious and destructive the battle was.



This picture tells more than a thousand words could ever do.
Main street after the battle



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

EZ0095

The main attack against the village commenced soon after midnight on the **23rd of July 1916**. The troops had been instructed to push forward close to the barrage being laid down by the division's field artillery even at the risk of being hit by friendly fire. The 9th and 10th Battalions ran into stiff resistance in the old German Line (O.G.) and it is significant that the Victoria Cross was won by a member of these two battalions on this part of the front. In the 9th battalion's case, a platoon was being held up by 2 machine guns and grenade throwing Germans. To break the deadlock, Pte. John Leak jumped out of the trench without orders, ran forward, and threw 3 bombs into the German position. He then jumped into the position and bayoneted the 3 enemy gunners. The 10th Battalion had a difficult job clearing the Germans from their section of the advance until determination, endurance and courage finally secured a safe position. They lost heavily, however, with one Company losing about 40 killed or wounded out of 70 men. By the following morning Pozieres, up to its north-western corner, was in the hands of the Australians. Total casualties from the battle were recorded as KIA 57, WIA 271, and 65 were missing (=393). They were then relieved by the 4th Brigade which continued the attack.

An anonymous writer described these conditions: "Three days without sleep often without food and deafened by unceasing and threatening artillery fire they were living in trenches that were trenches no longer but were shell holes of churned and beaten soil. They had been buried, dug out and gassed. Tired, stunned and exhausted, they staggered out from battered trenches choked with wounded and lined with mangled bodies." The 3rd Brigade, in late August, relieved the 1st Brigade in front of Mouquet Farm in conditions no better than those they had left at Pozieres. Desperate struggles ensued day and night and it took until late **September** before the Germans were subdued. The Brigade lost 840 men in front of Mouquet Farm. By the end of September Australian casualties in the battle of the Somme totalled over 50,000 and included the 5,300 lost at Fromelles. The 9th had extricated itself from the churned earth and carnage of Mouquet Farm late on **22 August 1916**.

They now moved back to Flanders and even took leave to the UK, "Blighty Leave". The huge, quick losses on the Somme prompted the Australian Government to conduct referendums to allow subscription to be introduced to supply the re-enforcements needed. Both referendums returned a "No" vote.

By **late October** the 1st Division was back on the Somme where they found the area had been churned into a waste moorland, bare of dwellings, trees or hedges, and blocked by innumerable craters. As winter approached the Australians found themselves in a sea of slimy mud up to 2 feet deep, "**Somme Mud**". Early **November** saw the 9th trudging back into the line at Flers along the tracks, "sledges-tracks", where, in the dark, many men and animals fell again and again into shell-holes. Men were continually pulled out and many pack animals, stuck fast in the mud, had to be shot. Flers was described as "The defunct village that lends its name to the sector of mud and corpses that we guarded for the winter". It was about this time that the Battalion's well respected C.O. for the past 18 months, Lt. Col. Robertson was promoted to Brigadier General and given command of the 12th Brigade.



Pack animal pulled from the mud



Shell-holes and mud



A consequence of the mud was "Trench Feet"

By the end of **December 1916** the Battalion had been moved out of the line and remained out for two months. At the end of **February** the Germans began their withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line, however, several villages still needed to be taken by the Allies. The 1st division were holding the line at the village of Lagnicourt when on the **15th of April 1917**, 23 German battalions with storm troops and guns attacked the line held by a little over four battalions. Fighting was fierce and the situation perilous at times. Eventually, the combined fire of supporting companies Lewis guns and rifles sent the Germans into retreat. Hundreds were cut down by British artillery fire and gun-fire as they tried to flee.

The official historian needed 50 pages to describe this swift and lively action in which two members of the 12th Battalion were awarded the VC. The **6th of April 1917** saw America declare war on Germany. By early **May** the 9th was engaged in another action—The Battle of

Bullecourt—AWM Photo: E603



Bullecourt. “The battle had become a furious and continuous bombing battle—our mills bombs and rifle grenades versus German broom

stick and egg bombs”. The 9th took about 900 yards of trench, 3 trench-mortars, 3 flamethrowers, 250 rifles and a large quantity of egg and stick bombs. The Battalion had lost 26 killed and 130 wounded. Soon after Bullecourt, the Australian divisions were moved back from the line to billets in villages on the old Somme battlefields. The 3rd brigade were billeted in the village of Ribemont where they rested for 5 weeks before moving back to Flanders. It was at this time that their long serving, well respected 2 I/C, Major Neligan, was promoted to Lt. Col. and appointed Commander of the 10th Battalion. After a long rest the 3rd Battle of Ypres began for the five Australian divisions now up in Flanders. The attack at Polygon Wood was the first occasion on which 2 Australian divisions would be taking part in an attack side by side. The 9th and 10th Battalions, arriving through Chateau Wood suffered heavy losses...The 9th lost all its Company Commanders and half its junior Officers. On the **20th of September 1917** a barrage from over **3,000 guns** crashed out and the line moved forward behind the barrage which was creeping at the rate of 100 yards every six minutes. The barrage was so perfect that all objectives were easily taken with many enemy surrendering quickly without firing a shot. This action followed the 1st phase which had taken place a week earlier. The 1st phase had cost the 9th Battalion 238 casualties and total Australian Casualties amounted to over 5,000. The casualties mounted alarmingly as the push towards the Hindenburg Line battled its way through Menin, Broodseine Ridge and Passchendaele. It is appropriate that, as Remembrance Day approaches, that we pause to Remember Them—**Lest We Forget**.

The Broodseinde Ridge battle began tragically on the **4th of October** when the Anzac Corps troops, milled about the waiting line, were shelled as they waited for zero hour. At daybreak dead lay in groups along the front.

Australian troops march through Ipres Past the ruined cathedral that Monet loved to paint.



Australian Troops in the Ypres battle field



Fortunately for the 9th Battalion they were being held back as support and therefore escaped the terrible carnage of the morning. Even though the casualty figures were high, the Broodseinde Battle was an outstanding success and convinced the German Command that its tactics were powerless against the Allied “step by step” approach. Total Australian casualties were almost 6,500.

Passchendaele Ridge was the next operation which developed into a more drawn out battle that was more strenuously contested by the Germans. The weather was bad and the 1st attack failed because of it. A 2nd attack a few days later also failed. A 3rd attack by the Canadians on the **26th of October** was followed by subsequent attacks which finally resulted in the capture of Passchendaele Ridge. The 9th Battalion was not involved in these main attacks, however, they did still take casualties from shellfire. On the **13th of November 1917** the Division was withdrawn from the line for a rest. A month later the 3rd Brigade moved to the Messines sector to hold the front which was quiet in this area now. They remained there until early **April 1918**. As from the **1st of January 1918** all five Australian Divisions had been formed into The Australian Corps.

To be continued in the next edition. In the meantime further reading is available in the PDF versions of the DVA Western Front books which can be accessed through the library link on the Sub-Branch website.

Remember to Remember—At 11a.m. on the 11th Day of the 11th Month



Lest We Forget

New Zealand VC winners continued:

We have skipped a couple of issues with the New Zealand VC winners so here are a few more.

Sergeant Keith Elliott, 22nd Battalion, 2NZEF



Wairarapa farmer and rugby player Keith Elliott (1916-1989) was awarded the Victoria Cross for his efforts at Ruweisat Ridge on 15 July 1942. Serving with 22nd Battalion, Elliott was wounded in the chest while leading his platoon in a successful breakout. Under heavy machine-gun and mortar fire he led a bayonet charge across 500 m of open ground, capturing an anti-tank gun, several machine-guns, and 50 prisoners. He then went on to help destroy two more machine-gun positions and capture another 80 prisoners, despite suffering further wounds to his thigh and knee. Promoted to Second Lieutenant in May 1943, Elliott was sent back to New Zealand soon afterwards as part of a campaign to boost morale at home. After the war Elliott was ordained a minister in the Anglican Church, working for many years in the Wairarapa and Wellington regions.

Sergeant Alfred Clive Hulme, 23rd Battalion, 2NZEF



Dunedin-born Alfred Clive Hulme (1911-1982) was awarded a Victoria Cross for a series of heroic acts on Crete. A sergeant with 23rd Battalion, Clive (as he was known) led a series of counter-attacks against German paratroops around Maleme airfield on 20-21 May 1941. Four days later he played a prominent part in the New Zealand counter-attack at Galatas, clearing a dangerous German position with

hand grenades. After hearing that his younger brother (also serving on Crete) had been killed, Hulme began hunting down German snipers, either alone or with small groups of New Zealanders. On occasions he disguised himself as a German to get close to his targets. Hulme was ruthlessly efficient – he is believed to have killed more than 30 enemy snipers before being seriously wounded on 28 May while stalking yet another.

Squadron Leader Leonard Henry Trent, RNZAF (attached to RAF).

Nelson-born Leonard Trent joined the RNZAF in November 1937 and gained a short-service commission in the RAF the following year. Trent was awarded the VC for his actions during a daylight bombing raid on an Amsterdam power station in May 1943. On the way to the target, Trent's formation of 11 Ventura bombers (one plane had returned to base earlier with mechanical problems) was decimated by German fighters – only two aircraft reached the target area. Despite heavy anti-aircraft fire the New Zealander pressed home his attack and completed his bombing



run. His aircraft was shot down immediately afterwards and the survivors, Trent and his navigator, were taken prisoner. In 1944 he took part in the 'Great Escape' from Stalag Luft III but was recaptured and spent the rest of the war in a POW camp.

Flying Officer Lloyd Allan Trigg, RNZAF (attached to RAF).

Lloyd Trigg is the only serviceman to have been awarded the VC on the 'recommendation' of an enemy. A salesman from Whangārei, he joined the RNZAF in June 1941. After undertaking pilot training in Canada he was seconded to the RAF and posted to Coastal Command, flying anti-submarine patrols from West Africa. During an operational sortie on 11 August 1943, Trigg sighted *U-468* on the surface. Despite being hit repeatedly by anti-aircraft fire, Trigg pressed home his attack and fatally damaged the German submarine with depth charges. His crippled Liberator then crashed into the sea with the loss of all eight crew. German survivors praised Trigg's courage after they were picked up by an Allied ship. Their evidence was instrumental in the New Zealand-er being awarded a posthumous VC.



Sergeant John Daniel Hinton, 20th Battalion, 2NEF.

Jack Hinton earned his VC while serving with 20th Battalion in Greece. In April 1941 he was amongst a large force of New Zealand and British troops awaiting evacuation from Kalamata.



When the Germans attacked and a retreat was ordered, Hinton shouted, 'To hell with this! Who will come with me?', and charged two enemy field guns. After eliminating the gun crews with hand grenades he stormed two houses, bayoneting the Germans inside. Shortly afterwards he was shot in the stomach and taken prisoner. While a prisoner of war Hinton escaped twice and made several other attempts. He was told he had been awarded the VC as he lay in hospital recovering from a beating administered to him after one of these attempts.

All content and photographs courtesy of NZ Govt. History website.

This New Zealand VC winners section will be concluded in the next Bugle edition.

If anyone wishes to comment or would like something researched for inclusion in the "Bugle" kindly email me (Graham) at this address:

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Lest We Forget