

Commemorative Address - Australian Service at the Digger Memorial, Bullecourt

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This afternoon we have walked where those we have come together to remember walked almost a century ago. We stand side by side to remember our shared history, forged in the battles that helped shape our history here at Bullecourt, and in the many other towns and villages in France and Belgium where Australians fought during the First World War.

Through the story of one soldier, we can reflect on the experience of many.

By April 1917 Alfred Guppy had already fought a long war. He enlisted in September 1914 and served at Gallipoli before moving to the Western Front.¹ In the moments before Dawn on 11 April 1917, he waited alongside fellow Australians of the 4th Division for the assault on the Hindenburg line near Bullecourt to begin. They were to attack to the right of the town in support of the British offensive around Arras to the north.² The battle became known as the first battle of Bullecourt.

In the early morning light Alfred and his fellow soldiers were confronted with “a perfect hail of bullets” from German machine guns. He wrote:

As one looks around in the breaking dawn with the ground white with snow, he sees everywhere hundreds of figures moving calmly forward in perfect formation with here and there men falling as a bullet strikes home. We reach the barb wire entanglements and find that we have to rifle through the narrow gaps.³

Alfred reached the barbed wire entanglements to find them uncut. Though the action had not started well, some units of the Division did break into the Hindenburg line. However by

¹ NAA service record

² AWM http://www.awm.gov.au/units/event_110.asp, <http://www.westernfront.gov.au/bullecourt/what-happened-here.php>

³ Guppy, Alfred Leslie, AWM collection, 2DRL/0447

11am, unsupported by artillery, cut off from reinforcements and facing a fierce German counter attack, the Australians had begun to retreat. Alfred urged men on the verge of surrender to fight on, but soon realised there was little choice but to retreat or be captured.

Attempting to return to Allied lines, Alfred made his way from shell hole to shell hole until he saw a party of German troops in his path. Hidden and with an enemy machine gun only fifty yards to his left, he lay low until the late afternoon.

At 4pm, almost twelve hours after the battle began, Alfred was discovered and captured.

In a large church in a German-held village Alfred was reunited with other members of his battalion. Together, they tried to come to terms with the horror they had experienced. Although Alfred could not have known it, the fighting outside Bullecourt on 11 April cost two Brigades of the Australian 4th Division over 3,300 casualties.⁴

Reflecting on the last hours of that day Alfred wrote:

*Few words pass between us for we feel too much stunned with the awful day we have passed and the realisation of what we are now.*⁵

Alfred had become one of some 1,170 prisoners – the largest number of Australian soldiers captured in any single engagement of the war.⁶

Three weeks later Australian and British troops made another attempt to seize the Hindenburg line at Bullecourt. But Alfred played no part in it. The 4th Division had been withdrawn from the line and he remained a POW until the end of the war.

His story did not end with the First Battle of Bullecourt and our story does not end with the Western Front.

⁴ <http://www.awm.gov.au/military-event/E110/>

⁵ Guppy, Alfred Leslie, AWM collection, 2DRL/0447

⁶ AWM http://www.awm.gov.au/units/event_110.asp

Many Australian men and women of the Navy, Army and Air Force have followed in the footsteps of Alfred's generation. In the decades that followed, they have served in the Second World War, Korea, Malaya, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan and in many peacekeeping operations. Today beneath the shadow of the Digger, we honour them all.

Lest we forget.

End text