



BOTH SIDES OF THE WIRE

The memoir of an Australian officer captured
during the Great War

WILLIAM CULL

EDITED BY AARON PEGRAM



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About the author

William Cull was an apprentice coach builder from Sanford, Victoria, who enlisted in the AIF in May 1915. He saw active service as an infantry officer on Gallipoli and the Western Front where he was severely wounded and taken prisoner during the 6th Brigade's attack on Malt Trench near Warlencourt in February 1917. He spent eleven months in captivity in Germany before being transferred to Switzerland in January 1918. He died in Melbourne in 1939.

About the editor

Aaron Pegram is a historian at the Australian War Memorial and the Managing Editor of the Memorial's magazine *Wartime*. A Charles Sturt University history graduate, he is currently writing a PhD thesis on the 3,861 Australian troops taken prisoner by the German Army on the Western Front.

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Page viii: Captain William Ambrose Cull, 22nd Battalion, in London
after thirteen months as a prisoner of war in German captivity.
Reproduced from *At All Costs*, 1919.

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W. AMBROSE CULL
(Captain Late A.I.F.)

Introduction

Captain William Ambrose Cull, 22nd Battalion, Australian Imperial Force (AIF), was taken prisoner on the Western Front early on the morning of 26 February 1917. A veteran of the Gallipoli campaign and the fighting at Pozières on the Somme, Cull was seriously wounded in the hip by fragments of a German hand grenade as he led his company during a brigade attack on Malt Trench—a formidable German stronghold just outside of the French village of Le Barque, which was well protected by thick belts of barbed wire, machine guns, and a garrison of well-trained and experienced German troops.

It was vital for attacks like these to be made with the assistance of large amounts of artillery that would cut paths through the wire and keep the Germans in their dugouts instead of at their machine guns, but this attack had no such support. Elsewhere, the Germans had withdrawn from their position—so tenaciously held throughout the Battle of the Somme and the depressing winter that followed—so that they could stand and fight the Allied armies along the Hindenburg Line many miles to the east. British and Dominion troops, including the Australians, followed in their wake, some re-establishing contact with determined German machine-gunners standing to fight a rearguard action. But Malt Trench was believed by Australian commanders to be lightly held and could easily be taken by the advancing infantry. Because the rest of the Allied front was following up on the German withdrawal, the commanders were eager that the attack be made and the objective secured. Cull headed out into No Man's Land to patrol the German wire the night before the attack, but found the German bastion at Malt Trench to be held by a powerful and determined enemy that was willing to stand their ground. He protested to his commanders, telling them how futile such an attack would be, but in reply was told curtly that 'not a shell' would be fired and that 'the attack must be launched at all costs.'

His objections ignored, Cull led his men within sixty yards of the uncut enemy wire before they were met by a wall of German rifle and machine-gun fire. Images of soldiers being hung up on barbed wire and slaughtered by machine guns is probably one of the most pervasive and exaggerated stereotypes of trench fighting during the First World War, but without the firepower to beat down the German wires it was the reality that faced Cull and his men that night in their attack on Malt Trench. Illuminated by German flares, Cull tells us that in the face of the murderous machine-gun fire, his 'doomed but dauntless men' tore at the German wire 'with bare and bleeding hands' in the effort to press on with the attack.

Cull negotiated the first belt of barbed wire and was making his way through a second when a German hand grenade landed at his feet and exploded, tearing away part of his hip and blowing him out in the open. He was dragged by his men to the safety of a nearby shell hole, but they were unable to bring him back to the Australian positions when they later withdrew. Owing to the loss of blood, Cull drifted in and out of consciousness for hours, but was mortified to wake to the sound of German troops moving about the uncut wire, searching for survivors. For Cull, the sudden realisation that he was going to be taken prisoner was purely mortifying: 'Now that there was no longer any hope of escape, I wished they would come, though what the Battalion would think of me if they knew that I was taken prisoner worried me. The thought was so bitter that for a moment I cared little whether I lived or died.' Cull's worst fears materialised in the form of a German soldier who discovered the wounded and bleeding Australian at the bottom of his shell hole, and brought him into the trenches that Cull and his men had so desperately tried to take.

William Cull thus became one of 4057 Australians taken prisoner during the First World War.¹ I first came across his book, originally titled *At All Costs*, at the beginning of my PhD research on the Australians captured on the Western Front. Charles Bean, the Australian official historian, used Cull's description of the attack on Malt Trench in Volume IV of the *Official History of Australia in the war of 1914–1918*, and Bill Gammage used Cull's letters in the State Library of NSW for his PhD thesis which ultimately became *The Broken Years*—the landmark study of Australians during the First World War. Hundreds of books document the horror that 21,400 Australians suffered in Japanese captivity during the Second World War, but *At All Costs* was one of the very few publications that I could find on the Australians that had been captured a generation before. As it turned out, Cull's was one of just four published accounts written by the 3867 Australians held captive by the Germans, and like the 196 Australians captured by Ottoman Turkey, their account of hardship and anguish was quickly forgotten by a nation deep in mourning. The loss of up to 60,000 Australians on the cliffs of Gallipoli, in the deserts of Sinai-Palestine and Mesopotamia, and in the putrid mud of France and Flanders was a burden simply far too great to bear for such a young nation.

I was immediately struck by how frank and candid Cull's account of the war truly was; not only of his capture and ordeal as a wounded Australian officer in the hands of the Germans, but of his brief service on the Gallipoli peninsula and the gritty reality of trench warfare on the Western Front. Unlike other memoirs I had read by returned servicemen writing in the late 1920s and 1930s, *At All Costs* had a raw sense of immediacy that had not yet had the chance to mellow with the benefit of time. Cull speaks bitterly about his enemy, using the dehumanising labels of 'Hun' and 'Bosche' instead of the affable 'Fritz' of more measured writers. Unlike other authors, Cull writes openly and candidly about the thrill of stalking men in No Man's Land, the psychology of battle, and the personal sense of humiliation felt at becoming a prisoner of war. Most revealing was Cull's description of the nature of raiding and patrolling in the so-called 'quiet sector' near Armentières, known as 'The Nursery', where Australian troops learned the rigours and routine of warfare on the Western Front after their arrival from Egypt in March 1916. Here, the surrender of 'treacherous' Germans was not always accepted, although this grim reality of trench fighting was a subject that few front line memoirists could be frank about. Bean gave several examples of it throughout the *Official History*, but explained that such things were inevitable in close quarters fighting that depended on the 'exercise of primitive instinct' for survival. It was one of the many realities that troops faced on the Western Front, although Cull had the misfortune of learning that the Germans, too, would at times not take prisoners.

At All Costs first appeared in 1919 at a time when governments across the British Empire were concerned about how the vanquished Central Powers had treated its prisoners of war. From 1915 until the end of the war, the British Committee on the treatment by the enemy of British prisoners of war regularly released reports on the conditions Allied prisoners were facing in enemy captivity. These reports were based on interviews from the wounded and sick who had been repatriated to England, escaped prisoners of war, and various forms of correspondence that had been mediated by the neutral countries to and from the German War Ministry. Excerpts were routinely published in the British press, where they proved to be of great propaganda value, but Australians were mortified when reports from occupied France told for the first time how their own troops were faring in the hands of the German Army.

In May 1917, Charles Bean, then the Australian war correspondent, interviewed two men who had been among the 1170 Australians captured during the 4th Division's costly and unsuccessful attack on the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt on 11 April 1917—the largest group of Australians taken prisoner in a single engagement throughout the entirety of the war. They had escaped from behind German lines, and had brought with them news that the unwounded other-ranks men were being held as 'prisoners of respite' in deliberate violation of the 1907 Hague Convention, and were being used as labourers within the range of Allied artillery fire. Their poor treatment, according to the Germans, was in retaliation of the British Army using captured Germans as labourers behind its front line, and would continue until all German prisoners were removed from within 30 kilometres of the British lines. In reality, however, a German manpower shortage following heavy casualties at Verdun and on the Somme the previous year ensured that the captured Australians remained behind German lines as labourers until as late as November 1917. The escaped men told a tale of woeful neglect, random beatings and lootings, inadequate provisions, and extreme hunger, which only affirmed the image of the German Army as a cruel and merciless enemy. 'They can starve and ill-treat them as much as the like,' Bean thundered in one of his despatches. 'One can only thank Providence that Australians have long, long memory, and that the Germans may regret for centuries the months when they did their will upon these 1000 men.'²

News such as this was fragmentary at its best, so it was only after the war that the full story of the treatment of Australian prisoners emerged from the prison camps of Germany and Ottoman Turkey when men like Cull began to tell their stories. After their repatriation to England, over 2000 Australian prisoners of war gave written statements about the circumstances of their capture and the quality of their treatment in the hands of the enemy. Treatment varied according to rank, the theatre of operations in which a man was captured, the enemy unit that captured him, whether he was wounded or not, whether he remained for long periods of time behind the enemy front line; and when he did eventually make it into the prison camps, the location of that camp within the enemy nation. Australian prisoners experienced extremes at both ends of the spectrum, but unlike the sufferings of Australian prisoners in the Pacific during the Second World War, no unified narrative emerged from the prison camps of the Central Powers. Conditions in Turkey were simply horrible with 60 Australians (30 per cent of Australians taken prisoner by the Turks) dying in captivity, mainly as a result of disease. Conditions in Germany were much better, where 337 of Australian prisoners died (8 per cent of Australians captured by the Germans), almost three quarters of which were from wounds received in battle.³

With the notable exception of the deliberate mistreatment of the Australians captured at Bullecourt, Germany overwhelmingly adhered to the rules outlined by the 1907 Hague Convention. As an officer

Cull was given better treatment than the NCO and other-ranks prisoners. Once his wounds had healed sufficiently at the hospital at Bochum, Cull was held in officer camps at Karlsruhe, Freiburg and Heidelberg in southern Germany with other British prisoners where he could draw pay, could at times be given parole (based on the gentleman's agreement that no escape attempts be made), and was never put to work.

Vital for prisoner survival in Germany were the regular consignments of mail and food parcels from the Red Cross Society, which all Australian prisoners in Germany were able to live off rather than the inadequate camp provisions. Australian prisoners in Turkey also received food parcels from the Red Cross, but the unreliable supply lines across the Austro-Hungarian Empire and the isolated regions of the Turkish prison camps made distributing welfare to prisoners extremely difficult.

In spite of the better conditions Australian prisoners experienced in Germany, selected statements that described the worst of the treatment at the hands of the German people were published in 1919 by the Department of Defence, under the title *How the Germans treated Australian prisoners of war*. With the Treaty of Versailles yet to be signed, the publication served as an indictment for defeated Germany to pay for its outrages committed against prisoners of war. The other prisoner of war memoirs were published in Australia at this time, but the observation that the vast majority of Australians survived captivity and the war seems to be one made with the benefit of hindsight rather than the view shared at the time.

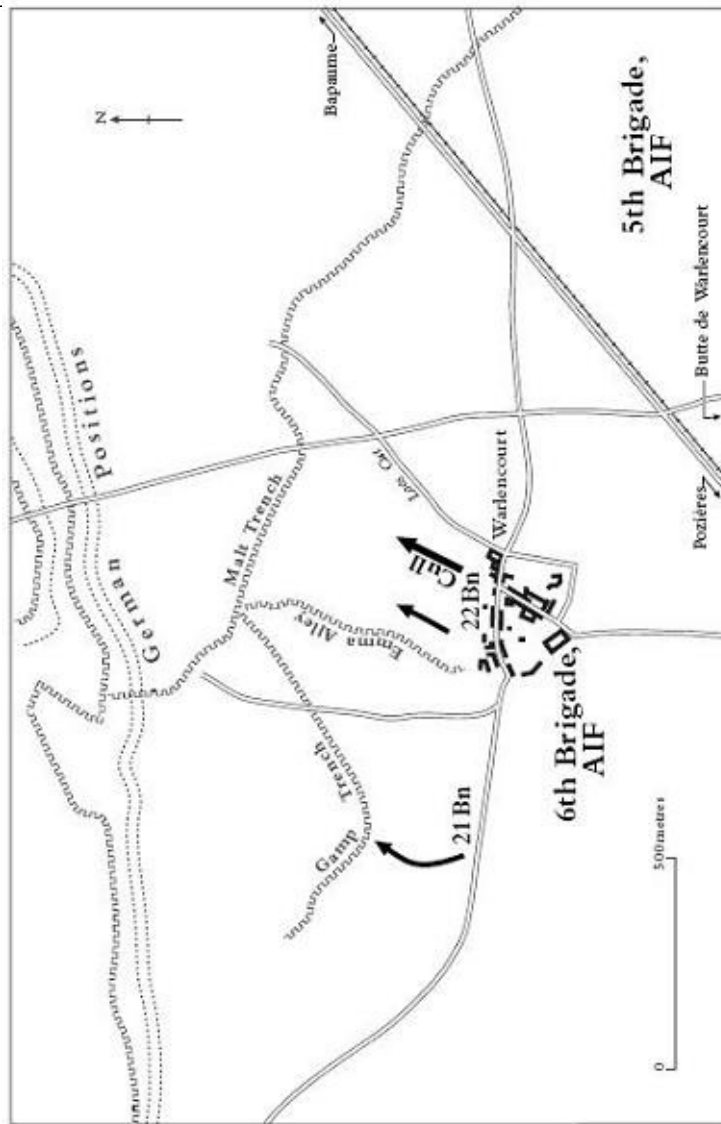
Unlike the other memoirs written by returned Australian servicemen, *At All Costs* gave a unique perspective of the burden of war felt by the people on the other side of the wire. In 1914 the British imposed a naval blockade of Germany which produced critical shortages in basic areas such as fertilisers, fats and other basic commodities. International trade collapsed, and Germany lost millions in finance and commerce. The armaments industry was sufficiently controlled by the state to continue production until the end of the war, but agriculture was not so well organised and was strained by a massive army with a voracious appetite as well as the needs of millions of people at home. As in all countries, Germany was forced to impose wartime rationing, but a haphazard attempt by the state to fix pricing at the point of production, not at the point of sale, encouraged producers to withdraw from the market. This caused massive inflation of essential food items such as milk, vegetables and fruit. A potato shortage was attributed to the enormous consumption of fodder required by stock, and millions of pigs were slaughtered in the great *Schweindemord* of 1915. No pigs meant little fertiliser, which worsened existing problems caused by the failed crops of 1914–1915 and the 'turnip winter' of 1916–1917. Meat became scarce. Conditions on the home front deteriorated as the war dragged on, and by the time the first Australian prisoners had arrived in Germany in mid-1916, the German population had long been feeling the effects of the war in the pits of their stomachs. But with regular consignments of food parcels sent to them by the Red Cross in London, Australian prisoners were completely self-sufficient from the Germans' meagre ration of turnips, *Kriegsbrot* and *ersatz* coffee, and by late 1917, they were easily among the best-fed people in the country.

Cull's story is, therefore, a very different account of the First World War than many Australians are familiar with. It is not a story of courage and heroism, because Cull certainly did not see it in such a way, but rather a story of the adversity, perseverance, tragedy and resentment of a young Australian who spent thirteen months as a prisoner of war in Germany. Cull's story is both powerful and evocative, and contributes to our greater understanding of the sacrifice made by Australians during the First World War.

In *Both Sides of the Wire* I have kept Cull's story very much as it appeared in its original published

form from 1919, with the notable exceptions of the introduction, endnotes, epilogue and title. All mistakes appearing in these sections are none other but my own. The notes have been included in this edition to set Cull's story within the broader experience of captivity during the First World War and convey to the reader that the war for William Cull continued many years after his repatriation to Australia. Where possible I have corrected the spelling of locations and place names in Egypt, France and Germany, and have taken the liberty of including the ranks, Christian names and units of people influential in Cull's story for wider interest.

Aaron Pegra



6th Brigade attack, 25 February 1917

Camps where Cull was held, in order of imprisonment



Chapter 1

Egypt and Gallipoli

The story of the Australian training camps in Egypt, the dramatic assault upon the Turkish cliff trenches of Gallipoli, where so many of our men had their baptism of fire, where many sleep in silent company, has been often told, so it is necessary only to offer a few personal impressions and experiences of that campaign.

Prior to the war I held a commission in the citizen military forces, but that, apparently, was not considered a vital recommendation for war service, because it was only on the twelfth application and after repeated offers of service in any capacity that I was finally accepted and sent to Duntroon for the special course. In any case the age limit of twenty-one years—soon afterwards extended to twenty-three—for commissions would have proved a barrier to holding commission rank at the age of twenty with the AIF, though not with the Imperial Forces, for, in despair of seeing war service at home, I had applied to the War Office, and in Egypt later was offered a commission. In the meantime I had passed out of Duntroon as one of five special instructors for Broadmeadows Camp, and once enrolled with the Australians, there was, naturally, no desire for service elsewhere, even though accompanied with that offer of rank which was denied at home.

As a result of many disappointments both before and after enlistment, I missed the heroic landing at Gallipoli, and to an Anzac that much has ever been a matter of regret. Beginning as a Private, I had gained my Sergeant's stripes when eventually I got away with the 6th Brigade under Lieutenant Colonel George Morton, commanding officer of the 23rd Battalion, who had been my battalion commander in home soldiering with the 71st City of Ballarat Regiment. Both on Gallipoli and in France it was my good fortune to serve under officers identified with the Ballarat district.

Egypt had been called the land of sun, sin, sorrow and sore eyes. Its temperatures are as high as its morals are unquestionably low, and Cairo is qualified in both ways to be its capital. One had to be very young indeed, very unobservant, not to realise the pity that Australian troops were ever landed there at all, even though it paved the way to Gallipoli and the name and fame of Anzac. It was in one sense dramatically picturesque that it should have fallen to the lot of the youngest nation amongst the Allies to sojourn in Egypt and campaign in Palestine—two of the cradles of the world. Their immemorial ruins were fingerposts pointing us always back to the grey days of antiquity, giving a new meaning to Scripture and history. The pity is that the contrast between past and present should, in its human elements, be so marked. There is nothing inspiring in the Egyptian today. He represents squalor and vice at its worst, and into these centres of decadence were dumped thousands of young Australians, many of whom had just thrown aside their school books, ignorant of the dangers of their

surroundings, full of confidence in themselves. Their first knowledge of the outside world might have been gained in much better company and in a cleaner atmosphere. It was especially hard upon lads who were playing the man's game, with very little preparation for it. Apart from the desire for action no one was sorry to see the last of Egypt.

Our first touch of hostilities on the way to the Turkish coast came with the torpedoing of the *Southland*, our transport being near enough at the time to assist in the rescue of her troops. The death of Colonel Richard Linton, commanding officer of the 6th Brigade, was to me a matter of deep regret because it was mainly upon his very strong recommendation that I had finally obtained the chance for active service. Even in the Lone Pine trenches, with the zip of sniper bullets always about one's ears, the occasional boom of big artillery, and the very near presence of the unspeakable Turk, it was difficult for one to realise that he had reached the Mecca of his pilgrimage. Even this early in my experience of war and with prying aeroplanes frequently crossing over our lines, I began to realise that the machine could never alter or lower the status of the human scout. The glamour of night work, of creeping and peering through the darkness to get touch of the enemy and some knowledge of his intentions began then to get possession of me. The searching of actual war finds elements and qualities in many forms. Under its grim influence one must discover himself afresh, though the finest find of all is that which he discovers in others, the spirit and full meaning of comradeship, the depths never before plumbed which the grim psychology of battle alone reveals. To have seen the souls and hearts of men laid bare is to know men—the very flower of men—in a new phase, and in that knowledge to be forever exalted.

The duller weeks of Gallipoli, in which both sides hung grimly to their lines, each watching and waiting for the other to lead, passed on with such excitements as an occasional bit of sniping, a constant vigilance in the matter of spies, for in this we were able to teach Abdul little. He took the ventures of it, both in our uniform and his own, and in this proved himself a brave soldier. In all the work of war time, none is more widely misunderstood than that of the military spy. Knowing well that, even on the faintest suspicion, he will be riddled with volleys of awkward questions, trusting wholly to his own mental alertness to survive that ordeal, he goes into enemy lines fully aware that discovery means short shrift and sudden death. Only the soldier can understand and appreciate all the risks of such a duty, the vital importance of success, the inevitable consequences of failure. The civilian scorns him, but the soldier takes off his hat to him.

With a fortnight's experience much of the novelty of trench warfare had disappeared. One was absorbed mainly in ordinary campaigning pursuits, the desire for a change of diet, the hundred and one little every day devices that help to lessen discomfort and maintain physical fitness. There was the perennial problem of the little nuisances of life, the unbidden guests which come and abide with you—not as single spies, but in battalions. Had lice been sheep, many of us were squatters. The sight of the blue Aegean suggested fish and fishing, and our first experiment was with a tin of bully beef and bomb. The tin was opened and thrown into the sea. Half an hour was given the fish to get interested, and the bomb followed the bait. The first catch was eleven fish up to 5 lbs in weight. On the following day we got over thirty, and the fish for breakfast as an alternative to fat bacon was just then one of the most desirable things in life. The only book I possessed—a translation of Dante's *Purgatorio*—seemed in one sense suited to the occasion and the scene. When nothing else was offered there was always the Turkish sniper and the wish to exchange compliments with him. One day, through over eagerness to get in touch with one of them, I laid myself open to crossfire from another quarter, and was given a lesson in prudence through the bridge of my rifle being shot away.

As bad luck had prevented me from seeing and sharing the beginnings of Gallipoli, the chances of war passed me out before the end of it. On the evening of November 5th—Guy Fawkes Day—our fireworks came in sudden and disastrous form. Sitting in company headquarters, which was roofed with iron and covered with about a foot of earth, I was giving some instructions to Sergeant Major James Purcell and Sergeant Fisher when a Turkish bomb found us. It was of a new pattern, made of shell casing filled with high explosive, and with a shaft some feet in length screwed to it. It burst immediately upon piercing the roof. Purcell, standing a little way off, was killed instantly. Fisher had amongst other wounds, one of his hands badly mutilated. My injuries were chiefly on the back and crown of the head, eight serious shrapnel wounds in all, and a compound fracture of the skull. There was a wound in the right shoulder also, and the force of the blow seemed to have shot the right eye so far out of the socket that it had to be pushed back in again. Some fragments of iron lodged at the back of it even now causes complete loss of sight for a time.

It seemed the end of all things for the moment, but meant only the end of Gallipoli, and what touched me most on leaving it was the concern of the men with whom I had been more closely associated. In Egypt I had not been a tender taskmaster. There were times when I felt that my platoon hated me very cordially, that my death in or out of action would have caused them no grief. In two months of Gallipoli we had come to a better knowledge and understanding. I realised it then, realised it later when, although forbidden to boast about trophies of war, they managed to bring me out a few souvenirs of Gallipoli. Because of all that lay behind it, no gift that I ever received had a greater value.

A month of Malta and St John's Hospital followed upon that adventure and, with the help of a good constitution, I made a quick recovery. My flesh must, I think, have remarkable healing qualities, for the whole of my face, which was practically raw and disfigured when leaving Anzac, healed very rapidly and soon began to look normal again. Many fragments of Turkish metal which the x-rays revealed were not recovered by the surgeons, and still give occasional trouble.

I was able to see a little of this keep of the Mediterranean before leaving it, the tombs and memorials of the old knights of St John of Jerusalem, their armour and weapons in the armoury being of chief interest. Otherwise than in its fortress value and its old association with pilgrimages to the Holy Land—which seem, by the bye, to have been the carefully conducted Cook's cheap excursions of the period—Malta is not especially interesting. During convalescence I had a chance to visit Florence but wished to get back to Egypt, wholly for the sake of meeting my brother Cecil and to arrange, if possible, for his transfer to my own corps.⁴ It seemed to be highly desirable at the moment that my brother and I should be together, and headquarters were always willing to help out any such arrangement. Later I began to doubt the value of it, because in close companionship the anxieties about the other to devote himself to the single purpose, and there is always the chance that both may go out in the one calamity.

We had a sad illustration of that afterwards in the attack on Mouquet Farm. Captain Harold Smith led a company of the 22nd; his brother Captain Dick Smith had a company of the 21st. They went over the top together, and both were killed within a few yards of the parapet. A third brother, who had been badly wounded in the first attack, died in an English hospital a few days later, and the family tragedy was complete. All three were magnificent fellows—men in battle, gentlemen always.

Before reaching Cairo the wounds in my head had reopened, but a fortnight in hospital left me fairly fit for service, though with little hope of again seeing Gallipoli. Apart from the suggestive fact that reinforcements were no longer being sent to the peninsula, one had that definite sense of something impending. A dark cloud seemed to be gathering over the east, and those were not good days for

anyone who happened for the moment to be outside the absorbing sphere of action. So the news that the great adventure had ended, that we had stolen away into the night, leaving our dead to the mercy of the Turk and the trenches, which he could never win in action, to his easy occupation, was not altogether a bolt from the blue. It was a melancholy ending to a magnificent effort. Into the strategic considerations which made evacuation desirable one may not enter without fuller knowledge of the circumstances, but the Anzacs of today have no self-accusing memories of it, no torturing sense of anything undone that might humanly have been accomplished. It brought them at least glory, well won in sacrifice. As one who shared only in a little of its story, it is possible to say so much without egotism, to say it for others as well as for Australians, because it is even now necessary to recall at times the splendid story of a certain 29th Division, though few on Gallipoli who had their eyes and ears open will need to be reminded of it. With the great story of Mons fresh in our ears, it seemed at the moment an unhappy fact that our shining things were being accomplished chiefly in retreats.

From the quiet confidences of camp and trench I knew how hard it was for the Anzacs to come away from Gallipoli, hardest of all to leave the little white crosses in the folds of the hills, where in their loneliness the lost lads lay waiting for the last daybreak.

*When across the mighty mountains
And along the silent sea,
The sublime celestial bugler
Shall ring out the Reveille.*

It had been a hard preparation for the greater phases to come, because there were no reliefs on Gallipoli, no billets behind the line—men were always in it and under it.

In camp again upon historic ground in the desert of Sinai, amongst the old trenches of Tel-el-Kebir and hard by a cemetery filled with British dead. In the changeless east, shifting in many things—chiefly in sand—it was astonishing to find the old lines still so clearly marked. Just about that time I made the acquaintance of an Egyptian doctor, a very charming man, who on learning where we were camped chatted freely and interestingly upon incidents of the old campaign. That he was so familiar with every detail of that battle of thirty-three years ago was no longer a surprise when I found out that he was a nephew of Arabi Pasha, who fought us there.

Chapter 2

New battle grounds

With two companies of the rearguard of our expedition for France I left Egypt for the second time on the Khedival mail steamer *Osmanieh*, afterwards sunk by submarines. There was a second call at Malta, for a damaged screw sent us in for repairs, and we spent three days in port. In this delay, fate served us a good turn, for a boat, in company of which we should have been, was torpedoed. Without further incident we reached the great French naval fortress of Toulon—one of the most interesting places I have ever seen—early in March 1916, and afterwards steamed to Marseilles where the Australians disembarked, and where we saw our first of the Bosche in some 8000 prisoners who were working about the docks. It was yet too early to see southern France in its spring vesture, but after Egypt and Gallipoli any land in which green things flourished seemed beautiful. Very soothing it was to eyes so long accustomed to the grey pinnacles of the peninsula and the red of shifting desert sands, so the new adventure seemed to open with fairer promise.

The valley of the Rhône, cultivated to its last root with formal squares of hard-pruned orchards, lined in poplars and with vines clinging to every accessible niche of its rockiest hills, is charming at all seasons. We had been lifted from the world's nursery into the middle distance of medieval times amongst places such as Dijon and Tarascon, built up through centuries upon their own refuse, and with the medieval smell, which is decay accumulated and grown old, still lingering about them. Transfer from the crescent to the cross was pleasantly obvious in the little shrines which crown so many of the hill crests. The olive country was our only disappointment, for to the olive is given only the poorer soils of southern France and the grey-green of the groves by contrast of the verdancy of Rhône water meadows, still held some suggestion of that oriental sterility which we were but too willing to forget.

Travelling chiefly by day we had a fair glimpse of the pleasant fields of France, some acquaintance with the character of its historic towns like Lyons, the great silk centre, before we began to tread upon the heels of retreating winter again away north at Rouen by the Seine, after a hundred hours' journey through a land that has been washed and combed into cultivated beauty by many generations. Little wonder that the Frenchman is an ardent patriot, for his is a land that would have stirred even our home sluggards to action and sacrifice. Seeing it with new and eager eyes, we could realise all the meaning of that epitaph roughly scratched above the grave of a dead French soldier on the Somme:

*My body to the earth,
My soul to God,
My heart to France.*

It needed no troop trains to tell us that France was at war, for on that journey, which will live so long

in memory, one saw few able-bodied men out of uniform. The day's work in France was being done chiefly by men bent with age, by women who, seen in the fields through the haze of early morning, recalled Millet's picture, *The Angelus* and by children. At some of the railway junctions we noticed even women engine stokers and cleaners—*Vivre la France!* With twenty-four hours in Rouen one had a chance to see some of the sights of the town, amongst them the beautiful Cathedral of Notre Dame—one of the few great northern churches which have been spared from the ruin of malignant German hate. We entrained next day for Berguette; a seven mile march at the end brought us to our billets at Wittes, and thence a few days later to the trenches of Fleurbaix, just south of Armentières, and within three hundred yards of the enemy, with whom every Australian was more anxious for a direct deal than he had ever been with Germany's hoodwinked tool, the Turk.

What a contrast to Gallipoli and the rainless Sinai desert were these waterlogged manways of the Western Front, with the tail end of a hard winter and occasional snow storms still biting into them. For eighteen months the tide of war had ebbed and flowed with little material gain either side. The proximity of the Hun had but hardened our hate of him, for that particular sector seemed to reek of his atrocities. We had fought the Turk as a formally declared enemy, without any particular animosity towards him; here it was altogether different. One must be blind to all the misery of martyred France, deaf to all authenticated tales of Hunnish depravity, here he could sit down with any degree of patience to wait for that which might happen.

It was early in April that we took over Fleurbaix from the 15th and 16th Royal Scots, and amongst other warnings given to us was, 'Look out for their patrols. They bombed us last night, and bombed us the night before. They're always bombing us in.' Fritz was presuming a bit considered that he had established a prowling right over the battle belt, but in less than a week he had given up possession.

The lure of night scouting, the silent, tense sensation of feeling one's way through the dark, groping for the unseen and unknown, began to get a grip of me again. It was sharpened up by resentment of the liberties which the Hun patrols were taking. Experimental patrols on three successive nights on no man's land served to strengthen a natural love for that particular work. If you meet an enemy the chances are that you meet him single-handed, matching the acuteness of your senses, your night craft against his. It is generally a fair deal, a fair duel, and he who is worst equipped for it takes the consequences. My first patrol was a prudent half-way to the German wires, and feeling about in the night for an hour and a quarter—rather than an experimental scour that one with any definite aim, for one needs to be quite sure of his nerves and the strain is constant. On the second occasion I left the patrol half-way and worked up close to the Bosche entanglements, repeating it on the following night.

Apart from personal liking for the job there was some purpose behind it. I was in charge of a party of three officers and seventy of other ranks (composed mainly of specialists such as grenadiers, machine-gunners and snipers) sent in ahead of the battalion to learn the line, and the best way to learn was by personal investigation. When news of my night promenades reached the ears of the commanding officer, a warning lecture followed. Officers could not be spared for that work, though before very long the need for it was fully realised.

Amongst our near neighbours were the Canadians, and news of the very effective scouting done by some of their expert backwoodsmen reached the ears of our divisional staff, who were so much impressed that they set about making special patrol arrangements. A lecture by a Canadian Captain, who had charge of the scouts of his own battalion, was being arranged, and attended by representative officers of each battalion in the division, as well as by headquarters staff. The Canadian was an expert in the job. With an enthusiasm that was infectious he urged the absolute necessity of scouting being

properly organised as a battalion matter, instead of being casually undertaken just as the need or the impulse came. His arguments were, indeed, so convincing that the staff decided immediately to set about organising special patrols on the same lines as the Canadians. It was my good fortune to be given the job.

We realised that the work was both delicate and dangerous, and there was a call for volunteers. Of high courage there was no lack. The other requirement was keen intelligence, coupled with persistency. When complete, it was a command of which any officer might be proud; impressive less for its strength than for its qualities, a close companionship based upon mutual understanding. It was clearly understood that, if any man betrayed the confidence of his comrades, he should be shot, that if I failed them there should be no compunction in carrying out a sentence mutually self-imposed. A majority of the scouts were bush men.

Our first undertaking was to get absolute control of no man's land, representing at that point a breadth of about 350 yards between the rival fighting lines, to bar it to the Hun patrols, and, if possible, locate all their listening posts and machine-gun stations. On the very day that the scouts were organised the Brigadier had a job ready for us. The 24th Battalion reported that an unused trench, lying about a hundred yards in front of the enemy line, was believed to be occupied by them at night. We were to reconnoitre, bomb the Bosche out if they happened to be in possession, and fix up some sham protection to indicate that we intend to hold it. The hope was that on the following evening an enemy party would investigate, and with a machine gun trained on the position might spring a trap on them. We found the trench almost full of water, and with a canvas screen and sand bags fixed up, made it a fair imitation of a semi-circular redoubt. 'Will you walk into my parlour?' said the spider to the fly, but the fly, more suspicious than curious, declined the invitation.⁵

On the following night we crept towards the German wires, but within eighty yards of them an observer whispered that an enemy patrol of about twelve men had passed behind us towards our own lines. Retiring to our wires we sent in for the additional men and chased the Germans back to their trenches.

Night patrols on both sides are forbidden to bomb except in the last emergency, and the reason for this will be obvious. Their work is mainly investigation, and as it is impossible in the darkness to discriminate between friends and foe, supporting fire from either trench is impossible. So it was no uncommon thing to find two rival patrols, investigating each other curiously and silently through the dark with only a few paces intervening. Ours was, however, a bombing party, and having cleared the ground and dug shelter-holes just deep enough for fire cover, I took a Sergeant and two men, creeping right under their wires, we had the fatigue party absolutely at our mercy. With bomb pins drawn and the lever held down by the finger only, we could hear the low murmur of their conversation, apparently a party of about eight. They were so sure of themselves that some whistled softly at their work. On the signal four Mills bombs dropped on them, so beautifully placed that the burst suggested the position of stars in the Southern Cross. The whistling turned to an agonised scream.

That is a characteristic of the Hun. When surprised or hurt he screams. Our men take it sometimes silently, or with an exclamation, but frequently with an oath. Once you have heard a German scream he has lost caste in men company. On the moment the bombs were tossed we dashed for our funk holes, and then what a commotion! The German flares lit up no man's land, and their machine guns chattered across it but 'Brer rabbit he jes' lay low and dun say nuffin.' Safe from the storm that swished just overhead, we laughed in sheer enjoyment.

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