

Mires of the Somme:
The actions of the I ANZAC Corps at Flers–Guedecourt
November 1916

by Nicholas Jensen

Abstract

Considering the vast scope and breadth of the Somme’s historiography, it is surprising that the Ist ANZAC Corps’ role at Flers–Guedecourt has attracted only marginal mention in the Somme’s expanding literature. Aside from C.E.W. Bean’s account in the *Official History*, in which he vividly describes the Flers–Guedecourt attacks as “undoubtedly the most difficult in which the AIF were ever engaged”, there is no monographic study which examines the role of I ANZAC Corps at Flers–Guedecourt in its final month of combat in the Somme campaign. Historians such as Bill Gammage and Joan Beaumont have suggested that the Flers–Guedecourt attacks should be recognised as a more significant moment in the broader history the AIF in the Somme Campaign.

Introduction

By the time the I ANZAC Corps reached the Flers–Guedecourt sector in late October 1916, the Somme campaign seemed to be progressing slowly into its final month of combat. The promising successes gained in autumn at Pozières and Mouquet Farm seemed to fade, as the Somme’s milder spring was gradually overtaken by the harsher winter conditions. Nevertheless, for the Somme’s Commander-in-Chief, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig and his adjuncts at GHQ, September was seen as the Somme’s long-awaited watershed and, in the mind of its commanders, it was surely a sign of promising things to come. In the space of 15 days, during the second half of September, the allied coalition managed to capture more ground than had been achieved in the entire three months since the campaign’s opening on 1 July.¹ For a moment it seemed that Haig’s strategy had been partially vindicated. Following the advances of September, Haig boastfully assured the War Committee in London that

¹ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 261.

the remaining months of the campaign would afford, “full compensation for all that had been done to attain it”.² For the first time Lloyd George (chief of the War Committee and a staunch critic of Haig’s methods) also reciprocated the sense of confidence, guaranteeing that Haig could “count on full support from home”.³

Setting the scene

Bolstered by these developments, Haig believed there were still gains to be achieved on the Somme. Not only had September yielded the most decisive advances of the entire offensive, but German morale also seemed to be succumbing to the allies’ mounting pressure. In early October, Haig wrote to Major General Sir Henry Rawlinson, commander of the IV Army, urging the exploitation of this advantage:

We must try to hold the enemy in our front, worry him, cause him loss, and generally wear down his morale. But weather and training requirements make big offensives impossible. Our purpose can be fulfilled along the centre of the Fourth Army by an offensive, which will provide good opportunities to improve our position.⁴

Haig was now determined to prosecute the final phase of the Somme battle during the winter. In his own words the plan was to “press the main attack south of the Albert-Bapaume road with the objective of securing the enemy’s last line of prepared defences between Morval and Le Sars, with a view to opening the way for the cavalry.”⁵ This plan had remained essentially unchanged since the Somme’s beginning in July. In fact, the important German-held town of Bapaume (which sat on the heights of the battlefield, overlooking the allied position) was still the chief objective of the IV Army.

² Haig’s diary extract quoted in Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2013), 246.

³ Lloyd George quoted in David R. Woodward, *Lloyd George and the Generals* (London: Routledge, 2004), 91.

⁴ AWM 35/13 “Charles Bean’s Questions: Commander in Chief instructions to Rawlinson”.

⁵ AWM4 1/14/2 Part 2 “General Staff, Headquarters, 4th Army – October 1916”.

Bapaume fulfilled two key purposes on the Somme. First, it functioned as a central junction in the road network for the German armies in the region, operating as the major infrastructural and supply depot for the battlefield. Second, it provided its German defenders with a superior vantage point from which they could observe artillery adjustments and changes in troop arrangements behind the allied front. The Albert–Bapaume Road (also known as the Old Roman Road) was the major highway that cut through the battlefield and connected Bapaume with the region’s other town, Albert.⁶ Yet despite the promising progress of September, Haig’s plan to launch a breakthrough assault against the Transloy line seemed overly ambitious.⁷ Rather than adopting Rawlinson’s more cautious “bite and hold” tactics – which proposed a far more realistic approach to the battlefield’s conditions – Haig opted for the jugular.⁸ In theory, a successful breakthrough was predicated on a heavy artillery barrage that would force a gap in the enemy’s line. This gap would subsequently allow for a rapid movement of either cavalry or tanks, which would breach the enemy’s line and enable an accelerated advance towards the German rear position near Bapaume. In short, Haig’s policy was to smash through an entire trench system in one swift stroke.

The breakthrough strategy was commonplace among the superiors in the High Command. For Haig in particular, his early training at the Royal Military College, and also his experiences in the Boer War, were especially influential in fixing the breakthrough technique to his tactical repertoire.⁹ As historian Paddy Griffiths has emphasised, Haig’s belief in a breakthrough attack on the Somme was, even amidst the conditions during October and November, an alluring prospect he could not resist pursuing.¹⁰

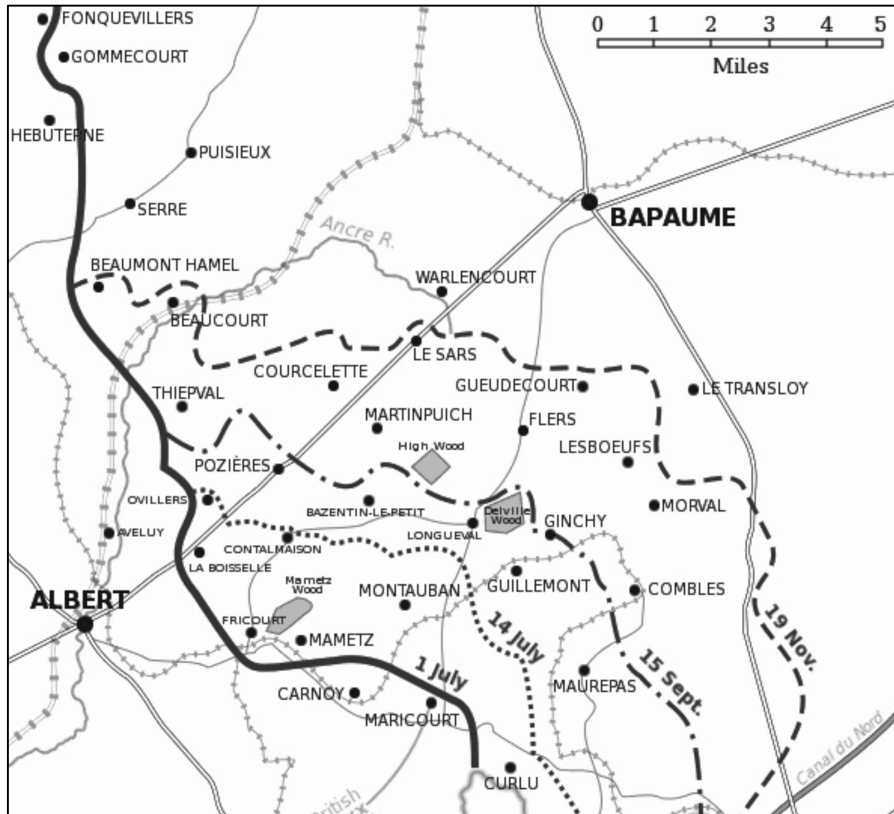
⁶ Martin Middlebrook, *The Middlebrook Guide to the Somme Battlefields* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 118-120.

⁷ AWM4 1/14/2 Part 1 “General Staff, Headquarters, 4th Army – November 1916”.

⁸ For an analysis of Rawlinson and Haig’s relationship and their views on tactics, see Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front: The Military Career of Sir Henry Rawlinson 1914-1918* (Yorkshire, UK: Pen and Sword, 2004), 271.

⁹ Gary Sheffield, *The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army* (London: Aurum Press, 2012), 25.

¹⁰ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front: The British Army’s Art of Attack, 1916-18* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 32-33.



Map 1. The Somme battlefield (July–November, 1916). Note the lines of progress made by the allies from 1 July to 19 November. (Source: T. Dodson Stamps and Vincent Esposito (eds.) *A Short Military History of World War I Atlas*).

Winter on the Somme

By the beginning of October the conceptual weaknesses of Haig’s strategy began to be seen more plainly. Rain started to fall in October, and grew heavier as the month progressed. The onset of winter completely transformed the battlefield into one vast and muddy quagmire, which called for a serious revision of allied strategy.¹¹ One English observer described Flers–Guedecourt’s muddy plains as being “best imitated by arranging innumerable cups and basins as closely together as possible ... only on the rims of the shell-holes walking was made possible.”¹² Nevertheless, the BEF continued to launch attacks in October that were limited in scale and were frequently postponed by the arrival of severe conditions which rendered the battlefield’s terrain impassable. Behind the Somme lines another crisis was

¹¹ For an incisive secondary guide of the Somme’s daily weather conditions, see: Gerald Gliddon, *Somme 1916: Battlefield Companion* (London: Sutton, 2006).

¹² Anonymous, “The Flora of the Somme Battlefield” *Royal Botanic Gardens Kew* 10 (1917): 298.

unfolding that threatened the virtual collapse of allied infrastructure. In his private diary, Henry Rawlinson expressed growing concerns on this issue: "I am anxious about getting artillery and ammunition to the front. If rain comes again we shall be in major difficulties."¹³ Still, the winter's mud had already damaged most of the railways that transported essential supplies from Amiens to Albert and the persistent rains had washed away many of the road systems that connected supply depots to the frontline.

But the weather was not the only contributing factor to the allies' breakdown. As Rawlinson recorded in his diary, the devastating accuracy of German shelling in the Flers–Guedecourt sector also caused enormous damage to supply columns near the front. Every minute, claimed one officer of the BEF's 11th Battalion, a heavy 5.9-inch salvo smashed the important supply route along the Longueval–Flers Road.¹⁴ Thus a widespread shortage of food, ammunition, heavy weaponry and vital medicine inflicted a debilitating toll on the allies' capacity to mount an effective attack. Three more strikes were made by the BEF in October on the 7th, 12th and 18th, but none of these made any progress. It seemed sensible at this juncture for the allies to accept the Somme's conditions as they were. But no winter quarters were taken until the allied position could be improved in preparation for a new offensive at the beginning of 1917.¹⁵

Journey to Flers–Guedecourt

The I ANZAC Corps had been committed to Flers–Guedecourt for nearly a month before it arrived in the sector. Even before the fighting began, the AIF's journey to the battlefield was a long and unforgettable one. By now, Bean wrote, "rumours had reached the Australians of great hardships suffered during the recent bad-weather offensives. Some officers of the Corps ... had watched a British battalion after relief dragging itself, covered with mud, along the road at a snail's pace, with

¹³ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 233.

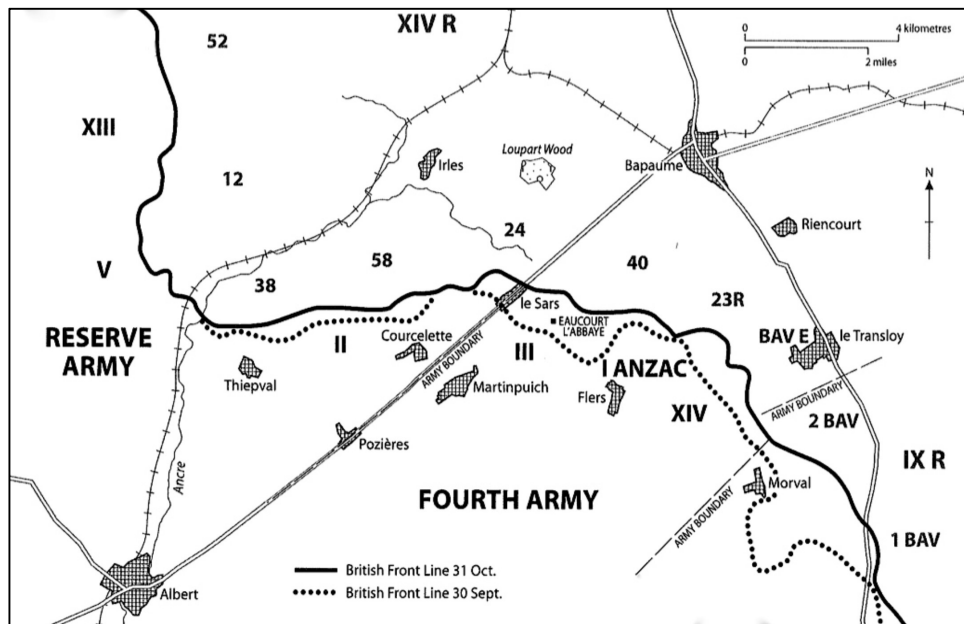
¹⁴ C.E.W Bean, *The A.I.F. in France, 1916*. Vol. 3 of *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1929), 901.

¹⁵ AWM4 1/2/11 Part 2 "General Staff, General Headquarters BEF – November 1916".

hardly a semblance of formation.”¹⁶ Other soldiers making their way to Flers–Guedecourt described even more vivid scenes. In one diary entry, an artilleryman noted:

On foot one has to go very cautiously... one of our officers rode into a shell hole. His horse disappeared in the [mud]... He had to be pulled out with ropes and in doing so they strained his organs ... it is a common sight to see men pulling one another out of the mud here—it clings like glue.¹⁷

On 30 October the I ANZAC Corps relieved the BEF’s XV Corps and joined the IV Army. The Australians assumed the central position in the region, which sat just below the Transloy line. They were responsible for approximately four miles (six km) of frontage, which stretched roughly from Eaucourt L’abbaye (where the Corps boundary met the BEF’s III Corps) to the south of Guedecourt (where the AIF boundary met the BEF’s XIV Corps).



Map 2. The I ANZAC Corps’ position in the IV Army zone near Flers–Guedecourt (Source: Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 278.)

¹⁶ C.E.W Bean, *The A.I.F. in France*, 896-97.

¹⁷ AWM 1DRL/0309 Private Record “Captain Charles E Gatliff – November 1916”.

By 30 October, the key directives for the operation had been disseminated for the first attacks in early November.¹⁸ The main strategic priorities for the AIF were to capture two German salients which protruded out of the Transloy line. The first was a triangular salient known as Fritz's Folly, whose tip extended to within 80 yards of the allies' front near the village of Guedecourt.¹⁹ The second salient, known as the Maze, was located approximately 1.8 miles further north-west. It featured a complex network of trenches that penetrated deep into the German trench system behind the front. The previous BEF strikes against these salients in October had been convincingly repelled by German defenders, who were able to launch efficient counter-attacks against their intruders.²⁰ The IV Army realised that these salients marked critical openings into the German trench system, which – compared with other sparsely manned sections of the Transloy line – would require a strong bombardment for any successful breach to occur.²¹ By the beginning of November, however, the conditions were continuing to deteriorate. Captain A.E. Dent, an officer of Australia's 19th Battalion, offered an extensive description of the mud at Flers–Guedecourt in early November.

The conditions were most appalling during this period, and our men have had the most strenuous time. The bleak November weather has been at its worst. Rain and sleet has poured down almost incessantly and turned the whole countryside into a quagmire. The trenches were impassable, dugouts wet through, rifles dirty and choked with mud, and even the clothes on the men's backs are entirely soaked through.²²

Attack on Fritz's Folly

The minor attack on Fritz's Folly was launched on the evening of 4 November. Following a three-minute barrage, which failed to cover the advancing units, two companies of the 3rd Battalion and three from the 1st Battalion attempted to move

¹⁸ AWM4 1/14/2 Part 2 "General Staff, Headquarters, 4th Army – November 1916".

¹⁹ AWM4 1/29/10 "General Staff, Headquarters, 1st ANZAC Corps – November 1916".

²⁰ AWM4 23/44/15 "27th Infantry Battalion Unit Diary – November 1916".

²¹ AWM4 1/14/2 Part 1 "General Staff, Headquarters 4th Army – November 1916".

²² Captain A. E. Dent, *Fourteen Months A Prisoner of War* (Narrabri, NSW: North Western Courier Print, 1919), 63.

forward to their jumping-off positions.²³ Here the two battalions split. The 3rd moved to face two trenches named Lard and Hilt (which ran alongside Fritz's Folly) and the 1st advanced to the western face of the salient in three separate companies.²⁴ However, German scouts of the 23rd Saxon Division, stationed along the Bayonet Trench, spotted the 1st Battalion and began to fire flares into no man's land to expose them to machine-gun fire. This sighting delayed the operation for two hours until Lieutenant General McCay at Divisional HQ, exasperated by the disruption, urged that the attack go ahead.²⁵

When the 1st Division's artillery barrage eventually fell into no man's land and the two-phased infantry movement followed on either side of Fritz's Folly, the mud was so dense underfoot that both advancing waves faltered; as soon as they reached the halfway point across no man's land, German flares, shells and machine-guns were already firing on them.²⁶ A soldier of the 1st Battalion later recorded the intensity of this moment in his diary:

As soon as we [jumped out] ... the flares were sent up in batches which lit everything up like day, and showed us men falling everywhere and the boys struggling through the mud bogged nearly to the knees ... In the German wire, I got badly cut all over and ended up by getting hung up in the stuff for all the world like a sack of wool chucked onto a heap of barb wire ... by this time the fighting was fierce, shells, bombs, mortars ... were falling amongst us like hail.²⁷

The attack launched by a bomber party of the 1st Battalion at the tip of the salient was a complete failure, as it was detected by a strong German position and, according to Captain Phillip Howell-Price, was almost totally destroyed by German machine-gun fire.²⁸ Two parties of the 3rd Battalion, on the opposite face of Fritz's

²³ AWM4 23/20/21 "3rd Infantry Battalion, Unit Diary - November 1916".

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ AWM4 23/18/13 "1st Infantry Battalion, Unit Diary - November 1916".

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ MLMSS 1493/1/6 "Archibald Barwick Diary, 4th November - November 1916".

²⁸ AWM4 23/44/15 "27th Infantry Battalion, Unit Diary - November 1916".

Folly, experienced some success, temporarily holding portions of the Lard, Hilt and Grease trenches; yet stronger posts on higher ground were eventually manned by the Germans and, coupled with the defeat of most of the 1st Battalion, the attack was brought to a conclusion.²⁹ Charles Bean wrote in the *Official History*: “The night attack, made in circumstances which rendered success almost inconceivable, had cost 170 casualties including 9 officers in the 1st Battalion, and 38 in the 3rd.”³⁰

Into the Maze

While the 1st Division failed to secure a foothold in Fritz’s Folly, hurried preparations were underway to replace the 5th Division with the 2nd Division from reserve for the morning’s attack on the Maze.³¹ The decision was an exceptionally late one, especially considering the incoming units of the 2nd Division had such limited opportunity to study or familiarise themselves with the major objectives of the operation or with the extraordinary terrain in which they would be fighting. However, though the 5th Division withdrew, its commanders – owing to their familiarity with the conditions – retained command of the 2nd Division.³²

The major attack on the morning of the 5th began even less successfully than the attack at Fritz’s Folly. On the evening of the 4th, while the 1st Division’s strike was taking place further down the Transloy line, the 26th, 27th and 28th Battalions arrived at their jumping-off positions. However, the contingent was one short.³³ The 25th Battalion was left straggling behind, delayed from the long march through the mud and left waiting for rations and other critical supplies. For a moment it looked as if they would be unable to take part in the attack, but after a night of marching to the jumping-off position, with no rest, the wearied 25th Battalion

²⁹ AWM4 23/20/21 “3rd Infantry Battalion, Unit Diary – November 1916”.

³⁰ C.E.W. Bean, *The A.I.F. in France*, 909.

³¹ AWM4 1/29/10 “General Staff, Headquarters, 1st ANZAC Corps – November 1916”.

³² C.E.W. Bean, *The A.I.F. in France*, 914.

³³ AWM4 1/43/22 “Administrative Staff, Headquarters 1st Australian Division – November 1916”.

arrived to replace the 26th and make preparations to join the attack. The experiences of the 25th Battalion will be revisited in more detail.³⁴

In spite of the complications in arriving at the jumping-off trenches, the AIF's artillery barrage commenced promptly at 9.10 am, signalling the troops to advance over the top into no man's land towards the Maze. But, through a pitiful misunderstanding of orders, the Battalion commanders failed to order the advance at the precise time the barrage fell. Instead, the directive arrived at 9.13 am for the units to advance into no man's land, by which time the cover of the barrage had subsided. Along the western face of the Maze at the Gird trench, the 28th and 25th Battalions were met by heavy machine-gun fire and most of the infantry were forced to seek refuge in muddy shell holes. A company of the 27th Battalion, under the command of Captain John Elder, managed to penetrate and annex a portion of Bayonet trench.³⁵ By this time, too, the 25th Battalion had improved its position and even succeeded in breaching a gap in the Maze. Yet as night fell, rain began to fall heavily on the plains at Flers-Guedecourt and a growing shortage of ammunition and a lack of infantry support forced the remaining companies of the 25th and 27th Battalions (after holding segments of the Maze for up to five hours) to withdraw to the safety of allied lines in the dark.³⁶

Assessing the Damage

Following the failures of the 4th and 5th of November, the Somme battlefields were subjected yet again to another extended period of heavy rain and becoming a muddy morass. High Command, seemingly unperturbed by this reality, expressed an immediate wish to renew attacks on the Transloy line by the 7th. It was only the disruption of the weather that forced the postponement of action until the 14th of November. Nevertheless, the desire to renew operations, even after the comprehensive failures of 4th and 5th, when no ground had been captured and casualties were high, seems surprising. The pause between the attacks in mid-

³⁴ AWM4 23/42/15 "25th Infantry Battalion, Unit Diary - November 1916".

³⁵ AWM4 23/44/15 "27th Infantry Battalion, Unit Diary - November 1916".

³⁶ Ibid.

November, according to Bean, was the most psychologically traumatic the AIF had ever experienced. In one particularly memorable passage from the *Official History* he attempted to recapture the ominous scenes:

In the dark those who stepped away from the road fell again and again into shell holes; many pack animals became stuck fast in the mud and had to be shot, and men were continually pulled out, often leaving their boots and sometimes their trousers. Three of the 25th Battalion had to be dug out of the jumping-off trench on November 5th; a company commander of the 5th Pioneers was dragged out by a mule; a few weeks later a rescue party broke the back of an officer of the 2nd Division whom they were trying to haul from the mud.³⁷

Despite the many privations, however, there were some positives to be salvaged. To take one instance, the resourcefulness and organisation of General Cyril Brudenell White proved critical to the recuperation of allied supply systems in November. His intervention resulted in the development of policies that restored and re-systematised many of the supply columns, road networks, infantry shelters and light-gauge railways in the sector which had broken down or had fallen into disrepair throughout October and November. He produced a valuable memorandum that highlighted, in particular, the immense distance between the front line and the major supply columns. To White, this was the most pressing impediment of the period which needed to be fixed.

On 14 November attacks were resumed at Flers–Guedecourt. One medical officer exclaimed in his diary:

Will they not realise we Australians who have worked to a standstill need complete rest right away from the line, if not we shall go to pieces. The awful weather added to the continuous work is slowly doing us up ... and personally I think is breaking the hearts of men.³⁸

³⁷ C.E.W. Bean, *The A.I.F. in France*, 918.

³⁸ AWM 2DRL/1227 Private Record "Lieutenant A. F. Sutton".

The AIF's 5th Brigade and two battalions of the 7th Brigade launched another attack on the Maze, which seemed to produce a carbon copy of the 2nd Division's failed attack on the 5th. For two days, portions of the Maze system were held but were eventually reclaimed on the 17th by German counter-attacks. Bill Gammage described the final stages of November best when he wrote: "The attack was made by weary men, in impossible conditions. It was repulsed, as were most others made during this futile month, for mud, cold and exhaustion easily outmatched gallantry, dreams of glory, and duty."³⁹

Morale at Flers-Guedecourt

According to C.E.W. Bean, the Flers-Guedecourt attacks marked a definite low point for the AIF on the Somme. The compounding effects of the punishing winter, and the operational failures that came with it, inflicted a heavy psychological hammer-blow on the morale of the AIF. Examining morale in this context has become a significant area in the field of military science since the end of Second World War; but morale has often proved to be a highly abstract analytical term for scholars to define and conceptualise. As historian T.R. Brereton has commented in a brief historiographical survey of the subject: "Morale is an indistinct topic and an elusive goal, yet historians, psychologists, sociologists, and professionals alike understand that it can frequently mean the difference between death and survival, defeat and victory."⁴⁰ Let us analyse the decline of morale in the I ANZAC Corps more closely by examining the case of the 25th Battalion.

Hardship in the 25th Battalion

At 7 pm on 2 November 1916, the recently promoted Lieutenant Colonel, James Walker, ordered the infantrymen of the 25th Battalion to an awaiting convoy of lorries which took them from the small village of Dernancourt in the northern Somme region to their new billets near Mametz Wood, about five miles further

³⁹ Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974), 178.

⁴⁰ T.R. Brereton, "Ethos/Morale/Esprit de Corps" in Charles Messenger (eds.) *Reader's Guide to Military History* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 159.

south.⁴¹ Here, with other battalions of the AIF's 7th Brigade, the 25th awaited further orders.⁴² The 25th Battalion was raised and recruited in Queensland in March 1915, with a small contingent of recruits from Darwin.⁴³ As a fighting unit, the 25th Battalion was a distinguished, respected, experienced and well-decorated military outfit, and was to receive battle honours in all the major conflicts of the First World War.⁴⁴

By the time the 25th Battalion had spent two days at the Mametz camp (alongside the 26th, 27th and 28th Battalions), new orders were disseminated from Corps Headquarters instructing two companies of the 25th to move to the Carlton Trench, near the village of Longueval to prepare for an assault on the Maze on the morning of the 5th of November. The two companies of the 25th left their digs at Mametz at 1.30 pm on the 3rd and moved on to Longueval, which was situated approximately six miles away from the front line at Flers–Guedecourt. In sections, the muddy roads had been completely eroded away by heavy rains which made the journey between Mametz and Longueval an extraordinarily strenuous one for the battalion, as they were forced to negotiate their way through the mud and at times even wade through it. According to one soldier's account, mud along the tracks to Longueval was as much as 18 inches (37 cm) deep.⁴⁵ In another account of the day's events, a Lieutenant exclaimed in his diary:

How is all this appreciated? You would understand if you knew that outside the door and everywhere is mud ... mud from one inch to two inches deep and much, much more. And we've been living and moving in it ... That is, all our work for days past has been mud, mud, mud and rain fell too.⁴⁶

⁴¹ D. McDonald, "Walker, James (1863-1942)", *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 12 (Melbourne: The University of Melbourne Press, 1990), 224.

⁴² AWM4 23/42/15 "25th Infantry Battalion Unit War Diary - November 1916".

⁴³ For a history of the 25th Battalion, see: B. Doneley, *Black Over Blue: The 25th Battalion, A.I.F. at War 1915-1918* (Toowoomba: USQ Press, 1997).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ AWM PR00142 Private Record "Corporal Leonard Clyde M. Bryant".

⁴⁶ AWM 1DRL/0316 Private Record "Lieutenant R. W. Grant".

At 8.15 am on the morning of the 4th, after nearly 18 hours of trudging through the muddy tracks to the IV Army's central position, the 25th Battalion reached Reserve HQ at Longueval. With little time for rest, the Battalion received its first orders for attack at 3 pm, instructing them to take the central position of the 7th Brigade and move up to the jumping-off trenches less than half a mile away from the Transloy line and the infamous German-held Maze trench system.⁴⁷ The attack was to be launched in conjunction with other companies of the 27th and 28th Battalions at 9.10 am the following morning. At 4 pm that afternoon, however, while the two companies of the 25th Battalion under Captain Nix made preparations for mobilisation and immediate departure to the front, they were forced to delay because food rations and emergency rations for the operation had not yet been received. In frustration, Lieutenant Colonel Walker ordered his battalion to remain behind until the rations had arrived and then to proceed to the front. Now the 26th Battalion, which was initially to sit in reserve, was to go ahead in the place of the 25th.

After waiting in still worsening conditions for approximately eight hours, hunger and restlessness among the Battalion began to take over. At 6.30 am, after a night of long waiting and marching through the Somme's mud and rain (and at one point becoming lost), Captain Nix's two companies finally arrived at the advanced Brigade headquarters near the jumping-off trenches. In one soldier's account, particularly referring to the day and night of the 4th, he recalls:

I think that the awful conditions under which we struggled to the line during those early November days dwarfed the slaughter by the German artillery to almost nothing in comparison. We had heavier bombardments since ... but one seemed to pull through with much less mental strain than one did during those early days in the Somme morass.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ AWM4 23/42/15 "25th Infantry Battalion Unit War Diary - November 1916".

⁴⁸ AWM 2DRL/0219 Private Record "Sergeant A.E. Matthews".

These sentiments were common. Indeed, a variety of the private records of the 25th Battalion mention the harrowing march that was taken to arrive at the front in time for the operation. In one extreme case, a private recorded in his diary:

We were halted on the Hill ... in the pouring rain with no shelter, no tucker and told to do the best we could ... I absolutely threw my marble in and if it wasn't for the thought that I was on active service I think I would have wasted a cartridge on myself.⁴⁹

Similarly, for a Medical Officer of the 3rd Field Ambulance, the level of exhaustion of the 25th Battalion was clearly evident, as he wrote:

I was rather shocked with the look of the men. Not demoralised in any degree – but grey drawn faces – and very, very grim. It is the first time I ever passed a battalion without seeing a single smile on any man's face. Gask tells me that they feel it more than any troops here. Their letters show it – some of them are utterly sick of the war and do not want to fight again.⁵⁰

According to another Medical Officer, "some of the men sat down and simply wept with fatigue."⁵¹ Nevertheless, the two companies of the 25th Battalion continued with the operation at 9.10 am. The advance of the first company towards the Maze, after emerging too late into no man's land, could not be shielded by the artillery barrage and was thus largely shot down by German machine-gun fire. The second company experienced more success and managed to capture a portion of the Maze, but was eventually knocked back by a German counter-attack at midday, when it could no longer hold out with so few supporting companies. The attack launched on the night of the 5th, as already mentioned, was ultimately a failure with no ground gained.⁵² Even behind the allied lines, and in other units too, the conditions of the battlefield seemed to take a toll on those in reserve. One lieutenant of the 14th Field Engineering Party wrote: "Mud from the top of our heads to the bottom of our boots, drenched to

⁴⁹ AWM 3DRL/2578 Private Record "Private Thomas J Cleary".

⁵⁰ AWM4 26/46/23 "3rd Australian Field Ambulance Unit Diary – November 1916".

⁵¹ C.E.W. Bean, *The A.I.F. in France*, 910.

⁵² AWM4 1/29/10 "General Staff, Headquarters, 1st ANZAC Corps War Diary – November 1916".

the very skin, your thoughts must be alone for the perishing men in the front line ...
No songs are sung and no poetry written.”⁵³

In the ensuing days, the weather continued to worsen at the front, and declining morale remained a palpable problem in the second strike along the Transloy line later in November.⁵⁴ The 25th Battalion’s journey to the front, and then engagement in combat, encapsulates a minor yet illuminating theme of what was a far larger and deep-seated problem in the I ANZAC Corps during November on the Somme.

Evaluating morale

Bean’s own assessment of the I ANZAC Corps’ morale (after observing it firsthand in November) was that it “was never low; even in the worst conditions at Flers the response of the troops often amazed those who knew them best; but this period represented the bottom of the curve.”⁵⁵ Here Bean proposed a traditional view of morale, suggesting that the spirit of the infantrymen had not been cracked, but rather the less vital element of mood was damaged.⁵⁶ Yet Bean’s well-known desire to lionise the physical prowess and the mental strength of the Anzacs possibly distorts his judgement. If Bean concluded that the AIF was close to breaking point, then the state of things was probably a good deal worse.

As preparation for combat, the AIF had undertaken an extended period of training in the Ypres Salient in Belgium during September for their last phase of attacks.⁵⁷ There they focused on refining troop movements, trench raids, practising artillery barrages, and other basic tactical skills required for combat.⁵⁸ Even in the immediate stages leading up to November, barrage practice was conducted regularly, so that

⁵³ AWM PR82/049 Private Record “Lieutenant Harold W. Fry”.

⁵⁴ AWM4 23/42/15 “25th Infantry Battalion Unit War Diary - November 1916”.

⁵⁵ C.E.W. Bean, *The A.I.F. in France*, 940.

⁵⁶ It is interesting to note that Bean proposed something of a Clausewitzian reading of morale here, as he evokes words such as ‘spirit’ to describe the condition of the I ANZAC Corps during this period.

⁵⁷ Scholars have emphasised the obvious link between comprehensive training and high morale in combat. See, for instance, Hew Strachan, “Training, Morale and Modern War,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41 (2006): 211-227 passim.

⁵⁸ AWM4 1/29/8 “General Staff, Headquarters, 1st ANZAC Corps - September 1916”.

the infantry were totally confident of their ability to implement it when the time arrived. However, the time spent practising the artillery barrage had no beneficial effect in combat, as the early November barrages were complete failures. The legitimate efforts to ready the AIF for combat suggest that the decline in morale had very little to do with a lack of training. But few of these preparatory measures could have equipped the AIF for the conditions of November.

The most acute cause of the AIF's lapse in motivation and spirit stemmed from the harsh weather on the battlefield. As many private records make clear, the dense mud and extreme rains, which were frequently cited by soldiers – alongside other themes such as exhaustion, fatigue and a basic lack of food and sleep – were the most conspicuous and demoralising factors of this period. It is also significant that the AIF units at Flers–Guedecourt had been raised in northern Australia, mainly in Queensland and Darwin (and some also from Adelaide). This fact helps to explain why the morale of the AIF was more affected by the conditions than their BEF counterparts, who had been fighting in the sector much longer and were presumably more attuned to the region's climate. The unfamiliarity of the conditions was certainly stressed and taken into account by the AIF's medical branch before November.⁵⁹ Special attention was devoted to the fact that Australia was a dry subtropical country which, according to Butler in the *Official Medical History*, greatly "increased the concern of the medical department of the corps."⁶⁰ Later in November, however, many of the men of the I ANZAC Corps experienced snow for their first time.

The spread of trench foot

Despite the efforts to prepare for the harsh conditions, widespread medical problems also triggered a major deterioration in morale. In one particularly urgent despatch to GHQ and the AIF units at the front, the Director of Medical Services wrote: "Men come into Field Ambulances with socks so caked with mud that they

⁵⁹ AWM4 26/15/10 "Deputy Director of Medical Services, 1st ANZAC Corps".

⁶⁰ A. G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services 1914-1918 Vol 3, Special Problems and Services* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1943), 78.

are absolutely stiff and have to be cut off, as if they were set in plaster. I don't think three pairs of socks in the existing conditions will suffice for the men in the front line."⁶¹ By mid-November, the I ANZAC Corps' medical estimates suggested that upwards of 90 per cent of the 2nd Division was suffering from trench foot.⁶² Rawlinson complained that these very high figures were yet another sign of poor discipline in the AIF, indicating that soldiers did not observe proper etiquette at Dressing Stations and disregarded the necessary precautions that should have been taken to ensure feet were kept sanitary, such as regularly applying whale oil and replacing wet socks with dry ones.⁶³ But trying to keep one's feet dry in mud that seldom fell below a man's shin was almost impossible, especially as the most of the soldiers' boots had given way.

The soldiers' accounts of trench foot, and the rapidity with which it spread, were vividly described in private diaries. In one typical account from November, a Lieutenant of the 18th Battalion wrote: "There was not a place anywhere in the trench where we could stand clear of water ... as soon as I took my boots off my feet had to make way to the Ambulance station, barefooted. The distance was something like two miles and I had some difficulty in negotiating it."⁶⁴

⁶¹ AWM4 26/15/10 "Deputy Director of Medical Services, 1st ANZAC Corps".

⁶² A. G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services*, 167.

⁶³ AWM4 1/14/1 "General Staff, Headquarters 4th Army - October 1916".

⁶⁴ AWM 2DRL/0278 Private Record "Lieutenant Frank H. Semple".



Figure 4. Soldiers of the I ANZAC Corps being carried to Bernfay Ambulance Station with trench foot (AWM E00081).

Like the high rates of trench foot in the 2nd Division, there were other statistical indicators from this period that pointed to poor morale. In one case, the 3rd Field Ambulance, which was responsible for a large portion of the AIF soldiers at the front, recorded that, of all the casualties incurred on the battlefield at Flers-Guedecourt during November, a staggering 51.9 per cent were caused *only* by the conditions of the battlefield, rather than by combat.⁶⁵ To verify this figure, the non-battle casualties recorded for November (which excludes men who had been “wounded in battle”) nearly trebled by the end of the month. Moreover, November yielded the highest number of “self-inflicted wounds” in the AIF for the entire Somme Campaign, with approximately 21 soldiers self-mutilating.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ S. Austin, *The Body Snatchers: The History of the 3rd Field Ambulance, 1914-1918* (MacCrae, VIC: Slouch Hat Publications, 1995), 81.

⁶⁶ Figures taken from Appendix i, A. G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914-1918, Vol II, The Western Front* (Canberra: AWM, 1940), 864-65.

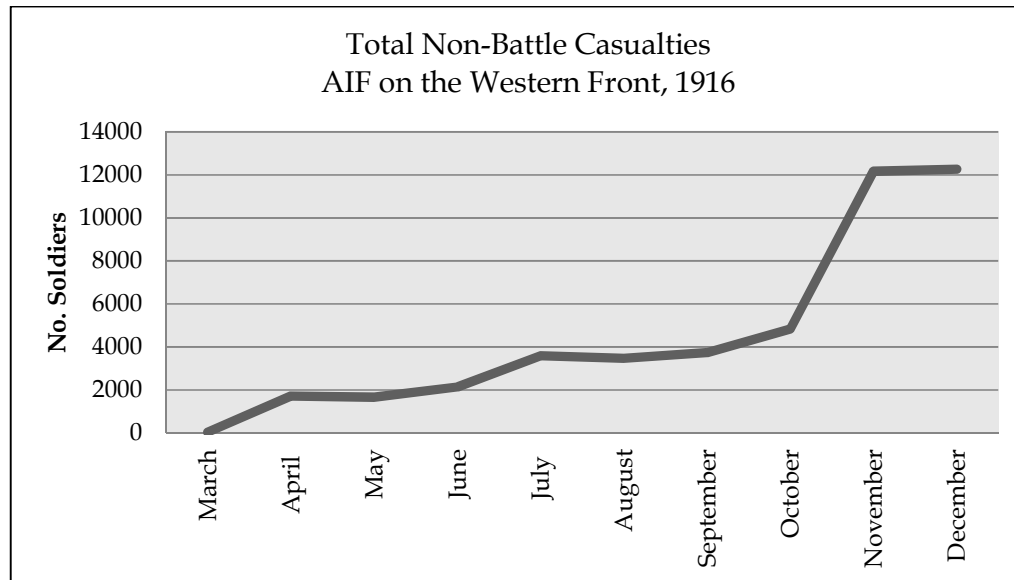


Figure 5. Note the steep rise from the beginning of October to the end of November (Source: A. G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914-1918, Vol II, The Western Front* [Canberra: AWM, 1940], 864.).

From the outset, it was clear that two dominant and essentially connected sets of factors precipitated the AIF's decline in morale. First, the extreme weather conditions and the widespread fatigue of the infantrymen underpinned this period's failures and subsequently set in motion a chain of others. Second, the conscious understanding among the AIF units that they could not achieve their objectives was also detrimental to combat motivation. According to the military theorist and psychologist F.J. Manning, declining morale becomes particularly relevant in combat when the biological and psychological needs of a fighting contingent are effectively unfulfilled, as they were for units of the AIF in November.⁶⁷ The deficiency in food and sleep fell under what Manning identified as a lack of biological needs, and the absence of a realistically achievable objective incited a further psychological malfunction. Indeed, for Manning and other theorists of combat morale and *esprit de corps*, the foremost psychological function of an army's morale is argued to be the conscious ability and confidence of a collective to achieve a defined target. Without this essential purpose, the AIF faced a total paralysis, as there was no clearly understood aim for the soldiers. The combination of these decisive factors at Flers-

⁶⁷ F.J. Manning, "Morale, Cohesion, and Esprit de Corps," in R. Gal and A.D. Mangesdorff eds., *Handbook of Military Psychology* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1991), 467.

Guedecourt drove the decline of the AIF's morale to perhaps its lowest point in the entire Somme Campaign.

Command at Flers-Guedecourt

Despite the clear tactical flaws in the October attacks, as historians Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson have argued in *Command on the Western Front*, the I ANZAC Corps managed to replicate many of the BEF's mistakes again in November.⁶⁸ On the 12th of October, Rawlinson confided to his diary:

There are numerous [instances] of wire uncut, distant machine gun fire and strong counter attacks, but the fact is that Bosch⁶⁹ put up better fight of it this time and until we can reduce his [impact] further by shaking his morale we shall not, I fear, drive him out of his present line, though it is by no means a strong one ... in places it is difficult to see - since we came forward off the high ground we have to a great extent lost the advantage we had over him of observation.⁷⁰

As well as these reservations, the creeping barrage continued to miss crucial targets that sat beyond the enemy lines; and the advancing troops – who were to trail behind the creeping barrage so as to protect themselves from German artillery – continued to incorrectly time their advance and consequently exposed themselves to intense machine-gun fire.⁷¹ Rawlinson and the IV Army Intelligence also documented the alterations of German defensive tactics at the front, with particular reference to the rearrangement of machine-gun placements – and more crucially, the replacement of new divisions from reserve, which were also reinforced by the addition of 23 new heavy artillery batteries.⁷² Following the strike and repulsion of the IV Army on the 12th of October, Rawlinson convened an emergency meeting at IV Army headquarters in Heilly (approximately 18 miles [28 km] behind the front

⁶⁸ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 252.

⁶⁹ 'Bosch' was an allied colloquialism for a German soldier.

⁷⁰ Henry Rawlinson's diary excerpt quoted in Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *The Somme* (London: Yale University Press, 2005), 270.

⁷¹ Robin Prior and Trevor Wilson, *Command on the Western Front*, 251.

⁷² AWM4 1/30/9 "Intelligence Headquarters, 1st ANZAC Corps - October".

line) to seek an immediate explanation for the persistent failures and to find a rapid solution.⁷³ According to the conference notes, the commanders stressed the revitalised morale of the new German defenders; the difficulty of advancing in the increasingly muddy conditions; the lack of surprise and the predictability of tactics; the imprecision of the artillery barrages; and the deficiency in proper aerial observation for the surveillance of the enemies' defensive positions. In short, the meeting at Heilly re-emphasised the lack of proper planning, which significantly disadvantaged the October attacks at Flers–Guedecourt and highlighted, above all, the need for a more carefully conceived and inventive approach for the next encounter.⁷⁴

Notwithstanding the good intentions exhibited by the allied commanders at Heilly, it must be asked why precisely the same strategies that dogged the allies in October – and which were discussed comprehensively at the conference on the 13th – were not in any way modified in the attacks in November. Why was no revised method adopted to correct the previously failed attacks along the Transloy line? To be sure, these questions are not without their problems for the historian. In fact, they encapsulate some of the broader methodological dilemmas in studying the Somme campaign and the First World War, as scholars seek to understand (often in puzzlement) why certain orders were made or not made, or why unworkable tactics continued to be implemented even though their defects had been proven time and again.⁷⁵ November at Flers–Guedecourt was an exemplary case in point.

Setting aside this problem, here was a situation in which the commanders at corps and divisional headquarters, who knew the conditions of the battlefield well, beseeched those in the higher echelons of command (mainly Rawlinson and Haig) to reconsider the November attacks. The Australian commanders Lieutenant General McCay and Harold “Pompey” Elliot were vocal in their criticisms of Haig's plan, but none were so contemptuous as Lord Cavan, the commander of the XIV Corps, who

⁷³ AWM26 6/41/46 “Conference Papers from Heilly on 13/10/1916”.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Gary Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*, 136.

despatched a memorandum to Rawlinson and Haig which deserves to be quoted at some length:

With a full and complete sense of my responsibility I feel it my bounden duty to put in writing my considered opinion as to the attack ordered to take place on November 5th ... An advance from my present position [north-west of Flers–Guedecourt on Le Transloy] with the troops at my disposal has practically no chance of success on account of the heavy enfilade fire of machine guns and artillery from the north, and the enormous distance we have to advance against a strongly prepared position, owing to the failure to advance our lines in the recent operations ... [there] is a danger of this attack shaking the confidence of the men and officers in their command. No one who has not visited the front trenches can really know the state of exhaustion to which the men are reduced.⁷⁶

Candidness of this kind was not common in the upper ranks of the BEF in 1916, especially if a subordinate was addressing his senior. But Cavan's blunt directive marked an admirable effort to make his superiors aware of the front-line conditions and, above all, to communicate total frustration at the prospect of having to renew attacks in November. After Rawlinson considered Cavan's memorandum, he and Haig reached a compromise that momentarily appeared to indicate the closure of the Flers–Guedecourt sector until the beginning of 1917. But Haig later reneged on this arrangement and reinstated his commitment to continue attacks on the Transloy line in November.⁷⁷

Conclusion

While it is occasionally difficult to rationalise or indeed reconcile many of the decisions made (or their lack) behind the front line, it worth recognising that many of the significant directives concerning Flers–Guedecourt were out of the control of many of the commanders close to the front. As Paddy Griffith has suggested, "At the

⁷⁶ AWM45 3/11/46 "Cavan's Memorandum to Rawlinson - October 1916".

⁷⁷ AWM4 1/14/1 "General Staff, Headquarters 4th Army - October 1916".

highest operational levels the positioning and timing of an offensive usually depended far less upon the vibrant technical question of how it might be converted into a decisive breakthrough than upon more mundane political questions such as the esteem in which Haig was held by the Prime Minister.”⁷⁸ November on the Somme for the I ANZAC Corps seems an exemplary case of this kind. Indeed many of the dubious “gains” to be captured in the muddy Somme valley throughout November appeared to be legitimated more on the banks of the Thames than on the battlefields near Flers–Guedecourt, as Haig desperately sought to extol the recompenses of the bloody campaign on the home front.⁷⁹

The AIF’s experience at Flers–Guedecourt featured many of the enduring and profound symbols that are immediately associable with the cattle of the Somme. The deplorable weather conditions, the futility of the objectives, the mental strain and abject misery of stalemate and trench warfare, were all palpable elements on the Somme battlefield in November 1916. Nonetheless, despite the primacy of these themes, there are still significant gaps in the Somme’s historiography, in which the role of the AIF has not been adequately investigated. Given the shattering magnitude of the Somme Campaign, and the importance of the AIF’s stake within it, greater attention should be devoted to cases such as Flers–Guedecourt, where the morale of the AIF was stretched to its absolute limits.

⁷⁸ Paddy Griffith, *Battle Tactics of the Western Front*, 35.

⁷⁹ To examine some of the interpretations that have been advanced by scholars to explain why Haig continued to order attacks on the Somme in November, see: Gary Sheffield, *Somme*, 141; see also, David French, “Sir Douglas Haig’s Reputation, 1919-1928: A Note,” *The Historical Journal* 28 (1985): 953-960 passim.

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