

AUSTRALIANS

Known as the

« Diggers »

THESE smiling soldiers full of swagger and with a rifle slung over their shoulders were from a country on the other side of the world. Australian soldiers were affectionately known as “Diggers” (the word refers to a gold miner), in the same way that the British were known as “Tommies” and the French as “Poilus”. On their heads they wore their characteristic tilted “slouch hat”, with the left side folded up to enable their rifle to be carried on their shoulders. On the turned-up side, the “Rising Sun” symbolised the sun rising on the huge British Empire, to which Australia belonged at the time.

Out of a population of four million inhabitants, some 313,000 Australians travelled thousands of miles to join in the war effort in Europe. For many of them it was an adventure and a trip of a lifetime, and for 60,000 of them a journey that ended in their deaths. Out of this hell, Australia forged its national identity. Every 25 April – the date on which the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (Anzac) came ashore on a beach on the Gallipoli peninsula – the country commemorates Anzac Day so as not to forget the sacrifice of its soldiers during the First World War, as well as other conflicts in its history.



Photo: Alain Jacques documentary collection

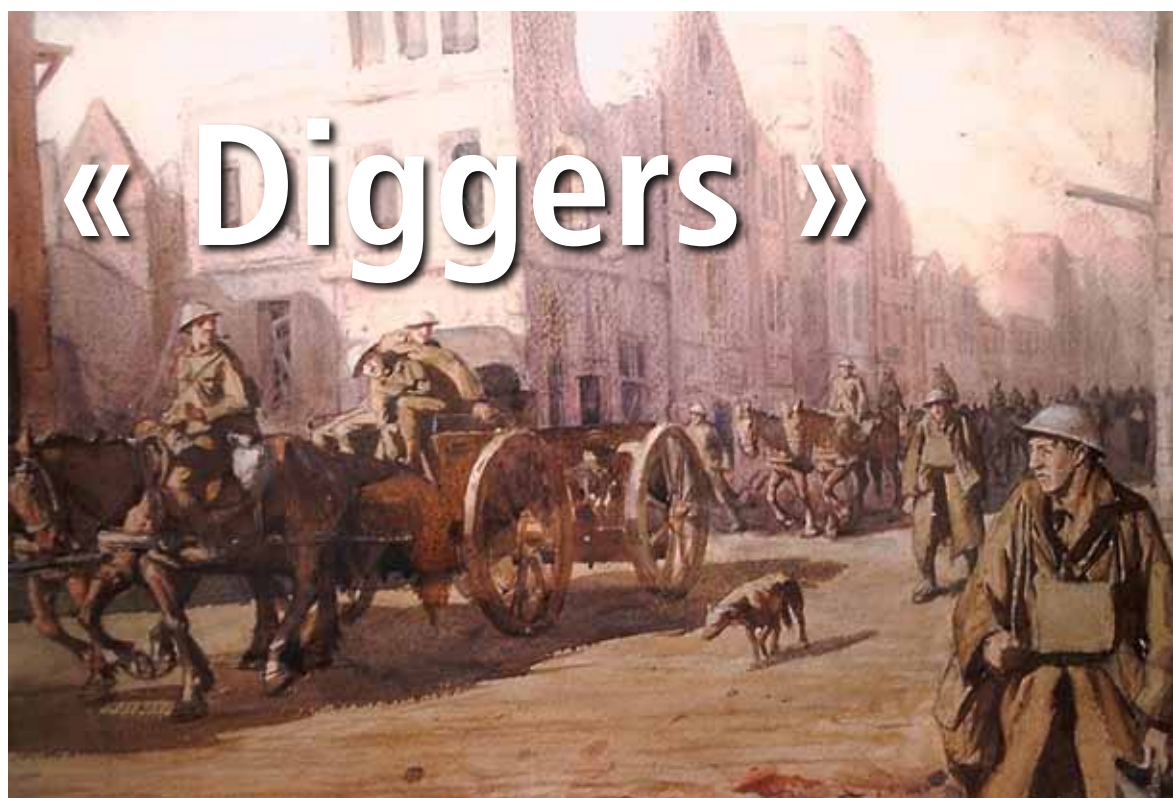
Battle of Fromelles

It is 1916, and the major battles are concentrated around Verdun and in the Somme. While Verdun resists and the early battles in the Somme claim countless lives, Haig asks the Australians to prepare themselves for an attack in the Fromelles sector. He wants to give the impression that a major offensive on Lille is planned to distract the enemy's attention and to ensure that German troops are not sent as reinforcements to the Somme. At around 6pm on 19 July 1916, the 5th Australian

Division goes on the offensive. The land is flat, the soldiers are inexperienced and many of them are discovering the trenches – where gas, machine guns and charges across enemy lines are part of daily life – for the very first time. On the former battlefield, a stele pays tribute to the soldiers killed in this fruitless and ineffective diversion, which resulted in the deaths of 5,533 men and officers from the 5th Division.

Battle of Bullecourt

On 26 and 27 February 1917, the Germans withdraw to the Hindenburg Line, a rearguard action code-named “*Alberich*”, which results in the liberation of 99 out of 189 occupied towns and villages in the Pas-de-Calais. Most are dynamited, roads and railway lines are destroyed, trees cut down and wells poisoned. On 17 March, the Australians enter Bapaume, which had been occupied since 28 August 1914. Cynically, a German report declares: “*Having been ruined, Bapaume was set alight in 400 different places*”. At 4.45pm on 11 April, the Australians from the 1st Anzac Battalion launch an attack to the east of Bullecourt. A bitterly cold wind, mixed with hail, sweeps across no man's land. The first wave of men have 600m to cover; the supporting troops posted behind the railway embankment have a further 500m to negotiate. Eleven tanks accompany the attack, and become the immediate focus of enemy fire. Six are destroyed before they have even had the chance to reach the enemy wire. The British artillery has not done its job properly: once they reach the barbed wire, the Australians are forced to run along the defences to find a way through.



“*The Australians entering Bapaume*” is a canvas by Mervyn Napier Waller (1893-1972) which is unknown to the French public. The artist was seriously wounded at Bullecourt in May 1917, resulting in the amputation of his right arm. During his convalescence, he learnt to write and draw with his left hand. Upon his return to Australia, he became a renowned artist.

The counter-attack starts at around ten o'clock, preceded by a bombardment. Mortars fired from the northeast of Bullecourt take out the trenches captured one after the other; a battery hammers the parapet. Windows in Riencourt are also fired at: with snow as a backdrop, the soldiers are perfect targets. The response of the Allied artillery is ineffective, firing too far and unaware if the Australians had already reached Bullecourt. In the captured trenches it was a case of running for your life. “*Many of the wounded who remained were taken prisoner or finished off if their condition was desperate...*” This was how the first Battle of Bullecourt ended: 3,000 men lost and 1,142 soldiers and 28 officers taken prisoner. On the German side, the losses in a single day totalled 749 soldiers.

Guided by air support, the artillery pounds the enemy positions. This time, most of the networks of barbed wire are destroyed. Hendecourt, Riencourt and Bullecourt are a pile of rubble but in their shelters the Germans are still prepared for an attack. To the rear, hundreds of men are working to repair roads to enable the transport of munitions, supplies and water. On the night of 20 April, around 3,000 gas shells are fired by the Germans, who try to check the Allied attack. Postponed several times, the date of the attack is finally fixed for 3 May. The objectives: Bullecourt and Riencourt for the Australians; Hendecourt

for the British.

The numbers are astonishing: in a single day the field artillery fire 70,730 shells and the heavy artillery 19,186. The initial waves of attack are launched. The dead from the attack on 11 April can still be seen caught in the barbed wire. Confusion soon reigns as both the Germans and British use identically coloured rockets to launch their barrages. Attacks and counter-attacks continue until 17 May. Craters caused by wave after wave of shells and grenades compound the situation. Von Moser lost 7,000 men in this second battle, which was considered an act of heroism by the troops of the Württemberg unit. On the Australian side, the two assaults accounted for a total of ten thousand victims.

“Quoi ? L'Éternité”

The role played by Australian troops in the strategy of the Allied forces is therefore clear to see, particularly in 1918 when they countered the last major German offensive. Their combat role in Villers-Bretonneux, where they prevented a breach between French and British forces, has gone down in legend. Viewing this tranquil plain today, dotted with sheep and the occasional cypress of trees, it is difficult to imagine the drama that unfolded here, with thousands of corpses littering its fields. “*Every time I pass through these former battlefields, as quiet as death on either side of the noisy motorway, in itself as dangerous as life, I am reminded of the past*”, wrote Marguerite Yourcenar in “*Quoi? L'Éternité*”.

In the same way that Vimy resonates with Canadians, Bullecourt is a name that Australians of every generation are familiar with, given that details of the battle are still taught at school. Down Under, a town in Queensland is called Bullecourt, and another Bapaume. Every year, hundreds of Australians brave the 12,000 miles separating them from the Artois and the Somme to pay their respects at the graves of their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. These pilgrims paying tribute to the memory of the “*Diggers*” regularly visit the tourist office in Bapaume. In 2007, a couple arrived with a photo of a painting that they own: “*The Australians entering Bapaume*” by Mervyn Napier Waller. At the end of August 2008, another Australian couple came to the tourist office to show some extracts from the “*war diary*” of their grandfather. “*They visited all the places described in the journal*”, explains Pascale Jannoty. William Gilbert MacKenzie, a “*Digger*” who had fought in all the major Australian battles, was so marked by his experiences in the Somme and Artois during the Great War that upon his return to Tasmania he erected a sign on his house pointing towards “*Vélu*” (a village near Bapaume).