

ARTHUR BLACKBURN

“The Man Who Never Stood Still”

There is a type of soldier revered around the world; these are known as the Australian New Zealand Army Corps, or better known as the ANZACS. These are the soldiers who created the Anzac spirit; a spirit full of compassion, courage, endurance, determination and loyal mateship. This spirit is well described by war historian, C.E.W. Bean: “Anzac spirit stood and still stands, for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship and endurance that will never own defeat.”¹ Arthur Blackburn was a soldier who epitomized this spirit. He was the first South Australian to be awarded the Victoria Cross in World War I. Arthur proudly represented his country in both World Wars and was a founding member of the South Australian Returned Servicemen’s League.



Figure 1 - The earliest existing photo of Arthur Blackburn.



Figure 2 - Portrait of Lieutenant A. S. Blackburn, VC

On 25th November 1892 in Woodville, Adelaide, Arthur Seaforth “Blackie” Blackburn was born. He was the youngest child of Canon Thomas Blackburn and Thomas’ second wife, Margaret Harriette Stewart Browne. Arthur was from a family of seven children; three half brothers, two brothers and a sister. By 1912, Arthur had already lost both his parents; his father in May of that year and his mother in 1904. After four years of studying, Arthur, at the age of 21, graduated and joined the Bar as a lawyer. Shortly after graduation, Arthur began work with the law firm, *Nesbit & Nesbit*.

Once war was declared, Arthur Blackburn, like many other able bodied men, enlisted. He signed up on 19th August 1914, and was among one of the first in the state to enlist.

Arthur landed at Gallipoli on 25th April 1915. Notably, he and another soldier were known to make the furthest incursions into enemy territory. While fighting at Gallipoli, Arthur’s leadership skills led him to be promoted from Lance Corporal to Second Lieutenant on 6th August 1915. After being evacuated from the Gallipoli campaign, 23 year old Arthur Blackburn was promoted to full Lieutenant. After a short rest period in Egypt, Arthur moved on to fight on the Western Front and arrived in Marseilles on the 2 April 1916.

¹ Arthur Burke OAM, ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee, 13 April 2011, *The Spirit of Anzac*, viewed 12 June 2011, <<http://www.anzacday.org.au/spirit/spirit2.html>>.

Arthur's first major battle on the Western front was the Battle of Armentieres. He fought for just over three weeks on the front line with the 10th battalion. Being a young officer would have been a very difficult and insular position. The more senior officers wouldn't have readily accepted him, and yet he would have been unable to join in with the banter and camaraderie of the enlisted men. This paradox saw Arthur break with tradition by eating with his men, rather than with the officers, as was the custom.

Leaving the Battle of Armentieres, Arthur moved on to what was to be his most notable battle, the Battle of Pozières. Pozières is a rural village situated 130 kilometres from Paris in Northern France. The village was vital to enemy defences for it provided an observation post overlooking the surrounding countryside. Between July and August 1916, the small village of Pozières became the centre of one of the bloodiest battles of WWI. Arthur's actions during this battle earned him the Victoria Cross. His gallantry during the several hour ordeal, showed his skill as a leader. He led his men in the noblest way - by example. Arthur's actions exemplified the honour and bravery that any Anzac soldier would be proud of.



Figure 3 - The small village of Pozières situated in Northern France.



Figure 5 - OG1 trench after battle.

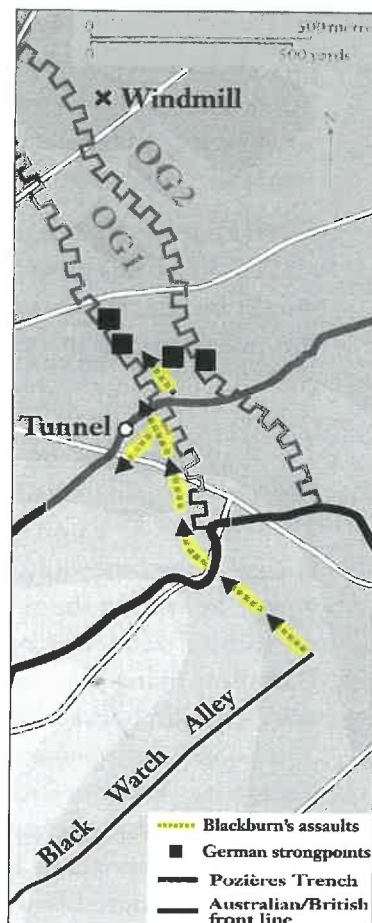


Figure 4 – Blackburn's assaults on the extreme right of the Australian line at Pozières on 23 July 1916.

On the 23 July, 1916 Blackburn was ordered by D Company Commanding Officer, Major Felix Giles to take a company of 50 men into the 'Old German lines' (OG lines) to storm an enemy trench. At 5:30am, the thick cloud of battle smoke disguised the morning sun that rose across the apocalyptic landscape. As the sound of battle raged in every soldier's ear and the smell of death and decay permeated every crevice, only the skeletal remains of trees rose above the muddy battlefield. An unknown lieutenant described the conditions: "We had literally to tramp or crawl over the piles of dead bodies, both allied and German, which jammed the trench and which had obviously had been there for days from earlier shelling"².

² Faulkner, A. 2008, *Arthur Blackburn, VC: An Australian hero, his men, and their two wars*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town, p. 95.

Driving the Germans out of the trench as they advanced, Arthur and his men captured 150 yards of OG1. Gaining ground as they fought, Arthur neared the Pozières junction. The uncertainty of the number of enemy, and the chance of ambush that lay around the corner worried him. Blackburn decided to take only one of his NCOs, Robert Inwood, and they reconnoitred the situation. On returning back to his men, Blackburn organized another fierce attack. At this point, many soldiers would've pulled back and consolidated their position but

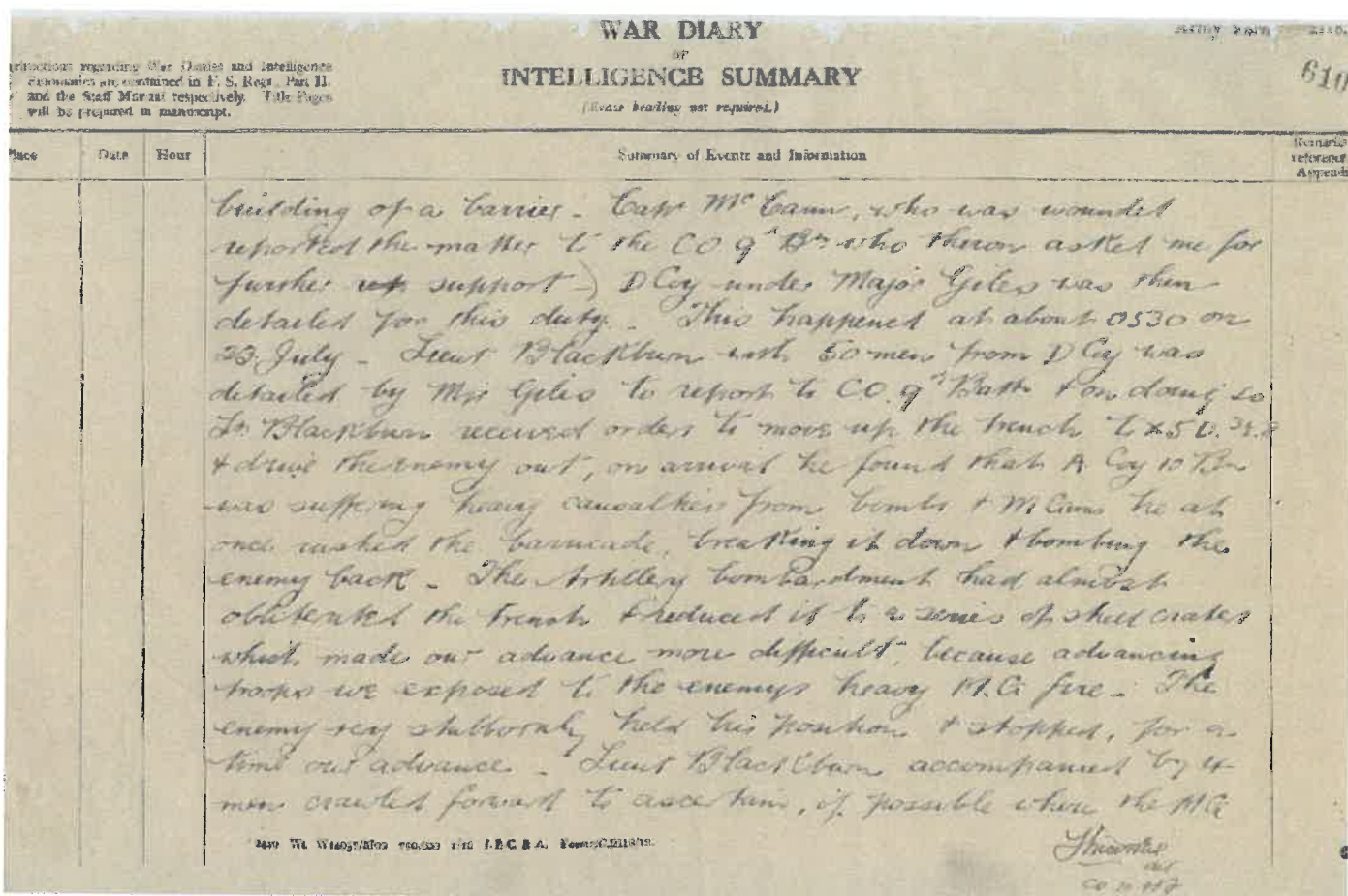


Figure 6 - A war diary entry from the 10th Battalion in 1916. It explains Arthur's assaults on OG1. It reads -This happened at about 0530 on 23 July - Lieutenant Blackburn with 50 men from D company was detached by Major Giles....

these proud young Anzacs stormed and captured the four way junction. Blackburn left a group of men to hold the position, while he and the rest of his men turned and advanced down the Pozières trench. They succeeded in capturing more than 110 yards of the trench. Lieutenant Blackburn scurried along the Pozières, until he reached a section of collapsed tunnel. He furiously dug a small passage through and was surprised to find the Australian 9th Battalion firing line, which effectively closed the gap in the allies' line.

Arthur led three more forays down OG1 but could advance no further. Arthur and his men dug in and held their position. After the battle, he was known to comment in a letter to his friend, Guy Fisher "... about every 20 yards the trench would be obliterated for three or four yards and you would have to fully expose yourself to get any further. Of course, as soon as Fritz found that we were attacking it, he got his machine guns and snipers trained onto the gaps and made this unhealthy. In addition to this, his dugouts in the trench I was attacking

were 30-40 feet deep and he was fighting like fury to keep it.”³ At nightfall, Arthur and his men were removed from the deadly trenches. Altogether they had captured 400 yards of enemy trench. While Blackburn had remained unscathed, many of the men under his command had been either killed or wounded. The battle of Pozières was a costly one, for which the allies paid heavily. In six short weeks, Australia suffered 23,000 killed or wounded to claim this strategic highpoint of the Somme.

After resting at Black Watch Alley, Arthur fought in the three battalion assault at Mouquet Farm. Shortly after the assault, due to fatigue and the damp conditions, Arthur contracted pleurisy. He recuperated in a French hospital before being evacuated on a hospital ship to England on the 14th of September 1916. This ended his service on the front lines of World War I. Arthur was recognised for his valour as a fine Anzac by being awarded the Victoria Cross. King George V presented this most prestigious award at a reception at Buckingham Palace on October 4, 1916.

rd Inf. Bde.	1st Aus. Divn.	1st A & N.Z. Army Corps.	29.7.16.	Date of Recommendation.
Action for which commended			Recommended by	Honour or Reward
Oth tn.	Lieut. Arthur Seaforth BLACKBURN.	<p>During the operations against POZIERES. At 0530 on 23rd July Lieut. BLACKBURN was detailed with 50 men to drive the enemy out of trench about X 5 D.3.5j, the enemy strongly resisted and it was only by dogged determination and skill that the trench was eventually taken. Lieut. BLACKBURN led no less than 4 separate parties of bombers in this attack, most of the men whom he led were either killed or wounded. Lieut. BLACKBURN exhibited great gallantry, skill and determination in the face of heavy opposition and captured 250 yds. of trench. Having secured this advantage Lieut. BLACKBURN and Sgt. INWOOD (who was killed) crawled forward to reconnoitre the position and subsequently he took another 120 yds. of trench at X 5.B.O.I. and established communication with the Bn. on his left. I cannot speak too highly of the gallantry of Lieut. BLACKBURN.</p>	G.O.C. 3rd Inf. Bde.	V.C.

Figure 7 - Arthur's Victoria Cross recommendation

Arthur Blackburn was an unlikely Anzac and VC recipient. The typical Anzac is an icon of masculinity; sun bronzed and athletic, a loveable larrikin with a dry wit; a true bushman and a dependable mate. Arthur was a slightly built man with knobby knees but this was just his exterior. His appearance belied the fierce determination and true Anzac spirit that he held within. During WWI, many young men enlisted with romantic notions of travel and adventure, and impressions that they were going to 'go over there to show the Huns a thing or two'. After facing the terrors of war, countless numbers of men returned shell-shocked and battle scarred, vowing never to fire a shot in anger ever again. The question could be posed: 'Is belief about what you are fighting for more important than all the other Anzac qualities?' For Arthur Blackburn was faced with all the same terrors as all the other soldiers on the Western Front and yet Arthur's conviction was so strong he returned to fight in WWII; during which he achieved the rank of brigadier.

³ Ibid., p. 99

Eleven years after WWII, Arthur was diagnosed with prostate cancer and died four years later, the day before his 69th birthday. He suffered an aneurysm and died suddenly. He was awarded a state funeral with military honours.

The Anzac spirit is something intangible that is carried throughout life and reflected in everything you do. Not all battles are fought in the theatre of war. Arthur fought for many things throughout his life and by no means did he see it as an opportunity to distinguish himself. With only the outcome in mind, he undertook them with a sense of righteousness befitting the Anzac legend and its traditions. To do honour to the Anzac tradition is to be mindful of the words of Arthur Blackburn himself. Arthur said in the RSL newspaper 'Back' in 1947: "...let your thoughts be for those who died in the Anzac tradition, and let your deeds be worthy of them and the country which they and you served"⁴.



Figure 8 – Arthur Blackburn (second left) leaves Buckingham Palace after being presented with his VC by King George V, 1916.

⁴ *ibid.*, p. 428

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arthur, M. 2004, *Symbol of courage: A History of the Victoria Cross*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London.

Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University 2006-2011, *Blackburn, Arthur Seaforth (1892–1960)*, viewed 20 May 2011, <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/blackburn-arthur-seaforth-5256/text8857>>.

Australian War Memorial, *OL00271.006 - Victory Medal: Lieutenant A S Blackburn, 10 Battalion AIF*, viewed 16 June 2011, <<http://cas.awm.gov.au/item/OL00271.006>>.

Department of Veterans' Affairs and Board of Studies December 2010, *Australians on the Western Front 1914-1918*, viewed 23 July 2011, <<http://www.wwl.westernfront.gov.au/pozieres-windmill/index.html>> .

Faulkner, A. 2008, *Arthur Blackburn: An Australian Hero, His Men, and Their Two World Wars*, Wakefield Press, South Australia.

Greatwarcollection.nl, *Pozieres 1916*, viewed 26 July 2011, <<http://www.greatwarcollection.nl/Html/pozieres.html>>.

Macklin, R. 2008, *Bravest - How Some of Australia's Greatest War Heroes Won Their Medals*, Allen & Unwin, New South Wales.

National Archives of Australia, *Your story, our history*, viewed 26 May 2011, <<http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp?B=6688084>>.

Staunton, A. 2005, *"Victoria Cross" Australia's Finest and the Battles They Fought*, Hardie Grant Books, Prahran, Victoria.

Tudball, L. 23 November 2000, *Pozieres – A Study Guide*, viewed 23 July 2011, <<http://www.roninfilms.com.au/get/files/935.pdf>>.

Wikipedia the free encyclopedia 8 July 2011, *Arthur Blackburn*, viewed 25 July 2011, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Blackburn>.

IMAGES

- Figure 1 - *The earliest existing photo of Arthur Blackburn.* [photograph] (Arthur Blackburn's family collection).
- Figure 2 - *Portrait of Lieutenant A. S. Blackburn, VC.* [photograph] (Australian War Memorial photographic image number J03069).
- Figure 3 - Eric Gaba, 2008. *France location map-Regions and departments (The small village of Pozieres situated in Northern France).* 1:3,000,000, Wikimedia Commons.
- Figure 4 - Keith Mitchell. *A map of Pozieres showing Arthur's advancements.*
- Figure 5 - *OG1 trench after battle.* [photograph] (Australian War Memorial Collection, negative number E00007).
- Figure 6 - Australian War Memorial. *A war diary entry from the 10th Battalion in 1916.* [electronic print] Available at: http://www.awm.gov.au/cms_images/AWM4/23/AWM4-23-27-9.pdf (page 4) > [Accessed 19 July 2011].
- Figure 7 - National Archives of Australia. *Arthur's Victoria Cross recommendation.* [electronic print] Available at: <http://naa12.naa.gov.au/scripts/Imagine.asp> > [Accessed 26 May 2011].
- Figure 8 - *Arthur Blackburn (second left) leaves Buckingham Palace after being presented with his VC by King George V, 1916.* [photograph] (Arthur Blackburn's family collection).