

2012 Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize  
**Arthur Seaforth Blackburn**  
Dale Thorpe – Loxton High School





## Arthur Seaforth Blackburn, VC

In the opinion of many, no soldier typified the ANZAC Spirit more than Arthur Seaforth Blackburn. With a larrikin grin, Blackburn flourished in the face of adversity, valuing nothing more than protecting his country, his fellow soldiers and those he loved. I regard the ANZAC Spirit as a quality in everyday people, a determination ground into the very fabric of being Australian. It is about looking out for others, giving for the sake of giving and holding true to your cause; a quality found in Australian servicemen throughout history, with no better example than those on the Western Front. Blackburn was a true example of the ANZAC Spirit, choosing to fight and rest with those he commanded and putting himself in the place of others, providing support where it was needed and leadership in times of turmoil. Arthur Seaforth Blackburn was the essence of the ANZAC Spirit; courage, character and above all an unfaltering sense of duty.

According to his enlistment papers<sup>1</sup>, Arthur Blackburn enlisted in Australian Infantry Force on the 19<sup>th</sup> of August 1914, a voluntary army raised at the beginning of the Great War and according to a biography<sup>2</sup> written about Arthur, he was the first private soldier to enlist in South Australia. An unlikely candidate for service, Arthur stood at 175 centimetres weighing just 175 pounds. Before joining the cause, Arthur was a barrister fresh out of Adelaide University. A career not commonly preceding warfare, Arthur was likely looking for a quick and easy tour before settling down into his professional career. With school fees looming over his shoulder, the armed forces would have provided a new source of income. To Arthur, an adventure waited. Only twenty five, Arthur had seen little of the world; he was keen to see the world and meet new people before settling down. After a few months on the battlefield Arthur would be a hero, his pockets lined with the generous soldier's pay rate of four pounds daily. He would return a man, having served his King and country on the front lines, earning the respect of his friends, family and his future wife's parents. The reality of the situation would never set in until it was well and truly too late.

Two years into the Great War, Blackburn set sail for the Western Front. Having served at Gallipoli for nine months, Arthur had survived his initiation into the Great War; he was now considered an experienced soldier. However, this experience came with consequences. Before departing, Arthur suffered neurasthenia; in the words of a soldier – shell shock. A wound not of the flesh had finally seemed to defeat Blackburn, but he was not yet ready to give up the fight. In a bold demonstration of determination and ANZAC Spirit, Arthur managed to re-join the 10th Battalion in time for departure on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March, 1916. The 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion would leave Cairo, the Australian Infantry Force's international training ground, for Marseilles, and then travel by train through the blooming French country side. As the trains inevitably drew closer to the front, experienced soldiers picked out the dull thud of shelling in the distance. The 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion was posted to a group of farms 25km from the front lines and would be sleeping in barns for the next few weeks. They quickly grew to like the French host families, often helping with chores and were pleased with the lack of serious fighting. These first few weeks on the Western Front were not what the men had in mind; the 10<sup>th</sup> had arrived at a stalemate.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of May the 10<sup>th</sup> were moved to the front lines and were handed steel helmets, almost as a token foreshadowing what was to come. These helmets became a dear friend to every Australian soldier as shrapnel



Arthur Seaforth Blackburn (Post War)  
- Faulkner, Andrew 2008, "Arthur Blackburn, VC"

<sup>1</sup> National Archives of Australia, Enlistment Papers of Arthur Seaforth Blackburn, <http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/scripts/Image.asp>, Viewed (2 September 2011)

<sup>2</sup> Faulkner, Andrew, 2008, Arthur Blackburn, VC, Wakefield Press, Adelaide p. 7



whistled throughout the battlefield, maiming friend and foe alike. For several weeks the 10<sup>th</sup> endured a repeating daily routine. In an environment such as the trenches, it is difficult to believe men could remain driven. I will never be able to fully comprehend how these men saw the rationale to persevere in these horrible conditions, their perseverance and determination is unparalleled in modern Australia. Each morning, before dawn the men would stand guard. With bayonets fixed, they would peer into no-man's land waiting for a deadly fire fight to begin. Once this time passed, the men would enjoy breakfast as men replaced their posts. As Blackburn was a young officer at the time, it was his responsibility to ensure each of these responsibilities were carried out on time. During the day they would play cards, write letters home or chat on what little things they knew at the time. According to Colonel Weir's unit diary, the trenches would be shelled almost every day; soldiers were often buried alive as towers 100 feet high of dirt were torn out of the earth. What little sleep the men got was in damp and depressing conditions, surrounded by puddles and the howl of the icy wind. After several weeks on the front, the 10<sup>th</sup> began marching to the Somme where Arthur would show spirit and determination befitting a hardened ANZAC.

From the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July onwards, Blackburn would participate in one of the largest Allied offensives of the Great War – The Battle of the Somme. A biography written by Andrew Faulkner<sup>3</sup> describes Blackburn's impact on this battle and the important role he played. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion marched out of Sausage Valley towards Pozières. With the distant thud of shelling ahead, the 10<sup>th</sup> turned into Black Watch Alley; a yellow, wet and corpse ridden trench that was in full view of the enemy. Gas shells burst all around the men and as gas masks were fitted any sense of organisation vanished. As Blackburn's platoon struggled to find its way out of the gas, the men in front continued to push on ahead into the trenches. Just before dawn, Arthur was ordered to take seventy men into one of the parallel trenches that ran up the east side of Pozières. Among these men were bombers that Blackburn had trained personally just months earlier. Over the next six hours Blackburn led repeated attacks on the German trenches. Using grenades as cover, Blackburn lead his men along 350 feet of trenches, putting himself in the line of others in times of conflict. Blackburn's team had unrelenting machinegun fire on their position, and snipers trained on visible patches of trench. However Blackburn refused to give up even as his comrades were being gunned down around him; a steadfast demonstration of the ANZAC Spirit.



Left: A captured German trench

Right: OG1, what remains of the nearly destroyed trench Blackburn captured at Pozières

- Sourced from: Faulkner, Andrew 2008, "Arthur Blackburn, VC"

<sup>3</sup> Faulkner, Andrew, 2008, Arthur Blackburn, VC, Wakefield Press, Adelaide



As the morning drew near, the German forces attempted a desperate counter-attack on the now Australian-occupied Pozieres. Artillery fire rained down on Australian positions. For six hours the artillery fire continued, completely draining the morale of the men who had just gained a vast victory in the taking of Pozieres. Archie Barwick, a young soldier at the time, wrote in his diary<sup>4</sup> describing the men during this moment - "Any amount of them could be seen crying and sobbing like children their nerves completely gone." The Australians were finally relieved on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July, now changed men. As the troops were marching back to the nearby town of Albert, a relieving soldier<sup>5</sup> described the soldiers as "drawn and haggard, and so dazed that they appeared to be walking in a dream... in all my experience I have never seen men quite as shaken up as these." However, the journey of these men was not yet over, after a week's rest at Berteaucourt, the 10th was to participate in a final joint attack on Mouquet Farm. A stone-ridden and hilly environment, Mouquet farm was described as a tactical nightmare. The 10<sup>th</sup> wound its way through a ravaged environment littered with bodies and rubble from previous engagements. A mission destined for disaster; the attack on Mouquet Farm resulted in 120 casualties of Arthur's battalion. These losses were in vain; the 10<sup>th</sup> was relieved on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August, never to see the victory their sacrifices would ensure.

Blackburn was admitted to hospital in September, having contracted pleurisy while on the front lines. While in hospital he casually picked up a newspaper, and read that his name was included in the six recipients of the Victoria Cross, the highest military honour awarded for valour. Arthur Blackburn was the first South Australian to receive the decoration, a grand achievement for any soldier. However, always a modest man, Arthur told the Australian Parliament: "I have always regarded the winning of that decoration not as any reward for what I personally did, but as a reward for the bravery and gallantry of whom it was my privilege to lead." Arthur Blackburn truly was the embodiment of the ANZAC Spirit. From his enlistment, all the way to Pozieres, no soldier could provide a better example of leadership, determination and a duty of protection to his companions. Arthur Blackburn was and remains an Australian Hero, his legend – the legend of every ANZAC will live on through the spirit of future generations, their journey eternally bound in history, their memory surviving in the hearts of all Australians.



Arthur Blackburn (second left) leaves Buckingham Palace after the award of his Victoria Cross

- Sourced from: Faulkner, Andrew 2008, "Arthur Blackburn, VC"

<sup>4</sup> Defending Victoria (1997) "JULY and AUGUST 1916", <http://users.vic.chariot.net.au/~ianmac/pozieres.html> Viewed (12 September 2011)

<sup>5</sup> Faulkner, Andrew, 2008, Arthur Blackburn, VC, Wakefield Press, Adelaide p. 108

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