BRONWYN HUGHES

'Y'rs affectionately, Mont': the World War I correspondence of William Montgomery

William 'Mont' Montgomery was a 24-year-old art student at the National Gallery School when, concerned at the dire war news from France, he enlisted on 29 January 1915.[1] When the new Victorian 6th Brigade was raised at Broadmeadows in late March, No. 929, Private William Montgomery was assigned to D Company, 21 Battalion.[2] Over the next four years Mont fought in many major battles – Gallipoli, Pozières, Ypres and Mont St Quentin among them – learning the art of soldiering and attaining the rank of sergeant. Tragically, on 5 October 1918 and with the Allied victory so close, Mont died of wounds in the battle for Montbrehain village on the Hindenburg Line.[3] It was the last day of the last battle fought by Australians on the Western Front.

Y'rs affectionately, Mont

Soon after entering Broadmeadows Army Camp, Mont wrote the first of hundreds of letters home, always signing off his last page – 'Yrs affectionately Mont'. Mont wrote as if he was painting with oils or watercolour, using colourful words to capture his firsthand experience of war, from broad views of daily life in the trenches to terrifying, exhilarating, wounding battles, but without losing his humanity or wry sense of humour. Wary of the censor's blue pencil, Mont sometimes turned his keen eye towards the sustaining beauty of landscape, the local people, architecture, customs and food, which were all so different from the sheltered Australian life he knew as a child and youth.

More than 300 of Mont's letters, along with postcards, official documents and condolences, were generously donated to State Library Victoria in 2011.[4] They show the highs and lows of one man's life at war and reveal an intelligent and observant witness who writes openly from personal experience, within the constraints of censorship. The centenary of World War I has encouraged a review of these events, and the publication of the letters, diaries and memoirs of officers and men in new works helps to expand our unavoidably limited understanding of this cataclysmic period.[5] Mont's unedited, unannotated and unpublished letters, however, give an immediacy to his thoughts and feelings as he wrote home from the trenches.[6]

'Of course, we have no idea where we are going'[7]

On 8 May 1915 and with little fanfare, 21 Battalion embarked on HMAT *Ulysses* at Port Melbourne, sailing with the rest of 6th Brigade to an unknown destination, filled with expectations of the adventure ahead.[8]

Once in Egypt, training ramped up and the raw Broadmeadows troops were 'gradually … transformed from an unorganised mob into a well-trained army'.[9] After months of 'eating sand and falling on stew',[10] the men of 6th Brigade left Alexandria on 30 August aboard the *Southland*, unaware that their destination was the Gallipoli Peninsula, but well aware of enemy submarine activity in the Mediterranean. Just days later, passing close to the island of Stratae, the war came to them suddenly in the form of two torpedoes fired from the German submarine *U-14*.[11] With no time to take evasive action, the first 'fish' tore into the waterline below the bridge, while the second passed to the aft of the vessel.[12] Later, Mont wrote home, wrongly assuming the story would have been reported in the Australian press:

> I was just about to mount guard – I went on at 10 o'clock – when the shock came & Lord was it a shock. There was one great crash & she shivered from stem to stern & then stood still. We carried a 4.7 [gun] on the aft poop deck & two machine gunners & managed to get a shot in … Well for a second or two my hair stood on end & my spine ran chilly but I think I recovered fairly quickly and did not rush the boats but went from the lower deck to the upper and lent a hand there. I wasn't in the first thirty boats & was in one of at least the last ten but which one I'm not sure. Not very many chaps lost their heads – a few did and jumped into the water – and I can remember very well looking into the water & seeing a good many struggling there & realising that one would have to look alive or very soon the other way. Well we got the boat away – a collapsible one, all the wooden ones being

1

Sept. 19th 1915

The Young Men's Christian Association
and the
Australian Branch Red Cross
In the trenches
with
H. M. Mediterranean Expeditionary Force in Egypt.

From
No. Coy. Batn
Brigade Devisn.

Dear Father I am very much afraid that this is going to be a most mournful letter but under the circumstances you must pardon. Last night at 6 o'clock my best pal, the only one with whom I had any common interest in the way of art & literature was shot through the brain & died almost immediately. Jim Burns (Corporal Burns) Sgt. [illegible] & myself have always dined together since we have been in the trenches, have shared nearly everything together & generally have clubbed one with another to make things go more easily. If one should happen to get a little more of something than the next one – a little more jam, a few cigarettes, more tobacco – he invariably divided it among the other two so that the partnership was a very close one. I will tell you the whole circumstances that led up to his death. At about half past four in the afternoon the men in the support trenches generally wake up & set about getting something to eat preparatory to [illegible] supper at 6 o'clock

A 'most mournful letter' from Mont to his father, William Montgomery, written in the trenches at Gallipoli on 19 September 1915. Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15414, Box 27/2

gone by this time … when the bally thing finally got into the water we slid down ropes – a distance of thirty feet or so into her & I burnt my hands slightly with the speed I came down. Well we pushed off and were beating about for about 4 hours when we were picked up by the ________ a ship which had been captured about this time last year from the Germans in the Bay of Bengal. Meanwhile the other boats had been all picked up by the French torpedo boats or our destroyers or by one or two other ships that came to our rescue.[13]

The flotilla of rescue ships dropped their bedraggled human cargo on the island of Lemnos, many of the men in shock and suffering from exhaustion. Thirty-two Australians lost their lives, 14 of whom were men from 21 Battalion.[14] One casualty was 6th Brigade's commanding officer, 54-year-old Colonel Richard Linton, who succumbed to exposure after an hour and a half in the water following the capsize of his lifeboat.[15] He, along with those of his men who perished, was buried on Lemnos. The *Southland* eventually limped into port, too, thanks to the quick action of the chief engineer who ensured the bulkheads were closed immediately after the torpedo hit, and the volunteer skeleton crew of a dozen men, under 21 Battalion's Captain Harry Crowder, who shovelled coal to keep the ship afloat and underway.[16]

After only a few days on Lemnos, the brigade was preparing to complete its landing at Gallipoli:

> Capt. Duggan called out for any man who was fully equipped to stand forward & I think one chap came out. Some of the men had come on board absolutely nude – having lost everything & there wasn't one man who had either his web equipment or rifle. We were refitted with all sorts of odds & ends of stuff – dead men's kit, Tommy clothing etc. I got a Tommies tunic – much too small for me but better than nothing. All our webbing & rifle etc. were recovered from the *Southland* so we reached the front fairly well equipped again[17] … on coming from Lemnos to here [Anzac Cove on the night of 6 September], a distance of only 40 or 50 miles there wasn't a man on board who wasn't in a more or less nervy condition. The boat [*Abassieh*] had no wireless & very few life boats & not enough life belts to go round. The orders were – every man to take off his boots & putties. Those who had no life belts to take their stand beside the boats those who had life belts to stand fast & God help those who couldn't swim. Fortunately we got through without a mishap but we would have fared badly if we had managed to run into a submarine. The submarining of the *Southland* shook up every man on board and many may never get over it.[18]

Mont relived the torpedo attack and its aftermath on more than one occasion, writing a month later from his trench at Courtney's Post:

> I wouldn't go through an experience like that again for anything. Every night in the week death purrs & croons within a foot of my head but I take not more notice of it than a mosquito but no more torpedoes for me thank you … I can still stand on the poop deck & watch her settle down in the water like a stone & still see the sea full of struggling swimming soldiers.[19]

Cyril Leyshon White's hand-drawn Christmas card to Mr and Mrs Montgomery, 1915. The card is inscribed 'with best wishes from the Gallipoli Peninsula'. Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15414, Box 27/2

> That one cruel jar & the sound of rending steel will stay in my mind till I'm a hundred and the sight of one or two of the corpses & the rest all sown up in sacks & labelled like so many sheep was gruesome.[20]

'Trench life is no fun ...', 1915[21]

To give his family some idea of the Gallipoli terrain, Mont likened the beach around Anzac Cove to a scaled-up version of Portsea or Mornington on Victoria's coast, '... much steeper and instead of ti-tree there grows a dense sort of scrub. The first lot of Australians must have been gods or supermen or something to take the heights they have ...'. Brigade Headquarters was set up, perched on the terraces behind Scott's Point, and 21 Battalion's four

companies dispersed along the ridge, with D Company at Courtney's Post.[22] It was to be home for more than three months, as the Gallipoli war had become a matter of holding the line through a network of trenches:

> The very first night I was in the trenches I was put on guard in a saphead. This was a secret one & no shots whatever were to be fired except if a [Turk] should actually come down the shaft. As it was my first night I was naturally a bit nervy & you can imagine the shock I got when I saw a dark object moving slowly over the rim of the crater. Fortunately I managed to keep my head & on looking closer discovered it to be a huge rat leisurely making his way around the rim. The difference between a rat and a man is not very great to a chap who's in a state of funk more or less ... That post was a brute of a one. As I say it was secret & all I was supposed to do was to listen for enemy sappers & anything else. A dozen times during the night I could hear picks & shovels tap tapping underneath me & expected to be blown up at any minute ...[23]
>
> The trench I am in is only about 10 yards from the enemy in one place and the place I am stationed in it is about 40 yards from them. So far I have been on duty every night and last night I had charge of 6 men on the post. You have to keep a constant watch all night by looking over the trenches. In the day time this is done by means of periscopes but at night of course they are useless and you have to look over & chance the shots. Things are much more lively at night than in the day time ... Their snipers are very annoying & some of them are very good shots. There is one of them who regularly as clockwork sends a bullet up in front of the trench & scatters earth all over us. I had eight rapid shots at him the other night but I couldn't get him ... We could hear a dog barking in the enemy trenches the other night & it sounded rather funny. Also we have to be on the qui vive all the time for any mining or sapping that they may be doing. The night before last we could hear them working on their barbed wire entanglements & all the tap tap tap sounded weird & ghostly. A few volleys from one or two sections soon stopped them though & every time they went at it we repeated the dose.[24]

Many snipers were highly skilled, quick to move when it 'got hot', and successful at picking off the Australians, as happened to one of Mont's few close companions, Corporal James Burns, on the evening of 18 September 1915. Mont, whose letters were generally buoyant or, at worst, accepting of his situation, wrote in great distress to his father the following day, begging pardon for pouring out his grief:

> Last night at 6 o'clock my best pal Jimmy Burns, & the only one with whom I had any common interest in the way of art & literature was shot through the brain & died almost immediately … The first news that reached me of the tragedy was from one of the signallers who came with the yarn that Corporal Burns was killed – shot through the head & had died instantly. I couldn't believe it but very quickly found out that it was only too true – had put his head over the parapet to try & get in a return shot & had been instantly killed. The bullet entered through the forehead & came out the back of the head nearly lifting the top of the skull off & splattering the brain over the trench. I'll spare you any more details but at 9 o'clock I was relieved from duty to attend his funeral which was of the saddest & most impressive character. The cemetery is almost two miles from here – almost right down to the beach … The moon was very bright & the stars shining bravely when all that remained of poor Jimmy was committed to the Lord … The burial service was short & very simple … and the chaplain read the service with the aid of a pocket torch … He was buried as he had died – in his uniform with his martial cloak around him and only a blanket between his face and mother earth. He lies with his head towards the sea whose surf can be distinctly heard and his face to the stars and his feet to the trenches so that if he were to stand up he would still be facing the enemy.[25]

In November, 21 Battalion's front was shortened and reorganised and preparations began to dig in for a Gallipoli winter. Unbeknown to the troops, planning for evacuation was already underway and, on the night of 18 December 1915, Mont, one of the party of six men under his Company Commander Captain Bernard Duggan, with another party under Captain Crowther, remained on duty after the majority of the battalion left from Watson's Pier.[26] His task, with two other men, was to guide the troops to the lighters.[27] It gave him a grand view of the departure.

> You would have smiled to see the troops all coming down with muffled feet – you see the men had orders to tear up their blankets and tie them around their boots. No man was allowed to carry a pack which projected over the shoulders – as he might catch in the narrow saps and block the men behind him. It was a sight never to be forgotten – thousands and thousands of men pouring down the valleys – not a word spoken – not a footfall heard – and not even a cigarette allowed.
>
> Well – before we left we posted automatic rifles in the trenches – worked by water which fired every few minutes. The stores we abandoned – Oh Lord – hundreds of thousands of pounds of stuff – Red X stores – ordnances

> – stores of all descriptions – food – boots clothing – it made one sick to see all those valuable things being left. We ruined as much as possible – poured kerosene over lots of the stuff – and set fire to it – dumped millions upon millions of rounds of ammunition and bombs and shells into the sea – the pity of it.[28]

Christmas was spent camped amid rain, sleet and freezing conditions on Lemnos before returning to further training in Egypt, torrid duty in the Canal Zone and reorganisation of the battalion. The battalion left Alexandria on the *Minnewaska* on 20 March 1916 and arrived at Marseille four days later, thankfully without submarine activity on the journey.

'Somewhere in France', 1916[29]

> This is a picnic beside Anzac. All the chaps say the same. At Anzac goodness only knew where your next day's tucker was to come from. Whether or not you'd get anything to drink. You couldn't buy anything or see anyone and your horizon intellectual & physical was bounded by the walls of your trench … Here things are vastly different … What a beautiful country France is! I grow more & more in love with it each day … The little grey-roofed villages with their thatch & tile roofs, the village church, the farms & hayricks & long level meadows, the sheltered lanes & big even avenues of poplars, the white winding roads so beautifully kept, the comfortable, solid, prosperous farmhouses with their equally prosperous inmates – la Belle France with a vengeance.[30]

Mont was not entirely seduced by the apparent bucolic calm of the rural landscape of northern France:

> One rarely meets a man of fighting age. All the farm work is done by the aged or the very young & those young men you do see are either engaged in war work of some kind or else have been invalided from the front. The little boy of the woman where we were quartered was very ill indeed & our battalion doctor was nursing him. I was called in to interpret & had rather a difficult job of things as such a lot of medical terms entered into the conversation. The doc diagnosed the case as bronchial pneumonia & said that it was a toss up whether he saw the morning or not. The poor little beggar was only 12 months old & the poor woman was nearly frantic. He pulled through however & is now as well as ever.[31]

The battalion had its first frontline duty in the 'quiet sector' of Fleurbaix and then later at Bois-Grenier, as the Australians learnt to deal with a very different

war from the Gallipoli campaign. Mont's 'picnic' came to abrupt conclusion in the Lille Post Salient, northern France, on 21 June 1916:

> On June 21 – the longest day by the way – I had an experience that will last me the rest of my life … Just after the shelling began in earnest I saw that there would very likely be something doing & I sneaked along the bottom of the trench to tell the men to be in instant readiness for an attack.[32] I hadn't gone very far before a high explosive landed just behind the parapet smashing it in with me under it. For a second I lost my head a bit – I was unable to move hand or foot being pinned down under the fallen timber … Well to tell you candidly I thought I had no possible chance as the shells were falling around me like hail and I said to myself 'Even if you do have the good luck to escape from the shells which is almost impossible – you will be killed in the attack which is almost certain to follow.' 'Supposing even you do escape safe from the bombardment they are sure to send over an attack of gas.' 'You will be killed by that because you can't get your respirator on because for one thing you can't move hand or foot & for another you couldn't get your gas helmet on even if you could use your arms because your head is jammed.' So you see I was in a pretty pickle. My head was the only thing not covered but that made things a bit worse in a way because I was getting covered with the showers of earth & stones the shells were kicking up. And then again I was nearly suffocated by the choking fumes given off by the shells as they burst … As things turned out I escaped with shock & a few bruises and a cut behind the ear – the whole lot not making one really decent wound … I still feel shaky & nervous but am otherwise all right. It was the worst 2 hours I have ever put in & I only hope I don't put in any more like it.[33]

After the bombardment quietened Mont was dug out with pick and shovel by his men. Stretcher-bearers were keen to carry him to an aid post, although his ordeal under fire did not result in severe physical damage and he offered to return to the line immediately, an offer that was swiftly declined by his superior officer. He was severely shaken, likening his waiting for death to his experience on the *Southland*, but 'this time was much worse'.[34]
Weeks later, the battalion moved closer to the battle, finally camping at the Albert brickfields before moving closer to the epicentre of the first Battle of the Somme at Pozières. The 6th Brigade was heavily involved in fighting in late July and early August, with the 21 Battalion acting as the carrying battalion, generally in full view of the German lines. By 22 August 1916, Mont's battalion was in the van as it faced the heavily fortified Mouquet Farm:[35]

> I won't forget it for a hundred years. It was the hottest shop I have ever been in & I don't want another like it. There was stoush & slather & whack dealt out by both sides. I passed down the German trench (that had been) and it was literally piled with corpses. You have heard ere now of their 40 feet dugouts etc.? I find that it has not been exaggerated & saw more than one full of German dead. That was only one little incident in a long tragedy and I could tell you for hours of many others as bad or worse than that. How I escaped death God only knows. I was knocked unconscious once & had my helmet on! with a piece of shrapnel another time, & yet got off without a scratch. And these also were all in the day's work as I had escapes as close as those several times a day.[36]
>
> At Moquet Farm [sic] the cows [Germans] had tunnelled right underneath & when we took it they came up behind us & cut us off. The 21st battn lost nearly 500 men that day out of about 650. I was the only corporal left in the coy … it was only by sheer good luck that I wasn't one of them. One shell got 17 of us – 7 killed & 10 wounded …
>
> We were to attack at dawn. At 4.30 there was to be an artillery preparation lasting a minute & a half. At 4.31 + ½ it was to lift a hundred yards & we were to follow in its wake. It would take Dante & Shakespeare rolled into one to describe that 90 seconds. The vault of heaven opened & the whole firmament seemed to come crashing to earth. We were covered by a roof of steel & the crash & roar & screams of the shells was something awful. I remember feeling a sort of exhilaration & yelled aloud in my excitement 'Give it to the _____ you beauties'. The whole thing, attack, counter attack & all were over in half an hour & then came the reaction. I shook & shivered & sagged at the knees like a baby in absolute terror. The prisoners we took were more frightened than I was – which was saying a lot by the way – … terrified as I was. I couldn't help feeling contempt for them for the way they cringed & crawled with their 'Mercy Kamarade' whine.[37]

The battalion's casualties were dire – 651 casualties, killed, missing or wounded, leaving a depleted 491 battle-weary men to be led by 11 officers into Belgium.[38] By 5 September 1916 they took over from the Canadians at St Lawrence Camp near Ypres before moving on to Toronto Camp for reinforcement and further training.[39]

> Saturday afternoon Sept 9th when I was having a nap the Sgt. wakened me up and said there was a good job offering in Poperinghe – about 7 kilos out – if I cared to take it I could have it. So that afternoon at 6 o'clock we came here. The job was town piquet & guard – I sgt. 1 cpl. & 20 men. For a few days

> & nights I was visiting rounds & then was taken off that & made billeting N.C.O. to the Anzac area. It's a job I like. I have to take the troops to their various billets & see that the billets are left in good order & condition when they leave & also that they are clean when they enter them. It's a bigger job than you might think because there are hundreds of houses in the town available for troops & it's no easy job seeing to every one of them but the conditions are so good that I don't mind if I've twice the work.[40]

But it was, as always, only a short respite and, by late October, the brigade was on the march again, back to the Somme, just as appalling winter conditions set in:

> I have been in and out of the trenches – or rather, shell holes – and am now back at billets for a breathing space. We had an 18 days go there this time & I assure you it was no good. The shell fire was not nearly so bad as at Pozieres or Moquet Farm [sic] but oh the mud – indescribable. When one talks of mud one understands the sort of liquid we were used to in Australia but here it's an absolute misnomer. Glue is not nearly strong enough a word but I can think of no other just at the moment. I shall just give you a few instances to give you an idea of it.
>
> The 19th Div. (Tommies) attacked. They reached about halfway across No Man's Land & got stuck in the glue. Fritz seeing their plight hopped over to finish them & he in his turn got stuck. The two artilleries just played on each side till they were decimated.
>
> In going into the trenches I just managed to make them. The post we had to occupy was about a hundred yards long but I was so done – just fell against the parapet exhausted – up past my knees in mud – stay there till morning. At daylight I made another effort but was still too weak & didn't get to where I should have been for 24 hours afterwards – only a 100 yards away. Had Fritz attacked he could have just walked in. Every rifle was choked with mud, the bolts were unworkable, the men were exhausted & no one knew his front. Fortunately he didn't [attack].[41]

On 6 December 1916 Mont received much-anticipated English leave, his first extended rest out of the war zone since Egypt: '... marched straight to Westminster – Horseferry Rd. – Anzac Hqrs. Changed my money got new clothes, had a shave and hot bath and a good dinner & was free, free, free, for 10 glorious days.'[42]

Leave was a chance to meet his Newcastle upon Tyne aunts and uncles, who welcomed and cosseted their young nephew. For Mont, it brought his father's early home to life as he walked the streets in the company of his

relatives. Back in London he spent time with former Melbourne friends who took him on visits to the theatre, opera and supper parties before making a quick pilgrimage to see Canterbury Cathedral in Kent.[43] By Christmas he was back in France with his unit.

'As fit as a flea again ...', 1917[44]

After fierce fighting in abysmal conditions at Pozières, Mouquet Farm and the Somme battle at Flers, Mont marvelled at his good health and ability to dodge bullets:

> I haven't had the suspicion of a cold – nothing wrong at all. A devil of a lot of chaps evacuated, physically unfit but I have no such luck. It seems I'm doomed never to have a day's hospital – nor to get wounded & get 6 months Blighty – but just go & slog along all through.[45]

But Mont's good luck changed dramatically in 1917 as nearly two years of 'foot slogging' and 'narrow squeaks' caught up with him. A 'mild attack of influenza' took him to No. 5 General Hospital, Rouen, in January and Convalescent Camp in February, while a heavy frost and more impossible winter weather created hell for the battalion, which was by then astride the Albert-Bapaume Road at the Butte de Warlencourt and then on the right sector at Le Sars.[46] In April Mont was settling in as orderly corporal to the 21 Battalion lines at the Australian Base Depot when he contracted mumps.[47] This was undoubtedly a better option than that facing the rest of his battalion, who were preparing for a fight near Reincourt, in the 'Blood Tub' – the battle of Bullecourt – where, on 3 May, 6th Brigade alone of the advancing force reached its objectives, but with a fearful casualty toll.[48]

A rejuvenated Mont rejoined his unit after spending months 'in no less than 5 camps & travel[ling] ... 400 to 500 miles' and including extra delays to rule out suspected diphtheria and to undertake extensive dental work at the Base Depot at Le Havre.[49] By June, the depleted battalion was in reserve, rebuilding and training at Beaulencourt, 16 kilometres behind the lines, 'within easy range of the heavies' but no shells landed within a mile of the camp.[50] Two months later, a full-strength 21 Battalion was on the march again into Belgium where it would take part in fighting the third Battle of Ypres. Mont was full of praise for the allied artillery, believing the German artillery 'though still pretty good – is nothing like it was on the Somme last year':

> When [British forces] went over the top [at Ypres] ... the 18 pounders were to go in front of us & play on the first objective for 12 minutes. Then the

A lean and confident Mont Montgomery, Amiens, 1917. Photographer Lucien Hacquart. Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15414, Box 1/7

> barrage lifted & went forward to the 2nd objective at the rate of 100 yards in 4 minutes. From there it played on the 3rd objective & so on until it reached the 4th objective – where it stopped & stayed in front for 2 hours. In the meantime the heavies got busy on his roads, communication trenches, dumps, gun positions magazines & so on. I've never seen such a barrage – hardly a mouse could live under it – & hardly a mouse did.

With this constant bombardment, it is no wonder that the landscape was razed and, by battle's end in November 1917, more than a million soldiers and civilians were killed, wounded or missing. The 21 Battalion took part in the assault on Broodseinde Ridge, which was part of the preparatory attack on Passchendaele.[51] Mont was a casualty only hours after 21 Battalion went in again on 8 October and, although he described the gunshot wound to his back as 'slight', it proved sufficiently serious for him to be evacuated to Calais:[52]

> I got [this little smack] at 2 o'clock in the morning in the Ypres salient – just on the left of Polygon Wood. We were digging in for all we were worth when a Fritz aeroplane came over & dropped some parachute flares. These are rotten things – they float about in the sky for about 10 minutes or

> 1/4 of an hour & light up the ground below like day. Of course he spotted us – couldn't help it. Here was the whole of D Coy most of us in the open digging away like mad. Then about 5 minutes later – over came the stuff – not very much – you'd have thought he'd have pumped it in like anything but he contented himself with only a few H.E.s – heavy stuff though. The one that got me burst about 50 yards away & only serves to prove my old theory that you're safer 5 yards from a shell – provided you're down on your stomach – than you are 100 yards away standing up. Anyway it was only a small splinter that got me … The stretcher bearers dressed me & reckoned I'd better get away to the dressing station … Arrived there I had it dressed again and the doc gave my walking ticket to an advanced Casualty Clearing Station. I lost my way getting back there and eventually spent the rest of the night in an old dugout. When dawn broke I made my way to Ypres … went by ambulance to a C.C.S. [Casualty Clearing Station] about 10 kilos from Poperinghe.[53]

Mont was amazed when, after a fortnight in No. 30 General Hospital at Calais, his 'scratch almost healed' and expecting a convalescent camp would be his next abode, he was marked 'England'. It was a welcome return to Blighty and after stays at hospitals in Camberwell and Harefield, Mont had leave to visit his Newcastle family again and many artist friends in London before returning to No. 3 Command Depot, Hurdcott in Wiltshire. This time he was able to spend a weekend seeing the 'quaint old bits' of Salisbury and exploring its cathedral that 'rises straight out from the midst of a brilliant well kept lawn'.[54] There was an element of guilt too, as Mont candidly told his father 'I don't deserve all this. You see this year I've hardly seen any action at all'.[55]

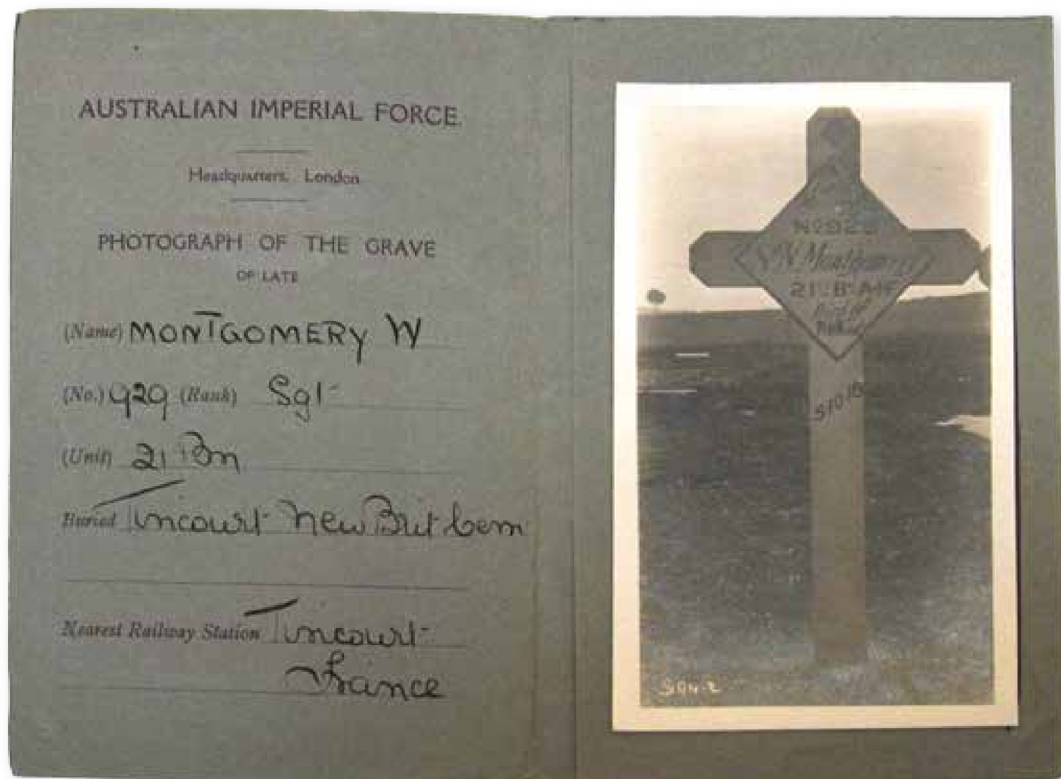
'Big things are happening & Fritz is having a nasty time of it …', 1918[56]

Mont missed having Christmas with his unit; he also missed parcels from home that were 'divvied' up and enjoyed by his platoon. By the new year he was stuck at the Havre base and keen to rejoin his unit:

> I'm heartily sick and fed up hanging about here & wish to goodness they'd … let me get up to the battalion again. After all that's my Alma Mater & my sheet anchor & the sooner I get back the better pleased I'll be.[57]

Returning to his unit in May 1918, Mont recorded plenty of action over the next two months:

> Been through two gas attacks, one hop over, on patrol in No Man's Land more time than I can count, several nights on outpost – not a cushy job


AUSTRALIAN IMPERIAL FORCE

Headquarters, London

PHOTOGRAPH OF THE GRAVE

OF LATE

(Name) MONTGOMERY W

(No.) 929 (Rank) Sgt

(Unit) 21 Bn

Buried Tincourt New Brit Cem

Nearest Railway Station Tincourt France

Temporary grave marker for Sgt. N (*sic*) Montgomery, Tincourt New British Cemetery, near Peronne, France 1919. Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 15414, Box 27/7

> by any means, because if the Hoch comes over – you're the sacrificial goat, volunteered for one raid, which didn't come off.[58]

By July, Mont was aware that Germany was 'getting it now' and that reports reaching the troops were very satisfactory.[59] A month later and 6th Brigade was in the thick of the fighting at the Battle of Amiens; afterwards Mont's spirits were high in the certain knowledge that this battle had changed the war irrevocably:

> What do you think of the news? It's some drive isn't it? Thank God I was well in it. My battalion was in the 3rd wave to begin with & it wasn't long till we found ourselves well up in front. It was a day – the 8th August I'm speaking of – that will live in my memory & I wouldn't have missed it for all the world. My! – but what stories I have to tell – everything else we've done seems to pale into insignificance beside it … one of the biggest days in the Allies history. The cavalry going through the tanks rushing up, the artillery galloping into action – oh my hat … I simply can't describe it all – it was so magnificent. The tanks poured through all morning & at one time I counted 40 – and they had been going through for a couple of hours before that & kept going for three hours afterwards – there must have been hundreds &

hundreds of them. I doubt if ever before in this war – even in 1914 that the cavalry have been used to such an advantage – and we could see the whole lot of them. And how often too has the artillery been seen going up at a gallop – quite in the approved style – horses plunging & rearing – drivers sweating & cursing – going hell for leather.

Our barrage was a beauty. I'm getting quite a connoisseur in barrages – only very few shells dropping short. Our casualties were exceptionally light – I've never seen so few – we suffered infinitely more in the little stunt of 19th [Ville-sur-Ancre] when we only advanced a 1000 yards or so – and compared to Pozieres or Ypres were infinitesimal … And talk about booty – good Lord – three or four trains – engines & all – a timber yard as big as Moores, ammunition enough to blow up the whole British Empire, & thousands of tons of tucker & supplies. I'm only talking of what I saw myself which as you may easily understand was only a very small part of the whole affair.[60]

D Company was in position on the right, next to the Canadians and, despite the fog and a determined push back by the enemy, the brigade gained significant ground. The 21 Battalion was relieved on 18 August and driven back in charabancs – 'an event almost unheard of' – to Daours in the Vecquemont area. But respite was short and, by the end of the month, the battalion was again in the reserve line near Cappy, preparing for the successful assault on Peronne and Mont St Quentin.[61]

One of Mont's last letters was written after the battle, on 8 September 1918, to his stepmother, May Montgomery:

After a month of as hard & strenuous fighting as it would be possible to get & now we are out of the line for a few days. Dunno when we go in again – but I'd give anything for a fortnight's spell. It's been vastly interesting though & I wouldn't have missed it for worlds.'[62]

Despite 6th Brigade's role in the victorious action of August and September, especially at Mont St Quentin, casualties were heavy (estimated at 30 per cent for 31 August – 1 September alone) and, on 20 September, orders were received to disband the severely depleted 21 Battalion and to reassign the officers and men to the remaining battalions of 6th Brigade.[63]

On the same day, the shocked men formed a deputation and waited upon their commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Duggan, before an unsatisfactory meeting with the brigadier on the following day. Company Sergeant Major Trevascus and Mont, not long promoted to sergeant, spent the next few days weighing up brigade sentiment as well as visiting other

battalions slated for disbandment to 'find them most strongly with us'. On Wednesday 25 September the order to march out was given by Duggan, who 'broke down entirely' as the officers moved out as per orders. The men did not. By electing to defy orders and not marching to their new units, the men effectively mutinied, but duties and discipline were maintained throughout the interregnum under the appointment of Trevascus as commanding officer, and Montgomery as adjutant. At 6.30 pm the men received word that disbandment of 21 Battalion was in abeyance. The news was received to deafening cheers; the mutiny was over and the unit, effectively their 'family', would remain together, at least until they were no longer in the line of fire.[64]

By October the battalion was in reserve, camped in poor billets at Roisel, but was soon moving towards a last outpost of German resistance on the Hindenberg Line at Montbrehain. On 5 October, with little planning, a few hours' notice, depleted numbers, relying mainly on maps and, more unfortunately, poor intelligence that underestimated the recent build-up of German defences, 21 Battalion took the centre position – in the village itself – with 24 Battalion on its left flank and the untried 2 Pioneer Battalion to the right. Despite the odds, 6th Brigade's attack was successful, but it came with greater human cost than the battle at Mont St Quentin.

Sergeant Mont Montgomery did not survive the battle. Moving his men through the village to establish a forward machine gun post, a 'bullet pierced his buttock and must have penetrated the vital organs'.[65] He was evacuated by his men to No. 12 Casualty Clearing Station where he died later the same day, 5 October 1918, the last day on which Australian infantry was in the frontline and just weeks before the Armistice was signed.[66]

In *Farewell, Dear People* (2012), Ross McMullen writes with clarity and compassion of a 'lost generation' of estimable young men like Mont, who were poised to bring leadership and creativity to wide-ranging fields of endeavour.[67] Like other men with four and more years of experience at war, Mont was mulling over his postwar future in the last months, knowing that the end of the fighting was in sight. Would he have been an artist, as he planned before the war, and taken over his father's stained glass enterprise, or would he have opted for journalism or flying, as he casually mentioned in letters? As war neared its end, William Montgomery had grown to be a well-respected, accomplished, personable and mature young man with a solid understanding of humanity in all its guises. He had the potential to offer much to his family and friends and the wider Australian community but, tragically, he ended up as one of the Great War's 'lost generation'.