Chapter Eleven

Everyday burdens

> 'Let him who thinks that War is a glorious, golden thing, who loves to roll forth stirring words of exhortation, invoking Honour and Praise and Valour and Love of Country…look…at this skeleton lying on its side, resting half-crouching as it fell…perfect but that it is headless…Who is there who has known and seen who can say that Victory is worth the death of even one of these?'.
>
> Lieutenant Roland Leighton
> 7th Worcesters.

> 'Oh, it was horrible, horrible. And the hopeless folly of it all.
>
> Private Mark Yewdall,
> 1/28 Battalion London Regiment (Artists' Rifles)

The decks of the Port Lincoln were lined with soldiers gripping hold of thousands of red, white and blue streamers thrown to them by loved ones and other well wishers gathered on the wharf below. The men were boisterously loud, their officers, watching from the side, quiet and self-restrained. Amidst ringing cheers, the vessel cast off at midday, making for the entrance to Port Phillip Bay through which the parents and grandparents of so many on board had earlier sailed to begin their lives anew in Australia. Some among the women watching wept as the troop ship swung about. Others stood very still, watching but not seeing, oblivious of the throng about them and its clamour.

After pausing for a time outside the heads, the Port Lincoln and a number of other transports sailed west to Albany in Western Australia and then on towards South Africa. After the first few weeks the initial excitement of their first sea voyage would have subsided and the Free brothers would have grown tired of the monotonous diet and accompanying routine of physical training, lectures, deck games, rifle-practice and rumour mongering. Their interest would soon be revived, however, on sighting the coast of South Africa and, after that, the port of Durban. Here they would have shared the experience of Corporal Alan Campbell of the

Australian Flying Corps whose ship left Melbourne shortly after the Port Lincoln, and who later wrote to his mother that:

> The first person that we were able to discern on land was a girl, or perhaps she would prefer, a young lady, neatly dressed in all white, who waved to us and in excellent semaphore, sent Australia some very nice messages. We gave that girl the loudest cheer that, I think, I ever heard, 2500 of us together and she disappeared. We had not seen a female for so long, that the sight of her did us good.

After a few days leave in Durban where they and their friends dined in the local YMCA and rode free on the trams to the city's museums and other sites of interest, the boys rejoined the Port Lincoln where they would again have been treated to the spectacle of the young woman, one Ethel Campbell, coming onto the wharf with several chaff bags full of fresh oranges. These she threw to the departing troops as fast as her native helpers could pass them to her and, when all were despatched, waved goodbye and semaphored them 'Good Luck'. Her gesture so touched the watchers that they, like many before and after, took up a collection and sent her a gift from England. This served, it seems, to increase even more her admiration for the Anzacs—her 'heroes to the core'—whom she had already eulogized in (amateurish yet heartfelt) verse:

> We can't do much, I own it;
> But give them a passing cheer,
> While the real elite beat a shocked retreat;
> Why? They saw one drinking beer!
> Oh God! could we show these misers
> The path the Anzacs went!
> Could they rest in their beds at night-time,
> And live in their d——d content?
> Could they talk with a sneer of Australians,
> When one or two get drunk?
> I'd rather a drunk Australian
> Than a wealthy Durban funk!
>
> (Cited in the *East Charlton Tribune*, 14 February 1917).

The ships sailed without an escort to Cape Town and then along the west coast of Africa and across the equator. They were now in 'dangerous waters' and were not allowed to smoke or show lights of any kind on deck after sunset. This was for good reason. Much to the trepidation of the soldiers on board, a German submarine began stalking the Port Lincoln and chased it into the port of Freetown in Sierra Leone where, without a pilot, it ran onto a

sandbar luckily within the harbour. Sam and Bert and their colleagues were hastily disembarked and spent an unplanned week in Freetown seeing the sights, having their photographs taken, and waiting for a replacement transport ship. This was the SS Ulysses which left in a convoy from Sierra Leone on 5 December and arrived without mishap at Devonport in the United Kingdom three days after Christmas.

The troops travelled by train from the port to a small siding on the Salisbury Plain from where they marched, in a long loose column, to their transit camp some four miles distant. Cold, but cheerful and dry, the men sang and whistled as they swung along the country lanes, peering with interest at the neat farms and buildings they passed, and shouting greetings to the few villagers they espied. On arrival at the camp they were numbered off, 22 to a hut, given blankets and a straw mattress, and told to be up to receive orders at 6.30 the next morning. The following day Bert and Sam were allocated to the 4th Machine Gun Company of the 10th Brigade and began training for active service on the western front.

Life at Lalbert meanwhile continued on. The winter frosts and fogs were followed by propitious rainfalls that saw the Wimmera transformed in spring into a brilliant, rolling green landscape. Samuel and his younger sons carried on with fallowing, fence-mending, shearing, dipping, crutching and, towards Christmas, harvesting another bumper crop of wheat. Fanny and her daughters joined others in the district in attending and organising sewing circles, dances, flower day celebrations and other gatherings to provide goods for the troops and raise money for the war effort. The boarders at the Lalbert Coffee Palace agreed to be fined for breeches of etiquette. The money generated was given to the local Red Cross Society which, at Christmas, distributed the £14/14/11 it had collected to the Belgian infants fund and Lady Munro-Ferguson's Government House-based Central Depot (*East Charlton Tribune*, 24 January 1917). Encouraged by the Education Department, the local school held colourful bazaars at which there were be-ribboned stalls packed with goods of all kinds for sale, and where people partook of such amusements as sheaf tossing, sack racing and ladies nail driving.

Discussions in the region's towns and newspapers centred on the harvest yields, the plague of mice overrunning the wheat fields in the Mallee, and the planned introduction of daylight saving—thought by most to be a 'darned nuisance'. Some were

excited by the appearance in the district of Mr Gillies' Overland automobile. '[B]uilt of the very latest design and fitted with a 25 horse power motor', it could travel from Quambatook to Melbourne, a distance of over 200 miles, in just seven and one half hours (Noblet, 1984: 74). Others gave consideration to the vexed question of how mothers were to ensure their daughters' future happiness in view of the 'dreadful toll of man-life exacted through the war'. The editor of the *East Charlton Tribune* told his readers that all young women cannot now hope to be wives and mothers, and some must be trained 'in the business or profession for which they show the most talent'. If contrary to expectations they do eventually marry, the article continued, the young women 'will be all the better and more methodical housekeepers'. The paper finished with the warning that clear evidence of the tragic consequences of not preparing daughters accordingly could be found 'in the majority of our boarding houses…[in which are located] a great number of aimless spinsters…[who] lead a narrow, selfish existence' (*East Charlton Tribune*, 13 January 1917).

Unconscious of the irony involved, the *Tribune* also gave strong support to a new nation-wide recruiting campaign, that had begun in January. Run by committees headed by Federal members of Parliament, it aimed to increase dramatically the numbers of Australian men serving in the charnel-house trenches of Europe, and involved yet another round of 'public meetings, posters and parades, films and lantern-slides, and 'Win-the-war' days' (McQuilton, 2001: 77). Recruiters from the city were also back, determined to fill the country's quota of enlistees. Their task was by this stage neither an easy nor a popular one. As the recruiting officer for the Wimmera, Lieutenant Craig, informed the Donald Council: 'Many men held the wrong idea as to the need for recruits. They had a grievance against the government and would not enlist'. Craig continued that public meetings were not an effective means of recruitment. 'His idea was to get a caravan and travel the surrounding districts, making a direct appeal to farmers' (*Donald Times*, 9 February 1917).

In spite of Craig's misgivings, a monster recruiting rally was held at Donald's St George's Hall in March. The assembled throng, which the reporter from the *Donald Times* thought had come mainly to listen to the local band, were shown a moving picture entitled 'A Soldier's Life in the A.I.F.'. Craig then tried to convince them that, statistically speaking, life at the front was no more dangerous than at home (*Donald Times*, 23 March 1917). He and Sergeant-Major Durand called on the women of the district also to

do their duty and tell their men to enlist. In doing so they were drawing on the latest advice contained in the 'Organiser's Companion', a guide for recruiters recently distributed by Melbourne's Director-General of Recruiting. This suggested that the 'softer feelings of womanhood have to be suppressed…Hearts must be steeled so that every woman can say firmly to any eligible man, no matter in what relation he stands to her, "You ought to go, GO!"…One slight pressure of feminine persuasion', the pamphlet argued, 'is worth a battering ram of raillery and indignation' (cited in the *East Charlton Review*, 10 February 1917).

Two of Craig's recruiters, Sergeants Fitzgerald and Boyd, took advantage of a large crowd attending the Charlton races to spruik for volunteers. Mounting a box placed near the publican's booth, Fitzgerald told the gathering that the time had arrived 'when we should put all things aside and defend our country, or do otherwise and prove ourselves a race degenerate and unworthy'. Under the impression that someone in the crowd then told him to 'shut-up', the sergeant 'very warmly challenged the supposed interjector to a fight, conditionally that if he (the sergeant) were beaten, the victor should enlist'. Even with this moment of excitement, the meeting at Charlton, like that at Donald, yielded only one volunteer (*East Charlton Tribune*, 3 March 1917).

Despite all the meetings and speeches, constant hectoring by politicians and recruiters, tours by specially formed recruiting bands, and such novel measures as a call for eligibles to take the place of the original Anzacs so the latter could be home for Christmas, this and a second recruiting campaign begun in July 1917, failed to yield the numbers set by the government. This was largely because, as the Chair of Donald's recruiting committee Councillor Sproat lamented to his colleagues in April: 'all the men who have intended to go have gone' (*Donald Times*, 6 April 1917). Many people in the region had also begun to believe that the bush was being asked to do more than its fair share, and that any further flow of young men would denude the country of its rural workforce. This more cautious sentiment was reflected in a concert and slide show organised in Wodonga by Henry Beardmore, where the slides shown

> …were photographs of the men and women from the district who had [already] enlisted. Beardmore read a brief description of the lives and fates of the 136 people shown in the slides. Two of them happened to be his own sons (McQuilton, 2001: 81).

Like Henry Beardmore and thousands of others across the country, members of the Free family eagerly awaited letters and cards sent from overseas which, in addition to describing the writer's own experiences, often contained news of relatives or other families' sons and, to the delight of the younger children, photos of strange places and exotic peoples. Indifferent to the dangers their brothers were soon to face, and younger family members would have basked in the awe and excitement these mementos generated at school, and felt pleased and proud that their older brothers were upholding the Free family's name within the district. Their parents would have written or spoken more circumspectly of their sons' happenings. Although distracted by home and community responsibilities, Fanny especially, would in quiet moments have experienced the pangs of anxiety felt by all mothers, wives and sweethearts of men gone to war: the fear that their paths will soon run from one danger to another; the worry that they may suffer from pain or distress; and the sudden, despairing thought that they might never return. Like many men then and since, Samuel probably preferred not to dwell too directly on his sons' prospects lest it brought on the very events he feared, and require him as a consequence to deal with emotions he might not be able to control.

Over this time both parents would have been sustained by the knowledge that their boys were in England and not France, and by the hope that the war might end before they could cross the Channel. Late in May 1917 they received a postcard from Bert dated 7 May and informing them that he and Sam had 'volunteered to go to France. We will be leaving some time this week, so I will say Good Bye and Good Luck just until I come back'. Their relative peace of mind was ended and both, but Fanny especially, would be subject to the wearing anxiety and suspense of waiting always for news and fearing always the worst. For all they knew, indeed, their boys may already be in the trenches, have already been confronted by the infinite perils of life at the front, and too terrible even to contemplate, be lying crushed and broken and buried in the fields of dead of France or Belgium. We have no record of how Samuel and Fanny responded to Bert's news. It is possible that Samuel replied along the lines of Peter McCormick who, on hearing his son was soon for France, wrote: 'I may say I have more confidence in your goodness and manliness today than ever before, I know you will play the game and do your best under the most trying circumstances' (cited in Luckins, 2004: 29). Like many other mothers, Fanny may have sought to reassure her boys

(and herself) by talking of their future homecoming or, more simply, invoking Christ's help in protecting her sons.

The two brothers sailed from Folkestone for the Machine Gun School at Camieres in France on 10 May 1917. On 16 June they were posted to 10 Machine Gun Company which operated in support of the 10th Infantry Brigade in the 3rd Division of the II Anzac Corps. They were to serve together in No 6 Team of the company's 3rd Section and were to be commanded by someone who had preceded them by only a few months, LCpl George Piggot Holmes from Geelong. The brothers joined their unit just after the Battle of Messines in Belgium in which 35 members of the company and 750 from the Division overall were either killed or wounded. It was not long, however, before Sam and Bert would have their first experience of trench warfare, in a diversionary attack that took place in the Messines sector on 29 and 30 July.

The so-called Windmill Feint, by infantry from 11 Brigade, was directed against a series of German outposts that were located forward of their main line. Its purpose was to make the Germans think that the coming allied offensive was going to be launched there rather than its actual location at Ypres to the north. The guns of 10 MG Coy were grouped with those of 9 MG Coy in order to contribute to the barrage covering the initial attack and then to provide support for subsequent S.O.S. tasks. In the days leading up to the attack, Sam and Bert and their colleagues spent most of their time stockpiling thousands of rounds of ammunition. As one of their colleagues, L. M. Jungworth, recorded in his diary, this was exhausting and dangerous work:

> We would have to walk through sticky mud knee deep 3 miles to the ammunition dumps and then each man took a box containing 200 rounds. It was almost too heavy for a man to lift on his back. Sometimes we would tie them on so as to have our hands free to keep from falling and then sometimes men would fall and be unable to get up. All the time we would be getting shelled but be too exhausted to care.

On the night of the attack, No 6 Team moved into its positions and waited for zero hour. Suspecting an attack, the Germans kept firing off flares which hovered and flickered over the forward trenches, casting eerie shadows across no-man's land. Rifle and sometimes machine-gun fire would erupt for a few seconds and then peter out. It started raining and a stray shell landed in the midst of an adjoining section, killing two men and wounding two others. At 3.50 am the artillery began its bombardment and the guns of the two machine gun companies opened fire at the rate of

50 rounds per minute onto the ground 100 yards in front of 11 Brigade's front line. The focus of their fire was advanced a further 100 yards a minute until zero plus 30 minutes when 'two guns in each section ceased firing and the remainder scorched back to a range of 2800 yds'. The noise remained constant and deafening until zero plus two hours when, according to the unit's war diary, 'all guns ceased fire and layed [sic] on their S.O.S. lines'. Altogether some 75,600 rounds of machine gun ammunition were expended in the initial barrage. The efficiency of the bombardment was said to be

> shown by the statement of a prisoner who rushed over to our lines shortly after ZERO. One bullet had penetrated his left wrist and another had torn across the front of his jacket without wounding him. He stated that he had been in a shell hole post with several others. When the barrage opened they all attempted to reach our lines and he was the only member of the party that succeeded in coming through the machine gun fire.

After heavy fighting, the infantry's objectives were also achieved and the soldiers of the 42nd and 43rd Battalions dug in for the expected counter-attack. At 9pm bodies of German soldiers were seen moving from their front line towards the Australian positions. S.O.S. rockets were fired and the machines guns of 9 and 10 MG Coys 'replied within a few seconds, followed almost instantly by the artillery. Under this barrage and fire from the posts, the German movement died away' (Bean, Vol. IV: 719). A further and final counter attack mounted at first light met a similar response. The operation was considered to be a success even though 11 Brigade suffered 550 casualties and 'the German Command was never in any doubt as to the true object and direction of Haig's [coming] offensive' (Bean, Vol. IV: 721). On 31 July the division was withdrawn to the rear of the line where 10 MG Coy's machine guns were overhauled and it took on reinforcements. On 13 August the unit, now totalling 9 officers and 214 other ranks, entrained with the rest of 10 Brigade and travelled to Wizernes from where they marched to Mieurles and then to St. Sylvestre Cappel where they rested in their billets and awaited new orders.

Back home the campaign to recruit soldiers for the coming battles on the western front was conducted with the same resolute determination as the British generals planned their war of attrition against the Germans. The state recruiting committee sent out letters impressing on Australian women the necessity of 'giving up their men for the service of the country' (*Donald Times*, 5 June

1917). Its call was taken up by such regional newspapers as the *Swan Hill Gazette* which declared that if 'an eligible man is wavering between his love for his people and a desire to "do his bit", a word from his mother, wife, sister or sweetheart, as the case may be, would render his path clear. He would see instantly that he could not shirk from his duty' (*Swan Hill Gazette*, 5 July 1917). Recruiters continued also to harp on the theme even though, as the *Donald Times* noted in its report of a public meeting held in the town in July, that '[s]uch an appeal is little good in the country, as many young women at the meeting took exception to the remarks of the speaker' (*Donald Times*, 6 July 1917). Perhaps because of this, the recruiters and war advocates began to change tack, again reserving their most ardent reproaches for the slackers and shirkers 'who are living in peaceful Australia while their comrades are fighting to maintain their native land free from despotism' (*Swan Hill Gazette*, 19 July 1917).

Fanny and her daughters would have over this time prepared for the boys and their friends parcels containing cakes, puddings, smokes, soap, insect repellent, tins of fish and fruit, socks, flannels and balaclavas which the recipients found a God-send while on sentry duty or mending the wire strung-out before their trenches. The parcels, copies of local newspapers, and strings of letters written by friends and family members were always welcome, reminding them of happier times at home and, as Corporals Harold and Vernon Willey had earlier told their parents, helping them 'forget, for the time being, some of the hardships and horrible scenes we daily see' (*Donald Times*, 20 April 1917). Again we don't know exactly what Fanny and her daughters wrote in their letters to the boys. It is likely though that their mother's letters would have been much the same those of Maria Keat who expressed pride in her 'darling soldier boy' Alick, constantly reassured him that he was neither forgotten nor unloved, and kept him fully informed both of family news and what was going on across the region (McQuilton, 2001: 136).

On 24 May, the boys' younger siblings celebrated Empire Day at school where, at the direction of the Education Minister, the lessons consisted of 'readings, addresses, recitations and songs of an imperial and patriotic character' (*Donald Times*, 11 May 1917). The excitement generated by this and other official occasions continued, however, to be offset by news, which spread like a fire in stubble, of the war's 'swiftly accumulating tragedies'; and the sight of more and more of the district's women in mourning. In March came news that Lance Corporal Alfred Joseph of

Quambatook had been killed in action at Dernancourt, and that Private Oliver Goldsmith from Corack had died of influenza in London's General Hospital: 'a young man with fine prospects of a successful career…[his life was] cut off before he had the opportunity of fulfilling his mission' (*Donald Times*, 2 March 1917). Another former Corack resident, Sergeant James Neyland, was killed in action in April while serving with the 1st/6th Battalion Gordon Highlanders. Neyland was 36 years old, had served in the Boer War and enlisted while working as a gold miner in South Africa. In May came the news of the deaths of Privates 'Ossie' Davey, James Perry of Corack and James Duncan of Donald. Like James Neyland, Duncan had earlier served in South Africa. Though 33 years old and married, he was unable to remain in Australia 'while so many shirked the Empire's call'. Leaving 'his lonely wife in the care of friends', he enlisted in … and fought in the battle of Baupaume. There he was wounded in the arm and repatriated to England where he died of pneumonia (*Donald Times*, 12 June 1917).

The lengthening casualty lists and newspaper accounts of stupendous battles occurring in places near where her boys were serving would have made Fanny more anxious still about their safety and well-being, more wary of the approach along the drive of a strange horse and rider, and more fearful of having returned to her, unopened and unread, her own letters to her sons. Her growing anxiety would not have been helped by a statement by the Prime Minister, released in the lead-up to the Federal election in May, that disability pensions were to be paid for life to soldiers suffering: the 'loss of both legs, loss of both feet,, loss of both arms, loss of both hands, loss of an arm and a leg, loss of hand and foot, loss of both eyes, loss of one eye together with loss of leg, foot, hand or arm' (*Donald Times*, 24 April 1917). Nor would she have been entirely comforted by the announcement by Senator Pearce that 13 AIF soldiers who had been blinded in battle had been placed in the St Dunstan's Home for the Blind in England where they were successfully engaged in such occupations as poultry farming, basket and bag making, and boot repairing and joinery. 'In spite of the darkness in which the soldiers live', the Minister in his office in Melbourne assured the people of Australia, 'they are all happy and contented in their various occupations…which react [in turn] in a most gratifying manner on the mentality and disposition of the patients' (*Donald Times*, 3 April 1917).

General Sir Douglas Haig's new offensive was to take place at Ypres, a name that people in the Wimmera weren't initially sure

how to say although they would have ample opportunity to perfect its pronunciation before the year ended. Located 22 miles from the Belgian coast, the city of Ypres had before the war been an important centre of commerce and agriculture. It sat in the centre of a flood plain which in centuries past had been recovered from the sea and now lay at the base of a number of small hills and wooded ridges that spanned the city's eastern approaches. This area of Flanders had been the site of bloody battles between the British Expeditionary Force and the Germans in 1914. These had ended in a stalemate with the Germans entrenched on the heights and the British occupying the plain below. Although under observation and constant fire and harassment by German gunners, the British were determined to hold on to both Ypres and the semi-circular salient that extended out from it. The 'Salient that so many had died to preserve could not be abandoned to create a straighter, more logical line of defence. As every yard of earth had been fought for, it had to be preserved at all costs' (Steel and Hart, 2001: 19). The price of this irrational if understandable single-mindedness on the part of Britain's military and political leaders would prove to be very high indeed.

Haig's idea was to break out from the Ypres salient, first capturing the ridges that extended from Pilckem in the north-east, through Passchendaele to the east, and around to the Gheluvelt Plateau that lay to the south-east of the town and was intersected by the road to Menin. Once this was achieved, British and French forces would then sweep northwards, isolating and eventually capturing the German-controlled ports at Ostend and Zeebrugge. The new offensive would thus not only relieve the pressure on Ypres but also end the threat Germany posed to Britain's own Channel ports. More ominously for the troops involved, Haig was also convinced that a major campaign in Flanders would finally break the resistance of the German Army, which had already suffered huge losses at Verdun and on the Somme, and win the war. All that was needed was one last gigantic effort and the enemy would fall. Although their backgrounds and temperaments differed markedly, Haig thus shared with Australia's prime minister, Billy Hughes, a ruthless determination to continue on with the war of attrition and crush once-and-for-all the German war machine. Both seemed also to exhibit a callous disregard for, or at best an indifference to, what such an uncompromising strategy would mean for the hundreds of thousands of soldiers involved and their families.

The 'Third Battle of Ypres', as Haig's offensive was known, began just before dawn on 31 July 1917 when 'a long jagged line of flame burst from the ground some way in front' of the British soldiers crouching in their frontline trenches, and was 'followed by a tremendous crack as our field guns opened fire' (Captain Thomas Outram 1st/5th Battalion King's Own Royal Lancaster Regiment, cited in Steel and Hart, 2001: 99). The noise of the subsequent artillery barrage was so deafening that Private Alfred Warsop of the 1st Battalion Sherwood Foresters could neither hear nor make himself heard by his childhood friend standing next to him in their trench. 'I shouted but I couldn't hear myself at all. I wanted to tell him that we would keep together so I grabbed his hand and we went over together as we had gone to Sunday School—hand in hand' (cited in Steel and Hart, 2001: 101). Another soldier thought the noise so loud that it would be heard in England. The undulating roar of the bombardment would certainly have been heard by the Free brothers in their trenches in the Messines sector. As Roland Leighton had done in 1915, it is likely that they and their colleagues would have listened to it 'not with equanimity, but with a certain tremulous gratitude that it is no nearer. Someone is getting hell but it isn't you—yet' (cited in Bishop, 2000: 202).

The first stage of the attack, conducted entirely by British and French troops, achieved mixed results. While much of the Pilckem ridge and the approaches to Passchendaele were captured, virtually no progress was made on the Gheluvelt Plateau. Unable to subdue their opponent's artillery fire, the German front-line divisions suffered significant casualties but so did the British especially in the wake of a number of follow-up attacks aimed at either exploiting localised German weaknesses or 'straightening the line'. The overall number of killed and wounded suffered by the British between the beginning of the offensive and the completion of the first stage on 28 August totalled some 68,000. 'Battalions of fit strong men, forged by their training and previous battle experiences, had been reduced to husks'. And no 'fewer than twenty-two divisions had been through the mill and could no longer held to be effective' (Steel and Hart, 2001: 137 and 212).

As bad as they were, these figures gave no sense of the pain and suffering endured by those who had been unfortunate enough to be involved in these first battles. The artillery duels that preceded the initial bombardment turned the already muddy fields into a quagmire that could only be traversed on duckboard tracks (which were themselves constantly shelled). Included in this barrage were

copious numbers of mustard gas shells which blinded and maimed many soldiers and forced the remainder to wear gas masks while struggling through the mud on their way to the frontline, digging pits for their guns, or hauling loads of ammunition and other supplies up from Ypres. To cap everything else, it rained steadily both during the initial battle and then throughout August, soaking to the skin the soldiers in their trenches, filling the millions of shell holes with water, and turning the landscape into a veritable swamp.

> Rain, mud, gas shelling and constant bombardment. I had never seen such a scene nor thought it possible. The whole country was water-logged, small pits of muddy land joined shell holes great and small, full of water, many with dead men and animals, the stench of which made us retch. In the blinding rain in the dark, heavily weighted men would slip into a shell crater and drown in gas contaminated mud often unheeded by their comrades (Captain Philip Christison, 6th Battalion Cameron Highlanders, cited in Steel and Hart, 2001: 162-3).

Undeterred by their troops' suffering, Haig and his generals in their chateaux at the rear, declared the month's meagre gains sufficient to continue on with the offensive, albeit with more limited objectives. The original hope of breaking through to the Belgian coast—always a fanciful aim—gave way to securing the Ypres salient for the coming winter and, more ominously for the troops involved, to further grinding down the enemy. Haig's 'long-drawn-out process of chewing up and spitting out German divisions had begun and would soon develop a grim momentum of its own'. The strategic success or otherwise of the Ypres offensive, and conflict on the western front generally, was now 'to be measured by the results of a grim battle of attrition designed to run down the German forces in terms of numbers and morale' (Steel and Hart, 2001: 136).

Haig's single-minded obsession required of course that Britain and its Empire continue to provide the cannon fodder needed to bleed Germany dry. Although in some cases disheartened, even angered, by the slaughter taking place on the western front, British and Australian politicians and their supporters nevertheless fell into line, pursuing with ever-increasing vigour those who had yet to enlist. While they would not openly complain, the Australian, Canadian and New Zealand soldiers lining up for the coming battles around Passchendaele were beginning to understand the drawbacks of the system of imperial defence their national leaders had earlier acceded to. Their generals were not senior enough to challenge Haig and his principal staff officers. They were not

directly or properly represented on the War Policy and other committees responsible for monitoring and giving strategic and political direction to the generals at the front. And in Australia's case, their prime minister who the soldiers would later honour as 'the little digger', was too busy fighting his political enemies and employing his 'merry tales of deceit and tricks' at home to worry much about the soldiers at the front (Horne, 1983: 87).

The second stage of Haig's offensive involved the British Second Army which now included both I and II Anzac Corps. The Second Army's task was to advance across the Gheluvelt Plateau to the Passchendaele ridge some three miles from the British front line. Drawing on the lessons learnt from the battle of Messines, the objective was to be achieved not in one but four separate 'bite and hold' operations. Each operation was to be well prepared, involve relatively limited advances, and provide time for the assaulting troops and supporting artillery fully to consolidate their positions before the next attack was commenced. Australian forces were to be involved in all four operations. On 20 September the 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions, would be required to push some 1,500 yards along the Menin Road. Six days later they were to assault the German positions around Polygon Wood. On 4 October the 3rd and 5th Australian Divisions were to capture the village of Broodseinde and its surrounds. In the fourth and final operation, which would take place over the period 9 to 12 October 1917, these same divisions were to attack and occupy the village of Passchendaele.

Lying in their billets well to the rear, the Free brothers would have been woken by the roar of the guns which marked the beginning of the second stage of the Third Battle of Ypres. It is likely that they and their mates would have clambered on wagons or the roofs of near-by buildings to watch the red glare on the horizon interspersed with flashes of light generated by the larger guns or exploding ammunition. Their preparations for their own involvement in the offensive would have been accompanied by the constant sound of artillery, rumbling and cracking like outback thunderstorms, as the battles of the Menin Road and Polygon Wood proceeded apace. On 3 October, the men of 10 MG Coy moved to the rear of the line near Vlamertingue from where 10 Brigade were to advance into their positions for the assault on Broodseinde. The attack was to be carried out by … and … infantry battalions. Numbers 1 and 3 Sections of 10 MG Coy, under the command of Lieutenant Smith, were to provide supporting fire while 4 Section, under Lieutenant Woods, would

advance with the infantry and assist in the consolidation of the final objective.

As the attacking infantry made towards their assembly points, Sam and Bert and the other members of 10 MG Coy spent the evening preparing their barrage positions in the vicinity of the Bremen Redoubt. It was the brothers' first experience of the infamous Ypres salient, an experience they could undoubtedly have done without. The landscape was completely barren and featureless. There was no grass or vegetation of any kind save the stripped and shattered trunks of trees illuminated at night by the flash of guns or the wavering lustre of star shells and Very lights. There was a terrible, putrid, decaying smell that ebbed and flowed with the incoming bombardment, a toxic mix of rotting flesh, cordite and mustard gas stirred from the depths of the larger craters by bursts of high explosive. The unit's machine guns and ammunition needed for the coming barrage had to be manhandled first along the duckboard tracks that snaked across the muddy terrain and then across open ground to the barrage position. The wooden tracks, from four to eight feet in width, were crowded with soldiers bearing rations, ammunition, and the stores and materiel needed to build and repair trenches and dugouts. There were long files of infantry making for the frontline. Dressed in greatcoats and carrying rifles, haversacks, ammunition pouches, grenades, water bottles, gas masks, entrenching tools, and picks or shovels, they would tilt their steel helmets in the direction of incoming shells and hurry on. For although the weather had improved over the September period, much of the track remained lined with sump holes full of rancid water and deep sucking mud. Men stepping into this mire, or knocked from the duckboards by shock waves from shells, could easily become fast stuck or sink quickly out of sight and earshot.

The journey from the duckboards to the barrage point was no less dangerous and nerve-wracking. The landscape was littered with shell holes, barbed wire entanglements, horse carcasses, wrecked limbers, burning cordite and smashed guns. There was scarcely a yard of unbroken ground that did not contain an ammunition dump or field guns firing hard as their owners struggled to register targets and suppress enemy fire. German shells all the while—whiz-bangs, Minnie-Wurfers, 5.9s and other products of Krupps industries—rained down from the darkened sky, exploding in spurts of flame and sending out scything showers of metal and mud. And German aircraft flew overhead, dropping bombs. Within this maelstrom it was easy to become disoriented

and lost, to flounder around in the mud for hours looking for landmarks, guiding points, dugouts and familiar voices. Even when the soldiers completed their tasks and finally were able to rest during the early morning lull, they were still unable fully to relax:

> You'd hear in the distance, quite a mild 'pop' as the gun fired five miles away. Then a 'humming' sound as it approached you through the air with a noise rather like an aeroplane, growing louder and louder. As it grew near you began to calculate with yourself whether this one had got your name on it or not…The awful thing being that this is not an isolated experience but it goes on continuously minute after minute and even hour after hour' (Lieutenant Charles Carrington, 1/15th Battalion, Warwickshire Regiment, cited in Steel and Hart, 2001: 251-2).

While the Free brothers and their comrades snatched some much-needed sleep, it began to drizzle. Sharp, chilly squalls drove in from the southwest causing the battlefield again to become, in the words of the official history, 'greasy' if not yet 'drenched'. A German artillery barrage, which preceded an attack of their own on the same night, began to fall among the waiting Australian infantry who were, by this stage, crowded together just to the rear of the front line. In spite of the casualties this caused and the ever-worsening weather, the morale and expectations of the troops were high in large measure because this was the first time in which the divisions of the two Anzac Corps would actually fight side-by-side. The attack began at 4 am and soldiers of the brigade moved forward under the barrage provided by the artillery and the machine guns of 1 and 3 sections. After heavy fighting all of the brigade's objectives were achieved. The attackers dug-in and Sam and Bert and their colleagues hastily moved their guns forward to a new barrage position from which they could cover likely assembly points for the expected German counter-attack. This did not eventuate however, and, after a sleepless night, the company was relieved by one from the British 66th Division.

The brothers were no doubt relieved that they had survived but also pleased that they had performed their tasks professionally and well—Sam was now the No 1 in his team which meant that he fired one of the section's guns—and had helped the attacking infantry achieve all of its objectives. While the cost of the attack would have given them pause for thought (the Australia divisions lost over 6340 men killed or wounded including 26 members of 10 MG Coy) they had little time to dwell on its consequences, for already they were getting ready for the next and more difficult

stage of the operation. This involved a two-phase assault on Passchendaele itself and would prove to be much more arduous. The attack, which was to be conducted by the 9th and 10 Brigades, was to begin at first light on 12 October 1917. On this occasion, 1 and 4 sections of 10 MG Coy were to form the barrage battery and 3 Section under Lieutenant Potter plus a subsection of 2 Section were 'to move forward to [the] jumping-off tape with the infantry' and join in the attack.

Bert and Sam and the other soldiers from the two brigades spent the night of 10 October on grassland flats to the east of Ypres. According to the official history, 'tents, which were to have been provided, were not there' and so the soldiers had to camp 'on the wet grass, under such timber or old sheets of iron as they could find' (p. 910). The rain that had started falling on 4 October had set in, turning parts of the battlefield into a quagmire.

> There was no ground to walk on; the earth had been ploughed up by shells not once only, but over and over again, and so thoroughly that nothing solid remained to step on; there was just loose, disintegrated, far-flung earth, merging into slimy, treacherous mud and water round shell holes so interlaced that the circular form of only the largest and most recently made could be distinguished. The [British] Infantry in the outposts moved hourly from shell hole to shell hole, occupying those that had just been made and which had not, in consequence, yet filled with water…Covered with mud, wet to the skin, bitterly cold, stiff and benumbed with exposure…they hung on to existence by a thin thread of discipline rather than by any spark of life. Some of the feebler and more highly strung deliberately ended their lives (Major C. L. Fox, 502 Field Company Royal Engineers, cited in Steel and Hart, 2001: 259).

The units of 10 Brigade began the approach to their jumping off points at around 6pm on 11 October. As the history of the 39th Battalion described with some understatement, the area they were crossing had just been 'won from the enemy, and consequently was badly broken up by gun fire into a series of shell holes'. This and continuous driving rain made the ground almost impassable except along the duckboard tracks that had been laid the previous day. These were being 'accurately and persistently shelled not only with high explosive, but, at some points, with [mustard] gas'. Shuffling along in the driving rain, many soldiers overbalanced on the narrow, greasy duckboards and had to be pulled free, covered from head to foot in heavy thick mud, from sodden shell holes. Others became separated when negotiating a break in the path caused by shell fire and found themselves crawling in the pitch black over the bodies of the soldiers who had been killed or

wounded in the lead-up attack. The leading platoons did not reach their assembly points until around 3am whereupon they took shelter in sodden shell holes, pulled their waterproof sheets over their heads to protect them from the rain, and tried to sleep. As 39 Battalion's history records, this was no easy task:

> Zero hour was still two hours ahead. Continuous heavy rain fell the whole time and the Germans kept up … [their] bombardment. Little shrapnel was used, and the ground was so soft the shells buried themselves before exploding. But for this circumstance, the waiting troops would have been decimated before the battle began. As it was, heavy casualties resulted. The men longed for zero hour, preferring activity to a passive submission to a heavy bombardment.

The attack on Passchendaele began with the usual pre-dawn bombardment. Thousands of shells screamed and sizzled over the heads of the attackers, landing on or bursting over the German front line in a pulsating, jolting, roaring inferno. Thousands of soldiers carrying their weapons emerged from holes in the ground all along the front and moved forward through the smoke and rain, crouching and running to get up to the rear of the barrage line. In most places they had to move across a water-logged and muddy terrain, and through artillery and machine gun fire streaming in from positions that had neither been destroyed nor suppressed by the British bombardment. As Private Norman Cliff of the 1st Battalion, Grenadier Guards later described, these dreadful conditions made the attackers' task all but impossible. 'We splashed and slithered, and dragged our feet from the pull of an invisible enemy determined to suck us into its depths. Every few steps someone would slide and stumble and, weighed down by rifle and equipment, rapidly sink into the squelching mess…When helpers floundered in as well and doubled the task, it became hopeless. All the straining efforts failed and the swamp swallowed its screaming victims'. Under orders from their officers to move on without delay the Guardsmen and others across the front were forced to abandon mates who became stuck in the mud and to push on.

> To be ordered to go ahead and leave a comrade to such a fate was the hardest experience one could be asked to endure, but the objective had to be reached, and we plunged on, bitter anger against the evil forces prevailing piled onto our exasperation. This was as near to Hell as I ever wanted to be (cited in Steel and Hart, 2001: 266).

A few among the attacking Australians reached the village of Passchendaele, but the heavy casualties sustained and the lack of support on their flanks eventually forced them to withdraw and

consolidate their line roughly where the attack had begun. There Sam set up his machine gun and with other remnants from the brigade held on grimly while awaiting reinforcements. During this time he would have noticed that Bert was no longer with them. He had gone over the top at the commencement of the bombardment but, like hundreds of others, had become separated in the scramble to get to the barrage line. Sam was still uncertain about his brother's whereabouts when Number 3 Section, which had lost three of its guns in action, was moved from the front line and rejoined the company's barrage position on Abraham Heights. A week later the unit was relieved by a Canadian machine gun company and Bert was posted as wounded and missing in action. The next day the survivors of the first and failed attack on Passchendaele returned by train to Mieurles. At that stage the unit's overall losses were thought to be three killed in action, 27 wounded in action, one, Bert, wounded and missing in action, and four missing in action. The 3rd Division suffered in all some 3199 casualties and would take months before it would be ready and able to fight again.

(8,151 words)