



In Freedom's Cause

## Missing Soldiers of Fromelles Group

### Silhouettes of War

Published on Page 10, of the Argus (Melbourne, Victoria), on Saturday, 22 May, 1920, 'Silhouettes of War' is a first-hand account of the 5th Division AIF. Referring to unit historian Captain A. D. Ellis, M.C. it is cited below as: National Library of Australia: <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article1704709> .

#### SILHOUETTES OF WAR.

##### DIVISION'S GREAT ADVENTURES.

Those who fought with and alongside the 5th Australian Division are fortunate that Captain A. D. Ellis, M.C., became the unit's historian, because in him are combined unusual powers of observation with a graphic pen. He was, on the other hand, lucky to be attached to a force that forged so many links in the chain of the Commonwealth military history. The vivid account of the battle of Fromelles, a summary of which was published in "The Argus" of Saturday last, will have given some indication of the forceful writing Captain Ellis has woven into "The Story of the Fifth Australian Division" (London: Hodder and Stoughton), which must be regarded as one of the most authoritative records of the war. Many incidents that puzzled "the man who stayed at home" have been explained in this volume, and new light has been thrown upon other occurrences that could only be half illuminated during the war. The whole of the profits from the sale of this fine publication are to be paid into a special fund, which will be used for some benevolent purpose associated with the division later on.

In Egypt the 5th Division became early associated with suffering. The move of the 14th Infantry Brigade from Tel-el-Kebir to Ferry Post it described in Captain Ellis's best style. The first day's march was about 14 miles. "To people unacquainted with the sands of Egypt" he writes, "it may appear incredible that even untrained Australian soldiers should find any difficulty in such a march, but all who have trudged through long stretches of heavy sand will realise that it was a big undertaking. In order to enjoy the full benefit of the cool hours of morning, Brigadier-General Irving wisely provided for an early start. . . . The formation of the assembly was complicated by a very heavy fog, which not only made it extremely difficult to maintain direction, but also drenched the men's clothing and equipment, while their boots soon became soaked in the damp sand. Before many miles had been covered there were stragglers,

been covered there were stragglers, and the 8th Field Ambulance at the rear of the column was busy collecting sufferers from sore feet, sickness, and exhaustion. A burning sun was now beating down upon the column, aggravating the men's distress and causing extreme thirst. . . . The water discipline seems to have been bad. At every halt it was found necessary to post pickets on the Sweet Water Canal, the water of which was unfit for human consumption. By the time Mahsowa was reached at 3 p.m., most of the men were much exhausted, and few of them felt equal to continuing the march on the following day. . . . But a still more trying march of sixteen miles to Moascar awaited them, and unfortunately, the day turned out to be particularly hot. . . . By half-past 10 o'clock the good ground was left behind, and the route followed, under directions received from the division, struck across heavy sand hills. These in the rapidly growing heat proved too much for the stamina of scores of men. They literally dropped in their tracks overcome by thirst and exhaustion. . . . Moascar was now but a few miles distant, and it was reached by those who had kept going at about 3 o'clock in the afternoon. Here news of the plight of the remainder reached Major-General McCay. Water supplies were immediately requisitioned and sent out along the route, and the men half dead with exhaustion, or distracted by thirst, were gradually collected and restored. . . . The first man of the 14th Brigade to reach Moascar was hailed by a New Zealand sentry, who halted him and inquired "Who goes there?" The man dropped his pack on the ground and wearily stretched himself before replying, "I'm Burke and Wills!"

Preparations for a major operation in the first Somme winter campaign were made in the face of great hardship, and Captain Ellis describes the digging of assembly trenches on the jumping off line as heart-breaking. "The work had to be done by night, and the journey to and from the trenches was itself a nightmare. The sticky mud would not 'throw off' the shovels, and almost as fast as the trench was dug the wet sides crumbled in again. . . . The weather continued vile; the trenches collapsed as fast as they were dug, and all ranks were gradually becoming exhausted, and in no condition for undertaking operations." It was here that the division had its first experience of "trench feet," which varied in extent from small gangrenous spots to the death of the whole

gangrenous spots to the death of the whole foot or leg, when amputation would be necessary.

Patrolling in No Man's Land was a phase of war in which the infantry of the 5th Division excelled, and the author tells of many thrilling incidents and of some tragically humorous ones. "A patrol of six found itself surrounded and cut off by an enemy party of 40. Hiding in shell holes the men tried to escape detection, but were observed and captured. . . . The prisoners who still had their Mills bombs in their pockets anxiously watched for a chance to escape. The German patrol missed its direction somehow, and after walking for a considerable distance the party was challenged in good, unmistakable Australian, and some rifle shots rang out. Realising that they had stumbled on to a friendly trench, the captives suddenly threw their bombs among the Germans. Bewildered by this turn of events, the entire enemy party was rounded up and ushered unceremoniously into a trench held by a company of the Australian division on the left."

At Polygon Wood the attack was backed by a remarkable concentration of artillery. In addition to the masses of field guns marshalled for the operation, Brigadier-General Coxon had control of 94 6in. howitzers, 32 8in. howitzers, 30 9.2in. howitzers, 36 60-pounders, 4 12in. howitzers, 1 15in. howitzer, and 8 6in. guns; that is to say a big gun to every 10 yards of front, not counting the 18-pounders, and 4.5 howitzers of the field artillery brigades. Captain Ellis tells how the battle commenced:—"Punctually at 5.50 a.m. our artillery opened in a single magnificent crash, and thousands of shells burst in a long, straight line of flame and destruction about 200 yards ahead of the waiting infantry. . . . The 4,000 men of the six attacking battalions dashed forward at a run. Somewhere behind the line of destruction lay their victims, shuddering in their pill-boxes, staggered by the sudden commotion, dazed by the concussion of shells, petrified by terror of the gleaming line of bayonets which they knew came grimly on behind the line of fire. Even now the line of bayonets was crouched within 60 yards of the wall of flame, and every man in it was tense and eager, so eager that some scarcely waited for the barrage to creep forward before they dashed into it and died." The rest of the story shows grim war in all its horrid but fascinating details. One of the novel features of the advance was a machine

gun curtain of fire moving close in front.

Sir John Monash gives all credit to the 13th and 15th Brigades for having captured Villers Bretonneux in the early hours of Anzac Day, 1918—the "real turning point of the war"—and the full story as told by Captain Ellis could be read aloud with advantage in every school on the great anniversary. The collapse of the Western front and the second battle on the Hindenburg line also provide word pictures that cannot fail to interest.

In Captain Ellis's account of the battle of Fromelles the name of the gallant officer who died after leading the fourth wave of the 60th Battalion to its objective is incorrectly given as "Major McCrae." It should be Major Geoffrey Gordon McCrae, a son of Mr. George Gordon McCrae, of Lower Hawthorn.