Frank MacDonald MM Memorial Prize

Name: Macy Charles
School: Taroona High School
Grade: 9
Date: 21st August 2017
Final word count excluding references and quotes: 1193

'*Such success as the Australians achieved in 1917 had been won by troops persisting through the sheer quality of their mettle, in the face of errors*'. (Charles Bean, Official Historian 1917). How accurate was this statement? Refer to the Battle of Bullecourt in your answer.

Australian soldiers showed great courage and comradeship in the face of adversity during World War One. However, these qualities were not enough to overcome the errors of their superiors. Australian success at war was limited, and costly. Throughout the Battles of Bullecourt, over 10,000 Australian soldiers were killed or injured in an attempt to breach the Hindenburg Line. Despite the Australians mettle, poor leadership at First Bullecourt ultimately lead to the these deaths. This is a clear example of the limited success Australians had at war, and the inaccuracy of Charles Bean's statement that "Such success as the Australians achieved in 1917 had been won by troops persisting through the sheer quality of their mettle, in the face of errors". Errors in staff work limited the success Australians had at Second Bullecourt. Despite being Australia's official war correspondent, Charles Bean was not infallible, and his bias distracts from the truth of his statement about the nature of the war in 1917.

Poor leadership, and errors in strategic planning, lead to limited success for the Australians during 1917, as demonstrated by the Battle of First Bullecourt. The small village of Bullecourt, Northern France, was part of the Hindenburg Line. Allied forces needed to break through this German defence consisting of trenches and barbed wire. General Gough, commander of the British Army, was responsible for the planning and execution of this attack. The Battle of First Bullecourt, in a failed attempt to break this line, came at a cost of 3,200 men. Gough's determination to break through the Hindenburg Line using tanks in the place of artillery had catastrophic results; while Gough hoped to gain the element of surprise by using tanks, without the artillery the barbed wire remained intact and the tanks failed to compensate. Gough's plan was hurriedly thrown together, and later described as a strategic blunder. Major Watson, commander of the Bullecourt tanks, wrote "General Gough received [the plan] with favour, and decided to attack at dawn on the following morning. The idea of an attack within twenty-four hours was a little startling."[1] This hurried plan, with no artillery support and little warning to the troops, was deeply flawed and lead to severe causalities. The tanks were to lead the charge, and break up the barbed wire while creating a shield for the infantry. The poor organisation and execution of this plan was clear during the battle, as the tanks broke down. It was an error on behalf of the generals to use these tanks, not only due to their unreliable nature, but also as Australians troops had not yet fought alongside tanks, and saw them for the first time only minutes before the battle. A Tasmanian infantry member present at First Bullecourt wrote "The British tank corps let us down badly and there was no co-operation between the tanks and infantry."[2] The Australians pushed on with resilience despite the malfunctioning tanks. However their mettle alone was not enough, with thousands of deaths and no land gained by the Allies. The mettle of the Australian soldiers was not at fault, rather the failure of the battle was a result of the poor planning from the Generals in charge, as acknowledged by Les Carlyon "The British Generals made terrible mistakes and they were called Fromelles and First Bullecourt."[3] Gough's impulsive strategies were the downfall of the Australian troops, "Courage and determination had failed to win the day and it was clear that the blame lay with the commanders and their ambitious plan."[4] The catastrophe of Bullecourt was so extreme, it was later used by the British Army as an example of how not to manage an attack. The battle shows the inaccuracy of Charles Bean's quote, as despite the Australians tenacity, Bullecourt was a failure.

---

[1] Peter Burness, Bullecourt and Bapume Australians on the Western Front - 1917 (Canberra, 2007) P. 5

[2] Les Carlyon, The Great War (Sydney, 2006) P. 356

[3] Carlyon, The Great War, P.756

[4] Burness, Bullecourt and Bapume. P.10

Second Bullecourt similarly demonstrated how the persistence and mettle of the soldiers was not enough to compensate for the errors of the leaders. Australian troops pushed the Germans back, in a bloody battle that lasted two weeks, with approximately 7,000 casualties, however the pyrrhic battle gained the Australians only 400m of strategically unusable ground. While some of the faults of First Bullecourt were addressed, new errors were made in their place. After the disaster of First Bullecourt, soldiers rehearsed Second Bullecourt's assault plan for days before the attack. However the rehearsals gave German troops knowledge of the attack to come. These mock battles utilised torches, and many soldiers felt that the German troops were watching their every move. This is described in a story recorded by Les Carlyon "'What time is zero?' he asked a Queensland farmer. 'There's no zero', the Australian replied. 'We're not thinking of attacking'. 'Oh we know you are,' said the German. What time do you start?'"[5]. The Germans were aware of the Australian preparations, as indicated by the later statement of soldier Billy May who wrote that "The Fritz knew our every move"[6]. The battle rehearsals were a clear mistake by the commanders in charge, and although the Australians determination showed as they fought at Second Bullecourt, Bean's qualification of "such success" does not an accurately describe this battle.

Poor staff work lead to the errors of Second Bullecourt, as shown by historian Eric Andrews who said it was a "serious weaknesses in Australian staff work that contributed to the slaughter of Australians"[7], and ultimately lead to the failure of Second Bullecourt. It was staff officers' responsibility to set up communication, and assist with planning the attack. Communication was poorly organised, leading to confusion between generals and troops. The lack of communication ensured that "it would be close to impossible for the Australians to hold the positions they had so grandly taken"[8]. The slaughter at Bullecourt was a result of poor staff work, and cannot be counted as success, however, officers were severely overworked, and received little training. They cant be entirely blamed for the failure of Bullecourt. The officers conditions was described by General John Charteris who wrote "there are few, if any, officers who do not work a fourteen-hour day, and who are not found at work far into the night."[9] The military system was under pressure, and bound to collapse. This breakdown occurred at Second Bullecourt, and while staff workers were at fault, they cannot be entirely blamed for the failure of the attack as they did not have the experience necessary. Bean's emphasis on how the troops were failed by their commanders ignores the extreme pressure on the lower levels of command and the mettle they displayed in performing their duties.

Charles Bean, official war correspondent, was not infallible. He was prone to writing what he wanted to see, rather than what he did see. Bean did not describe the true horrors of war, lest he dissuade men from enlisting "Not for Bean the harsh realities of war unless they were laced with humour. He didn't tell us much about the fear, desertion or boredom of soldiers far from home or the horror of it all."[10] Bean wanted to support the war effort in any way he could, however this was not always compatible with being a reliable historian "Bean was an exceedingly selective editor

---

[5] Carlyon, The Great War. P. 371

[6] Carlyon, The Great War. P.370

[7] E.M Andrews, Second Bullecourt revisited: The Australians in France 3 May 1917. P.43

[8] David Coombes, A Greater Sum of Sorrow. (New South Wales, 2016) P. 27

[9] Richard Holmes, The Western Front (London, 1999) P. 117

[10] John Menadue. "Commercialisation and the casualness of going to war" (2016) 19th July 2017 https://independentaustralia.net/article-display/commercialisation-and-the-casualness-of-going-to-war,8571

who rejected anything which might have modified his vision or tarnished the name of Anzac."[11] Bean's personal diaries are an example of this. Here, he wrote candidly of what he saw, but when compared to his journalism, there is a stark difference. This shows the conflict created by the crossover between Bean's duties as a journalist, and as a historian. While he wanted to accurately describe what was happening on the Western Front, Bean also wanted to push his view of the Australian soldiers. Bean admired the soldiers, and did not want to sully their reputation by writing against them. Bean was quick to blame British commanders in his writeup of Bullecourt, but softened the blow for Australian generals, such as General White, who held the same responsibility for the failure. Bean worshipped White "it is possible that Bean, because of his proximity to certain senior officers of staff - particularly White - or perhaps even [his inability] to face the fact himself, attempted to cover up the simple truth that the Australians themselves contributed to the disasters."[12] This shows that Bean's desire to show the Australians in a good light may have outweighed his desire to accurately describe the Battle of Bullecourt.

Australian troops showed great courage throughout the war, in particular 1917. However, sheer determination and grit was not enough to guarantee them success. This was shown through the First and Second battles for Bullecourt. Errors made at both these battles lead to undeniable failure, and show the inaccuracy of Charles Bean's quote when referring to this Battle. The quote relies too heavily on Charles Bean's ideal of what an Australian soldier should be, and fails to acknowledge the limited success had by Australians, in particular at Bullecourt. Charles Bean's praise of the mettle of the soldiers leading to success gives an incomplete picture of the events of 1917.

---

[11] David Kent. "The Anzac book and the Anzac legend: C.E.W. Bean as editor and image–maker" (2008) 12th July 2017 http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10314618508595713?journalCode=rahs19

[12] Coombes, A Greater Sum of Sorrow P. 371

Bibliography

Australian War Memorial contributors. (2007). "The Battles for Bullecourt". https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-battles-for-bullecourt [Retrieved 29th June 2017]

Beaumont, Joan. "*Australia's War 1914-1918*". Allen & Unwin Australia Pty Ltd, 1995
Pederson, Peter. "*The ANZACS: Gallipoli to the Western Front*". Penguin Group Australia, 2007.

Beveridge, G. (2000). "Journal of the Australian War Memorial". https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/journal/j36/bloodtub [Retrieved 6th July 2017]

Burin, Margaret and Joanne, Shoebridge. (2014). "The Gallipoli correspondent: diaries of a journalist at war". http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2014/11/11/4126331.htm [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Burness, Peter. "*Bapume and Bullecourt: Australians on the Western Front - 1917*". Department of Veterans' Affairs, Canberra, 2007.

Burness, P. (2002). "The Battles for Bullecourt" https://www.awm.gov.au/sites/default/files/the-battles-for-bullecourt-by-peter-burness.pdf [Retrieved 29th June 2017]

Carlyon, Les. "*The Great War*" Pan Macmillan Australia Pty Ltd, 2006.

Coombes, David. "*A Greater Sum of Sorrow: The Battles of Bullecourt*". Big Sky Publishing, 2016

Dapin, Mark. (2014). "War historian Charles Bean caught up in his own war of words". http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/review/war-historian-charles-bean-caught-up-in-his-own-war-of-words/news-story/8c41b6d09992c48a4f30d356676320d6 [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Davies, Glenn. (2016). "Manufacturing a legend: The 1916 Anzac Book". https://independentaustralia.net/australia/australia-display/manufacturing-a-legend-the-1916-anzac-book-,8920 [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Holmes, Richard. "*The Western Front*". BBC Worldwide Ltd, 1999

Honest History Contributors (2014). "Review note: Australia and the First World War". http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/review-note-australia-and-the-first-world-war-australian-historical-studies/ [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Iggulden, Tom. (2007). "Second battle of Bullecourt remembered". http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2007/s1906622.htm [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Jordan, B.G, Andrews, E.M, "*Second Bullecourt revisited: the Australians in France, 3 May 1917*", Australian War Memorial, 1989

Kendall, Paul. "*Bullecourt: Breaching the Hindenburg Line 1917*". Spellmount, 2010.

Kent, David. "*The Anzac book and the Anzac legend: C.E.W. Bean as editor and image–maker*" Historical Studies volume 21. Published online, 2008

McPhedran, Ian. (2014). "Charles Bean: If People Really Knew by Ross Coulthart explores work of Australia's first WWI correspondent". http://www.news.com.au/entertainment/books-magazines/books/charles-bean-if-people-really-knew-by-ross-coulthart-explores-work-of-australias-first-wwi-correspondent/news-story/fc7120baeee9dda0ec98671001bad6ea [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Menadue, John. (2016). "Commercialisation and the casualness of going to war". https://independentaustralia.net/article-display/commercialisation-and-the-casualness-of-going-to-war,8571 [Retrieved 19th July 2017]

Midford, Sarah. (2015) "Bean's Anzac Book shaped how Australians think about Gallipoli".http://theconversation.com/beans-anzac-book-shaped-how-australians-think-about-gallipoli-38203 [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Morrissey, Peter. (N/D). "Second Bullecourt - May 1917". https://rslvirtualwarmemorial.org.au/explore/campaigns/6. [Retrieved 19th July 2017]
Pederson, Peter. "A*NZACS on the Western Front*". John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd, 2012.

Prisk, Max. (2008). "The pen versus the sword". http://www.smh.com.au/news/national/the-pen-versus-the-sword/2008/11/07/1225561136011.html [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Serle, Geoffrey. (N/D). "Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918 - Volume VI Introduction". https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/understanding-military-history/official-histories/first_world_war/volVI_introduction [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Stewart, Cameron. (2015). "Charles Bean, Australia's first official war correspondent". http://thegreatwar.theaustralian.com.au/charles_bean/ [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Western Front Association contributors. (2008). "The Bullecourt Controversy". http://www.westernfrontassociation.com/the-great-war/great-war-on-land/battlefields/804-the-bullecourt-controversy.html#sthash.AjqvYCLe.zv0yAEaE.dpbs [Retrieved 12th July 2017]

Yves, M. (N/D). "The Hindenburg line". http://www.remembrancetrails-northernfrance.com/history/the-battlefield/the-hindenburg-line.html [Retrieved 6th July 2017]

Yves, M. http://www.remembrancetrails-northernfrance.com/history/battles/the-two-battles-of-bullecourt-april-and-may-1917.html [Retrieved 12th July 2017]