

Look back at horrific battles

■ Peter McLady

THE Battle of Pozieres took place from July 23 to September 5, 1916.

The Allied infantry began its attack during the Battle of the Somme, by exploding 19 mines under the German lines on July 1, 1916.

By the end of the first day, the British Army had suffered 57,470 casualties, including nearly 19,240 killed, the greatest loss ever in a single day.

Estimates of total casualties vary widely, but by the time the Battle of the Somme had ground to a halt with the onset of winter in November 1916, more than one million men had been killed or wounded.

On July 7, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) 1st and 2nd Divisions and the newly arrived 4th Division were ordered to the Somme.

The 5th Division remained in French Flanders where it would fight about two weeks later in what has become known as the Battle of Fromelles.

Fromelles was a microcosm of the bigger disaster taking place on the Somme.

“The fight at Fromelles was a short, sharp incident... that deceived its own people, not the Germans, and shook the faith of its soldiers... faith which might have been of great value... but of all the great battles of the next two and a half years, the fight that now lay ahead of the 1st, 2nd, and 4th Divisions, then marching up to the Somme Battle, was in several ways the hardest experienced by the First A.I.F.” (Bean 1948, 237).

The village of Pozieres occupied one of the highest points of the Somme battlefield.

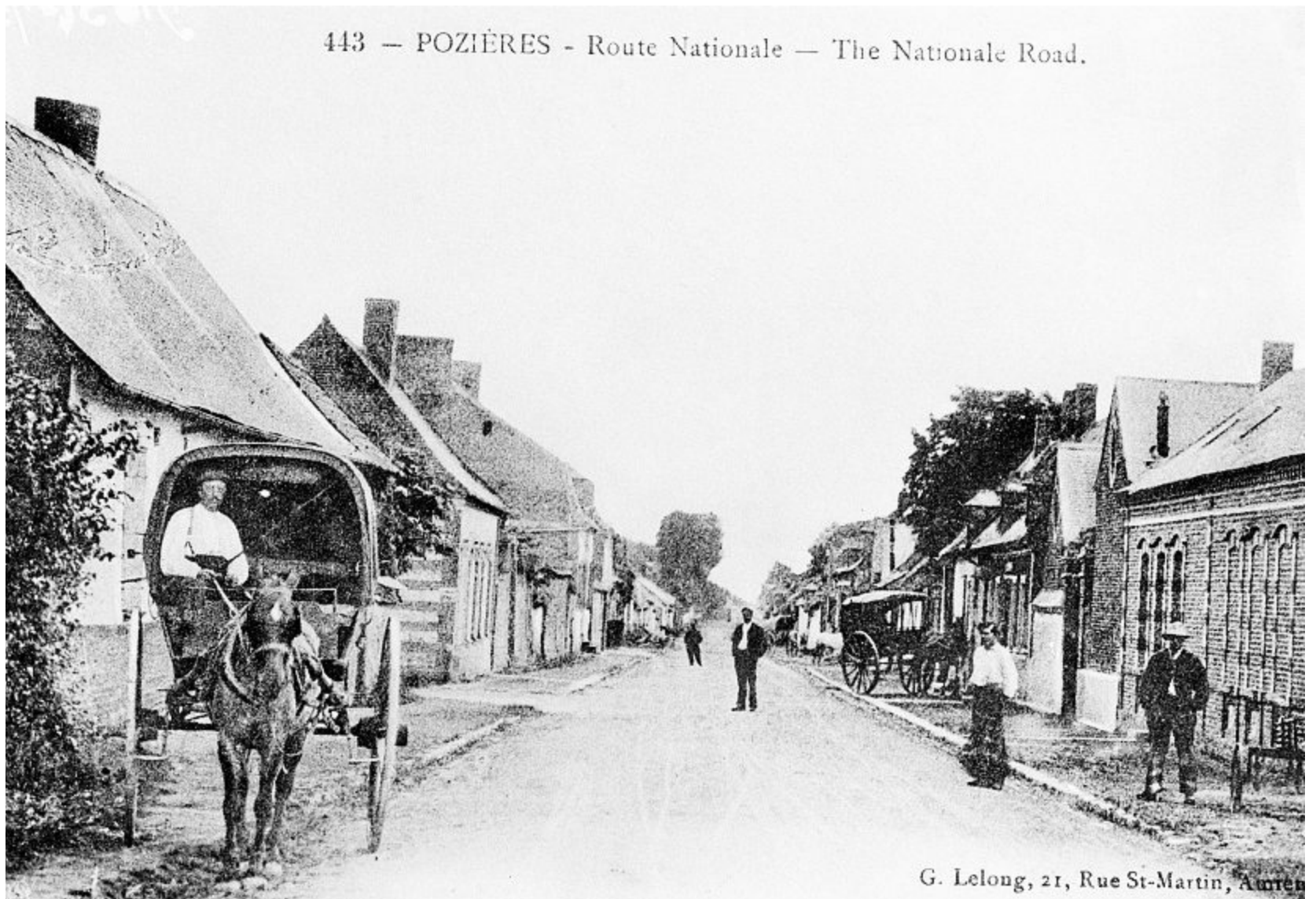
Between July 13–17, the British infantry made four vain and terribly costly attacks on Pozieres, the final one after a sustained bombardment that reduced the ruined village to rubble (Laffin 1992, 87).

The 1st Division AIF moved to the Somme frontline on July 19 and was ordered to attack Pozieres on July 23. At 12.30am the artillery barrage lifted and the first wave of Australians set off. They made steady progress and, despite fierce resistance, captured the lines of German trenches that were their main objectives.

“Many of the German garrison were killed or captured; others fled or withdrew to the northern end of the village” (Bean 1948, 242).

Through heavy fighting, including a “Herculean bombfight” the Australians moved through the village positions on July 24 (Bean 1948, 247). Once the Germans became aware they were losing the village, they heavily bombarded the area to inflict damage and loss on the 1st Division (Pedersen 2012, 40).

The German



LOOKING BACK: A pre-war photograph of the village of Pozieres looking along the main road through the village.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED



The main street of Pozieres in more recent times.

PHOTO: PETER MCLADY



The main street of Pozieres after the heavy bombardment by the British and the Germans.

PHOTO: CONTRIBUTED

“Many of the German garrison were killed or captured; others fled or withdrew to the northern end of the village

— Bean 1948, 242

destroyed with the loss of 92 officers and 2558 men.

The 2nd Division was then brought back to replace the 1st Division but in four days’ fighting lost 1268 men (Laffin 1992, 89). In an ongoing cycle of death and injury, the 4th Division took its place back in the front line. The 4th Division launched a series of successful attacks against objectives including Mouquet Farm. On September 3, the Australian 13th Brigade attacked and captured most of Mouquet Farm.

“In its last two terrible days at Pozieres, the 4th Division was joined in the fighting by the Canadian Corps. On September 5, the Canadians relieved the Australian positions but by then the 4th Division had lost another 1346 men. The surviving Australian troops left the battlefield to join their comrades now recovering at Ypres in Belgium.

In 45 days’ fighting on the Pozieres ridge, the three Australian divisions launched 19 separate attacks and lost more than 23,000 officers and men.

bombardment increased on July 25 as they prepared their final attempt to retake the village.

Private John “Jack” Swaysland, of Stanthorpe, died in action during the attack by the 9th Battalion AIF on July 23. He has no known grave, but is remembered with honour on the wall of the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, near Amiens.

Despite the 2nd Division having been at the front only since July 27, it was ordered to undertake its first assault just after midnight on July 29 (Pedersen 2012, 41).

The attack failed because of poor planning, costing the lives of 3500 men. The 7th Brigade was particularly hard hit as it tried to push onto the summit and “the low mound of the tumbled

windmill” (Bean 1948, 253).

Private Patrick “Paddy” Hyde of Stanthorpe was killed in the attack by the AIF 7th Brigade on July 29.

Paddy, too, has no known grave but is also remembered with honour at the Villers-Bretonneux memorial. The next attack was planned for August 2, but by then, more than 1.5km of new trenches had been dug, narrowing the distance across no-man’s land.

Believing the Australian troops were assembling for an attack, the Germans launched a relentless artillery barrage making the trench digging “one of the most terrible tasks undertaken by the AIF. Men were buried as they worked, were dug out, and buried again” (Bean 1948, 254).

The attack was postponed until August 4 when, under

cover of the new trenches, the 2nd Division was able to overrun the enemy lines including the old windmill site. In fierce fighting on August 5, the Germans counter-attacked but the AIF line held at the old windmill (Bean 1948, 255).

By now the 2nd Division was exhausted and had suffered heavier losses than any other Australian division in one tour of the line (Bean 1948, 256). During the 12 deadly days on the frontline, the 2nd Division suffered 6846 casualties. Five of its battalions had each lost between 600 and 700 men (Bean 1948, 258).

At 4am on August 7, the enemy attacked the Australian lines, capturing some of the forward trenches and dugouts. The German counterattack was turned back due to the

heroic efforts of the AIF.

Lieutenant Albert Jacka, arguably Australia’s most famous soldier of World War I, was instrumental in retaking the ground lost to the Germans in the early fighting. Following the failure of the German attack on August 7, the 4th Division concentrated its advance northwards along the Pozieres ridge towards the high ground of Thiepval.

Between August 8–21 the 4th Division, under the most appalling conditions, launched a series of attacks against the German stronghold at Mouquet Farm. The 4th Division, having lost 4649 men, was by then exhausted, and was replaced by the 1st Division which was brought back to the front (Pedersen 2012, 43).

The 1st Division made some gains but was virtually