

## VICTORY THROUGH DEFENCE

### The 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division's success on 14 April 1917 at the Battle of Lagnicourt vindicated Australian defensive doctrine

By MAJ Sean VW Childs.

The village of Lagnicourt in Northern France is around 6km southeast of the village of Bullecourt. Bullecourt in 1917 formed a part of Germany's new, heavily fortified defensive 'Siegfried Position' (known to the British as the Hindenburg Line).

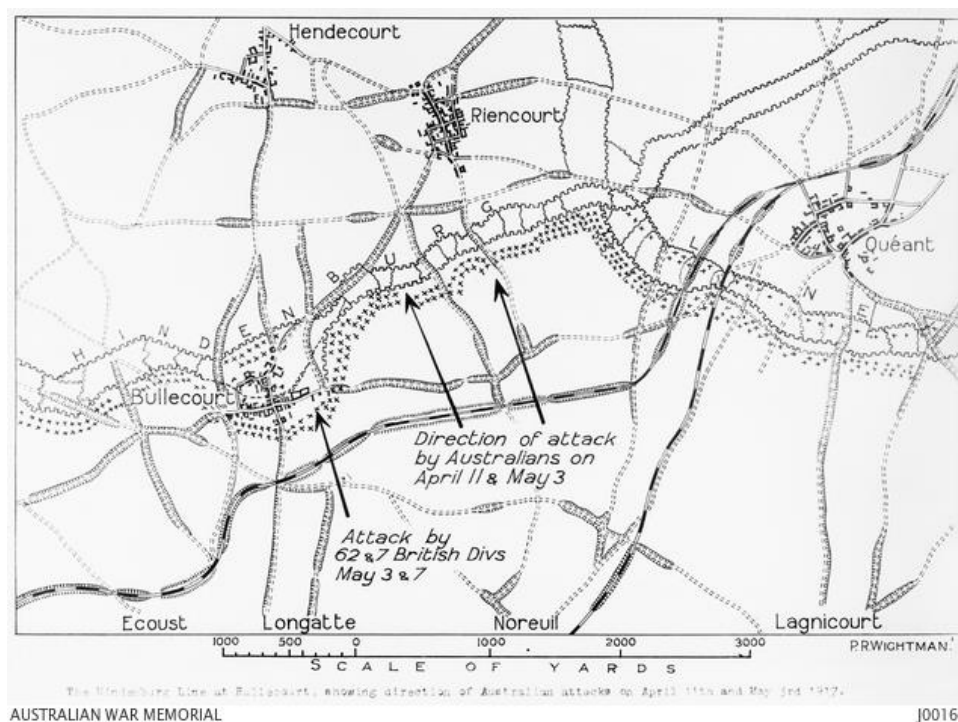
The German army strategically withdrew to the Hindenburg Line from February 1917, to shorten their front and make their positions easier to defend.

The British First and Third armies, seizing upon the German army's withdrawal, launched an offensive on Arras on 9 April, some 17km North West of Bullecourt.

General Sir Hubert Gough, commander of The British Fifth Army, supported the Arras offensive with an 11 April 'experimental tank attack' on Bullecourt, described as 'a diversion within a diversion'.

The Fifth Army's 62<sup>nd</sup> British Division advanced on Bullecourt from the left (West), the 4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division from the center, while the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division secured the right flank that included Lagnicourt.

The initial attack on Bullecourt (also known as the First Battle of Bullecourt (11-15 April) was a calamity, mostly because the tanks failed mechanically; and did not clear corridors for the infantry through the thick German barbed wire defences around Bullecourt.



From a tracing by Lieutenant P R Wightman; a map of the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt, showing the direction of Australian attacks on 11 April 1917 and 3 May 1917. Note that the British 7th Division was not involved in the 11 April assault on Bullecourt.

Compounding this failure was an oversight in Gough's 'limited-objective attack' plan that left the 1<sup>st</sup> Division's front line vulnerable. It was over 11km wide. The Germans attacked the Division's line before daylight on 14 April with twenty-three battalions.

Only four Australian battalions held the Lagnicourt sector. Some German elements overran part of the Division's gun line, while others entered the village of Lagnicourt.

By mid-morning, the Australians counterattacked, throwing back the Germans.

The 15 April diary entry of Captain Alexander Jackson Cunningham vividly describes the enemy's failures to capitalise on their early gains, 'the Germans got right behind all our 18 pounder batteries but did not have time to damage more than three of them'.

Although the Australian counterattack was a relatively minor WWI action, it demonstrated the strength of Australian defensive doctrine at that time.

The 1st Division had two forward brigades spread between the forward line of resistance and the second line. This left a depth brigade occupying the corps' main line.

The Division's swift and decisive counterattack at Lagnicourt was the result of forward Commanding Officers and Brigade Commanders' initiative, outposts manned by self-contained platoons and backed by local reserves, and accurate supporting British and Australian guns.

The counterattack signaled what the 1<sup>st</sup> Division could achieve even when on the defensive.



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*Troops billeted in a sunken road near Bullecourt, in France, during the fighting of the Australian troops in that sector.*

The 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division's casualties were over 700, while the German losses were over 2,300.

Read more about the 1<sup>st</sup> Australian Division in: Stevenson, R. 2012. *To Win the Battle: The 1st Australian Division in the Great War 1914–1918* (Australian Army History Series). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.