

DIRECT FIRE AMID THE WRECKAGE OF POZIERES

22-23 JULY 1916

Major Darryl Kelly, OAM

'Most of the dead lay on their faces in most natural positions. Portions of bodies lie everywhere as the shells burst up the place again every day'.

Captain Aubrey Wiltshire, 22 Battalion AIF

The name Pozieres would bring a shudder to any veteran who had experienced the Somme Campaign. The intense artillery barrages delivered by both sides, was beyond belief and was described by those who survived its ferocity, as 'passing through the gates of hell'.

Saturday the 1st of July 1916, signalled the first day of the Somme Campaign. This campaign was to be one of the bloodiest confrontations in the history of mankind (1). The Australian Imperial Force (AIF), were not to be spared from the carnage with the 1st Division being moved up in the third week of battle, destined for the assault on the fortified village of Pozieres. Our other intact divisions the 2nd and 4th, would also be thrown into fray, so as to take their turn in hell.

This paper is not intent on rehashing the writings delivered by previous authors who, over the past century, have examined the actions of Pozieres. Instead, it will deal with the action of a small group of Australian artillerymen and the forward thinking of their Artillery Brigade Commander. Their mission did not change the course of battle, instead, it may have provided a valuable insight to combating a looming issue – that being the fixed defences of a determined and experienced enemy. This enemy had the benefit of time, defensive development and most of all patience.

My intent is to raise questions, promote argument and encourage analysis of the use of artillery, not in its traditional in direct role. Instead, in revisiting the existing and under-utilised tactic of 'Direct Fire'. Due to the lack of accurate records, I have been required to utilise a significant amount of hindsight, analysis and 'gut feeling' in order to reach my findings. These findings are based on my personal experience, detailed reconnaissance of the ground and extensive research.

During the opening stages of the Somme Campaign the capture of the fortified village of la-Boisselle (2), was a key feature of the British attack. As the Australian 1st Division was moved up to prepare for assault on Pozieres, the date of impending battle was delayed on a number of occasions. Keen for souvenirs, the Australian soldiers in the support areas explored the newly captured defensive positions around la Boisselle.

(1) 57, 470 British casualties, with 19,240 dead. German losses 8000. Les Carlyon, The Great War, Pan Macmillan 2006

(2) la- Boisselle originally lies approximately 1-1.5 miles southwest of Pozieres, centre just off the Albert – Bapaume road. With the outbreak of war, it consisted of approximately 35 houses and a number of out buildings.

More importantly, astute commanders took the opportunity to tour the positions with their subordinates, intent on learning the defensive capability of their enemy.

The extent and complexity of the defensive positions alarmed the Australians. The dugouts were deep multi-story structures, utilising where able, cellars of demolished houses as the foundations. These defensive structures were elaborate in their outfitting, many adorned with furnishings, kitchens, flooring, lined walls, sleeping quarters and even wall paper, all recovered from the reclaimed houses.

The structures were further strengthened by the use of the French invention – reinforced concrete (3). This made these fortifications impermeable to indirect artillery fire, unless of an extremely large calibre gun scoring a lucky direct hit.

The Commander of the 2nd Field Artillery Brigade AIF, New Zealand born, Lieutenant Colonel Alfred Bessell-Browne was a forward thinker and with the further delay to the attack, saw an opportunity to seize the initiative and further prove a concept he'd been wetted to.

Bessell-Browne had a long and distinguished career as a gunner. Shortly after leaving high school, he enlisted in the Perth Artillery Volunteers in 1896, and within three years, he rose to the rank of sergeant.

He had enlisted as a private soldier in 1899, for service with the 1st Western Australian (Mounted Infantry), in the Boer War. Promoted through the ranks, he was commissioned in April 1900. Returning to Australia in March 1901, he immediately re-enlisted with the 5th Western Australian Contingent, first as Adjutant and later as the Second in Command. Promoted to Captain in June 1901, he went on to receive a Mentioned in Despatches in the July and later, the coveted Distinguished Service Order. Returning to Australia in 1902, Bessell-Browne rejoined the Australian Field Artillery as a lieutenant and was promoted captain in 1908. The following year, he attended a military science course at the University of Sydney (4). This provide him with the ability to explore and analyse situations, which coupled with his fighting prowess, gave him a new dynamic outlook on the role and functionality of artillery on the modern battlefield.

He was appointed to command the 37th Battery (Militia), in the lead up to the First World War and with the onset of hostilities, Bessell-Browne transferred to the AIF (5) as the Battery Commander, 8 Battery with the rank of major. Proof of his outstanding leadership was demonstrated when to a man, his battery followed him into the AIF.

(3) Defence Sites, Heritage and Structures, C.Clark, WIT Press, 2012

(4) The Australian Dictionary of Biography, Bessell-Browne, Alfred Joseph (1877–1947), Merrilyn Lincoln

(5) Australian Imperial Force

Bessell-Browne had attributed himself well both at Gallipoli and during the Cape Helles campaigns. Due to the medical evacuation of more senior officers, he was required to command both the 2nd and 3rd Field Artillery Brigades respectively, before the final evacuation of the ANZAC Forces. His final act prior to departure was to supervise the destruction of guns and limbers, which could not be re-embarked, thus denying their use by the enemy. His actions at Gallipoli earned him the award of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) and a further Mentioned in Despatches (6).

Bessell-Browne's experiences on Gallipoli would have haunted him. He was initially hampered throughout the campaign by out of date tactics, lack of ammunition and ammunition type and restricted manoeuvre capability. He was a commander who wanted to carry the power of his guns to the enemy, as did his divisional commander on the peninsular Major General W.T. Bridges (7).

This was demonstrated, when on the 1st of May 1915, when Bessell-Browne, with Bridges backing, had two of his guns dragged into the infantry's trenches and fire directly into the enemy trenches at a range of 400 metres. The action caught the Turks totally by surprise and destroyed their defences. The guns were able to withdraw without casualties, before the Turks could retaliate (8).

Following the success of the action, and against The Commander 1st Divisional Artillery Colonel Joseph Hobbs's (9) dogged reluctance, Bridges wanted the action repeated. This time the Turks fought back with fierce retaliatory fire, which bracketed the battery, which included Hobbs's eighteen year old son. Luckily, the battery only suffered two wounded. Hobbs reluctantly described the action later, as 'one of the most gallant deeds that I have seen since, I landed on 25th April (9).

Now Bessell-Browne faced a new enemy, who were renowned as the masters of defensive warfare. The Germans had nearly two years to prepare their defences on the Western Front and as the allies saw at la Boisselle, the German pillboxes and dugouts were well constructed and all but immune to the greater effects of indirect artillery fire.

It was now the evening of the 22nd of July 1916 and the Australian assault forces were moving up to launch their attack, timed to occur in less than five hours. In what I believe was an eleventh hour decision, Bessell-Browne decided to test the direct fire tactics of Gallipoli, against the well prepared defences of Pozieres village.

It was to be a single gun action and he allocated the task to the 6th Battery, who were currently deployed in Sausage Valley. The Battery Commander needed an experienced officer to take charge of the mission and chose British born - Lieutenant Samuel Thurnhill.

(6) AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914-1918 War, Alfred Bessell-Browne

(7) Major General Sir William Thorsby Bridges, Commander 1st Division, AIF. DOW 18 May 1915

(8) The Gunners, A History of Australian Artillery, David Horner, Allan and Unwin, 1995

(9) Colonel Joseph John Talbot Hobbs, Commander 1st Division Artillery, AIF.

25 year old, Thurnhill was a Gallipoli veteran, previously serving in 8 Battery under Bessell-Browne. Following the death of his mother in 1912, Thurnhill decided to try his luck in Australia. He was working as a farmer in Doodenanning, Western Australia, when war broke out. He enlisted in the AIF on the 14th of September 1914 and was allocated to the field artillery. He served as a gun number in 8 Battery during the Gallipoli and Helles Campaigns and was wounded in August. The wound was serious enough to warrant evacuation to Malta, for specialist treatment. Thurnhill returned to the battery in March 1916, as they were refitting at Tel el Kebir, Egypt. With the expansion of the AIF, the need to fill the ranks with experienced officers was paramount. Gunner Thurnhill was chosen as one of those for commissioning and was confirmed as a second lieutenant on the 12th of March with a posting to 6 Battery. His promotion to lieutenant occurred on the 10th of July, in the lead up to Pozieres (10).

Bessell-Browne knew Thurnhill from their Gallipoli days and was satisfied that they had the right man in the lead the mission.

Time was of the essence and Thurnhill was briefed in detail as to the mission and was allocated a single 18 pounder gun and detachment. As silence and deception was to be a key element to the success of the mission, the detachment set about muffling the travel noises of the gun, which included wiring sandbags around the rims of the guns wheels.

In addition to provide additional submission, portions of hard rubber truck tyres were cut and affixed to the wheel rims (11). The wheel hubs were also a concern and they came in for heavy greasing. The drivers set about silencing the chains and metal linkages of the harnesses with rags and sandbags.

Whilst the detachment worked on the preparations of gun, stores and teams, Thurnhill and his BC, poured over maps and any available aerial photos. They chose the best route to the firing position, to be straight up the Albert – Bapaume Road, until the detachment reached a point just behind the infantry's front line. There it was planned for the gun and detachment pause in the dead ground (12), to the right hand side of the road. Sunset and twilight was estimated to occur at 20.47 hours and moonrise at 23.33 hours with the moon in its last quarter showing 45% illumination (13). Thurnhill was to deploy his gun under the cover of the massive barrage impacting on village and strategic points around the village. The artillery barrage was scheduled to reach its peak with saturation fire, which was to occur between 0028 hours through to 0030 hours, where it would then lift and engage targets in depth of the village. At that point Thurnhill's gun was to open fire, enfilading the road and destroying the fortifications and barricades. In the meantime the infantry will launch their assault from the low ground to the right.

(10) National Achieves of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, LT Samuel Raymond Thurnhill

(11) AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914-1918 War – LT S.R. Thurnhill

(12) Bean, C.E.W. Official History of Australia in the Great War 1914-18, Volume 3, AIF in France 1916, Page 497

(13) info.com.au – sunrise / set/ moon rise / set / moon state conditions for Albert 22 July 1916

Due to the lack of official records concerning the mission, my analysis as to the preliminary reconnaissance, preparation, movement and execution of the mission will now be detailed.

The volume of ammunition required to achieve the mission was also a concern. The ammunition allocation was to be 115 rounds. This amount far exceeded both the existing Ammunition Wagon (38 rounds capacity) and the Ammunition Limber (24 rounds capacity) (14). So as to ensure that sufficient ammunition was on hand and that security of the deployment was maintained, use of the standard General Service Wagon (1916) would allow the full complement of ammunition to be manhandled into position, in one lift. The wagon, supplemented by filled sandbags, would also serve to provide additional protection for the detachment from enemy machine gun and rifle fire (15). Additional manning would be required to assist in manhandling the wagon into place. This is likely to have come from the Divisional Ammunition Column, as their duties to supply ammunition to the guns, would have been completed in the days leading up to the attack. (16).

Thurnhill would now be ready to conduct his detailed personal reconnaissance. He would have identified that the area on his left flank, was completely opened and thus vulnerable. He would have also considered the possibilities of capture and thus would have probably considered carrying in, two high explosive rounds and an emergency lanyard, so as to destroy the gun in place. This way it would not fall into enemy hands intact and with the ammunition, be used against in a direct fire mode, against our attacking troops (17). The main road, although potholed would still be relatively traversable and if he was to choose his lay-up position carefully then manhandling and deployment, would be that much easier.

The exposure to the strategically positioned pillbox later dubbed ‘Gibraltar’ (18), would need to be also considered. He may have thought to use two Lewis Gun teams, so as to engage to pillbox, whilst the gun was engaged in its main task?

Whilst the fixation of Thurnhill’s gun no real concern from a technical point of view, the orientation of the gun was critical. If the gun was allowed to sway from its line of fire, the rounds may cause friendly casualties with the advancing Australian infantry, coming from the right flank. Thurnhill may have positioned screw pickets (19) on each side of the barrel and secured together by rope, so as to provide a limited arc of fire and assist the detachment in keeping the gun oriented.

(14) Handbook of the 18-PR Q.F. Gun, Land Service, 1913.

(15) Bean, C.E.W. Official History of Australia in the Great War 1914-18, Volume 3, AIF in France 1916, Page 497

(16) Lack of recorded information in official records. It would be highly unlikely though that the guns would be depleted of manpower, at the time of such an important attack.

(17) Standard practice to destroy a gun to prevent capture is to load a round in both ends of the barrel and run out a long lanyard (rope) fixed to the firing mechanism. The detachment member then moves to a safe position and fires the gun. The combination of the firing pressures and detonation destroys the gun, thus making it useless to either side.

(18) The 2nd Battalion, AIF would capture ‘Gibraltar’ the following day.

(19) Steel screw pickets, also known as “silent” pickets. A screw picket was turned into the ground by inserting a piece of wood, bayonet or similar, through a loop at the top of the shaft and twisting it in a circular motion, much like a large corkscrew.

The last facet of the plan that would need consideration, was evacuation. Once they commenced firing, the Germans may react with counter-battery fire, which would leave Thurnhill's gun, ammunition and men vulnerable.

If the gun or ammunition were destroyed and the detachment were forced to withdraw, they could not escape to the right, as they would encounter the advancing infantry and would more than likely draw friendly fire. With the left still in enemy hands, it would have been out of the question as a possibility. Hence, withdrawal back down the original route, paralleling the road, would prove the most likely course of action.

If the mission was successful, he planned to withdraw the gun and run it into a shell crater (20). Remove the breech block and firing mechanism and withdraw the detachment. The gun could then be retrieved at a later time, when the tactical situation allowed.

With the preparations on gun, ammunition and wagon now complete, Thurnhill would deliver his orders. Given the shortage of time, the most direct route via Casualty Corner, then left along the main access track 300 metres from the intersection and before the 'Chalk Pit', would have been the likely route. This would have placed the gun and accompanying wagon accessing the Bapaume – Albert Road, 1200 metres south-west of Pozieres. Turning towards Pozieres would have placed the party at an oblique angle to the predatory fire as it advanced towards its laying up point, thus providing relative safety from the artillery barrage (21).

At the appointed time post twilight, the gun was brought out of action and harnessed to the team. So as to keep the horses as calm as possible, the drivers and detachment were likely to lead each horse by hand. This would have also aided in lowering the profile of the party, as it moved closer towards the front. Additionally, as the track passing from Casualty Corner to the Bapaume – Albert Road, via the Chalk Pit, was part of the Main Supply Route (MSR) for the battlefield, it experienced a high volume of foot, ambulance and logistic traffic. The dismounted leading of the horse teams, would have aided in negotiating the main portion of the track closest to the key intersection.

On pausing at the intersection of the track and the Bapaume – Albert Road, Thurnhill's party would have needed to pause, whilst the layered sandbags were tied around each of the horse's hooves. Whilst this was occurring, the rags and sandbags muffling gun, wagon, team and harness, would have been rechecked thoroughly. At this point he might have also considered fitting the specialist gas masks to each of the horses, so as to limit their vision of the exploding artillery rounds and also, to stifle the tell-tale sound of a whinny.

Now at the lie up point, Thurnhill would have needed to send his horse teams to the rear utilising the minimum number of horse holders. Wheels of the ammunition wagon, would have needed to be chocked so as to minimise the possibility of it running away.

(20) AWM 4, Australian Imperial Force Unit War Diaries, 1st Australian Division Artillery, 13/10/22. Order for action Artillery attack on Pozieres 22.7.16,

(21) Map at Attachment A

He would have needed to place his detachment in a protective screen to cover the left flank and the road ahead, whilst keeping himself and the Detachment Commander with two HE rounds ready, so as to destroy the gun and ammunition if contact was made and capture were imminent. The party may have also been required to bring the gun into action and use it in their own defence, if discovered.

Thurnhill would have checked and rechecked his watch, which had been synchronised along with every watch in the division, every hour since 1800 hours (22). He knew that at 0028 hours the massed 18 pounder batteries of the 1st Division Artillery, would adjust their fire from the existing five rounds per gun - per minute to 'free fire', meaning as many rounds that could be fired by each gun in the time available. This rate was to last until 0030 hours (2 minutes). He had to be ready in all aspects to commence firing, as the barrage lifted at 0030 hours, which was zero hour for the infantry assault was to commence (22).

Sam Thurnhill needed to be mindful of occupying the firing position. Perhaps it was best, to have all available men to manhandle the gun forward and then return and bring forward the ammunition wagon. Whilst the latter was occurring, he and the detachment commander could remain with the gun, orient it using his compass, embed the screw pickets and be on hand to destroy the gun, if either they or the manhandle party were compromised.

At his appointed time, he called his men in and they moved the gun forward. The wagon was best position to provide ready access to the ammunition, whilst also to provide limited cover to the detachment. If he had been able to secure the Lewis guns, they would have been best sited left front (10 o'clock) position to the gun, so as to engage 'Gibraltar' and the exposed left flank, in the event of an enemy counter-attack. Their concealment to date, was aided by the intermittent cloud cover.

As the crescendo of the barrage increased, the detachment readied itself. They would have needed a chain system of men to feed the rounds into the gun and remain in the chain to unload the expended cartridge case, throwing it as far as possible from the gun. Men would be required to hand the rounds down to the gunners from the wagon. Two gunners would be responsible to push the barrel through when ordered, so as not to have the barrel foul with residue from the expended rounds. A fouled barrel could cause a premature detonation on firing. Thurnhill would be observing the fall of shot and adjusting any fire accordingly. If anyone was hit, they would need to be dragged away and tended to later, as every man was required to on hand to complete the mission.

Suddenly, the indirect fire stopped, as the barrage was lifted to the new target around the Pozieres Cemetery, which was located further behind the village. Then, as pre-arranged, the Detachment Commander ordered – 'Continuous Fire - Fire'. Round after round was sent straight down the main street of the village and the tell-tale flash and rumble would indicate, that they had found their mark. The gunners would have soon developed a rhythm, intent of maintaining the continuous fire going down range.

(22) 1 AWM 4, Australian Imperial Force Unit War Diaries, 1st Australian Division Artillery, 13/10/22. Order for action Artillery attack on Pozieres 22.7.16,

Apart from minor adjustments in elevation, the fire would have been true and accurate, as each round would seat the gun further into a stable firing stance. Thurnhill would have known he would only have approximately 15 minutes to complete his mission. Anything after that may have his fire coming too close, to any of the advancing infantry who may overrun their objective.

The gunners would have kept their commander aware of the dwindling ammunition supply and probably counted down the last 10 rounds. When they reached the last two, Thurnhill would have made the decision whether to fire these or not, but with their ammunition all but expended, the gun would be of little or no gain if captured.

With all 115 rounds now fired, the order to ‘Cease Fire’ was issued.

Within minutes, Thurnhill would have had the gun on the move, leaving behind any unnecessary stores or produce (24). The main interest was withdrawing the gun. Reaching the designated shell crater they pushed the gun in. Here the breech block and firing mechanism would have been removed and carried to the rear.

Under Thurnhill’s leadership the detachment was able to reach the safety of their own front lines with no casualties. To Bessell-Browne the mission was a total success and he gladly reported the action to his higher headquarters.

Thurnhill’s actions earned him the Military Cross (25) but unfortunately, no awards were made to members of the detachment (26). Thurnhill continued to serve with 8 Battery, until his he was killed in action on the 5th of November 1916. He now lays at rest in Caterpillar Valley Cemetery, Longueval, France (27).

Summary

The indication that Bessell-Browne acted independently, in deploying the gun forward in the direct fire role, hinges on the scantness of official records pertaining to the action.

Also, the text in which they are drafted, especially the notation in the 1st Division Artillery’s Operational Summary (0200 hours 23 July 1916) (28), indicates that they were unaware of the action, until reported at its completion. Both the Unit War Diaries for the 2nd and 4th Infantry Battalions, which were the assaulting units closest to the guns position, indicate nothing of the action.

The 2nd Field Artillery Brigade (2 FAB), Unit War Diary depicting the action, clearly indicates that its implementation, was limited to a Commander 2 FAB initiative.

(24) Produce denotes expended cartridge cases, unused ammunition components etc

(25) AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, AIF, 1914-1918 War – LT S.R. Thurnhill

(26) AWM 28, Recommendation Files for Honours and Awards, Thurnhill, First Australian Division, Divisional Artillery Headquarters, 29.8.16

(27) National Achieves of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, LT Samuel Raymond Thurnhill

(28) AWM 4, Australian Imperial Force Unit War Diaries, 1st Australian Division Artillery, 13/10/22. Order for action Artillery attack on Pozieres 22.7.16, Appendix 0, Page 45

Lessons

From a lessons perspective, the action shows the aggressive nature of an artillery commander to carry the fight to the enemy. The clear indication, that the destruction of fixed, hardened fortifications, such as reinforced concrete pillboxes, barricades, and other fortified positions by indirect artillery fire, was not the most efficient means of neutralisation (29). His own experiences, warranted Bessell-Browne to continue to develop new tactics in order to combat these hardened fortifications, which were an integral component of the German defensive line.

The physiological effects of direct fire artillery against hardened, encapsulated targets, such as multi stories subterranean pillboxes, would have be a devastating on the occupants, thus allowing for a more effect capture by assaulting infantry. This was evident in the German Blitzkrieg assaults in the early part of the Second World War, against French fixed fortified locations, across their north-eastern flank.

Whilst the implementation of indirect fire support was improving in regards technology, ammunition and communications, the supported arms lacked a high calibre direct fire capability. The artillery gun in its direct fire mode, was the only weapon available to provide this capability. However both artillery commanders and their supported arms counterparts, believed that direct fire, was a potentially outdated tactic. Instead, it was a valuable tool of warfare, which in the right circumstances, could deliver a well-aimed, high explosive projectile, directly against a fortified target at the point of most vulnerability.

(29) The Metamorphosis of the God of War: The Changing Face of Australian Field Artillery in World War One, Nicholas Floyd, page 10