

LEST WE FORGET

BULLECOURT

We are now in the third year of the Great War centenary. It pops into our lives on ANZAC Day, and Remembrance Day. Such days are opportunities to learn and reflect on life and what happened a hundred years ago.

History is important- especially our own. It can help us understand our culture better when we know some of the experiences and attitudes in the past. It can help us avoid the danger of repeating mistakes made in the past, when we know about what has happened in the past and why. So what could our children learn from the Great War in 1917? April- May is the centenary of Bullecourt. This article has some suggestions for activities and discussions about it.

Language Changes

Have your children become aware that language changes over time and why? In 1917, what we call **World War 1** was known as the '**Great War**'. It became the '**War to End All Wars**' – after it ended. Think about why these names were used and changed?

What about the words that have been handed down for a century to be said in remembrance? "**Lest we forget**". We don't talk like that now, except for ceremonial times. What would we say today? 'Lest' means '**Let us not**'. What might be a more modern phrase to use? Hint: The huge,



brightly painted, "**Do not forget Australia**" sign greets all at the École Victoria, at Villers- Bretonneux, in the Somme, France- still, 100 years on.

Our children need to know that the phrase they say, means "Do not forget!" But more... Forget what? People? Places? Actions? Feelings? What did those living through the Great War do and leave to make sure future generations did not forget their experiences to retain freedom, for them and the future!

Sgt Jimmy Downing, Bullecourt A.I.F veteran, said "***Bullecourt represents for Australians a greater sum of sorrow and of honour than any other place in the world.***"

Bullecourt 1917

Bullecourt? Heard of it? Remember what? When? April- May 1917. Where is it? It was on the **Western Front**, in northern France. Try to find it in an atlas, including on-line.

What was it like? It lies on a flattish, small hill, surrounded by rolling farmland. It was a small hamlet of 400 people with one main street, before the War came and smashed it up. The German invaders had prepared it as a defensive position – with built in machine-gun posts and three sides ringed with several rows of barbed wire leading up the slopes. The last side backed onto a long fortification the Germans had built – the Hindenburg Line. From this description, make an A4 or A3 drawing of these features – to help understand what the Australian soldiers faced. After that, google for photos.

The Germans thought their defences were too big and strong to be overcome. But the British had new technology– the tank! Yes, a hundred years ago horse drawn transport was still in use. Motor vehicles, tanks and planes were being developed in this war.

What did these **Diggers** (Australian soldiers) do that may be worth not forgetting? Our **infantry** headed two battles retaking it: 1) April- About 5000 Australians attacked these defences ... and got through to capture the guns and town, then resisted counter-attacks, until a lack of support forced their retreat. The tanks especially failed to arrive. 2) **Artillery** pounded Bullecourt's defences for a fortnight before the next attack of about 12,000 Australians. Tanks helped this time. Bullecourt was captured and held.

The cost? 10,000 Australians were killed or wounded and over 1000 captured by the '**Hun**'. The gain? No real strategic value!!! An effect? Questioning of British planning!!

Table of Australian (Digger) Infantry in

Battles of Bullecourt April –May 1917

Battles of Bullecourt	Date(s)	Battle duration	Australian Battalions involved	Estimate of 'diggers' (500-1000/ btn)	casualties	Captured
1	April 10	9 hours	8	5000	3289	1170
2	May 3- 17	12 days	17	12000	7,482	Not reported
	Total					

Memorials

Bullecourt has four memorials: Musée/ Museum with artefacts; remnant sunken roadside; **Slouch Hat** memorial (to the A.I.F. **Australian Imperial Forces** units); and **Digger** Memorial (to the 10,000 casualties-dead or injured, including over 2000 M.I.A. - **Missing in Action**). M.I.A. can have no marked grave, instead we remember them with the name plaques at the Australian War Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux.

Make a Model of Bullecourt battles

A model can help show the difficulties our Diggers faced and overcame at Bullecourt. Choose a symbol to represent the diggers at Bullecourt. Would a slouch hat, a soldier or a paper-chain person be good? A slouch hat is at <http://www.topteacher.com.au/class-themes/special-occasions/anzac-day-remembrance-day/anzac-day-writing-prompt> These will go on the site features' drawing done earlier, so consider the symbol's size. Use a scale of 1 symbol to 1000 men. Mark each symbol with a 1 or 2 for the two battles using the information in the table above. Add symbols onto some of them for the dead (Christian cross), injured (Red Cross) or captured. (Later, consider these as fractions.) Place these symbols on the site drawing to show what happened to our men there.

Make a symbol for a tank. Do two of these – numbered 1 and 2 for each battle. To show when tanks helped, on the site drawing, put tank '1' away from the town and barbed wire lines and '2' on top of them, with the men '2'. Put an Aussie flag on the town to show that we retook and held it from the Germans.

Lieut Wilfred Barlow, A.I.F., Killed in Action (KIA) Bullecourt 12 May 1917, had written to his wife:

“I hope the war will soon be over because it is destroying the best men and everything that is beautiful and civilised in life.”

Communication

Today, the family of a soldier **K.I.A.**, like Lt Barlow, would be quickly informed and the media may arrive on their doorstep! How different was it a century ago? To discuss with children, try stepping communication methods backwards through time losing mobile phones, TV etc. In 1917, it took longer to get messages across land and seas, passed by cables, letters and newspapers.

Transport

Today, the family of a soldier **K.I.A.** overseas would expect him/her to be returned here for burial. Not so in the Great War! Consider differences in transport methods and time, refrigeration, the huge numbers dying (e.g.10,000 just at this site), the numbers of MIA, the need to help the injured. So where could families back in Australia go to tend graves? The many ANZAC memorials and tree groves provide places, as does ANZAC Day, for our remembrance. **Lest we forget.**

A Soldier's Poem

Googling Bullecourt will lead to many sites to tell the battle story, but what about poetry for insights into how people of the past felt? In 1918, *Bullecourt*, a poem was published in *Aussie- the Australian Soldier's Magazine*, (<http://www.australianculture.org/bullecourt-poem-1918/>). There is a real mood to this poem that makes it worth reading out loud. It has character and history. Some language we no longer use is explained in the notes. Some reflective questions for it could be:

- 1 Whom does the poem address (first word)?
- 2 What terms are used for those we would call ANZAC's today? (Are these terms still used today?)
- 3 What clues suggest this is the first, not second, battle?
- 4 What emotion does the poet have about this battle?

Our history is not long, so perhaps we can find room to not forget 'Bullecourt'- this year!

Text and photos by Jeanie Clark© 2017, Quotes and data come from various on-line World War 1 sources.