

FOURTH OF JULY 1918

the blood soaked trenches are swallowing 10,000 men a day ...  
to the men drowning in the Somme mire the Great War looks lost ...

# WOLFSBERG

ANZACS & AMERICANS

A MUTINY  
&  
A TRIUMPH

JOHN HUNTER FARRELL



## 2. KAISERSCHLACHT

Collapsing Fifth Army Front  
Old Roman Road Ancre sur Somme  
Somme Department Picardie  
Northern France

March 27 1918

*.....seven weeks earlier*

**H**IS MEN CALLED him Happy Jack because he never smiled. And he wasn't smiling now.

The Lieutenant Colonel fought off a looming despondency as he trudged at the head of his Anzac Battalion along the winding path that followed the Old Roman Road paralleling the River Ancre, between Amiens and Albert. They marched east, against a river of misery flowing west.

Wild-eyed British Tommies jogged towards the Australian column, fleeing the sound of the now not so distant artillery. Many were unarmed having lost their rifles in their panic. Wounded men hobbled along alone, their comrades too hell bent on escape to offer assistance. An officer riding a white stallion fled to the rear at a canter, studiously avoiding the contemptuous glares of the Anzacs as they marched towards the advancing enemy.

Clots of French refugees trudged along stoically pushing and pulling their pathetic valuables, sobbing grubby children waddling in their wake. The lucky ones whipping worn out donkeys, even goats pulling fragile carts. Bereft mothers cradling infants, grandmamas herding toddlers, old shepherds trying to drive their frightened flocks, all made a sad dispirited parade westwards, away from the maelstrom and the Kaiser's Stosstruppen shock troops.

A British officer staggered back from the Front dazed by the barrage. He was naked from the waist down, sickly yellow excrement flowing down his thin white legs. White froth caked his mouth, his crazed eyes darted around but saw nothing.

A beautiful white dog with a badly broken leg whimpered as it limped past, desperate to find its master in the chaos. In pain and confused, the dog growled at the Anzacs as they marched towards the sound of the guns.

A French woman veiled in widow's black tried to block the Lieutenant Colonel's path. Holding up a swaddled newborn, she tried to thrust the child into the Australian's arms pleading, "Please, please, please!"

"I'm sorry love, your baby can't come where we are going," Happy Jack apologised.

But the mad woman had already moved on, still shouting "please", trying to push the baby into another Anzac's arms, falling back, shouting French obscenities before trying yet again on another Digger further back.

Desperate as it was, the Australian Battalion Commander knew there was no time for this French tragedy. He had a mission to complete and he drove the Anzac column relentlessly forward.

He tried not to consider the bigger picture. He had to keep the mists of depression that stalked his thoughts at bay. But Happy Jack's world was collapsing around him.

The Allied gains made in the past two years in the furnace of the Somme had evaporated in a little over a week. The German High Command had thrown every man and every gun into a last ditch attack to defeat the British and the French before the Americans arrived with their millions of additional troops and bottomless pockets. It was now or never for the Germany Army. The German Generals had chosen the now.

The Angel of the Somme had fallen. Albert, where the gold statue of the Virgin had clung perilously to her perch on the brink of collapse from the cathedral bell tower, had already been over run. The very symbol of the years of Allied struggle against Imperial Germany had tumbled down into the rubble.

Poizieres, saturated in Australian suffering, gone. Thiepval, Fricourt, Peronne, Baupaume, Flers, Longueval. All gone in eight days of rolling German victories that had reversed two years of titanic struggle. Two years that had bled his young country dry and drenched French fields in Australian blood.

The British Fifth Army holding the central Somme sector of the Front had shattered on March 21 under a barrage of over one million German shells. The bombardment followed closely by waves of elite German Stosstruppen shock troopers who had stormed the shattered British trenches under a hail of stick grenades, slaughtering the dazed and gassed survivors.

Twenty thousand Tommies lay dead in the over run trenches. Thirty-five thousand more had been wounded in the madness. What remained of Fifth Army was in full retreat. To the Australian Lieutenant Colonel it looked more like a rout. Wise men were wondering if the war was lost. Happy Jack wasn't one of them yet, but the day was still young.

The Lieutenant Colonel's orders were simple. Advance to contact east of Franvillers. Find the Germans. Halt them.

Whole British divisions had been thrown in before them and had simply disappeared into the meat grinder. His men were just the latest plug sent forward to halt the flood.

Behind him marched five hundred and eight infantrymen from the 43rd Battalion, Australian Imperial Force. They smiled as they marched, undefeated and unafraid. Their distinctive march, all long languid steps and cocky swinging arms shouted Anzac. And that was something worth advertising. There were a lot of soldiers in France, but only those from the newborn southern lands of Australia and New Zealand could call themselves Anzacs. No one else would have dared.

It started to rain, light at first then settling in to a steady fall.

Somewhere behind Happy Jack, the Battalion Regimental Sergeant Major recognised that the outflow of misery, the rain and the deserting Brits was rattling his troops. He knew what to do. He piped up in a loud baritone and began belting out one of the Aussies' favourite marching songs. The tune soon picked up along the column.

*We're a pack of Aussie bastards,  
Biggest bastards in the world.  
So hide ya ladies, hide your grog,  
'Cos we're over here in the land of frogs,  
And we're gunna do a job...  
On the Kaiser.  
And we'll fuckin' get it done before we die.*

Happy Jack cheered up as he listened to his Diggers belt out the bawdy tune. The off key voices of his men restored a little of the Lieutenant Colonel's faith. Today, he thought, would be one of those days. Today German mothers would weep, not just Australian ones.

He had lost most of his faith in the Almighty somewhere in the Belgian wastes. But his confidence in his countrymen had risen to his rescue. His Diggers may not have loved him. But he loved them.

He had led Aussie infantry through thick and thin since December 1916, when the 3rd Division had been released from the Strategic Reserve and sent to France.

Never, not even once during those hellish times had he seen his boys lose their sense of humour or fighting spirit. They had stayed staunch. No matter how ugly the moment his blokes always managed a sly grin and a smartarse comment at his expense. Be it thigh deep in freezing Flanders mud for weeks without end, or Hopping Over the top into the hellfire of a big Stunt like Passchendaele. Or just cold, hungry and the colour of mud in the everyday slaughter of the Western Front.

They were special and they knew it.

They had a single minded belief in themselves and their mates that was unshakable. That belief enabled them to endure the endlessly unendurable that the Great War had

thrown at them.

Their confidence danced close to arrogance and its drunken sister recklessness. But it allowed them to do what most others had comprehensively failed to achieve. They could beat Germans. And, on a good day with the wind at their backs, they could defeat them decisively.

Happy Jack felt a flutter of unchristian warrior pride as he marched at the head of his elite battalion. He was leading Anzacs. The men of the Australian Imperial Force, or AIF as his blokes would say. Holders of the hard won reputation as the best Hun killing corps on the entire Western Front.

He turned and looked into the determined faces of the helmeted men behind him, the winding centipede of Australian soldiery weaving through the refugees and retreating Tommies towards the encroaching enemy.

The rhythmic cadence of combat boots tramping the cobblestones, weapons clinking against equipment and steel rubbing against canvas soothed the Lieutenant Colonel. They were the sounds of his family life. The only family he had known since he was called to active duty in Brisbane in late 1914.

The men were loaded up for battle armed with either a .303 Short Magazine Lee Enfield rifle or the Lewis Mark II light machinegun. Three or four 100-round bandoleers of .303 bullets in clever fast-load 5-round clips or the 47-round drum magazines for the Lewis machineguns were slung over their shoulders. Their pockets were filled with Mills fragmentation grenades they called 'bombs'.

Their distinctive khaki service dress with its grenade stuffed oversized pockets and the folded brim fur felt slouch hats, now slung from their packs, marked them out from all other British and Commonwealth troops.

The 43rd's oval, brown over blue battalion colour patch distinguished them from the other sixty infantry battalions of the Australian Imperial Force. They firmly believed they were the finest assault battalion in the entire world. But every other AIF battalion would have taken issue with that.

The 43rd Battalion was originally raised in South Australia, a long way from Happy Jack's home in tropical Queensland in Australia's northeast. But the Australian Army did not let a man lead his old battalion. It was a peculiarly Aussie thing, but the Australian Top Brass believed that no man should be made to order his old mates to slaughter.

He had led his original Battalion, the proud Queenslander 42nd, as acting Commanding Officer through the nightmare of late 1917. When they gave him a pip to go with his Major's crown to make half Colonel, he was transferred to the 42nd's sister battalion in the 3rd Division's 11th Brigade.

He was now the final word at 43rd Battalion.



LIEUTENANT GEORGE FORREST fought the sluggish controls of his heavily bomb laden RE.8 observation aircraft as it traced the path of the Ancre River, 1000 feet above the advancing Australian battalions.

Behind him his observer Lieutenant Pete Raymond worked frantically to record the positions of the advancing lines of Anzacs, trying to match the khaki columns against identifiable land marks between gaps in the smoke from burning homes.

“I’ve got Aussies below,” Raymond yelled forward to his boss, trying to make himself heard in the deafening wind tunnel of the RE.8’s cockpit. He annotated his map with a grease pencil. Marking the sighting, time and approximate number of troops near a town the map called Heilly.

Freezing raindrops smashed into the Australian aircrew’s faces with sharp thwacks. There was no shelter in the open two seater biplane. The aircraft’s overwrought engine screamed in fury as it fought to maintain their airspeed above the Australian 3rd Division. Below, the Anzacs were advancing at the double to fill the dangerous gap between the Somme and the Ancre, to prevent the Germans making good on their successful breakthrough by capturing Paris.

The rain made a mockery of Raymond’s goggles, forcing the young aviator to pull them away and squint through the windchill and fusillade of raindrops. He was trying to achieve the impossible and accurately plot the most forward Australian elements against the flow of refugees and Fifth Army survivors withdrawing towards Amiens.

Forrest caught sight of their 3 Squadron Australian Flying Corps wingman flying his RE.8 slightly higher and to the north. Both aircraft flew the same mission profile. If one was shot down, then the other could return with the vital intelligence. If both fell to German gunners or fighters, two more were already inbound to the same battlefield on the same mission.

“Fritz! Fritz!” Raymond yelled over the roar of the overloaded RE.8’s engine. His pointed finger indicating a small group of field grey German Soldats, some escorting khaki clad figures away from the battlefield to the east.

Forrest dragged his joystick back and worked his throttles, forcing the RE.8 to begrudgingly gain altitude. Raymond launched a magenta flare to inform their wingman and any Allied forces who could see them that they had made ‘touch’ with the enemy.

First problem solved, they climbed higher looking for any Huns worth bombing.

The rain clouds closed in at 1200 feet, forcing Forrest to stay low and fly in zigs and zags. Puffs of white and black smoke marked German guns firing. There was every reason to believe that they were the target.

“Fritz cavalry to the right,” Raymond shouted into Forrest’s ear, from the rear observer’s cupola. Forrest nodded his acknowledgement and turned his slow bomber towards the cluster of field grey men watering brown horses from an eddy on the Ancre.

Raymond manned his twin Lewis machinegun mount. His gloved hands quickly completing the final checks to ensure both his weapons were ready for action.

The RE.8 continued to close the distance between its propeller and the unsuspecting German cavalry enjoying some down time below.

Forrest noticed a neat hole in the stretched canvas fabric of the wing over his head. Then saw a second appear almost immediately.

“Fokker! Break left!” Raymond screamed, before opening up with long bursts from this twin Lewis Guns. Out of the corner of his eye, Forrest saw not an enemy Fokker, but an older Pfalz III hurtling in below them, trying to shield its approach from Raymond’s guns.

The RE.8 shuddered as dozens of machinegun bullets wracked the airframe, smashing wooden wing stays and severing structural wires. The RE.8’s massive engine missed a beat and spouts of oil sprayed back across the aircrew.

Raymond swivelled his double guns on their pintle, leaning dangerously out of his seat to engage the German fighter which came at them guns blazing from below and behind.

Forrest, fighting back terror and the urge to break off his attack and run for the Allied lines, somehow reached his target and yanked on his bomb release lever. Eight high explosive bombs hurtled down towards the German cavalrymen.

With the bombs gone, Forrest immediately began jinking the aircraft erratically, while turning west toward friendly country. The Pfalz fighter closed for another gun run.

Fear driven sweat fogged his goggles but Forrest zigged when the Pfalz zagged. Streams of tracers flew above and below his damaged aircraft, which was lighter and more responsive now that the bombs were away.

Then the frustrated German fighter pilot made a mistake. Instead of confining his attacks to the RE.8’s defenceless blind side, he made a concerted attack directly astern. Forrest dropped his tail, which exposed the entire nose of the fierce little Pfalz to Raymond’s twin Lewis Guns. Thin streams of tracer hit the German fighter’s engine.

The Pfalz pilot waved an angry fist as he broke off. Raymond returned the compliment with an obscene gesture in between Lewis Gun bursts.

“He’s done us over proper Pete,” Forrest yelled, as he struggled to keep the damaged aircraft level. An ugly flutter was visible on the lower right wing. It had lost too many of its wire supports to maintain structural integrity. They had to get down now. One minute’s flight time and the engine began stuttering. The airframe shuddering now, threatening to break apart. Black acrid metallic smelling smoke signalling imminent engine seizure engulfed the two airmen, sending both into coughing fits.

“I’ll put her down in that field to the right!” Forrest yelled, before he commenced his crash landing.

The RE.8 flew like a turkey but landed like a goose, bulldozing the cultivated furrows in the field before tipping onto her nose and grinding to a halt.

Forrest and Raymond fought off panic as they abandoned their broken bird. Both terrified that high octane fuel and a white hot manifold would see them engulfed in flame. Both had seen that ghastly ballet of death by inferno after crashes at airfields. Neither

wanted their names on that dance card.

At a safe distance, Forrest unholstered his flare pistol and fired a magnesium illumination round into the smouldering wreckage to prevent its capture by the advancing Huns. Raymond quickly folded all of his carefully annotated maps into his leather carry case.

They could see the columns of Anzacs marching forward to contact one hundred yards to the south.

Fear and adrenaline from their close escape combined with the overwhelming relief of being on the ground, alive and inside friendly lines. They laughed like over excited schoolboys.

“I suspect we’re in for a little morning stroll old boy,” Pete joked.

“Thank God for that,” Forrest replied. “I thought we were both heading West for a while there.”



THE STUTTERING SHRIEK of an inbound heavy artillery shell wrested Happy Jack from his thoughts. The French refugees scattered in terror as the shell passed over the cobblestone path before impacting in the trees a half mile away. The detonation threw up an enormous plume of dirt and debris, shattering the old oaks into splinters. A visible shock wave traveling out from the point of impact over the scattered soldiers and civilians crowding the old Roman Road.

Animals panicked, overturning carts. Women screamed and toddlers shrieked in terror. A young boy close by silently clutched his grandfather’s leg, frozen in fear. The boy’s bottom lip quivering at the knowledge that no one could protect him from the metal spitting monster coming down the road.

“Depechez-vous, depechez-vous,” the Australian Lieutenant Colonel loudly shouted in his poor French, trying to get the civilians to move faster, away from the German advance.

An old Frenchman with a deeply lined face was stoically reloading his family’s meagre possessions back into a handcart after the chaos of the explosion. On seeing the Anzac he walked up to Happy Jack and hugged him tightly. The old man whispered something the Australian didn’t understand before turning to his fellow villagers, thrusting his clenched fist in the air and roaring, “Vive les Australiens.”

Summoning all the pride and defiance they could muster, the tattered French villagers, even four and five year olds halted their flight and joined in, “Vive les Australiens.”

The touching display of faith and solidarity from the displaced French families almost brought a tear to the Australian Commanding Officer’s eyes. But he had seen too many sad things. He had used up all the grief God had allotted him.



Instead of feeling honoured he felt humiliated. He could not protect these poor people.

More retreating Brits passed the advancing Australians. But these men retained their weapons and looked more angry than frightened. The British Fifth Army may have been pulverised, but its shattered remnants were now furious and looking for vengeance.

A British Corporal with a Vickers machinegun tripod over his shoulder stopped as the Aussie column approached. He motioned for his gun team to rest while he moved towards the Lieutenant Colonel.

“Sir. Sir! Are you going to fight?” the young Brit NCO shouted at the Australians.

“We’re Aussies, what do you reckon,” a rough voice from the ranks of Anzacs replied.

“Can we come with you? We want to kill Fritzes, not run like bloody rabbits,” the Machinegun Team leader begged the Australian officer, marching backwards to keep pace with the advancing Aussie battalion.

Happy Jack was not going to deny these men a chance to regain their dignity. If they wanted to fight they could fight with his mob. He gave a thumbs up to the Brit gunners. The Tommies took that as a yes and rose to their feet.

“Come on lads,” the Brit NCO shouted, and the eight British machine gunners and their belt fed gun found a place in the column, the cheers of the Australians re-inflating their shattered pride.

Another shell, a much lighter and higher velocity round than the previous one, shrieked in with an incoherent hack, like a syphilitic old war god clearing its ulcerated throat. The shell detonating in the town of Heilly, one hundred yards forward of the column. A half dozen more shells quickly impacted before the German guns lifted their aim and moved to new coordinates, out of earshot of the 43rd Battalion.

“Artillery Formation!” Happy Jack barked. The order repeated by his officers and NCO’s down the column. The well drilled companies quickly broke from their four-up marching ranks into open files down each side of the road, each man separated by five yards from the next to minimise the casualties from any single shell.

“Skirmish Line along the axis of advance,” Happy Jack commanded. The platoon directly behind him moved to take the lead, breaking down into three sections. Two sections up advancing along the road and a third in depth following behind.

The ancient town of Heilly was nearly deserted when the forward formations of Australians passed through its cobbled streets. The last of those capable of leaving were packing their most valued possessions as the 43rd moved through, while those too old and infirm or simply too proud to flee stood silently at their doorways.

One old man, catching a glimpse of a slouch hat slung from an Anzac’s field pack, shouted with glee, “Les Australiens! Les Australiens!” The sad remnants of the village community clapped and cheered as the Diggers advanced to contact.

Happy Jack’s face burned red with embarrassment at the faith these simple Frenchmen had placed in his Anzacs. He was ashamed that these noble farmers had been forced to

flee for their lives. He was ashamed that he could offer them no guarantees. And he was ashamed to be part of an alliance that looked like it had failed to defend France from the rapacious Huns.

But now was not the time for emotional doubts.

The 43rd's Skirmish Line cleared the north-eastern fringe of Heilly, maintaining the advance at a steady pace. Rifles at the medium port ready for immediate engagement. Lewis Guns to the section flanks ready to provide enfilade fire.

All the Lieutenant Colonel could do now was assess the ground for immediate tactical response.

Now it was all up to his Lieutenants, Sergeants and Corporals, the men who would direct the Lewis Guns and the Diggers with their Enfields when Australian met German, somewhere in the luxuriant fields or on the cobblestones in the next mile or two.

And what ground it was. After nine gruelling months in the quagmire of Flanders, the bucolic splendour of the Ancre seemed like some girlish fiction. A happy place dreamed up by sad soldiers, where the earth was solid, houses had roofs, windows were glass and dairy cows still munched complacently on verdant fields splashed pink, white and blue with early Spring wildflowers.

Happy Jack tried to drink in the details during the advance. He did his best to record buildings that offered fire and observation potential and align his map with the gently undulating ground between the Ancre River to his north and the Somme River to his south.

He may have been an old war dog, but he had never fought in open ground without wire and bottomless mud mixed with the wreckage of men, horses, weapons, supplies and trench supports. He had only known Flanders, where the fear soaked ground swallowed up live soldiers whole, with no help from the Huns or God above.

Without warning it just happened. Four or five single shots broke out in the Skirmish Line to his forward right. A second later a half dozen Lewis Guns joined in. Shots building from staccato to a rampaging cacophony, punctuated with the odd dull thump of a hand grenade.



IT WAS LIEUTENANT James 'Johnno' Johnston's 21st Birthday and he was about to have a party. But not one his mother would have ever planned.

Johnno had been fighting this war even longer than Happy Jack.

He had arrived at the Front during the Allied amphibious assault at Gallipoli in Turkey as an eighteen year old replacement private for the South Australian raised 10th Battalion in July 1915. He had been fighting ever since.

He had fought with the 10th until a bullet found him at Pozieres in France, in July

1916.

Then he fought with the South Australian 48th before being gassed at Passchendaele, in October 1917.

He had been fighting with the South Australian 43rd since he left hospital in January.

The battlefield was his tutor. He had earned his commission with the bayonet and grenade.

He had left school at thirteen to help on his father's farm, his future seemingly set solid as a sod buster, scratching a living from the dry rocky soils of South Australia.

Johnno's sharp features and longish golden locks camouflaged the fierce intellect that his survival against the odds in Flanders and along the Somme had honed to a fine edge.

He liked leading Anzacs, and this was the best Stunt he'd ever experienced.

Prior to today, every operation he had undertaken was either on the craggy cliffs of the Dardanelles or the putrid sea of Western Front mud.

Today he was walking towards battle over pastures that were better than the best kept lawn back home. Johnno smiled. He would have skipped if his Diggers hadn't been watching.

His boys were grinning too. Too far down the chain to really understand the gravity of the Hun breakthrough, his Diggers, as Australian soldiers called themselves, were loving this. Instead of exhausting themselves and losing half their mates just getting across No Mans Land to put a blade to the Kaiser's crew, Fritz was coming to them. All they had to do was stroll out to meet him.

Johnno, like Happy Jack, had read the signs and sensed the enemy's presence. The first medium field gun shell told him that the German leading elements would not be far away.

While he carried an Enfield .303 rifle slung over his back and a satchel of grenades at his side, Johnno unholstered his C96 Broom handle Mauser machinepistol. He liked to flaunt it. The C96 was the most sought after status symbol in all of the Allied forces on the Western Front.

And his was no ordinary C96, but an original 7.63mm Turkish Mauser stamped with the crest of Abdul Hamid the Second and the Islamic date of 1314, rather than the German 1896. He had pulled the pistol from the stiff cold hands of a dead Turkish officer during the August Offensive on Gallipoli, almost three years earlier.

The Mauser, along with the A for Anzac on his shoulder patch, marked Johnston apart from the other officers of the 43rd. He had been fighting in Turkey before the 43rd had even left Australia. He had been wounded at Pozieres in France while they were still training on the Salisbury Plain in England as part of the Strategic Reserve. Johnston had been Mentioned In Dispatches twice, won the Military Medal at Bullecourt and the Military Cross at Passchendaele. Along that road he had earned the near worship of his Diggers in too many bitter battles and trench raids.

He led without dramatics. His Mauser loosely held, pointing downwards towards the dirt. He mostly let his men do the killing. He just told them who, when and where to kill.

“Eyes open,” Johnno ordered, as he carefully analysed his Skirmish Line. His expert eye checking their spacing and line of advance. He was constantly altering the positions of his three Lewis Guns as he absorbed the ground, looking for any advantage to be had.

His forward sections saw the enemy first.

A German Stosstruppen platoon, still draining the wine bottles they had looted from a nearby vineyard, were drunkenly advancing down the cobblestones of the Old Roman Road. They were confidently pursuing the shattered remnants of the Fifth Army towards the vital railhead at Amiens and what they imagined was certain victory.

The Australian riflemen didn't wait for Johnno's orders. They simply propped on one knee and dropped the Germans mid step. The high velocity .303 bullets zipping through their targets, sucking the life out of them like a puppeteer's assistant cutting a puppet's strings. The Lewis Gunners following almost simultaneously, carving deadly bullet beaten zones which scythed through the Huns still standing, before chasing down the runners with deadly streams of hot lead.

With battle joined, the leading rank of Australians stopped and propped, taking more aimed shots while the depth section leapfrogged through the centre, using their covering fire to gain ground on the startled German spearhead. The process repeated every ten yards.

Johnno was in the centre of the action, following his bayonets at a sprint. Barely altering his stride to put two rounds through a young Stosstruppen trooper's temple.

The rest of the Battalion reacted to the firefight. The 43rd's trailing companies moving to the right and left flanks to form pincers that quickly entrapped the surviving Germans.

Then it was over.

A dozen Germans, hands held high, were marched at bayonet point to the rear. Twenty-seven more lay dead or dying along the road.

The Diggers were ebullient. In three years of mass slaughter they had never experienced a running fight on open ground. They were intoxicated with the triple cocktail of adrenaline, fear and battlefield success that only combat soldiers know.

Johnno analysed the German dead. He quickly identified their commander's body. He had been one of the first to fall. Johnno leant down and lifted the brim of the German officer's helmet, revealing an older man than the Australian expected.

“He's mine Johnno,” Private ‘Shifty’ Carson shouted, as he sprinted into the kill zone. Carson expertly relieved the dead German of his pistol belt and holstered Luger with a long and brutal looking trench knife, before unpinning his Iron Cross and removing the man's watch. Job done, he moved on to the next corpse.

Johnno knew the unofficial looting rules and did not interfere. Maps, documents, diaries and cameras belonged to HQ. The rest was as they said, ‘first in best dressed’. Nor did he stop his soldiers as they busily plundered the German survivors of everything of worth bar their souls.

The boys would make a pretty penny selling their haul to the wallopers in the rear. He

reserved judgement. The Diggers' lives were short and brutal enough. Their best chance was a survivable wound. But only a lucky few won that lottery and were still able to smile.

He spared his Diggers his condemnation. He was happy as long as they stayed solid under fire and moved forward when he called.

But he knelt beside the slain Teuton commander, gently closing his eyes. "Bad luck mate," Johnno whispered, careful that his Diggers couldn't hear him.

His men were whooping, swearing and laughing. Regaling each other with self depreciating accounts of their own craven cowardice and the heroic stupidity of their mates, as Aussie soldiers had done since the first shot at Anzac Cove, back in April 1915.

It was like no other fight Johnno or his boys had ever experienced. At the run, amongst the wildflowers, on firm ground.

The exploitation of the killing zone was revealing. The Germans were wearing a new uniform and an enlarged Fritz helmet. Almost a quarter of them were armed with the new MP-18 trench submachine gun instead of the standard issue G98 rifle. One of the Diggers discovered a Bergmann MG15 belt fed light machinegun in the wildflowers, which had been dropped by one of the Germans attempting to flee.

Johnno scratched the results of the brawl in his field notepad before directing his men to collect all of the German 'potato masher' stick grenades. The potato mashers were top tools and he would put them to good use.

He had never seen German soldiers break and run before. He wasn't sure what it meant. He was pondering the situation when sad news broke his meditations.

"We're two down," Mark 'Poppy' Robertson the Platoon Sergeant called, after a quick head count. Mark had been the youngest of his intake back in '15 so they called him Pop. The name had stuck ever since.

"Shit. You always spoil all the fun Poppy," Johnno replied.

The Diggers spread out in a sad search and quickly found the body of Private Schmidt, a young South Australian from a German family who had volunteered to fight the Kaiser for his new country. Schmidt was lying peacefully, the life force chased from his slender frame by an unlucky bullet.

"Awww fuck no, it's Keith," came a horrified call, from back where the Skirmish Line had initiated the engagement.

Poppy made a long and ugly sound as he sprinted towards the Digger standing over Keith.

There, lying in a halo of wild flowers was Corporal Keith Williams, the olive drab of his tunic now deep red. The ugly gurgling of a sucking chest wound told everyone all they needed to know.

Keith Williams', decorated veteran of the Western Front since December 1916, luck had run out.

"I'm fucked Poppy," Williams rasped, while his best mate Poppy squeezed his bloodied hand. Heavy tears dropped from Poppy's long lashes, washing some of the bright red

oxygenated blood from his comrade's chalk white face. Pink frothy bubbles of blood and breath squeezed through the dying Anzac's woollen tunic.

"Don't worry mate, I'll be there looking for you in Hell before long," Poppy whispered, struggling not to choke on a sob as he gently placed his personal Luger behind his best mate's ear and pulled the trigger. The wet gurgle stopped with the bang. It was an act of love.

The two Diggers had been inseparable since joining up in Adelaide in 1915 and had somehow found the favour of the war gods all the way through Messines and Passchendaele. But their mateship died in a field near Heilly, in a firefight with no name, in a war that looked lost.

Keith's last breath took the elation out of the day's play. Johnno's Ancre River 21st Birthday Party had turned sour.

They wrapped Keith in a blanket beside the road. His bayoneted Enfield driven into the ground beside his body to mark the location for the gravediggers.

1st Platoon, A Company, 43rd Infantry Battalion continued the advance. They had business with Imperial Germany to attend to.

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