Arthur Blackburn, VC

Service numbers 31, SX6962

PART A

(Figure 1) Captain Arthur Blackburn, VC (circa 1918) Image from: https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J03069A

Arthur Blackburn (Figure 1) was born in Woodville, South Australia on November 25, 1892. He was the last of 4 children from his father's marriage to his second wife. His mother died when he was 12 and his father died when he was 18.[1] Following his secondary education, he obtained a Bachelor of Laws degree from The University of Adelaide and was admitted to practice as a solicitor in December 1913. His legal practice was limited; on August 19, 1914, he enlisted as a soldier in the 10th (South Australia) Battalion with the rank of private.[2]

Arthur was in one of the first landing boats with the 10th Battalion at Anzac Cove on the Gallipoli Peninsula on April 25, 1915. (Figure 2) The first day objective of the Battalion was 'Gun Ridge'. Although they failed to achieve their objectives, by nightfall the ANZACs had formed a beachhead, though much smaller than intended. (Figure 3) Blackburn was given a battlefield commission to the rank of second lieutenant on August 4 and posted as a platoon commander. Clearly, he was highly regarded by his superiors.

Arthur left Gallipoli on November 22.[3] He was there almost 7 months – a longer time than most of the Australians who served on the peninsula. The battalion went to Egypt where it underwent reorganisation. In February 1916, he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant.[4]

He was hospitalised for 3 weeks in March suffering from neurasthenia.[5] 'While he had been spared physical scars at Gallipoli, the stress of the battle left a detonated when the battalion

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[1] Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, pp 4-5.
[2] He enlisted with 200 others on the first day enlistments were taken. Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, pp 7-8.
[3] The last Australian left Gallipoli on December 20, 1915. 8709 Australians died during the eight-month campaign. 207 men of the 10th Battalion died. Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p84. See also https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/gallipoli/fatalities
[4] Wigmore, Lionel, *They Dared Mightily*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p60.
[5] He was seriously ill. Sometimes called shell shock, neurasthenia is defined as 'nervous debility or exhaustion'. It is commonly caused by 'overwork or prolonged mental strain' and is characterised by vague complaints of a physical character'. See Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, pp 87-88.

was split' and many of his friends went to other battalions.   'It appears that the split affected him more than most.' [6]

Arthur re-joined his battalion in time to move to the Western Front. They arrived in Southern France on April 2 and commenced training for trench warfare. They moved into their new billets at the front on May 18. On July 19, the battalion moved to the Somme (Figure 4) after 3 weeks in the Armentières frontline. The 10th Battalion was committed to its first major action on the Western Front on July 22. [7]

Sunday, July 23 was the first day of what would become known as the Battle of Pozières. [8] It was part of the second stage of the Battle of the Somme. [9] In less than 7 weeks of fighting at Pozières and Mouquet Farm, 3 Australian divisions suffered 23,000 casualties; 6,800 men were killed or died of wounds. [10]

'Pozières was a key point in the German line. It was on a low ridge that overlooked another fortified village, Thiepval, to the north-east. Its capture would protect the left flank of the main British axis of advance.   The 1st Australian Division's task this night was to storm the crescent-like Pozières trench arcing south of the village. Waves of troops then would capture the Albert-Bapaume Road and the village itself.' [11] (Figure 5)
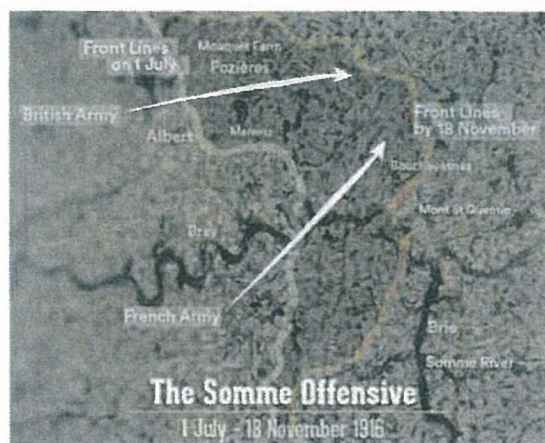
(Figure 5) An overview of Pozières and Mouquet Farm. Image from: https://www.abc.net.au/ww1-anzac/fromelles-pozieres/campaign-overview/

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[6]   Lieutenant General William Birdwood, the Commander of the Anzacs at Gallipoli, decided the best way to absorb the thousands of new recruits was to split each of the original 16 battalions in two. Each half would then be brought up to strength with reinforcements from Australia. The new battalions   would then include both hardened Gallipoli veterans and fresh recruits. See Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p87-88.

[7]   Virtual War Memorial Australia: Arthur Blackburn - https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/930

[8]   Wray, Christopher, *Pozières: Echoes of a Distant Battle*, The Australian Army History Series, Cambridge·University Press, Port Melbourne, 2015, p29.

[9]   The Battle of the Somme took place between July 1 and 18 November 18, 1916 on both sides of the upper reaches of the River Somme in France. The battle was intended to hasten a victory for the Allies. More than three million men fought in the battle and one million men were wounded or killed, making it one of the deadliest battles in human history. See Imperial War Museum London, https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-battle-of-the-somme.

[10]   Australian War Memorial Internet Classroom Resources: https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/resources/1916/pozieres#:~:text=Historian%20Peter%20Burness %20stated%20that%20killed%20or%20died%20of%20wounds.

[11]   Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, pp93-94.

The British tried to take the village but had little to show for it, Charles Bean reported, '... apart from the crumpled bodies of British soldiers left lying in the German wire.' Now the allies hoped to destroy the ruined village in an assault that would last 13 days.[12]

For his most conspicuous bravery on this day, Arthur was awarded the Victoria Cross.[13] He was the first South Australian to receive the decoration. He was ordered to attack a section of German trenches. Commencing at 5.30am he led 8 separate assaults, constantly being reinforced as casualties mounted, but eventually capturing the enemy positions. 41 of Arthur's total of 70 men were killed or wounded but he remained unscathed.[14] [15] [16]

The Australians captured the village of Pozières, and they were subjected to relentless artillery bombardment that reduced the village to rubble and inflicted a heavy toll. (Figure 6)

(Figure 6) Pozières, France, 1916. The main street of the town, now a mass of rubble destroyed during battle. (Image donor: T. Yeomans). Image from: https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C194072

[12]   King, Jonathon, *Great Battles in Australian History*, Allen and Urwin, Sydney, 2011, p102.
Charles Bean (1879 – 1968) is best remembered for the 12 volume *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914 – 1918*. He wrote six volumes and edited the other six volumes. It was published between 1920 and 1942. Before this, he was Australia's official correspondent to the war. He was the driving force behind the establishment of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10676229

[13] The Victoria Cross citation was published in *The London Gazette* on September 8, 1916 and read: 'For most conspicuous bravery. He was directed with fifty men to drive the enemy from a strong point. By dogged determination he eventually captured their trench after personally leading four separate parties of bombers against it, many of whom became casualties. In the face of fierce opposition, he captured 250 yards of trench. Then, after crawling forward with a Sergeant to reconnoitre, he returned, attacked and seized another 120 yards of trench, establishing communication with the battalion on his left.' Wigmore, Lionel, *They Dared Mightily*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1963, p58.

[14]   ' Virtual War Memorial Australia: Arthur Blackburn - https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/930
[15]   Blackburn wrote a four-page letter to a friend, Guy Fisher, on September 4, 1916 in which he describes the action on July 23, 1916. A copy of the letter is at Figure 7 (Image from the Australian War Memorial).
[16]   'By war's end very few – perhaps 10 or 20 men – of the 70 who fought alongside Blackburn at OG1 Trench (Pozières) were left alive.' See Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p127.

The 10th Battalion was relieved on July 25 after sustained heavy fighting.[17] Heavy losses led to Arthur's promotion to the temporary rank of captain on August 1.[18]

> 'Of that bitter battle, Charles Bean would write, "The field of Pozières is more consecrated by Australian fighting and more hallowed by Australian blood than any field which has ever existed..." Yet the sad truth is that a nearly a century on from those battles, Australians know only a fraction of what occurred.'[19]

After resting they were ordered to attack Mouquet Farm on August 18 in daylight. The Germans saw the Australians coming. The 10th Battalion suffered more than 50% casualties; they went into the line with 650 men, lost 51 killed, 171 wounded and 113 missing.[20] The Australians were relieved by the Canadians in early September and went into rest camp in Belgium. Mouquet Farm still remained in German hands; it would finally fall to British soldiers on September 26.

On September 8, Arthur reported sick with pleurisy and was evacuated to London; he was discharged from hospital on September 30. On October 4 he attended an investiture to receive his Victoria Cross from King George V. Arthur was invalided home to Australia in October for six months rest. He was discharged from the Army on medical grounds on April 10, 1917.[21]

Arthur married Rose Kelly on March 22, 1917. They were married for 43 until his death in 1960. Rose outlived her husband by 21 years and died in 1981. They had four children.[22] (Figure 8) He returned to the legal profession. He served as a member of parliament between 1918 and 1921. Sometime in 1920 he decided that politics was not for him, and he chose not to contest the 1921 election.[23] He

[Figure 8] Arthur Blackburn and his wife, Rose, leaving St Peter's College Chapel, Adelaide on their wedding day on March 22, 1917. (Blackburn Family Collection, image from Faulkner, Andrew, 'Arthur Blackburn', VC, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008.

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[17]   10th Battalion (D Company) soldier Private Louis Hoffman wrote in his diary: 'Terrible slaughter – hundreds of killed and wounded - too terrible to write about – will never be forgotten – Hell with the lid open – will be marvellous if there is anyone left to tell the tale ... Pozières is a terrible sight – dead and smell and flies by the millions everywhere.' Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p113.

[18]   Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p109.

[19]   FitzSimons, Peter, *Fromelles & Pozières: In the Trenches of Hell*, Random House Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney, 2015, commentary on the inside cover.

[20]   Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p111.

[21]   Virtual War Memorial Australia: Arthur Blackburn - https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/930

[22]   They had two sons Richard and Robert, and two daughters Rosemary and Margaret. Richard served in World War 2 in North Africa and New Guinea and later became a judge of the Federal Court of Australia and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Australian Capital Territory.

[23]   Blackburn was the Member for Sturt in the South Australian Lower House from April 6, 1918 to April 8, 1921. See https://www.parliament.sa.gov.au/en/Members/All-Former-Members.

joined the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia[24] and he was an original member of the Legacy Club of Adelaide.[25]

Arthur returned to the Army in the Citizen's Military Forces in October 1925. He served again in World War 2. In 1939, he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel. In 1940 he formed and commanded the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion. He served in Syria then his unit was rushed to Java where he was the commander of 'Blackforce'[26] On March 8, 1942, after much fighting against the Japanese Arthur, operating under Dutch command, was ordered to surrender.[27] He was a prisoner of war in Singapore, Formosa, Japan and Manchuria[28] until his release in August 1945. (Figure 9) Although he survived the ordeal it took its toll on his

AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL   01p0271.010

(Figure 10) Arthur Blackburn's military medal set – (left to right) Victoria Cross, The 1914/15 Star, The British War Medal 1914-20, The Victory Medal, The 1939/45 Star, The Pacific Star, The Defence Medal, The War Medal 1939-45, The Australian Service Medal 1939-45, The King George V Silver Jubilee Medal, The King George VI Coronation Medal, The Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Medal, Efficiency Decoration. Sourced by Robert Kearney courtesy of the Australian War Memorial. Image from https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/930

health. In July 1946 he was created a Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) 'in recognition of gallant and distinguished services in Java'.[29]

He resumed public life, but his health deteriorated progressively, and he died on November 24, 1960, aged 67. His military medals are displayed in the Australian War Memorial. (Figure 10)

The Anzac Spirit characteristics of perseverance and mateship were evident throughout his adult life.

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[24]   The RSSILA was the forerunner of the Returned and Services League (RSL). 'It was founded in 1916 to ensure a unified approach to address the lack of organised repatriation facilities and medical services available to those returning from service in the Great War. This included looking out for the families of those who did not return and arose out of discussions at a meeting in June 1916 of the Returned Soldiers Associations from QLD, NSW, SA and Victoria.' See https://rslnational.org/about-us/. Blackburn was the President of the RSSILA State Branch in 1917 – 1921 and SA State President of the RSL in 1946 – 1949.

[25]   'Legacy' in Australia was initially formed in 1923. Originally it was returned servicemen who undertook the duty of caring for and supporting widows and children. They later became known as Legatees. Today, it is often the Legatees who volunteer the support that Legacy provides to its beneficiaries. See https://www.legacy.com.au/about-us/our-history/

[26]   On February 21, 1942 Blackburn was promoted to the temporary rank of Brigadier and commanded all 3,000 soldiers on Java, now Indonesia. It was named 'Blackforce' after him.

[27]   King, Jonathon, Great Battles in Australian History, Allen and Urwin, Sydney, 2011, p113. Most of Blackburn's men were sent to Changi prison and many later laboured on the Burma railway or were sent to Japan. 22,376 Australians became prisoners of war of the Japanese in South-East Asia. Australian soldiers were captured in Singapore, Java, Timor, Ambon and New Britain. 8,031 died in captivity. After the end of the war, war crimes trials were held to investigate reports of atrocities, massacres and other causes of death. https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/pow/general_info

[28]   Faulkner, Andrew, Arthur Blackburn, VC, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p408. Like nearly all prisoners of war of the Japanese he was harshly treated, suffered many beatings, and lived on a starvation diet.

[29]   Faulkner, Andrew, Arthur Blackburn, VC, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p426. In the 1955 New Year's Honours List Blackburn was made a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG) for his services to the community.

Arthur enlisted as a private. He became close, as often occurs, with his fellow soldiers; they lived together, they fought together and sometimes they died together. After Gallipoli, the battalion was split, half of it went to form the 50th Battalion and new recruits replaced them. Many of Arthur's friends who had survived Gallipoli left the battalion. The split affected Arthur more than most.[30]

At Pozières, Arthur clearly showed the Anzac spirit of perseverance. He led 70 men[31] to secure a position to unite the Australian flanks. He was then ordered to take German strong points. On several occasions with a small number of men each time, he led parties of bombers to capture a German trench despite suffering losses each time. On one occasion he was the only one to return.[32]

Arthur embodied the characteristic of mateship.

> 'The sacrifice of his friends and fellow soldiers no doubt motivated Blackburn as he began fighting tooth and nail for returned men's rights, and to commemorate those who died. In the *Broken Years*,[33] historian Bill Gamage wrote that their ordeal purged the veterans of the "trivial and unnecessary"– this was certainly true of Blackburn as he affirmed, through his good works again and again, the blood bond of his soldier kin.'[34]

After World War 1 he had leading roles in the RSSILA (later known as the RSL) And Legacy in South Australia supporting the wives, partners and children of veterans whose fathers did not return from the war. Many others returned bearing the physical and mental scars of war.

In later life he was beloved by his men. His first Sunday back in Adelaide on his return from being a prisoner of war was an emotional day for him. 62 men of the 2/3rd Machine Gun Battalion decided on an impromptu tribute to their commanding officer. They assembled nearby and marched to his house where they stood to attention. He went out to meet them. 'It was an absolute joy to see so many of the chaps again. It was a complete surprise and was one of the most touching occasions I have experienced.'[35] It was the essence of mateship.

Arthur Blackburn was an extraordinary man.

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[30]   Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p87. See also footnote 13.

[31]   Reports of the total number of men Blackburn led during this action varies. His Victoria Cross citation says 40, King says 50 (page 104), Faulkner says 70 (page 98) and Wray says 70 (page 34). For 8½ hours he led several groups of small numbers constantly returning for additional instructions and more men.

[32]   Wray, Christopher, *Pozières: Echoes of a Distant Battle*, The Australian Army History Series, Cambridge University Press, Port Melbourne, 2015, p34. Wray quotes Charles Bean in *The Official History in the War of 1914 – 1918, Volume III: The AIF in France* at page 513, that Blackburn '… had by his persistence saved the position in the OG lines' (The old 'O.G. 1' line was an abbreviation for the 'Old German 1' line.) See https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C53827)

[33]   Gammage, Bill, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, Penguin, Canberra, 1974

[34]   Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, p127

[35]   It was reported in *The Advertiser* on Monday September 24, 1945. Faulkner, Andrew, *Arthur Blackburn, VC*, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008, pp419-420.

Part A – 1500 words including 'Arthur Blackburn, VC' heading and Service Numbers.

'The word count does not include referencing, the bibliography and brief captions under photographs/tables/maps etc.' See 2021 Premier's Anzac Spirit School Prize guidelines.

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https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/5-things-you-need-to-know-about-the-battle-of-the-somme

Virtual War Memorial Australia -
Arthur Blackburn   https://vwma.org.au/explore/people/930

Additional Internet Sites:

Anzac landing image: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Blackburn#/media/File:Anzac_landing_plan_April_25_1915.jpg
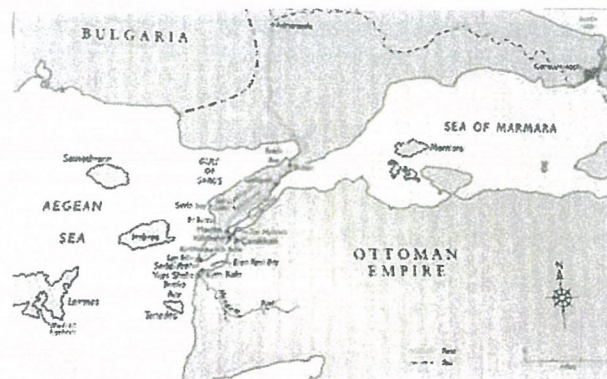
Blackburn, Former Member of Parliament: https://www.parliament.sa.gov.au/en/Members/All-Former-Members

Blackburn Photograph image: https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/J03069A

Fromelles and Pozières Map image: https://www.abc.net.au/ww1-anzac/fromelles-pozieres/campaign-overview/

Legacy Australia: https://www.legacy.com.au/about-us/our-history/

Returned Services League: https://rslnational.org/about-us/

The Somme map image: http://www.diggerhistory.info/pages-battles/ww1/france/somme-1916.htm

Remaining Figures (Photographs, Maps and a Letter)

(Figure 2) The Gallipoli Peninsula.
Image from: Carlyon, Les, Gallipoli, Pan Macmillan Pty Limited Australia, Sydney, 2001, p32
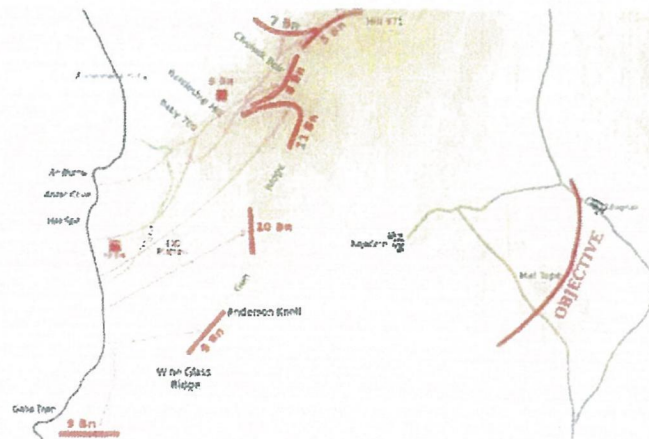
(Figure 3) The first day objective of the 10th Battalion for the landing at Anzac Cove was 'Gun Ridge'.
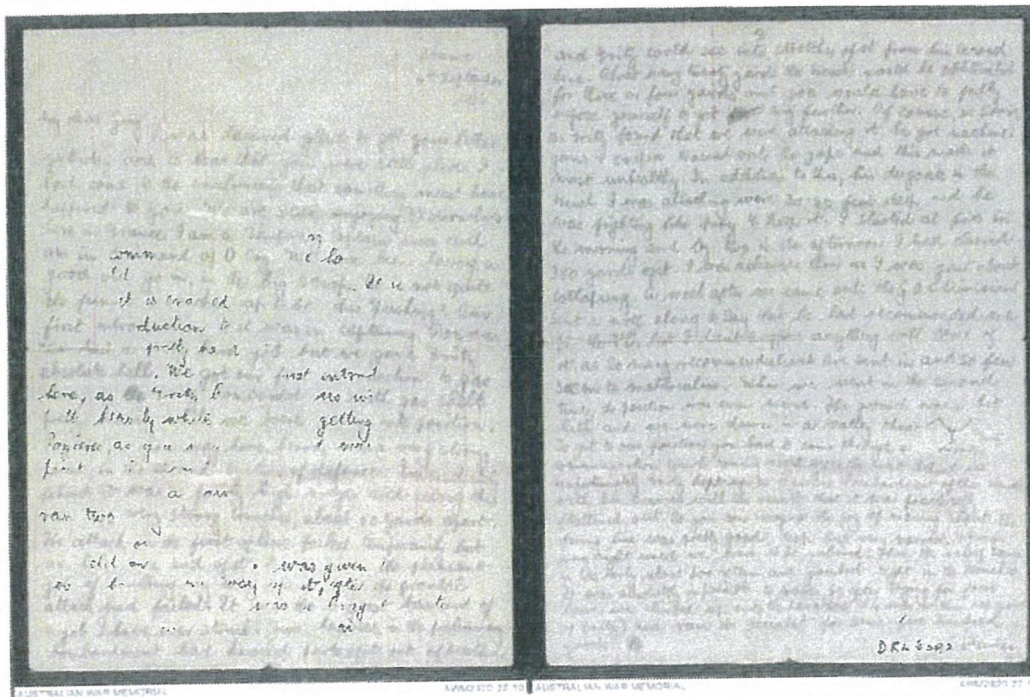*The green dotted line shows the actual extent of the lodgement at the end of the first day.*
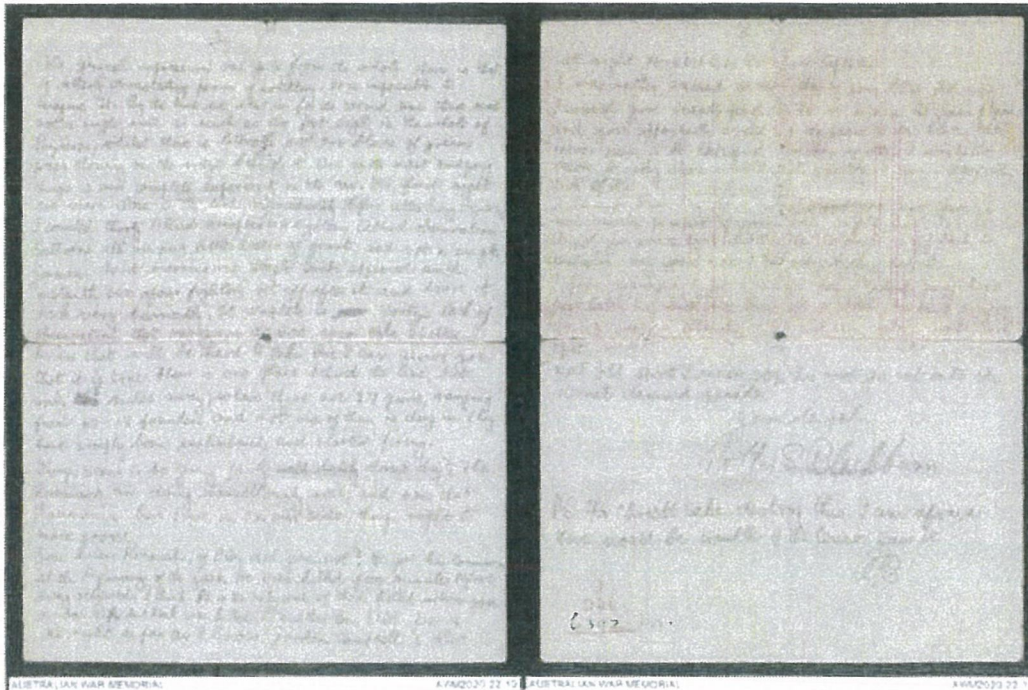
(Figure 4) The Western Front with Pozières marked in red.

(Figure 7) Four-page letter from Arthur Blackburn to his friend Guy Fisher, France, September 4, 1916.

In this letter to his friend Guy Fisher, Blackburn describes the action on July 23, 1916, during the Battle of Pozières for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross. Blackburn goes on to share his impressions of artillery power and Allied air superiority and his frustration at poker. He also mentions several people familiar to Fisher, including Henry Arthur Kinnish, Pep McKail, Dill Jose, and Temporary Captain Gordon Campbell.

Note the last line in the letter:

'PS. For Christ's sake, destroy this. I am afraid there would be trouble if the censor saw it.'

Images from: https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C2696996
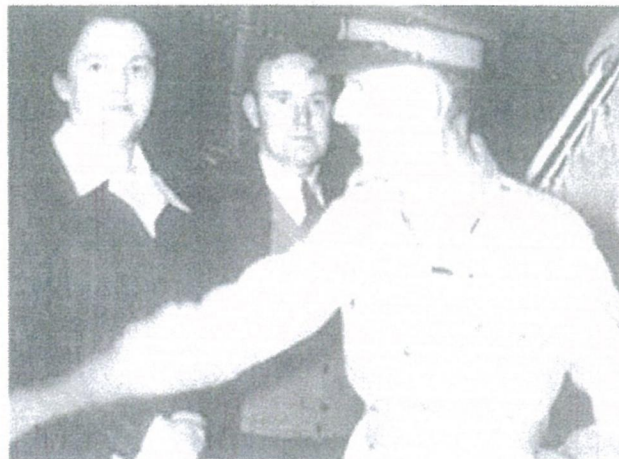
(Figure 9) A thin Arthur Blackburn, after his release from being a prisoner of war, alights at Adelaide's Parafield airport en route for Melbourne in September 1945. His wife Rose and his daughters travelled by train to meet him there. (Blackburn Family Collection)

Image from: Faulkner, Andrew, Arthur Blackburn, VC, Wakefield Press, Kent Town South Australia, 2008

PART B (486 words)

I discussed which South Australian I could research with my father as he has a military background. There was no one in our family who was South Australian and had fought in World War 1. He recalled that one of his classmates with whom he was friendly at university was Tom Blackburn. Tom's grandfather was Arthur Blackburn, VC; he was the first South Australian to be awarded the Victoria Cross. I decided to research him.

I concentrated on Arthur's role in World War 1 though he also served in World War 2. Initially I accessed the Virtual War Memorial Australia online for information on him, noting that he was South Australian, had served in World War 1, and had been awarded the Victoria Cross. I accessed the Australian War Memorial Schools Resources online for information about Australian casualties at Pozières and Mouquet Farm. I discovered that Blackburn's military medals are held on display at the Australian War Memorial. I also accessed information from several other Internet sites including the Imperial War Museum London. I looked at Lionel Wigmore's 1963 Australian War Memorial publication *They Dared Mightily* which provided a short history of Blackburn with considerable detail on the circumstances of his award.

I then used the 2008 comprehensive biography of Arthur Blackburn by Andrew Faulkner. I understand that this is the first comprehensive biography of Arthur, though his son Richard (later Sir Richard Blackburn) had written a short article summarising his father's life that was published in 1979 in the Volume 7 of the Australian National University's *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Faulkner's biography provides a broad view of the man, the man at war, and the man in peace. As I read the book, I realised that this was an extraordinary man.

To widen my research into the various battles and campaigns in which Arthur fought I accessed several books including Paul Pedersen's 2012 *ANZACS on the Western Front – The Australian War Memorial Battlefield Guide*, Jonathon King's 2011 *Great Battles in Australian History*, Peter FitzSimons' 2015 *Fromelles & Pozières: In the Trenches of Hell* and Christopher Wray's 2015 *Pozières: Echoes of a Distant Battle*. Wray's book takes a different perspective in that in the opening chapters he revisits the battle and considers its aftermath, including shell shock and the psychological effects experienced by surviving soldiers.

I cross-checked Blackburn's personal information and military experiences in the various campaigns and battles where they occurred. Occasionally I discovered some minor differences in information, dates and experiences. Where those differences occurred, I preferred to use Andrew Faulkner's biography after discussion with my father. I sought photographs and maps from a variety of sources to illustrate the text. With some initial research and reference guidance from my father, I wrote a first draft, then edited and completed the paper with comprehensive footnotes, references and acknowledgements, a bibliography, photographs and maps. My father provided me with some guidance on completing the footnotes.