

Killed in Action, World War 1

John Cromwell Hurley
(1889-1917)



John Cromwell Hurley
(early 1900s). Source:
family collection

Before the war

John Cromwell Hurley was born in the small Victorian town of Greta, the second son of the school teacher **Thomas Hurley** and **Mary Elizabeth Scholes**. Due to his father's work John spent his childhood in several country towns and eventually moved to the city of Melbourne where his father later became a Senior Inspector of Schools. In 1904, he entered Wesley College to complete his education and eventually became an actuary working for an insurance company, the AMP Society. Crom, as he was known, married Alice May Beckwith, April 30th 1913 and became the father of two children, a daughter Elva May and son James Thomas Cromwell (Jimmy). Like many other Hurleys of this family, Crom was apparently a good speaker and sportsman. In 1910 he one a prize with the

Mt Erica Methodist Literary and Debating Society, and he played cricket for the Mt Erica club (Mt Erica being hardly a mountain, just a bit of a rise in the vicinity of East Prahran - Crom probably attended the Mt Erica Methodist church where his brother Leo was married).



Crom (centre), his wife Alice May (far left) and children Elva and Jimmy (front centre) with his parents (right) and sister-in-law Marie (left holding her baby Gwen), probably at Ballarat. Possibly the last time he saw his parents before leaving for the war. Source: family collection



Lance Corporal John
Cromwell Hurley Regimental
No.5931. Source: family
collection

Joining up

Crom's brothers Vic (Thomas Ernest Victor Hurley, later knighted for services to medicine) and Les (Leslie Everton Hurley, a renowned physician and medical lecturer) had enlisted in the Australian Army Medical Corps and the AIF respectively in 1914 and had both served at Gallipoli in 1915 in 2nd Field Ambulance. Crom decided to follow in their footsteps and enlisted in the AIF on May 29th 1916. He was assigned as a Private in the 22nd Battalion, 16th Reinforcements. His record describes him as being 5 feet 6 1/2 inches in height, weighing 118 pounds and having brown eyes and 'scanty' brown hair.



2nd October
1916: Embarkation of
the 16th
Reinforcements from
Melbourne on HMAT
Nestor A71, consisting
of servicemen 5781 to
5994. Crom was in this
group, serviceman
5931. Source:
*Following the Twenty-
Second* Greg Stephens

Seeing the world

After preparatory training in Melbourne, Crom's unit embarked for England on the *HMAT Nestor* on October 2nd 1916, and landed at Plymouth, England on November 16th. On December 5th he wrote the first letter to his brother Les who was ill and returned home to complete his medical studies (and apologies for the racist language in paragraph two):

'My Dear Les,

I received your letter this morning & was very glad indeed to hear from you. If I had only realised how a letter from Australia was appreciated by Australians on active service I would have written more often to friends of mine who enlisted before I did. I am now stationed at No. 1 Camp Havant Salisbury Plains but we expect to move to [Rolston?] next week when we will join our training Battn. How long we will be there before we go to the front is another matter. Some say 4 weeks, some 10 weeks but personally I think we will leave England some time in January.

We had a very good trip over on the boat [...?] Capetown was our first port of call and we stopped there for a few days 1 of which we spent on shore. Capetown is not much of a place, the only redeeming feature being the mountain scenery which is really magnificent. The great drawback to the place are the niggers & halfcasts who are very dirty and cheeky, but nevertheless they proved quite capable in taking our boys down.....

.....When we landed at Plymouth we were immediately [.....?] for the nearest Rd. to Salisbury Plain. We are now lodged in huts (30 in each) and as we are each provided with 4 blankets & a straw bed & in addition there is a coal stove in each hut we can make ourselves very comfortable when off duty. The weather however is

rather too wet for my liking. The morning after we arrived here the ground was coated with about 12" of snow. The camp presented a very pretty picture! I understand this was rather exceptional for this time of year, at any rate the weather has been much warmer for the last week.

Last Sunday we were granted 4 days embarkation leave to see London. We made the best use of our time and visited Westminster Abbey, St. Paul's, St. James, & Buckingham Palaces, the Tower of London, House of Commons, The Waxworks etc. I must say that I was a little disappointed with London on the whole but perhaps this may have been due to the fact that all lights were out after dark & it was a different matter to get about in comfort & safety.....We are now settling down to serious training & have to get thru' a lot of work in a short time.

Well Les I hope you are not over working yourself and are a bit fatter than you were last time I saw you. I weighed myself 2 days ago and went 11-6 so you see the change has made a remarkable difference in me.....

Your Loving brother
Crom¹

Training in England

AIF training in Australia was brief and basic. The real training began when the troops reached England and was mostly conducted on Salisbury Plain at centres such as Larkhill and Tidworth where Crom did his rifle training. Crom's record states that whilst at Larkhill and Tidworth, he 'Obtained 1st class Qualification (Distinguished) and Passed as having a fair knowledge of the Lewis Gun at 6th Rifle course Tidworth from 3/01/17 to 25/1/17.' He also received a promotion to Acting Corporal which indicates he was identified as having some leadership potential. Corporals usually are in command of a section of soldiers which consist of two fire teams also known as 'bricks'.

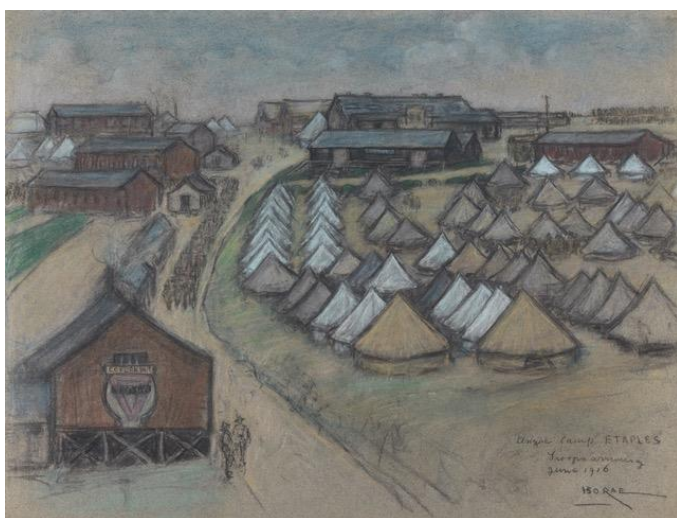


Australian soldiers firing a Lewis machine gun. Source: ddoughty.com

Between the time that Crom had enlisted (May 1916) and arrived in England, the disastrous and costly Battle of the Somme in northern France had been fought (July - November 1916), resulting in no real territorial gains for either the Germans or the Allies, but cost hundreds of thousands of lives, particularly Australians who had made huge sacrifices at Fromelles and Pozieres. The British desperately required more reinforcements in northern France to pursue their next major campaign, the 'Arras (a major town) offensive', and to distract the Germans from their fighting against the French further south. It was against this background that thousands more Allied troops were shipped over to the continent to continue the battle for France.

Toughened up at Étapes

On February 4th Crom's unit left from the English coastal town of Folkestone to board the SS *Arundel* to arrive at the Australian Divisional Base Depot (ABDD) in the French coastal town of Étapes. Crom's rank was now reverted to Private. Like most soldiers, Crom spent much of his wartime in camps such as Étapes, or smaller supporting camps and bivouacs, such as at Shelter Wood or Mametz Wood. Étapes, a huge camp (over 100,000 people) which billeted Allied soldiers from Britain, Scotland, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, was a supply depot, training camp, contained 16 military hospitals and was a Prisoner of War detention centre. However, Étapes had a particularly bad reputation. Conditions were said to be harsh and punitive, where soldiers were sent to be toughened up before going to the front.



ANZAC Camp Étapes, Troops Arriving 1916 Pastel and pencil drawing by Iso Rae. Source: Australian War Memorial

Firstly, the days spent there were boring and monotonous. In order to keep the men occupied and out of mischief, soldiers' days were filled with the drudgery of duties such as kit cleaning, mending, polishing, and particularly for junior officers - paperwork. There were also frequent military drills, parades, inspections, shooting practice and other training regimes, as well as salvaging and repairing equipment. Much emphasis was also given to heavy labouring such as building and repairing roads. Men returning from the front line would often complain that their so-called 'rest' periods were filled with hard manual labour, which, more than once, engendered mutinous behaviour and on two occasions resulted in the execution of a soldier.

Crom's introduction to France

Crom's initial taste of northern France was in late winter. Throughout February, March and April records describe intensely cold and wet weather, frost-bite, frozen hair and frozen food. On February 20th the army issued 364 pairs of gumboots to assist in dealing with the rain and melting snow that created the ubiquitous mud and slush. Walking was heavy and slow, impacting on the efficiency of the transportation of supplies and injured men. As snow thawed, semi-frozen fields disguised hazardous shell-holes easily stumbled into. Where there was boggy mud, which was everywhere, duck boards (wooden planks), were laid down to walk on but when wet they became extremely slippery.

On the ground heavy fog could provide helpful cover but equally create disorientation, especially at night making navigation difficult and dangerous. In the day time fog impacted the accuracy of artillery and grounded aircraft. As early spring progressed through April, thawed ground became hardened and easier to walk on, but often too hard to dig trenches. The sight of green fields was a rarity. A vivid description of these conditions was given by Captain Eugene Gorman of Crom's battalion:

'The land was gripped in an iron frost, and the shell-pitted region was no longer a sea, but a field of ice many feet thick, which men dug out with picks, and carried in sandbags to struggling fires where it slowly melted...The icy temperature was agonizing on feet and fingers, and although the long darkness, broken only by vivid gun-flashes, was unutterably wearisome - the prospect of a thaw was appalling.... yet it was so cold that the moistened hair froze as it was brushed, and bread had to be thawed at a fire before it was cut. The earth was void of vegetation, and the few surviving bare dry branches were as ghosts of happier days.'²



The frozen Somme battlefield near Mametz 1917. Source: Australian War Memorial

Camp conditions

The same monotonous regime of life at Étaples continued in the smaller support camps and bivouacs (temporary camps), which were often uncomfortable, cold and leaky. But at least at camp a soldier could get a bath, a clean if not patched up uniform, write and receive letters and have sports and evening entertainment such as card games and concerts. Crom's battalion was stationed at several camps in the Somme through February to April including Villa Camp and Shelter Wood (described by Capt. Gorman as 'a collection of huts which reared themselves from the slime of the Somme. They were huts and nothing more, without chimneys and in many cases deficient in lining boards which "previous occupants" had used for fuel.'³). Others, once peaceful country villages, now totally destroyed in battle and won back by the Allies, became new camps for Crom's battalion, such as Mametz, Le Sars, Le Barque, Becourt, Beugnatre, and Favreuil.



Once the village of Le Sars. Photo: Unknown official photographer May 1917. Source: Australian War Memorial

Temporary promotion

On February 18th, a 'dull grey day' at Villa Camp, the Official War Correspondent, Captain C E W Bean visited, and on the same day Crom was promoted to Acting Corporal (with extra pay until March 21st when he reverted to Private).

The Hindenburg Line

There was a misperception by British HQ that the Germans were retreating. Actually, it turned out to be a ruse. Whilst maintaining a charade of a scantily occupied front line, the Germans were actually building further behind, a stronger defence of deep trenches, thick entanglements of barbed wire, machine-gun posts and sections reinforced with concrete. This was called the Hindenburg Line by the Allies (after the German commander Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg). The overall objective for the Allies was to break and push the Germans back beyond this line and the only way to achieve this in the obstructive physical conditions was to execute a sustained pressure of many small operations, trench by trench, taking back village by village. The whole Somme Valley, farmland and forest became a desert of mud. As the Germans vacated each village, they would utterly destroy it, to leave little shelter for their enemy.

You can clearly see the destruction and devastation in this video from the DVA Anzac Portal:

<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/arras-bullecourt-and-hindenburg-line>

Bapaume Town Hall explosion

The next Allied objective was to move forward into Bapaume, one of many towns the Germans had wrecked as they retreated. Bapaume was now just a huge pile of rubble except for its Town Hall which provided some evening shelter. But here a time-delayed bomb had been hidden and on March 25th it exploded killing several soldiers. Crom's company arrived the next day and was given the task of clearing the rubble and looking for survivors.



The 22nd Battalion, C Company removing rubble from the Bapaume Town Hall following a booby-trap bomb explosion. Source: *Bapaume and Bullecourt Australians on the Western Front – 1917* Peter Burness

Watch these short videos from the National Film and Sound Archive 'Bapaume to Bullecourt': <https://aso.gov.au/titles/historical/bapaume-to-bullecourt/>

The flu

Following the Bapaume operation, whilst camped at Mametz Wood, Crom developed influenza and was sent into the Divisional Resting Centre for ten days. Enduring the cold and wet environment, under huge physical and mental stress, it is not surprising that respiratory infections - colds, flu and bronchitis, were particularly common amongst the troops. Other diseases such as rheumatism and 'trench foot' due to damp conditions, were an additional risk of this battlefield.



Mametz Wood 1917
Photo: Sergeant John Lord. Source: Museum Victoria

Meanwhile, on April 10th and 11th, AIF troops of the 4th Division were undergoing the campaign later known as the First Bullecourt, which aimed to take the small village of Bullecourt occupied by the Germans at a critical point on the Hindenburg Line. Due to bad planning and poor communication this disastrous operation was aborted but not without the Australians and British sustaining extremely heavy losses.

Letter from the front line

It was following this that Crom had his first taste of the front line. On April 24th, he was promoted to Lance Corporal⁴ and wrote a second letter to his brother Les:

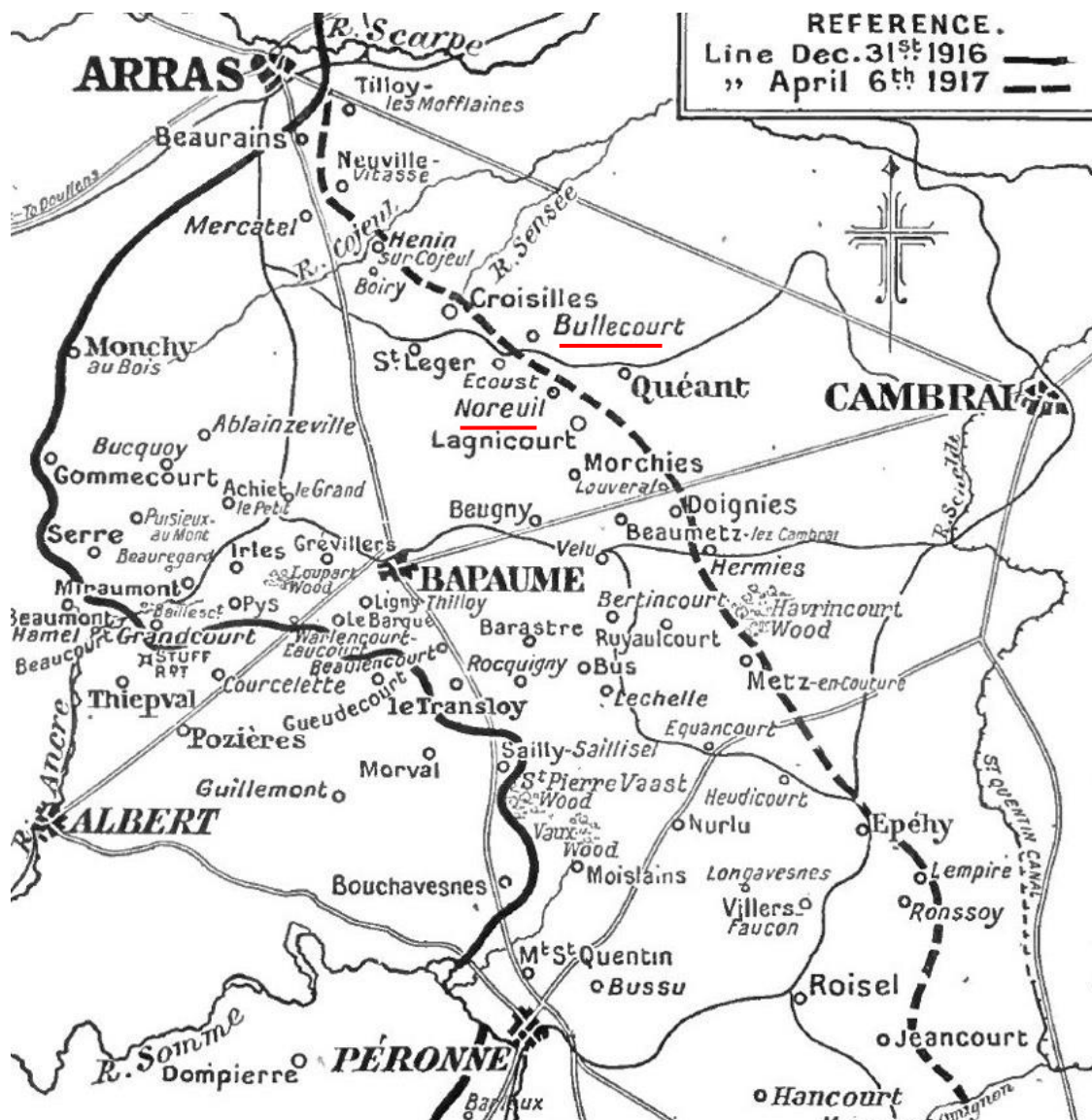
'.... Well Les I have just returned from a trip to the front line and although we were shelled a good bit during our brief stay in supports we experienced a very quiet time indeed when actually in the front line. It was my first experience but was rather interesting being entirely different from what I expected it would be, trenches being practically non-existent. You say in your letter that you may enlist again and probably you may have left Vic by the time this reaches Ausy. Anyway Les we decidedly have the upper hand.....(on this part of the front at any rate) and it would not surprise me if the war finished before you can get here. In my opinion a lot depends on Russia - does she intend to put her heart and soul into the business? I am afraid not.....

With much love to yourself and kind regards your friend and brother Crom¹⁵

The 'front line' experience he speaks of would have begun on April 14th when his battalion took over the front line at Noreuil about 3 or 4 kilometres south east of Bullecourt. His 'brief stay in supports' included carrying stores to the front line and establishing bomb dumps (bomb storage areas). On the last day of the operation, April 19th, all were drenched in heavy rain and retired 12 kms south west to the Divisional Reserve at Favreuil, 2.5 kms north of Bapaume, to spend the night in tents. The next 5 days consisted of sports for recreation and the observance of ANZAC Day on the 25th.



Men of the 2nd Australian Division at a supply dump between Noreuil and Bullecourt, during the fighting in May 1917. Source: Australian War Memorial



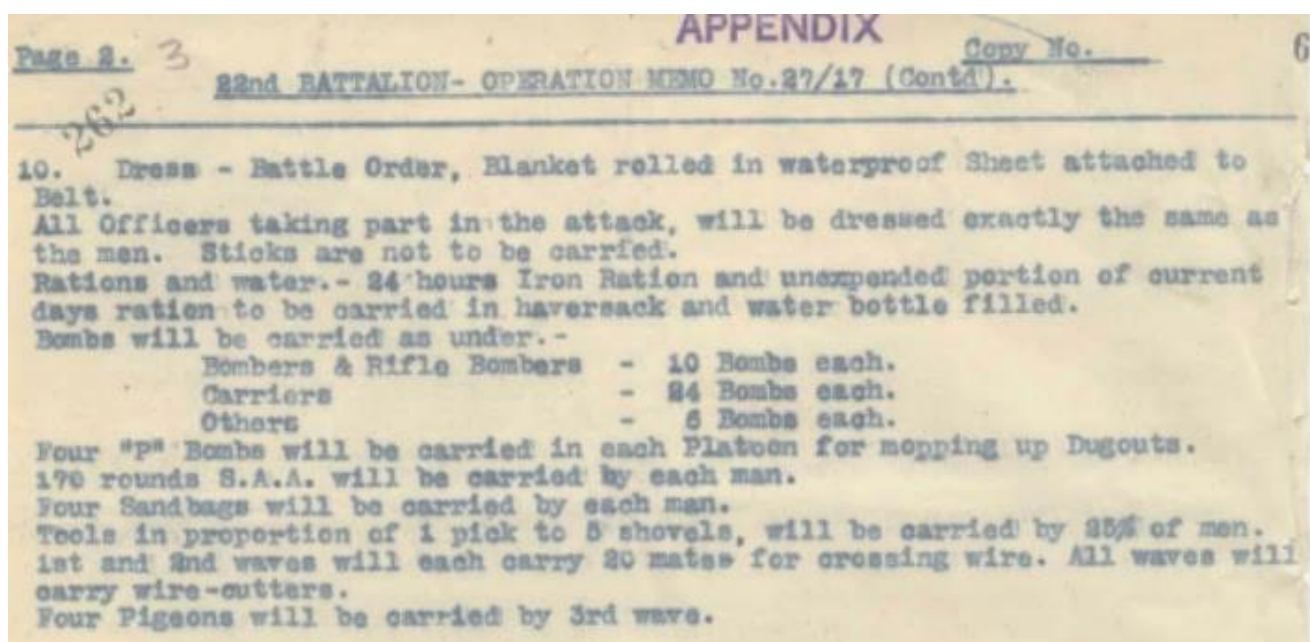
From February through to May, Crom's battalion moved from Albert through Warlencourt to Bapaume then on to battle at Bullecourt. The Hindenburg Line of April 1917 is shown by the dotted line. Noreuil and Bullecourt are indicated in red. Source: Wikipedia

Battle preparation

Orders for the 'Second Bullecourt' attack were issued on April 23rd and so began the training in earnest to take Bullecourt from the Germans and break the Hindenburg Line at its most crucial point. The plan was regarded as the best prepared and practised battle plan ever (lessons being learned from the disastrous 'First Bullecourt'⁶) and included several mock attacks on nearby 'practice' villages and the experimental use of Bangalore Torpedoes to clear the thick barbed wire. One particular and no doubt most unpopular exercise was at 11pm on the night of Saturday April 28th when the entire battalion was awoken to the unexpected command of 'man the Corps Line!' requiring every soldier to 'stand to'. Each company and their officers were timed - just for an experiment!

Battle plan

On 1st of May the companies and platoons were informed of the battle plan which was to be implemented on May 3rd for an assault at 3.45am ('zero hour'). The strategy was to advance in 4 waves with 25 yards (22.86 metres) between waves using the 'leap frog' principle (the first wave to advance, then lay down whilst the next wave went over them). Crom's C company was assigned to the second and third waves. Learning from the mistakes of the First Bullecourt, more attention was given to improving ammunition supplies and the Australians elected to not use tanks for support. The battalions would form up 500 yards (457.2 metres) from the enemy (closer than before) and be supported by large supplies of rifle-grenades and, for the first time, 96 Vickers machine guns. The troops were also given instructions on their dress and personal equipment:

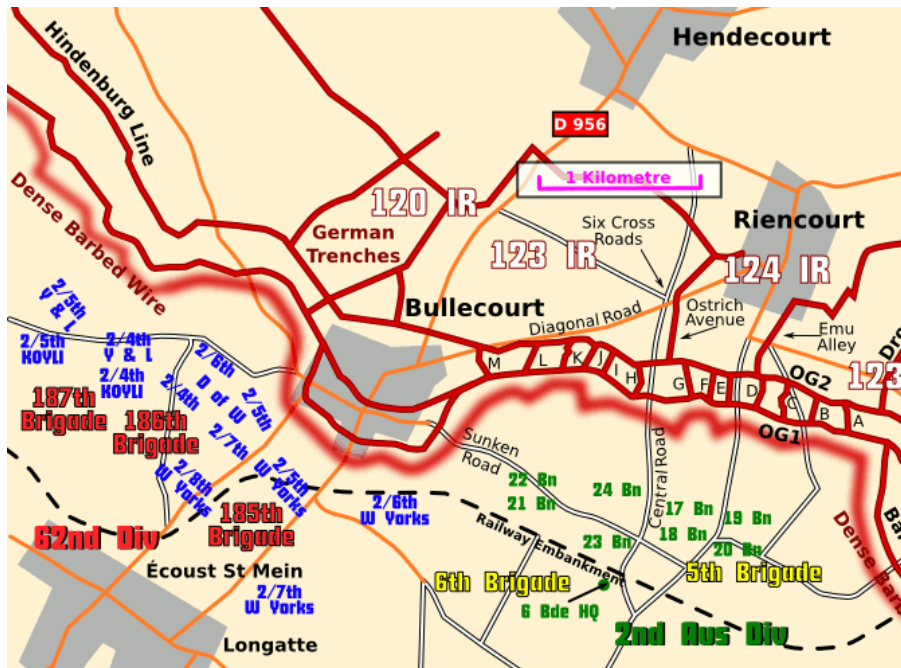


Section of page 2 of the Operation Memo for the Bullecourt attack. Source: Australian War Memorial

However, this was not going to be a surprise attack. The Germans had already received intelligence of the impending assault - and they were waiting.

Battle begins

At 7pm on May 2nd Crom was amongst the 639 soldiers of his battalion that moved towards their positions opposite the Hindenburg Line. Flanked by the 5th Brigade to their right and three brigades of the British 62nd Division on their left (to the south and west of Bullecourt), the 6th Brigade (Crom's) had the most dangerous position in the battle as they had to face the enemy to the north-east but also in the west, amongst the rubble of Bullecourt (the Allies having bombarded it previously in preparation for the attack) and Crom's battalion was at the forefront.



The positions for the second battle of Bullecourt. Crom's battalion is circled in green.
Source: *Following the Twenty-Second* Greg Stephens

May 3rd 1917- when Crom lost his life

By 1.30am the battalion had reached the railway embankment via their 'waves', and at 3am they began moving to their markers in No-Man's-Land. But due to increasing moonlight and a German searchlight they were suddenly exposed before 'zero hour'. The opening of the battle is vividly described in this excerpt from the diary of Crom's company captain, Captain W M Braithwaite⁷ whilst he was recovering in the London General Hospital on May 11th:

'I was hit about 4.15am on May 3rd. I will try and give you some idea of our show which believe me, was no good. Our battalion's job was to occupy a certain section of the Hindenburg Line between Bullecourt and Riencourt and then go further in about 280 yards and take possession of a sunken road. We moved up from Favreuil about 7 o'clock in the evening of the 2nd and reached the railway embankment at 2.45am and moved straight out to our Jump off mark. We had not got 50 men into position and lying down before the gentle Hun turned on a searchlight and of course that was the finish. Flares went up and he immediately started off with trench mortars and machine guns. However, eventually we got our men out into 4 waves and had them lying down until zero time at 3.45am. By 3.25 approx. his batteries started their tune and for 20 minutes we lay in shell holes whilst around us were falling "minnies" (minenwerfers), which were big trench mortars with explosions like the end of the world, 'pineapples', a sort of aerial torpedo, machine gun bullets and every class of German shell from the highest to the pip-squeak both high explosive and shrapnel. All this time Willie was trying to push his tummy further and further into the earth. All we had to do was lie there and wait for something to turn up. We lost a good few here, but when you realise the amount of iron that was flying through the air it is really marvellous how few got hurt. At 3.45 zero time our barrage started and that was goodoh. It really is wonderful, a show like this. We had all Fritz's machinery going then ours started. Talk about noise. No use trying to speak, what with Hun's fireworks display of rockets, the smell of the explosives and the dust and all to start with in the dark space before dawn, it was uncanny. By this time, all our waves and those of the 21st were mixed up. However, we got to the

1st and 2nd trenches and some parts had Huns in and others were Australians and talk about mix up. You couldn't imagine it. One minute would be quiet and then you would see some speedmaster bombs coming through the air and you would know that you were being shown the way out. Then we would push him along with our gentle Mills which is five times better bomb than the German one and so it went on until he was gradually pushed out of our show. I did not see any more of the show as I had had enough then!

Heavy casualties

Very heavy casualties, more than for any other brigade, occurred during this initial assault. After Captain Braithwaite was wounded, at about 4.18am Crom's company finally captured a section of the Sunken Road, took a few enemy prisoners, but failed to advance beyond that point due to heavy machine gun fire. Further attempts to advance were thwarted by strong German counter-attacks and enemy containment of the 5th Brigade and the British brigades. Captain Eugene Gorman wrote ' In this critical position they received enfilade and frontal fire from a resolute enemy but established themselves in shell holes just short of their objective and carried on a musketry duel until dusk.'

Below is a detailed description that refers to Crom's company 'C', written by Greg Stephens⁸:

'Given the position of the 22nd on the left of the 6th Brigade it had the perilous task to advance at almost point-blank range to the Germans garrisoning the eastern side of Bullecourt, and as a result caused its casualties to substantially exceed those of any other of the battalions engaged in this Second Battle of Bullecourt..... In addition one of the German batteries was throwing its shells short just in front of the German line opposite the centre of the 22nd, splitting the advance with the right entering the trenches with the 24th, but the greater part of the left fell behind the barrage and found groups of Germans manning the parapet and pouring rapid fire and bombs into the men. Many of the Battalion fell in No-Man's Land and at the German wire, including Capt. Hogarth (C Company, 2nd in Command of the 22nd Battalion), Capt. Slater, and with Lieut. Fraser being shot as he approached OG1. For many of the others on the left they were pinned down by fierce rifle and machine-gun fire.'



Capt. Hogarth of Crom's company, also killed on May 3rd. Source: Australian War Memorial

Crom was one of the many killed, and his body never was recovered.

Cost of war

Eventually the German line was broken, followed by another 24 hours of bombing. The Second Battle of Bullecourt was to run for over 2 weeks and cost the AIF 7,482 casualties and the British a similar number. As Peter Burness also wrote ' However, in the end this fighting had been for the possession of a ruined village and empty fields.'⁹ It was only Crom's brigade that had made any 'progress' on May 3rd.

In his book *With the Twenty-Second*, Captain Eugene Gorman takes a typically militaristic view:

'The Battle of Bullecourt occupies a unique place in the Battalion's annals. For no other struggle had the preparations been so complete, the rehearsals so thorough, or the general organisation so apparently perfect. Yet within a few minutes of its commencement, the combat developed into a pell-mell of violent hand-to-hand struggles, where the 6th Brigade met the flower of the German Army and beat it into quiescence.'¹⁰



Left: The Bullecourt battlefield looking towards Riencourt.
Source: *Bapaume and Bullecourt Australians on the Western Front 1917*



The Hindenburg Line (zig-zags) in front of Bullecourt on the right. On the left, facing the trenches are the networks of barbed wire. Source: *The Literary Digest History of the World War* by F.W. Halsey 1920

'Missing in action'

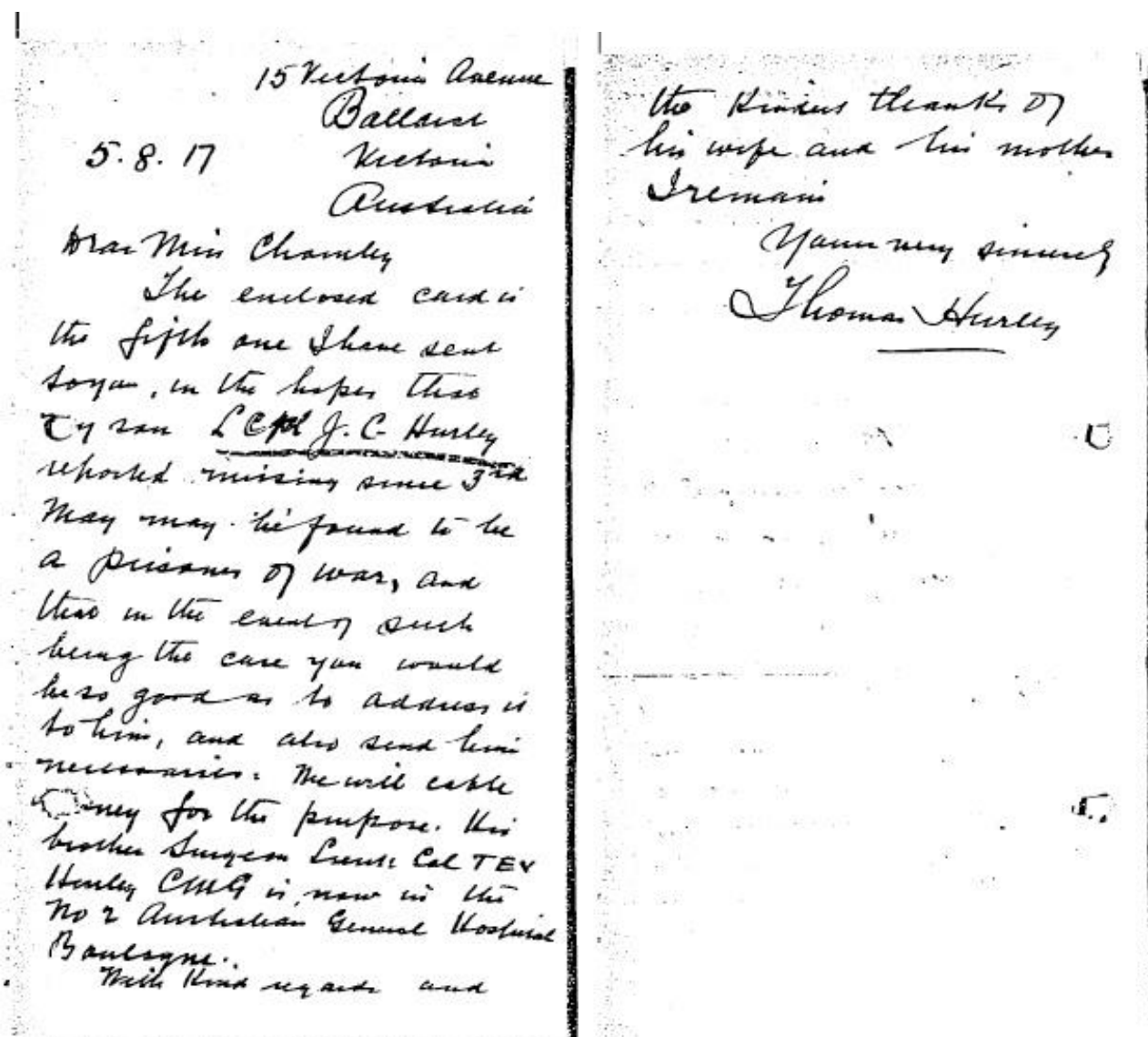
From the descriptions of this chaotic and intense battle, it is easy to see how it took 11 days to officially report Crom as 'missing in action'. It took much longer to confirm he was 'killed in action'. His whereabouts could not be confirmed for many months. His family, desperately worried, made many enquiries to the Australian Red Cross. One such letter written on August 5th from his father has been retained in their files¹¹:

'Dear Miss Chomley,
The enclosed card is the fifth one that I have sent to you in the hope that my son L. Cpl JC Hurley missing since May 3 may be found to be a prisoner of war, and in the event of such being the case, you would be so good as to address it to him, and also send him necessaries. We will cable money for the purpose. His brother Surgeon Lieutenant. Col T.E.V. Hurley CMG is now in the No. 2 Australian General Hospital Boulogne.

With kind regards and the kindest thanks of his wife and his mother

I remain yours very sincerely

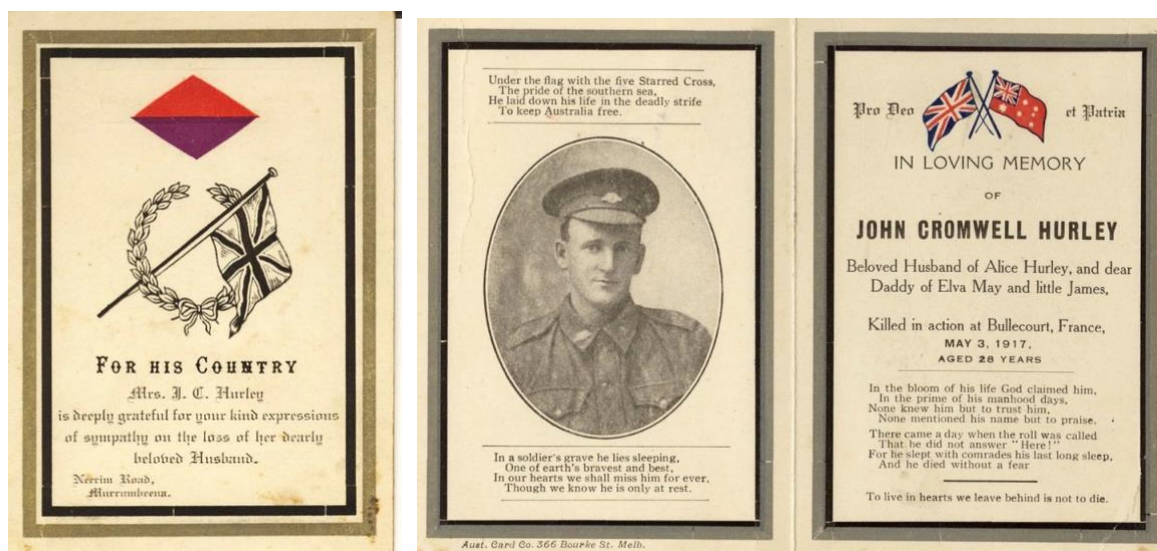
Thomas Hurley'



Thomas Hurley's letter to the Australian Red Cross. Source: Australian Red Cross Society Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau files 1914-18 War.

Death confirmed

A court of inquiry was held later in the year on November 26th and the commanding officer of the 22nd Battalion gave evidence that John Cromwell Hurley was 'Killed in Action' on May 3rd 1917. Crom was awarded the 1914-15 Star, British War Medal and Victory Medal. His widow Alice May received his effects in February 1918. These included a spirit flask, air cushion, cards, aiming card, book of musketry notes, four handkerchiefs, two notebooks, three military books and a photograph. He has no known grave.



Far left: Front of card Crom's wife Alice May sent to family and friends. Centre and right: Inside of the card. Source: family collection

and from *The Argus*, Saturday May 3rd 1919

'HURLEY-In loving memory of my dear husband, John Cromwell Hurley, who was killed at Bullecourt on the 3rd May, 1917.

I remember the night we parted,
I remember your last good-bye;
Ah! little I thought when you left us
You were going away to die. '
Far away on the fields of battle.
Rained on by shot and shell,
Ever ready to do his duty,
That's where my dear husband fell.

(Inserted by his loving wife May, and dear children, Elva and James Hurley.)'



Crom with daughter Elva May c1916. Source: family collection



Above and right: *The Bullecourt Digger* Australian War Memorial commemorating the loss of Australian lives at Bullecourt, France. Artist: Peter Corlett and Meriden Sculpture Foundry of Melbourne. Photo: Euan McGillivray 2010

2015 ANZAC Centenary

In 2014 I was contacted by Noeleen Lloyd from the Greta-Hansonville Heritage Group. For the ANZAC Centenary they planned to produce an Honour Board, Memorial Wall and Plaque (and later a book) to commemorate all those born in the district who served in World War I. As Crom and his brother **Leo** were born at Greta they were to be included in the list of names. In 2015 myself and cousins Jill and David were invited to the official opening. The ceremonies included speeches by Lt Gen (Ret'd) Ashley Power, and Cathy McGowan (MHR, Indi) and the RSL Wangaratta president Dr Warren Garrett recited the Ode. The wall and plaque were unveiled then guests moved inside the hall for the second part of the ceremony to unveil the Honour Board.



Left and detail above: On October 18th 2015, the community of Greta-Hansonville unveiled an honour board in the Greta-Hansonville Hall naming all the men from Greta who served in WW1. Crom and his brother Leo (Horace Leopold) are listed here. Photo: Noeleen Lloyd 2015

The Bullecourt Museum



The new *Musée Jean et Denise Letaille* at Bullecourt. This museum is dedicated to Jean and Denise Letaille, a local couple who collected and preserved hundreds of items found all over the Bullecourt battlefield including battle debris as well as personal effects of the soldiers. They worked hard to lobby the Australian and French governments to create this memorial to the fallen soldiers.
Photo: David Hurley 2015

Below right: Jean Letaille (1928-2012) at his own *Bullecourt Musée Militaire* (below left) in 2010. The new museum is built to the left of this building.
Photos: Euan McGillivray 2010



In 2010 with my partner and our daughter, I visited Bullecourt in France. It's an amazing contrast to stand in this peaceful village and look out at the ordinary farms and ploughed fields, then to see the photographs and hear the descriptions of this place and what happened here in 1917. I also can't imagine the impact that war had on the local community - the destruction of their village, their farms and livelihoods and the German invasion, turning their homes into a battlefield.

We met local retired mayor Jean Letaille (his wife Denise had died a few years earlier) who generously opened up his museum especially for us and showed us around. It was easy to see his gratitude to Australia through his amazing dedication to collecting, sorting and labelling the remnants of the battle, and with Denise and others, pressing the French and Australian governments to establish a permanent museum, which at least was underway before he died in 2012.

On reflection

My personal reflection on the Australian soldiers in WW1 is that they were young, naive, and mostly thinking of the rare opportunity that the AIF offered to go overseas. It was voluntary. However, the reality they faced when on those battlefields was very different to what most had expected. Whether they (Crom included) joined up for adventure or patriotism doesn't really matter in the end - the sacrifice was huge.

Ballarat Avenue of Honour

Between 1917 and 1919 the Ballarat Avenue of Honour¹² was planted to commemorate Ballarat citizens who volunteered for active service abroad in World War 1. It was instigated by one of the directors of the clothing firm E. Lucas & Co., Mrs W. D. 'Tillie' Thompson. The employees, known as 'the Lucas Girls'¹³, planted almost all of the 3,912 trees, of eleven different species, along the avenue for over 22 kilometres. The women's names were recorded with that of each soldier commemorated. The cost of the trees, £2,000, was raised by the employees themselves by activities such as clothing exhibitions, souvenirs and a ladies' football match in 1918 (£320 raised).

As Thomas and Mary Hurley were living in Ballarat at the time, all four of their sons are commemorated. The tree for Crom is an elm tree number 3514 planted on June 9th 1919 by Miss B. Wormald.



Above: Tree number 3514, Ballarat Avenue of Honour. Planted to commemorate Crom by Miss B. Wormald of E. Lucas and Co. on June 9th 1919.

Left: Detail showing the bronze plaque made in 1934. Photos: Euan McGillivray 2020

Ann Hurley

2020

hurleyskidmorehistory.com

Notes:

¹ A copy of the original letter is in my private collection

² Gorman MC Captain E., - *With the Twenty-Second: A history of the Twenty-Second Battalion AIF* (2009) p47

³ Gorman MC Captain E., - *With the Twenty-Second: A history of the Twenty-Second Battalion AIF* (2009) p49

⁴ Lance Corporals are required to supervise a small team of up to four soldiers referred to as a fire team, brick or crew

⁵ A copy of the original letter is in my private collection

⁶ Charles Bean the official war reporter noted: 'Bullecourt, more than any other battle, shook the confidence of Australian soldiers in the capacity of the British command; the errors, especially on April 10th and 11th, were obvious to almost everyone.' <https://www.awmlondon.gov.au/battles/bullecourt>

⁷ WM Braithwaite evidently changed his mind and went back into the fight (he was awarded the Military Cross for his efforts at Bullecourt), but died in action in another battle in October 1918.

⁸ Stephens, Greg - *Following the Twenty-Second* <https://anzac-22nd-battalion.com/>

⁹ Burness, Peter - *The Battles for Bullecourt.pdf* (Australian War Memorial)

¹⁰ Gorman MC Captain E., - *With the Twenty-Second: A history of the Twenty-Second Battalion AIF* (2009) p53

¹¹ Australian War Memorial - Australian Red Cross Society Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau Files 1914-18 War 1DRL/0428.

¹² Ballarat Avenue of Honour https://honouringouranzacs.com.au/page/avenue_of_honour and [https://bih.federation.edu.au/index.php/Ballarat Avenue of Honour](https://bih.federation.edu.au/index.php/Ballarat_Avenue_of_Honour)

¹³ The Lucas Girls <https://www.1wags.org.au/information/featured-stories/arch-of-victory-ballarat/>

Other resources:

Australian Dept. of Veterans' Affairs website ANZAC portal <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/>

Australian Electoral Rolls 1903-1954

Australian War Memorial

Baker, Chris website *The Long, Long Trail* <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk>

Bretherton, Jessica *Life in the Rear: Estaminets, billets, and the AIF on the Western Front, 1916-18.pdf* (Australian War Memorial)

Communauté de Communes du Sud Artois website Musée Jean et Denise Letaille: <https://www.cc-sudartois.fr/loisirs/tourisme/musee-jean-et-denise-letaille-bullecourt-1917/>

Greta-Hansonville Heritage Group

National Archives of Australia - WWI AIF Records

Trove (National Library of Australia) newspaper archive <http://trove.nla.gov.au>

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