Australian Light Horse at Villers-Bretonneux
24-25 April 1918

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Four horsemen rode through a shattered village in northern France. Spasmodic machine-gun and rifle fire sounded against the usual background of rumbling guns. Just north of the shell-damaged railway station the patrol encountered Australian infantry firing at German troops, some of whom were still in the village, while others were withdrawing towards a small forest to the south.

The troopers left the infantry and urged their horses along the railway embankment running east. Immediately they came under fire from a machine-gun post. The men dismounted and leaving one man as horse-holder, rushed the post and captured four prisoners. The patrol leader continued to advance alone. He came back with information and another prisoner. The patrol remounted and returned with their information and prisoners to their Headquarters.

The day was Anzac Day 1918; the village was Villers-Bretonneux in the Somme Valley; the Australian infantry were from the 57th Battalion which had just participated in a dashing counter-attack to recapture the village; and the mounted patrol was drawn from the 13th Australian Light Horse Regiment. The patrol leader was Lance-Corporal F E Lanagan who was awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal for his actions that day.2

The exploits of the Australian Light Horse on the Western Front are not well known. This is regrettable because they constitute a distinguished chapter in the history of the Light Horse. Though comprising less than two regiments,3 their contribution to the success of Australian operations was out of all proportion to their numbers, as this study of the recapture of Villers-Bretonneux on 25 April 1918 shows.

Villers-Bretonneux and the plateau on which it stood was a vital objective in the German offensive of March 1918. Australian forces had been instrumental in preventing its capture in early April. On 5 April, von Hindenburg wrote:

Our advance became slower and slower. The hopes and wishes which had soared beyond Amiens had to be recalled. Facts must be treated as facts. ... We ought to have shouted in the ear of every single man: 'Press on to Amiens. Put in your last ounce. Perhaps Amiens means decisive victory. Capture Villers Bretonneux whatever happens, so that from its heights we can command Amiens with masses of our heavy artillery!' It was in vain; our strength was exhausted.4

1 Lt Col D J Hunter (retd) served with the 8th/13th Victorian Mounted Rifles. He is a volunteer assisting with the VMR Regimental Collection, and is writing a history of the 13th Australian Light Horse regiment (AIF).
2 Based on information contained in LCpl Lanagan's citation held in file AWM28 at Australian War Memorial, Canberra.
3 In addition to 13th ALH, one or two squadrons of 4th ALH served with II ANZAC Corps Mtd Troops (later XXII Corps Mtd Tps).
Von Hindenburg rested his forces, then on 24 April launched them in a final effort to capture the vital high ground. The German assault, led by tanks, fell upon the British 8th Division. The 8th Div was driven out of Villers-Bretonneux and formed a defensive line about 2 kilometres to the west. The Australian 5th Div, occupying the line from north of Villers-Bretonneux to the Somme River, held its positions.

A counter-attack to recapture the village was imperative and none realised this more than Brigadier General H E (Pompey) Elliott, commanding the 15th Australian Infantry Brigade. Elliott's brigade was the 5th Div reserve and occupied positions north-west of Villers-Bretonneux. Elliott prepared to launch an immediate counter-attack even though the village lay outside his divisional boundary. H-hour was set at 10.00 am. A troop of light horse was ordered forward to support 15th Bde in its attack. Lt L V Reid was the troop leader. At the conclusion of the operation, he wrote a report which was included in the War Diary of the Australian Corps Mounted Troops. Reid began:

I moved out of camp at about 9 a.m. on 24th and reported to Lt Colan 59th Btn, made arrangements to protect his flank in a counter-attack.5

Brigadier Elliott's counter-attack was cancelled only minutes before H-hour on orders from III Corps which advised that 8th Div was well able to restore the situation without help. Elliott did not believe this for a moment. The 8th Div had been severely mauled during the previous weeks and had been hastily reinforced with young recruits. While 15th Bde settled down to await developments, Elliott stepped up his battlefield intelligence gathering.

Reid was released from his flank protection task and placed at the disposal of Lieutenant Colonel H T C Layh, 57th Bn, for reconnaissance duties:

I was then attached to Lt Col Layh at about 10.40 am. Sent out two patrols, one to 56th Bn and one to Bois le Abbe, to gain information reference the enemy and our own dispositions.6

The situation on the right flank of the 5th Div, held by 56th Bn, was stable and Reid's patrol returned quickly, but on the 8th Div front the situation was confused:

The right patrol however had a much more difficult task as troops appeared generally to know very little which was absolutely [certain].7 An extra patrol being sent out, however gained reliable information from the right.8

Reid's troop, less seven men, was released by Layh and came under command of Lt Col C V Watson. Watson was a spare battalion commander on 15th Bde HQ. Elliott made him "special intelligence officer" responsible for the Report Centre at Advanced Bde HQ.9 Reid placed his patrol in a base five kilometres northwest of Villers-Bretonneux and taking six men joined Watson at Advanced Bde HQ closer to the town. From the Report Centre, Reid dispatched patrols 'to keep in touch with our own infantry and that of the 8th Division on the right and report any changes of our own front line.'10

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5 Lt L V Reid, Report of Troop Operations, attached as an Appendix to the Australian Corps Mounted Troops War Diary for April 1918, p. 1. Page one of the four page report is missing from the War Diary held on microfilm at the AWM Canberra. I am indebted to Mr Cameron Simpson who provided me with a transcript of page one which he had copied from documents held at the Public Records Office in London.
6 Reid, p. 1.
7 The word is unclear, but this seems to be the context.
8 Reid, p. 1.
10 Reid, p. 1.
Throughout the afternoon of 24 April, horsemen combed and probed the battlefield for information. The 8th Div front continued to be difficult:

Patrols operating on the right had to make a personal inspection of the ground held, to get reliable information.

No casualties occurred during the 24th, one patrol however having a lucky escape in C28d [where the railway crosses the Roman road] after being covered by machine gun fire at close range managed to make good their escape and returned with reliable information at 10 pm.11

Captain A D Ellis, in his book, *The Story of the Fifth Australian Division*, wrote, that following the cancellation of the counter-attack:

... General Elliott was forced to chafe in comparative idleness ... His Report Centre, however, was doing good work, and largely through its activities reliable information of the position came regularly to hand.12

Darkness halted mounted patrolling, but not before the chaos and uncertainty of the morning had been largely set in order, and sound intelligence provided a basis for bold action. The clarity of

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11 Ibid, p. 2. This patrol was probably led by Sgt A Hollis.
the situation owed much to the mobility and audacity of the light horse. The Chestnut Troop of the Royal Horse Artillery, who supported 15th Bde in the counter-attack, noted in its War Diary:

Rapidity with which attack orders were got out on 24th inst., made possible by use of well trained cavalry (Aust Light Horse), who quickly located extent of enemy gains.13

On 25 April, the morning mist cleared to reveal a dramatically altered situation at Villers-Bretonneux. During the hours of darkness two Australian brigades had carried out a spirited counter attack. In a pincer movement, the village had been enveloped and the position of the German defenders made untenable. But the attackers had failed to complete their ambitious aim of encirclement. A gap of uncertain size still remained south-east of the village providing a withdrawal route for the defenders. Reid was called upon to locate the flanks of the gap and the position of British units which had advanced after daylight:

At about 9.30 a.m. on the 25th two patrols were dispatched, one to find the exact position of 57th Bn's right flank and unit on their right.14

One of the patrols was that led by LCpl Lanagan, already described. Lanagan returned from that particularly aggressive patrol having found what he believed to be the right flank of the 57th Bn. There was a problem, however.

During its attack the 57th Bn had entered Villers-Bretonneux from the north, cleared the northeast quarter of the village and emerged from its eastern edge to join up with the 59th and 60th Bns in occupying a line extending south from the Roman Road. One platoon on the extreme right had encountered enemy withdrawing south of the railway station. The company commander ordered that platoon, under Lt Falconer, to remain in position and continue harassing the enemy. Almost certainly it was this platoon which Lanagan located.

Was the position held by Falconer's platoon the right flank of the 57th Bn? Lanagan thought it was, and probably Lt Falconer, also. As Lanagan's patrol withdrew through Villers-Bretonneux, it noted infantry of the 22nd Bn, Durham Light Infantry digging-in in the station yard. This could only confirm Lanagan's belief that Falconer was the 57th's flank.15

In contrast to Lanagan's aggressive patrol, the second patrol, with the task of locating units on the right of 15th Bde, had a less eventful time. The patrol started from the 8th Div HQ and moved through the forested area, Bois l'Abbe. While still west of the village the patrol came upon the remnant of a British battalion, 2nd Middlesex, digging-in, but out of touch with flanking units.

The patrol skirted the village to a point south of the railway station where it was driven back by machine-gun fire from further east. The patrol had passed through the gap between the DLI at the railway station and the other Australian brigade involved in the counter-attack, the 13th Bde, without making contact with either.

This lack of contact clearly showed that a wide gap existed between the Australian brigades, and that the 8th Div was unlikely to be able to fill it. However, the patrol was able to withdraw through Villers-Bretonneux, as did Lanagan's patrol, thus demonstrating that organised enemy resistance there had ceased.

14 Reid, p. 2.
15 Reid gives what appears to be an incorrect map reference for the DLI position: O34d where O35d seems more likely.
As the day wore on, the question of the 57th Bn’s right flank continued to puzzle Bde HQ. Reid ordered out another patrol led by LCpl P G Blomley. This time the route was laid down making it clear that the patrol was seeking the southern end of the line extending from the Roman road. The ground over which the patrol attempted to advance was flat, and under German observation and fire. A company of the 57th Bn had attempted to cross from north of the Roman road earlier in the morning and found it impossible owing to machine-gun fire. Nevertheless the mounted patrol advanced and immediately was fired upon:

... one man & 1 horse killed, one man & 1 horse wounded and a 3rd man slightly shell shock. Brought these 3 men back & with 3 fresh men pushed on through O29b & d to O30e to O36a, where patrol came upon the 57th Bn just on the outskirts of VILLERS-BRETONNEUX, the Bn had to retire as some of our own shells were falling short. Patrol secured exact position and returned.17

The revised route was through the town then east. The battalion was encountered rather sooner than expected, having been forced back by allied shell-fire.

With the location of the flanks established, Reid’s troop carried out other tasks. Escorts took batches of prisoners to 5th Div HQ located about 10 kilometres north-west of Villers-Bretonneux.18 Then, in a night operation, guides were provided to bring infantry forward to close the gap between 13th and 15th Bdes:

A patrol went out at 10.30 pm to guide troops from O27d 4.5 to line running from O36b 5.1 to railway line at O36c 8.3.19

This patrol, led by Sgt R L Malseed, met two reinforced companies of the 49th Bn on the Roman road 1000 yards west of Villers-Bretonneux and guided them through the town to a line extending south from the 57th Bn right flank. There, the infantry were directed to defensive positions by Lt Hale, 50th Bn, and Lt Noad, 57th Bn, who had reconnoitred the position earlier. The Official History records the work of Hale and Noad, but makes no mention of the 13th ALH.

Sgt Malseed’s citation described the execution of this task as requiring him to move from one flank of the gap to the other, “in pitch darkness and over very rough ground, all the time exposed to very heavy fire”. His coolness and skill demonstrated the outstanding level of discipline and training which this superb light horse regiment had attained.

Reid’s troop reverted to Divisional control early on the morning of 26 April. The efforts of this small body of troops, one officer and 28 men, did not go unnoticed by 15th Bde. Lt Reid was awarded the Military Cross, LCpl Lanagan, the Distinguished Conduct Medal, and Military Medals were awarded to Sgts Hollis and Malseed and LCpl Blomley.

The recapture of Villers-Bretonneux on 25 April 1918 was considered by some to be among the finest exploits of the AIF. Without doubt, the success of the counter-attack owed something, perhaps a great deal, to the comprehensive intelligence gathered by the small bands of horsemen who crossed and re-crossed the inhospitable and uncertain battlefield.

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16 Bean, Vol V, p. 621.
17 Reid, p. 4. Almost certainly the man killed was 1233, Tpr Henry Forbes. He is buried in Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery.
18 Bean, Vol V, p. 541n, says General Hobbs 5 Div HQ was in a chateau “3 ½ miles west of Corbie”.
19 Reid, p. 4.
The activity of the 13th LH at Villers-Bretonneux typified the exacting nature of the role of Corps Cavalry, and the demands it placed on junior officers and rank and file. The success of major operations and the fate of many hundreds of men depended on the soundness of their judgement, acuteness of their observation, the honesty of their reporting, and the accuracy of their map reading. The 5th Div declared itself well satisfied. Ellis wrote:

No 4 Troop of C Squadron 13th Light Horse did good service throughout the Villers-Bretonneux fighting in connection with the Brigade Report Centre,...

The four horsemen riding through the battered village in northern France on Anzac Day 1918 probably asked for nothing more than to have been seen to have done their job, and to have done it well.

Bibliography

Australian Corps Mounted Troops War Diary, held on microfilm at AWM Canberra.


File AWM 28 at the AWM Canberra. In particular the documents relating to '1st Australian Corps HQ and Corps Troops'.

20 Ellis, op. cit., p. 302.