

Captain Benjamin Brodie

The raider

As the officers and sergeants sat in the dimly lit dugout, the etched features of the commanding officer (CO) were accentuated in the eerie light cast by the hurricane lamp. The men listened intently as he presented the plan in intricate detail. After each was assigned his task, the CO looked at the captain and said, 'Brodie, you'll be leading our blokes'.

Benjamin Greenup Brodie was a stalwart of the unit. He had enlisted as a private and from the earliest days displayed the leadership qualities that led to his rapid promotion through the ranks.¹ Ben was posted to the 34th Battalion AIF and left Sydney, bound for the United Kingdom, in May 1916. The battalion spent several months training before crossing to France in late November where the men were soon in the trenches of the Western Front—just in time for the onset of the terrible winter of 1916–17.

As they made their way up the line on their first night in combat, Brodie stood alongside the duckboard as the troops filed past. 'No smoking, no talking', he whispered. When the line ground to a halt, a nervous young Digger asked, 'You think we'll see any action tonight, Sarge?'

'Don't worry, mate. We'll see it soon enough.'

In the ensuing months, their actions in the trenches of Armentieres, at Messines, and their strike against the Oostaverne Line established the 34th as formidable



AWM E00145. France. January 1917. Australians of the 5th Division crossing a frozen trench by a duckboard bridge.

fighters, but their 'apprenticeship' came at a terrible cost—the loss of so many young Australian lives.

The men of the 34th became experts in the art of trench-raiding. Under the cover of an artillery barrage, the Diggers would sortie forward, rush the German trenches, snatch prisoners and blow up strong points, before vanishing back into the night. These incursions were devised primarily to identify opposing German units and, by the surprise of the attacks, keep the enemy off balance.² Many a German spent a sleepless night clutching his rifle and jumping at every noise, fearful that he might be snatched at any time by the Australian raiders.

When his platoon commander was killed, Brodie assumed command. The men immediately accepted the leadership change as Ben already had earned their trust and respect. Their faith in his judgement and common sense approach to soldiering was imperative, as their lives were in his hands.

In October, the battalion was engaged in the battle around Passchendaele. Heavy rains had reduced the area to a quagmire, the thick mud hampering movement and fouling weapons. The battle was a disastrous defeat for the Allies and the 34th Battalion suffered casualties of higher than 50 percent.

Following the Passchendaele campaign, the men were sent to the rear for a 'rest'—to enjoy warm billets and dry clothes for the first time in months. During the break, the commanding officer called Brodie into his office and passed an envelope to the sergeant. A very proud Brodie discovered the contents to be two pips—he had been commissioned as a second lieutenant.

A brief stint at the Officers' Training School at Amiens followed, then it was back in the line for the young platoon commander.¹ He was popular amongst the troops who regarded him as one of the boys, but one who was not averse to delivering a severe reprimand when necessary.

Brodie was a tyrant in battle, moving his men forward to seize one objective after another, so it was not surprising that he was soon promoted to lieutenant. On one occasion, he led the company to its objective when the officer commanding was taken out of the action. In early 1918, he was promoted to captain and took over as second in command of C Company.¹

At the beginning of March, the 34th Battalion occupied the front line as part of the 9th Brigade. On the night of 3 March, a brigade raid consisting of ten officers and 225 men attacked the German trenches. The raiders killed more than 50 of the enemy and captured an officer and ten men, before retiring to the safety of their own lines.³

As the commanders contemplated their next move, they agreed the best strategy was to repeat the action the following night—the Germans would never expect them to hit the same place two nights in a row.



AWM EZ0052. Wrapped in his overcoat, an unidentified Australian soldier sleeps in the trenches in the Bois Grenier sector.

That day, his company commander summoned Brodie to his dugout. ‘Warning order, Ben. We’ve got a manoeuvre on tonight and our company’s drawn the short straw. Make all preparations, will you? And by the way, you’ll be leading the push.’

Brodie passed on the information to his platoon commanders and then settled into his dugout to get some rest. Too stimulated to sleep, he reached into his pack and extracted his writing pad to start a letter to his wife.

Later, the commanding officer conducted the briefing on the plan of attack for the night’s raid, which was to be the same strength as the night before.

‘Sergeant Mudford, you’ll take the covering party on the left flank. You’ll have the Lewis guns, the bombers and plenty of bombs. The right flank will be handled by the 33rd.’³

‘Lieutenant Fell, you’ll have the taping party and support Sergeant Nunn with the demolition charges.’³

‘Brodie, you’ll be leading our blokes—about a hundred in all. Your mission is to blow up the tunnels and the dugouts, capture whoever you can and get the hell out. And don’t worry, we’ll have artillery support. The barrage starts at 0050 hours. Any questions?’



These photographs give some idea of the terrible state of the country over which the infantry often had to advance.





AWM E01209. An 18-pounder gun of the Australian Field Artillery dug in among the ruins of an old factory.

The men checked their weapons again. Most carried pistols, some carried clubs studded with nails and each of the raiders carried three or four bombs stuffed into the pockets of their tunics. As they waited till it was time to make their way to the assembly point, the heavens opened up, soaking the Diggers to the skin and creating a sea of viscous mud that clogged the soles of their boots. Volunteers of the YMCA and Salvation Army mingled with the troops, handing out cups of hot cocoa and coffee until it was time to go.

As the 18-pounders commenced firing, signalling the start of the raid, Brodie dispatched the officer and four Diggers to lay the forming-up tape. Seven minutes later, he sent out Sergeant Mudford's covering party.³ Using the tape as a guide in the dark, they took up positions in the German wire emplacements—a mere 45 metres from the enemy.

The main raiding party moved out, passing through the gaps that had been cut in the wire. Suddenly, a flare burst above them, creating pandemonium as the pale light illuminated the battlefield. 'Go! Go! Go!' Brodie yelled, waving his troops forward.

The enemy attacked relentlessly with grenades and machine-guns. Brodie stormed up to the parapet, urging the Diggers into the trench. As he directed his

men towards shelter, a burst from a machine-gun hit him in the side and chest.⁴ He dropped to his knees, but continued to yell commands. The stretcher-bearers grabbed their fallen captain and frantically pushed shell dressings into his gaping wounds.

Brodie's second in command, Lieutenant Fell, went about setting the explosives, while Sergeant Nunn led a party along the trench to the left. Reconnoitering around a bend in the trench, Nunn saw a large enemy force moving toward them. The Germans had anticipated the incursion and planned on trapping the raiders before they could withdraw. Nunn sent a runner to Fell with a message, 'Germans coming, lots of them!' Fell immediately gave the order to withdraw.

He then hurriedly made his way back to Brodie and knelt down beside the badly wounded officer, who by now had been placed on a stretcher with a knapsack supporting his head. Brodie grabbed Fell by the uniform, pulling him closer. 'Make sure you account for everyone before we leave, Fell', he muttered.

As they made their way back to their lines, Brodie repeatedly questioned his stretcher-bearer, Private Frew, on the state of his men.⁵ Frew reassured his patient that all was well, realising that although Brodie was gravely wounded, the officer's concern was not for himself but for the safety of his men.

As they reached the protection of the parapet, a relieved Frew leaned nearer the officer's head. 'We've made it, Sir, we've...' But it was too late, Brodie was dead.

Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, Captain BG Brodie
- 2 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume III, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 3 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume V, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 4 AWM 1DRL/0428, Australian Red Cross Society, Missing and Wounded Enquiry Bureau
- 5 *The All Australian Memorial, A Historical Record of National effort during the Great War*, British-Australian Publishing Service, Melbourne