



Crossing The Wire

David Coombes

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So wrote an Australian prisoner-of-war, Corporal Lancelot Davies, only recently taken prisoner at the first battle of Bullecourt, on 11 April 1917. For him – like another 1,200 Australians captured at Bullecourt – the future was indeed ‘blank’ and unpredictable. The experiences of Australian prisoners of war (POWs) or Kriegsgefangeners held captive in Germany has been largely forgotten or ignored – overshadowed by the horrid stories of Australians imprisoned by the Japanese during World War II. Yet, as David Coombes makes known, the stories are interesting and significant – not only providing an account of what those young Australian soldiers experienced, and the spirit they showed in responding to captivity – but also for the insight it provides into Germany in the last eighteen months of the war.

Drawing on previous inaccessible records – including interviews conducted by the late David Chalk as well as private papers and unpublished manuscripts (all part of the Chalk Collection) – Coombes focuses on one Australian brigade, the 4th Infantry, from its formation in 1914, through Gallipoli to its baptism of fire on the Western Front, culminating in the first battle of Bullecourt – which, in turn, leads to the prisoner of war experience.

An unknown future was certainly what awaited those mostly young soldiers as POWs – whether it be exposed to their own artillery fire while working for the enemy ‘behind the line’; in a hospital ward somewhere in France or Germany; or behind wire, in a camp, in Germany. What remained constant, and gave them reason to stay alive, often in the most horrendous circumstances, was their desire to be free – to get back to their family and loved ones in Australia.

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