

'Do it now - write down everything'



## 'Do it now - write down everything'

The Courier Mail (Australia)

August 4, 2024 Sunday

CourierMail Edition

Copyright 2024 Nationwide News Pty Limited All Rights Reserved

**Section:** CONFIDENTIAL; Pg. 65

**Length:** 1717 words

**Byline:** Justin Lees

## **Body**

---

The diaries of Australia's WWI correspondent reveal a tale of heroism, writes Justin Lees

One hundred and ten years ago this weekend, a conflict erupted that would devastate the world and leave repercussions still felt today.

The First World War witnessed Australia's first actions on the global stage, post-Federation - and gave this country both the Anzac legend and, some argue, decades of intergenerational trauma.

For so many, understanding Australia's journey through the 1914-1918 conflagration came via the narrative of one man: Charles Bean, a reporter who became Australia's official war correspondent and followed its course from beginning to end.

Often at the front, he made handwritten notes in scores of notebooks and diaries.

Those 20,000 pages became a basis for the eventual 12-volume official history of the war.

Kept at the Australian War Memorial - which itself sprang from an idea conceived by Bean - the diaries provide a behind-the-scenes view of the events he experienced; and a fascinating sense of how he witnessed history.

Over the coming months the diaries will be made easily accessible online as part of the memorial's Transcribe project. Ahead of that, to mark the anniversary of the start of the war, we share an exclusive selection of edited excerpts, with context provided by AWM historian Robyn Van Dyk, taking us through Bean's War.

'GOODBYE' War was declared on Germany and its allies by Britain and the Dominions on August 4, 1914. Bean was appointed to his war correspondent role after winning a reporters' ballot in September and his first diary entry came the next month.

Said goodbye to mother at 'Northampton', 27 Acland St. Taxie'd to Port Melbourne with father taking luggage. Morning tea at Mia Mia with Father & Tig (Bean's youngest brother, Montague). Archie (Whyte, a newspaper colleague and mentor) and Father came to Port Melbourne & after being held up on pier managed to get onto wharf

'Do it now - write down everything'

through Colonel Wallace & Major Dowse. Father left at 1.10 with Archie. Crowd in afternoon broke line of sentries & rushed wharf. Sailed at 3. Watched St Kilda pier for father & mother & thought I saw them waving a white handkerchief.

21 October, 1914

INTO ACTION Bean went ashore with Australian forces at Gallipoli, on April 25, 1915, and stayed there for the campaign.

You can't begin writing it too early. Do it now - write down everything in your diary.

31 March, 1915, quoting advice given by General Sir Ian Hamilton, commander of the British Mediterranean Expeditionary Force.

ANZAC COVE Wanting a comprehensive record of the assault on April 25, Bean kept up a running commentary, beginning the night before at sea, through the dawn landing and into that tension-filled first night at Anzac. Despite violence and danger, he managed a small joke about his messy scrawl.

If I am plugged and anyone gets this diary they'll probably think I was either tight (drunk) or very unnerved when I wrote it. The fact was it was written by night when no candles were to be had and I had to do as best I could in the moonlight.

25 April, 1915

'RECKLESS OBEDIENCE' The infamous, costly battles of Lone Pine and The Nek were part of the 1915 August Offensive, an ultimately unsuccessful attempt to break through the Ottoman lines. For Bean, it began with a bid to find his officer brother 'Jack' (John), as men assembled in trenches before storming the enemy lines at Lone Pine on the evening of August 6.

Left Monash and went along to see Jack â€¦ I thought I would get near where he started from â€¦ but tunnel was crowded.

3rd Battalion started to move into position about 2.30. It needed time as trench was narrow & they had to get down very small tunnels to secret firing line. â€¦ About 5.25 as I reached a convenient point â€¦ crowded with 3rd Battalion â€¦ I saw not slightest trace of nervousness. Men all had packs with some sort of tucker or knick-knacks in. Presently order came: Pull down top (sand) bags in the recess - so as to make it easier to get over. Whole trench looked suspiciously ragged. Officer took whistle from wrist. 'Prepare to jump out' he said. Put whistle between his teeth. I didn't hear mines go - presently he blew whistle.

August 6, 1915

Bean was wounded in the leg just before dawn the next day. He had the wound dressed but the bullet was too close to his femoral artery to be removed - he took it to his grave in 1968.

I was moving on again when something gave me a whack (like a stone thrown hard) in the upper part of the right leg â€¦ I was pretty sure I had been hit by a stray which had gone in on the right & not come out â€¦ so I knew I must go back. I could limp along pretty well.

August 7, 1915

Hobbling back for medical attention, he was just below The Nek as 600 dismounted Light Horsemen began their fateful attack. None reached the enemy trenches and 372 were killed or wounded.

â€¦ As I got opposite the Sphinx (a rocky promontory) a tremendous bombardment broke out. It really was a bombardment this time - not the feeble affair of 5pm yesterday. The dawn was just growing & the shell shaped cliff around the Sphinx, bellowed with sound.

'Do it now - write down everything'

I believe the 3rd Light Horse Brigade was a bit slow in getting out - didn't start for a minute or so after the finish â€¦ and the Turks had time to get up again & get out their rifles. Few men reached the Nek â€¦ The whole essence of the attack was that it should issue suddenly â€¦ whilst the Turks were staggered by the heaviness of the first blows â€¦ The whole chance lay in avoiding the risk of this battle crystallising again into a trench battle & that could only be done by sacrificing everything to speed â€¦ The point in which some of these Brigade Commanders seem to me grievously to have failed â€¦ - they stopped before the enemy stopped them â€¦ August 7, 1915

In his official histories after the war, Bean hails the courage of the ordinary troopers, displaying "reckless obedience" as they followed orders to charge into "certain destruction", despite having just seen their comrades mown down.

THE MINCING MACHINE After the evacuation from Gallipoli in December 1915, most Australian forces went to the Western Front, Bean with them. It was during the hellish fighting around the pulverised French village of Pozieres, in the 1916 Somme Offensive, that he saw industrial warfare in its most destructive form - near-continuous artillery fire, attacks and counter-attacks that cost 23,000 Australian casualties over 42 days. By comparison, 8700 Australians died and 18,000 were wounded in eight months at Gallipoli. Among the 6800 killed at Pozieres was Bean's cousin Leo Butler.

After an awful series of adventures with shrapnel and gas shell arrived at General MacLagan's dugout in Contalmaison. In the scurry of the last 100 yards across shrapnel swept roads in middle of which I had to put on my gas helmet - forgot to thank British signaller from 2nd Brigade who acted as my guide. Felt very sick with gas just before getting in but helmet is certainly a help. We have had several men lose their way here already. Pioneers sheltering under their own dump. Someone coughing. Helmets on again. 12.30 Bombardment around v. heavy. Aromatic smell of gas all round.

23 July, 1916

Pozieres has been a terrible sight all day â€¦ The men are simply turned in there as into some ghastly giant mincing machine. They have to stay there while shell after huge shell descends with a shriek close beside them â€¦ each shrieking tearing crash bringing a promise to each man - instantaneous - I will tear you into ghastly wounds - I will rend your flesh and pulp an arm or a leg - fling you, half a gaping quivering man ... to lie there rotting and blackening like all the things you saw by the awful roadside, or in that sickening dusty crater.

29 July, 1916.

Bean's sense of duty compelled him to return repeatedly - although he did wonder if it would get him killed.

The whizzbang shell burst 50 or 80 yards to our left, & I ducked. I was ashamed of myself the next minute. The man on the side of the trench stood up there with his back to that little spitting shell as if it were no more than rain. They didn't any of them even trouble to look round. About 5 fragments of small size hissed past us & they took no more notice of it than if a small boy were throwing mud. They were busy about their job - getting a heavy burden along over the crest to the right place.

They were stretcher bearers - Australian stretcher bearers. They had their white flag there - I had often heard of their work here before. But, by Jove, I never saw it as we saw it that morning. They have been the same from the day we landed in Gallipoli.

â€¦ I always feel surprised when I get alive out of Pozieres - I don't pretend to be brave. I want very much to write the history of this war and every time one gets into those hot corners I wonder if I am not really doing the wrong thing. However, I had resolved to understand the country out on that left. Going back this morning in the car ... past the ruins of La Boisselle I resolved - I will go to Pozieres once more, with the official photographer, to get the pictures the Australian records seem to need. And that will finish the job.

22 August, 1916

'Do it now - write down everything'

PEACE AT LAST At 11am on 11 November 1918, the Armistice signed by Germany finally brought an end to the war. It came as most of the Australian forces were having a period of rest behind the front lines. Some Australians celebrated into the night, but many described the end of the war as an anti-climax.

Returning to Lille that evening, Bean heard very little noise, but noticed the street lights were on: "Subdued - but still lights". He describes some "gruff cheers", and the "occasional bleating of some child's tin trumpet".

One could not realise it. No more gun flashes; no more flares. Tonight the streets would be bright - the towns would be lit; the cars would take the blackpainted eyelids off their headlights. The munition factories would have to bring their work gradually to an end; the business of the world for the last four years has finished. We had won - beyond all hope, everything exactly as the most optimistic democrat would have planned it.

11 November, 1918 \*You can apply to join the Australian War Memorial's Transcribe project as a volunteer, transcribing historical documents, at [transcribe.awm.gov.au](http://transcribe.awm.gov.au)

**Load-Date:** August 4, 2024

---

End of Document