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BOOK REVIEW

Beneath Hill 60: the Australian miners' secret warfare beneath the trenches of the Western Front

by Will Davies

Vintage Books: North Sydney; 2010; 272 pp.; ISBN 978 1 74166 936 7; RRP \$18.95 (paperback); Ursula Davidson Library call number 570.2 DAVI 2010



Many readers will have seen the film, *Beneath Hill 60: The Silent War*, a largely fictionalised account of the deeds of the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company in Flanders in 1916 and 1917. Readers may also be familiar with previous work by Will Davies, in particular *Somme Mud*¹, the diaries of Private E. P. F. Lynch, which he edited. Those who liked the film or Davies' earlier books will not be disappointed with *Beneath Hill 60*.

The book is much more than simply the story behind the film. It outlines the history of tunnelling operations in warfare dating back over a millennium, before focusing in detail on the use of tunnelling and mining in World War I. Tunnelling and mining on the Western Front were initiated by the Germans and it took the vision and technical knowledge of a British member of parliament, John Griffiths, to devise countermeasures. Griffiths put his proposals to the British high command, which eventually trialled them. Professional miners were recruited from British and Canadian coal mines and London sewer construction teams. In 1915, some eight British and three Canadian tunnelling companies were deployed on the Western Front. Drawing on their civilian skills and experience, these specialist tunnellers slowly devised and refined different sets of techniques appropriate to tunnelling through the different types of geological strata encountered along the trench line from the Somme to the Channel. Initially, German techniques were superior to British ones but slowly the British techniques came to match and eventually surpass those of the Germans, particularly the capacity for deep mining which the Germans never mastered.

While some Australians and New Zealanders with mining experience undertook tunnelling and mining on Gallipoli – to improve defence works and to counter Turkish tunnelling and mining activity (e.g. at Quinn's Post) and to support attacks (e.g. at Lone Pine) – specialist mining companies were not recruited and deployed until 1916 when three Australian and one New Zealand tunnelling companies were deployed to Flanders. By then, the British and Canadians had largely perfected their techniques, not only in tunnelling and mining, but also in countering the German tunnelling and in engaging the Germans in hand-to-hand combat in the tunnels. These techniques and tactics were duly passed on to the Australians who quickly mastered them, each company specialising in a suite of techniques and tactics appropriate to a particular set of geological strata.

The book, like the film, tends to focus on the deeds of the section of the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company led by Captain Oliver Woodward, MC**, as it is Woodward's unpublished diaries that provide much of the evidence on which the book is based. Interestingly, Woodward received his baptism of fire, not as a tunneller, but as a conventional combat engineer. Accompanied by a small infantry protection party, he crossed no-man's-land by night under enemy harassing fire, laid explosive charges within a German strong point (the 'Red House'), returned to the Allied trenches, deploying an ignition cable as he did so, then successfully blew the mine, which totally destroyed the Red House and initiated an infantry assault on the German line. For this gallant action, he was awarded his first Military Cross (MC).

Woodward's Australian tunnellers were not deployed to Hill 60 near Messines in Belgian Flanders until October 1916. There they took over a tunnel complex which had been fully prepared by the Canadians, including the packing of two massive mines beneath the German front line and the installation of the wiring system needed to detonate the mines. The Australians' job was two-fold: to maintain the tunnels, the mines and the ignition system against moisture and rising groundwater; and to protect the system against discovery by German tunnellers. This they managed to do – just – for eight months, before the mines were successfully detonated on 7 June 1917 with devastating results for the Germans. The detonation initiated the Battle of Messines.

Messines was the last formal use of tunnellers. For the remaining 17 months of the war, tunnellers were employed as conventional construction and combat engineers. Indeed, Woodward won his third MC eight days before the war's end, leading his section in constructing a tank bridge under enemy fire across the Canal de la Sambre à l'Oise as part of an assault river crossing by the British 1st Division. It was the last Australian action of the war.

Davies is an excellent writer who, while adhering to the historic evidence, employs the techniques of 'creative non-fiction' to bring his story alive. He has researched his narrative well, but the book has no maps, which it really needs, and there are a few annoying errors. Overall, though, I highly recommend the book to all interested in the role played by tunnelling and mining in the Great War and the small, but valuable, contribution made to it by Australian tunnellers.

¹See review at *United Service* 60 (4), 35 (December 2009)