



Lie of the land

Oliver Woodward describes the Hill 60 area in his memoirs as two sections divided by the cutting of the Ypres-Menin railway line.

"In the construction of this cutting the spoil was dumped in two areas of strategical (sic) importance in war," he wrote.

"Both dumps were on the

right-hand side of the cutting, one in the German and the other in the British lines."

By reason of its winding shape, the spoil dump in the German lines was referred to as the "Caterpillar", while that in the British lines was simply referred to as "The Dump".

The 60m contour enclosing the area of highest elevation in the vicinity (Hill 60) lay in the

German lines and in "No Man's Land".

Tunnellers historian Ross Thomas said Hill 60 changed hands several times as the war progressed and in May 1915 the Germans regained the landmark. They began its fortification during the following year.

The objective of tunnelling under Hill 60 and exploding mines was to capture the

Messines sector, an 8km ridge comprising the Ypres salient.

The Battle of Messines - which began with the June 7 blast - was a preliminary to the third battle of Ypres, which aimed to be a diversion for a joint Anglo-French assault elsewhere on the front to win the war outright.

Eventually this effort failed and the war again bogged down

on the Western Front until hostilities ceased on November 11, 1918.

However, Mr Thomas believes the Hill 60 explosion weakened German morale for the rest of the war, citing a comment from General von Ludendorff of the 204th Division that the blast was "simply staggering" for the Germans.

The stench of death

Tunnellers historian Ross Thomas describes the horrendous conditions experienced by all miners on the Western Front:

"Many diggers contracted influenza and bronchitis by working in the damp atmosphere - made worse by throat-choking dust - and had to agonisingly restrain from coughing and sneezing for fear of alerting the enemy.

To make shaft sinking conditions absolutely vile, there were occasions when digging in trenches exposed the putrefying remains of previously fallen soldiers.

Both underground and in the trenches there was an ever-present stench of death, with the sickening smell from a combination of dead bodies, excrement and filthy soldiers, not to forget the gas-stained mud in which the tunnellers toiled.

Lice and scavenging rats added to the appallingly unhygienic conditions. Sometimes uncharted latrines were encountered.

Self-induced conditions of poor candlelight illumination, combined with poor ventilation, left many tunnellers with headaches, dizziness and permanent sight loss.

Working under low-intensity lighting also caused an eye disorder called miners' nystagmus (common amongst coal miners), resulting in unsteadiness on the feet.

The tunnellers, as a result of their experiences, often trembled and were recognised by their pallid appearances.

The greatest killer of tunnellers was carbon monoxide gas generated from firings.

A close second was the horror of a cave-in, burial from a mud



Australian tunnellers working underground during World War I.

rush (with the ground turned to a horrific jelly as a result of continual artillery firing and underground blasting) or being blown skyward by an enemy mine or one of your own.

Tunnellers also had an abhorrent fear that their trench system would be captured by the enemy, only for the discovery to

be made by them on returning to the surface at the completion of their shift.

Not only were there casualties, heavy mental strain also took its toll.

If it was not for ample supplies of beef-tea and rum provided for the tunnellers, the toll most probably would be higher."

Greater recognition due for tunnellers' efforts

Although Captain Oliver Woodward's wartime achievements are beginning to receive wider recognition through the publicity surrounding an upcoming movie, the contributions of others associated with the Australian mining industry are equally deserving of commemoration.

The Australian Mining Battalion (later split into individual tunnelling companies) was formed in 1916 after Professors Tannatt William Edgeworth David and E.W. Skeats - geological department heads at the universities of Sydney and Melbourne - approached the Minister of Defence, acting on reports of underground warfare that had filtered back from Gallipoli. Meanwhile, professor of physics at the University of Sydney, J.A. Pollock, began work on a modified telephone or "geotelephone" for detecting faint sounds underground - one of Australia's first scientific contributions to the war.

By the end of 1916, three Australian companies and one New Zealand company were among a total of 32 Allied tunnelling companies.

Some of the tunnellers were members, or later became members, of the Australasian Institute of Mining and Metallurgy



The geotelephone - an Australian innovation.

(AusIMM). AusIMM's heritage committee drew *The Mining Advocate's* attention to Sergeant George Mason Hindmarsh, a member of the First Australian Tunnelling Company who distinguished himself at Hill 60 and was awarded the Military Medal.

As well as the Ypres Salient, Australian tunnellers engaged in their difficult form of combat on battlefields including the La Basse Canal, Loos, Vimy Ridge and the Somme.

Historian Ross Thomas believes these brave men have not been properly recognised, at least partly because underground warfare was often considered "ungentlemanly" by the top military brass. He said it was time for them to receive the recognition they deserved.