



## NEWSLETTER 1/2015

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### 'The Best System of Trenches in Australia': The Duntroon Trench Warfare and Bombing School

Mark Butz

In the First World War years, RMC Duntroon was one of the few aspects of the fledgling Federal Capital to prosper while construction funds were being redirected to the war effort. The AIF centralised Officer Training School was established at Duntroon in 1916, and connected to this was the School of Trench Warfare (later the Trench Warfare and Bombing School). (Moore 2001 p.50).

The School used a 'train the trainer' approach to instruct officers and SNCOs in attacking from, and defending, trenches. The officers would then return to their parent units as instructors. (Moore 2001 pp.50-51). The course ran for 18 days with about 32 students. Seven courses ran over 15 months, up to July 1917. (Duntroon Society 1/1986 p.7).

The AWM has two sets of notes taken by students of the course. These show that content included trench and dugout design, breastwork, saps and listening posts, wire entanglements, barricades and occupation of craters. It covered explosives, fuses and detonators for a range of grenades and bombs (including German models), and weapons such as machine guns, spring guns, trench catapults, and trench mortars. (AWM: 3DRL/6049; AWM: 3DRL/7111).

Over the years there have been references to a trench system, which has proved elusive ... until recent historical research on Jerrabomberra Wetlands finally located the area. On Mill Flat, on the opposite side of the Molonglo from the RMC, the School created an instructional system of trenches, dugouts, traverses and communication trenches. (*The Argus* (Melb) 27 Apr 1918 p.7) This was described as 'similar in every respect to those in Flanders' (*Queanbeyan Age & Queanbeyan Observer* 31 March 1916 p.2). In a speech to troops in 1916, the Governor-General declared it was 'the best system of trenches in Australia' (*Queanbeyan Age & Queanbeyan Observer* 21 Apr 1916 p.2).

The trenches were dug by personnel from 'The Men from Snowy River', the recruiting march which started at Delegate near the Victorian border and ended at the training camp at Goulburn. In March 1916 a 'trench-digging contingent' of sixty men travelled back to Duntroon to create the trench system. (*Goulburn Evening Penny Post* 30 Mar 1916 p.2) It occupied approximately 10 acres of alluvial river bank land, adjacent to the road to the old Duntroon ford. This had been part of a Lucerne Paddock, now known as the 'RMC bombing area' (NAA: A192, FCL

1920/927) or 'Bombing paddock'. (NAA: A361, DSG21/49).

Newspaper accounts describe the trench system as 'one of the show features of Duntroon'. Instructors from all parts of NSW were coming to Duntroon and 'using the trenches as models'. (*Goulburn Evening Penny Post* 30 Mar 1916 p.2) The chief instructor at Duntroon was Major E.L.D. Brownell, assisted by Lieutenant J.C. Vines (based also at Liverpool), both Imperial officers. The historical research has turned up some interesting details about both instructors.

Instructional use of the Duntroon trench system was captured in a motion picture produced as a 'preparedness war film', released in 1916 initially as 'Australia Prepared' and later as 'Australia at War'. (*Sydney Morning Herald* 17 Jul 1916 p.4). Some of the film's trench warfare scenes were filmed at Duntroon and some at Liverpool. A Sydney weekend magazine in May 1916 also featured pictures of the Duntroon system being used for training, with bombs and smoke. (*Sunday Times* 7 May 1916 p.19)

The Duntroon installation was modelled on the 'Island Traverse System', considered at that time to be the best trench system, 'probably due to the fact of Science playing such a leading part in the present warfare'. (Eichler in AWM 3DRL/6049).

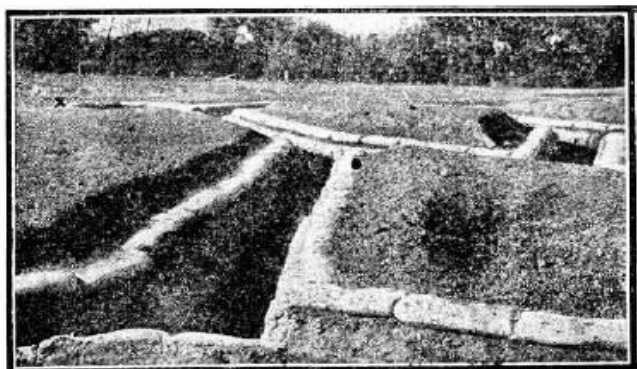
The system was located initially through examination of aerial photographs, and confirmed by references on survey maps and files from 1919-20. With contrast enhancement, the extent of the system was quite evident in aerial photographs of 1940 and discernible in 1951.



Trench system beside the Molonglo, 1940 (National Library of Australia: MAP Aerial Photograph Collection 1 55 16 451).

Based on notes and diagrams by attendees at the School (AWM: 3DRL/6049; AWM: 3DRL/7111), the Duntroon trenches appear to be a thin cross-section of a trench system, including:

- a first line fire trench with island traverses;
- an inspection or observation trench;
- a bombing trench (with recessed positions for a spring gun, catapult and trench mortar); and
- a second line fire trench with island traverses and with these intersected at right angles by communication trenches.



Trench system (National Library of Australia: *Sunday Times* 7 May 1916 p.19)

There are signs of what may be a bombing sap and a listening post or sap forward of the first fire trench.

Road construction in 1936 may have obliterated the line of an attack trench, and there are signs of what may be dugouts or a living trench at the rear. It is likely that the terrain also included craters from bombs or mines. It is known to have included some barbed wire entanglements.

The Officer Training School closed in July 1917, after which it is likely that the trench system remained largely unattended, although it may have been used at times for instruction of the RMC cadets. (Moore p.51).

In 1936, an approach road to a new bridge across the Molonglo (later Dairy Flat bridge) was constructed across the system. The lessee of the dairy at that time took this opportunity to fill in the trenches because they were hazardous for his cattle. (ACT Archives TL4463 Pt.1).

The trench system is being investigated by postgraduate archaeology students from the Australian National University.



ANU students on site—getting to work on sub-surface survey. (Photo: Mark Butz)

With a range of ‘Time Team’ techniques so far proving inconclusive (the site has been repeatedly flooded and much of it heavily disturbed with spoil dumps), trial excavations are planned, under the watchful eye of the ACT Heritage Unit. It is hoped that this work will provide guidance on how best to present and interpret the site, noting that the centenary of the trench system comes around in March 2016.

#### Sources:

Moore, Darren 2001. *Duntroon: a History of the Royal Military College of Australia*. 2001 Royal Military College of Australia, Canberra.

ACT Archives: TL4463 Parts 1 & 2 Block 3 Section 1 Fyshwick. Dairy Block 3 – S Frederiksen.

AWM F00143 Film: *Australia Prepared: Her Part in the World's War 1916*.

AWM: 3DRL/6049 Lt A M Eichler - Bombing and Trench Warfare School No.11 – Duntroon Royal Military College - Feb 8th -28th 1917.

AWM: 3DRL/7111 Lt C L Fox – Bombing and Trench Warfare School No.7 – Duntroon F.T. September 1916.

NAA: A192, FCL 1920/927 Molonglo Concentration Camp [Digital copy].

NAA: A361, DSG 21/49 Grass fire Mill Flat.

NLA: MAP RM 3146 (nla\_map-rm3146) Plan showing lucerne lands, Federal Territory, available for lease (Lease Ordinance, 1919).

Duntroon Society Newsletter 1/1986 p.7.

Newspapers retrieved via NLA Trove:

*The Argus* (Melb), 27 Apr 1918 p.7

*Goulburn Evening Penny Post* 30 Mar 1916 p.2

*Queanbeyan Age & Queanbeyan Observer*, 31 March 1916 p.2

*Queanbeyan Age & Queanbeyan Observer*, 21 Apr 1916 p.2

*Sunday Times* (Syd), 7 May 1916, p.19.

*Sydney Morning Herald*, 17 Jul 1916, p.4.

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Mark Butz is a writer/researcher with a background in earth sciences and ecology, and a lifelong interest in palaeontology, history, and archaeology. He worked with government agencies for more than two decades before starting his own business in 2012, as a facilitator, consultant, trainer and coach, mixed with voluntary roles in not-for-profit organisations. He has lived in Canberra since 1980 and before that in the Snowy Mountains and Sydney, while cultivating an increasingly close connection with the Eurobodalla coast. He is currently engaged in writing a comprehensive history of the Jerrabomberra Wetlands and environs, and a history of nature conservation in the ACT.

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