

# Gunner Robert Buie

## *Baron beware*

*As the two planes headed towards the Digger, he concentrated his sights on the second aircraft, muttering under his breath, 'Break right. Break right'. He held his fire until the Allied plane had passed overhead, then, as the pursuing enemy aircraft crossed the sights of his Lewis gun, the Digger squeezed the trigger, sending a stream of bullets towards his target.*

Robert Buie was born in the little village of Brooklyn, New South Wales.<sup>1</sup> He earned his livelihood fishing the waters of the Hawkesbury River, then selling his catch to markets in and around North Sydney.

By October 1916, the Great War had been raging for two full years. AIF casualties were high following the fierce battles in the Somme Valley, particularly at Pozieres and Fromelles. Buie, who was at the time working in the Northern Rivers district, realised there seemed to be no end in sight to this bloody war, that victory over the Germans was the only way to restore peace to Europe and safeguard the Motherland. Reinforcements were desperately needed.



*Gunner Robert Buie. (Family Collection)*

Buie volunteered for war service at the recruiting depot in the country town of Grafton and was posted to the 10<sup>th</sup> Reinforcements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Pioneer Battalion.<sup>1</sup> He was sent by train to the Sydney Show Grounds, which the military had taken over as a training camp for new recruits.

In early January 1917, the camp was agog with rumours that Buie's draft was scheduled to embark for England any time within the following three weeks. Buie decided to snatch a little extra pre embarkation leave. On 10 January, a warrant was issued for his arrest as a deserter.<sup>1</sup> It isn't clear whether Bob was arrested or surrendered, but he did embark on the troopship *Anchises* on 24 January.<sup>2</sup>

In late March, after the long voyage to England, Buie marched into the Pioneer Training Battalion based at Fovant. He soon realised 'pioneer' work was not to his liking and in November 1917 he transferred to the field artillery, with the rank of gunner.<sup>1</sup>

Allocated to the 53<sup>rd</sup> Battery, Buie not only proved himself a competent gunner but also an excellent machine-gunner—with the ability to operate a Lewis gun with lethal accuracy.

Following the collapse of the Russian Front, the German Army's main thrust could now be directed at the Allied line. Strengthened by the arrival of additional Divisions from the east, the Germans launched a savage attack along the British and French fronts. As units reeled under the ferocity of the attack, the Allied line began to crumble. The Australian, New Zealand and Canadian Divisions were rushed from the south. If the German push was not stopped, and the vital Channel ports fell to the enemy, Great Britain would be isolated.

The 53<sup>rd</sup> Battery was heavily engaged in the fighting, its 18-pounder guns bombarding the enemy positions day and night. At Villers-Bretonneux, the Australians held their ground against repeated attacks by the seasoned German troops.

It was Sunday 21 April 1918 and the Australian gun lines stretched across the Bray–Corbie Road.<sup>3</sup> With their guns dug-in and ammunition at the ready, the Diggers prepared themselves for the next German onslaught—determined to stay and fight to hold their position.

Buie was the 53<sup>rd</sup> Battery's anti-aircraft gunner. As he sat on an empty ammunition box, a hot brew resting on the ground between his feet, he could hear the distant drone of aircraft. He took little notice, as this was a familiar sound at the front line. He was engrossed with the task in hand—cleaning his Lewis gun—when he heard the frantic warning, 'Air raid! Air raid!' Grabbing his gun and slamming a drum of ammunition into the breech as he ran, he dashed to his post.

Buie scanned the skies looking for the approaching aircraft. He glanced at his mate 'Digger' Evans who manned the Lewis beside him.<sup>3</sup> They exchanged a conspiratorial thumbs up, then watched with interest as the aircraft flew towards them, locked in aerial combat. The German squadron was dominating the Allies—two British planes had gone down in flames and now a third spiralled towards the ground.

At the last moment, the pilot pulled back on the throttle, levelled out his aircraft and headed towards the Allied lines, a German plane in hot pursuit. The British pilot used evasive tactics to shake his enemy tail, but the German seemed able to anticipate every move, peppering his opponent with bursts of machine-gun fire. A second Allied aircraft was attempting to manoeuvre above and behind the German, but was too far away from the fight. On the ground, Allied machine-guns fired unsuccessfully at the German plane.<sup>3</sup>

Bombardier JS Seccull, who commanded the 53<sup>rd</sup> Battery's anti-aircraft guns, watched as the two planes approached them.<sup>3</sup> As they came closer, he noticed the unmistakable red tri plane. 'Bloody hell! It's the Baron!', he yelled.

Both Evans and Buie sighted the approaching aircraft, but the position of the Allied plane impeded their having a clear shot. Evans was the first to shoot but his fire was ineffective. Buie held his breath and prayed for the plane to break right. Suddenly, there was the Red Baron, directly in front of him. He fired his gun, aiming directly at the cockpit. He watched as the bullets found their mark—bits of the aircraft flew into the air as the damaged plane plummeted towards the ground.

The Diggers sent up an almighty cheer as the aircraft skidded to a halt in a field a couple of hundred metres away. They rushed to the smouldering wreckage where they found the lifeless body of Baron Manfred Von Richtofen.

Controversy surrounded the death of the German 'ace'. Everyone who had fired a shot during the aerial dogfight wanted to claim the kill. To settle the matter, the Allied high command launched its own internal investigation. About a month after the incident, Buie was called into the battery command post. 'Well done, mate', praised the gun position officer as he handed Buie the despatch from General Rawlinson, the commander of the Fourth Army. As a result of the investigation, Buie was given credit for bringing down the Red Baron.<sup>1</sup>

A couple of weeks later, the 'brass' visited the battery. 'Well done, Gunner Buie', General Birdwood congratulated as he shook hands with the Digger. The two chatted about the events leading up to the action and Birdwood mentioned that it would have been better if the Red Baron had been wounded and taken prisoner. As he was about to depart, Birdwood paused to admire the anti-aircraft sight atop Bob's Lewis gun. The old general whispered to Buie, 'Do you mind if I have this as a memento, lad?'<sup>4</sup>

Bob Buie was given a week's 'Blighty' (rest and recreational leave in England) as a reward for his actions. He was also formally congratulated in Divisional Routine Orders.<sup>1</sup>

Buie continued to serve with the 53<sup>rd</sup> Battery throughout the spring of 1918. Although his records do not indicate it, he was gassed—causing damage to his body that would affect his future health. On 29 July, Buie's condition was such that he required hospitalisation. It was severe enough to warrant his evacuation to England in the first week of August.<sup>1</sup> (An eye witness stated that Bob was in fact hospitalised as the result of a gunshot wound which he suffered on 8 August 1918. Again, this is not noted in his service records.)

Whilst in England he was diagnosed with myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle, which required hospital treatment for a further two months.<sup>1</sup>

On 19 December 1918, Buie sailed for Australia on board the troop transport ship, HMAT *Somali*. He spent Christmas and New Year aboard ship, but with his poor state of health, he didn't feel like celebrating. On his return to Australia,

Buie was admitted to the military hospital at Randwick and was eventually discharged from the AIF as medically unfit on 7 September 1919.<sup>1</sup>

The military authorities ruled that as Buie's illness was not 'war related' he was not eligible to receive a war pension—but as he had been gassed and suffered a bullet wound, he should not have been denied this financial support. To add to his woes, there was renewed controversy regarding the death of the Red Baron.

The official Australian war historian, CEW Bean believed that it was not Buie who brought down the German air ace, but another machine-gunner, Sergeant Cedric Popkin of the 24<sup>th</sup> Machine Gun Company.<sup>3</sup> Also, Canadian pilot Captain Roy Brown—who was in command of the third aircraft involved in the action at the time of the Baron's death—was adamant that he had brought down the German by firing from behind and above the tri plane.

However, close examination of the Baron's body showed that all wounds were to the front: no wounds at all were suffered from the rear, hence Brown couldn't have fired the fatal shot. It was to become a controversy that remains unresolved.

Buie returned to his life as a fisherman but he was constantly plagued by ill health. Times were hard and, without the support of a war pension, he struggled to provide for himself.

In 1936, with the country gripped by the Great Depression, he moved to the Sydney suburb of Paddington and sought work wherever and whenever he could find it.

A fire robbed him of his service medals, his Returned from Active Service Badge and his discharge papers—all destroyed in the blaze.<sup>5</sup> As ex-servicemen were given a priority in the job line, the lack of any proof of his military service made obtaining work all but impossible.<sup>6,7</sup>

Buie returned to his hometown of Brooklyn. He repeatedly applied for a War Service Pension, but was refused each time. Bob married a local divorcee, Laurel, who supported him through the difficult years that followed. His health continued to deteriorate, but he was forced to spend his days and nights fishing on the Hawkesbury River, trying to eke out a living for his family, who at times existed on a diet of a few stringy vegetables.

In 1956, Buie applied to Army Headquarters, Melbourne, for replacements of the medals which had been destroyed in the 1936 fire. In the letter of reply, he was informed that they would cost more than one pound three shillings—an amount the family could not afford.<sup>8</sup>

Eventually, Bob applied for and was granted a meagre invalid pension that was barely enough on which to survive.

On ANZAC Day 1964, just a few days after the 46<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of the Red Baron, Buie took his boat out for a night of fishing. Next day, when he

failed to return, his family became understandably worried so his son Kelly launched a search. He found his father's fishing boat drifting in a tributary, and slumped across the seat was the body of the old Digger.<sup>9</sup>

A few days after Bob's death, Laurel Buie wrote a heartfelt letter to Army Headquarters, advising them that she and her family had been left destitute by her husband's death. She requested his service record to enable her to apply for some form of assistance. At the same time, she asked for information regarding the Victoria Cross which she believed her husband had been awarded for shooting down the Red Baron.<sup>10</sup>

A reply came the following month stating that Gunner Robert Buie had neither been awarded nor even recommended for the VC.<sup>11</sup> The family was devastated as they were sure he had received something for bringing down the German ace.

Laurel again wrote to Army Headquarters requesting a copy of her husband's medals. In the letter, she outlined that Bob had earlier applied for a replacement set and she was now able and willing to pay the 23 shillings to obtain them for his children.<sup>12</sup> Unbeknownst to Laurel, Bob's right to obtain replacement medals had expired upon his death.

At this point, the Brisbane Waters Branch of Legacy stepped in to assist Laurel and her family with food and education expenses.



*Headstone—Robert Buie's grave, Brooklyn, NSW. (Author's Collection)*

The Buie family continued to fight for recognition of Bob's efforts. If he had not been awarded a VC, then perhaps it was the next best thing, so in 1973 Bob's daughter Merleine attempted to have Bob posthumously awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal, which she felt sure her father had earned but never claimed.<sup>13</sup> Again they were informed that no manner of decoration had been awarded or recommended.

Bob Buie, the man who so many believe shot down the Red Baron, was laid to rest in the Brooklyn Cemetery. His family continues to fight for the recognition that they believe he so justly deserves.

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Author's note: My sincere thanks to Bob's nephew, Mr Morrie Buie, Bob's son, Kelly and the entire Buie family for providing some of the personal details relating to Gunner Bob Buie's postwar life.

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### Notes

- 1 National Archives of Australia: B2455, WW1 Service Records, 3801 Gunner R Buie
- 2 AWM 8, Unit Embarkation Nominal Rolls, 1<sup>st</sup> Pioneer Battalion AIF, 1914–1918 War
- 3 Bean, CEW, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Volume V, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1936
- 4 R Buie, letter to the Editor, *Central Coast Express*, Gosford, June 1957 and Blankfield, A & Scorfield, R, *Never Forget Australia*, Villers-Bretonneux 75th Anniversary Pilgrimage Committee, Melbourne, 1993
- 5 R Buie, Statutory Declaration, Paddington, NSW, 18 December 1936
- 6 R Buie, letter to Officer in Charge, Base Records, Melbourne, 6 December 1936
- 7 R Buie, letter to Officer in Charge, Base Records, Melbourne, 28 December 1936
- 8 Officer in Charge, Base Records, Melbourne, letter to R Buie, 24 July 1956
- 9 Buie Family, interview with the author, October 2001
- 10 L Buie, letter to Officer in Charge, Base Records, Melbourne 28 April 1964
- 11 Officer in Charge, Base Records, Melbourne, letter to L Buie, 25 May 1964
- 12 L Buie, letter to Central Army Records Office, Melbourne, 14 June 1967
- 13 M Chidzey, letter to Central Army Records Office, dated 6 March 1973