

# INVESTIGATING THE AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCE OF THE WESTERN FRONT 1916–18

After the defeat at Gallipoli most of the ANZACs returned to Egypt, before being sent to the 'Western Front' in northern France and southern Belgium to fight against German troops.

While 50 000 ANZACs fought at Gallipoli and 8 000 died there, far more fought and died on the Western Front — 300 000 and 50 000 deaths. So while Gallipoli and Anzac Day are the powerful symbols of the involvement of Australians in the war, the far longer and more common experience was on the Western Front.

This Western Front experience is investigated in this issue.



ANM ART03645

H Septimus Power, *Stretcher bearers*

# Introduction

2015 is the 100th anniversary of the first major Australian involvement in World War 1 — the landing at Gallipoli.

This event, together with the subsequent Australian campaigns on the Western Front and Palestine in 1916-1918, are being officially commemorated by a large government-sponsored program.

In the previous units in this series we have asked what type of society Australia was in 1914 when World War 1 began, what the reactions were in Australia to its outbreak, what decisions the society had to make once war had started, and what happened at the landing at Anzac on 25 April, what happened on the Home Front during the war, and ways you can investigate the war in your local community.

For these units go to <http://www.servingaustralia.info/education/#estudies>

While we emphasise the Australian experience at Gallipoli, far more Australian soldiers and nurses experienced war for a longer time on the Western Front.

This unit shows how you can explore this experience.

# RSL COMMEMORATIVE PROGRAM – SERVING AUSTRALIA



This unit is part of an educational program about the centenary of Australian involvement in World War 1. It is sponsored as a civic and educational contribution to the young people of Australia by the Returned and Services League (RSL) and addresses the requirements of the Australian Curriculum History at Years 9 and 11/12.

Some of the main elements of this program include:

- ➔ Three curriculum units per year in eStudies for use at Years 6 and 9 to 12
- ➔ A new *Serving Australia website*, [www.servingaustralia.info](http://www.servingaustralia.info), that contains video, interactive modules, timelines, Centenary updates and information about youth and community programs.
- ➔ the App *Which WW1 hero are you?* in which students answer a series of personal questions which direct them to identifying a World War 1 Australian hero who had similar attitudes, values and characteristics.

**How did Australians respond to war in 1914? Why did they respond in these ways?**

An evidence-based classroom activity about Australia and the outbreak of World War 1. The activity asks students to investigate how the Australian public responded to the war.

**Can you make 10 good decisions about what Australia should do?**

**ALL COMMEMORATIVE PROGRAM - SHARING OPINIONS**

**WILL THIS SOCIETY GO TO WAR?**

An evidence-based classroom activity about Australia and the outbreak of World War 1. The activity asks students to investigate how the Australian public responded to the war.

**ALL COMMEMORATIVE PROGRAM - SHARING OPINIONS**

**AUSTRALIA IS AT WAR WITH GERMANY**

Can you make 10 good decisions about what Australia should do?

**ALL COMMEMORATIVE PROGRAM - SHARING OPINIONS**

**THE LANDING AT GALLIPOLI**  
What actually happened on April 25 1915?

**MYTHS FACTS OR MYTH**

**ALL COMMEMORATIVE PROGRAM - SHARING OPINIONS**

**CONNECTING WITH AND COMMEMORATING THE CENTENARY OF ANZAC**

**How can you commemorate 1915?**

**ALL COMMEMORATIVE PROGRAM - SHARING OPINIONS**

**Investigating THE AUSTRALIAN HOME FRONT**  
During the First World War

**1914-1918**

**ALL COMMEMORATIVE PROGRAM - SHARING OPINIONS**



# ACTIVITY

# 2

## Testing the image

Here are nine photographs of Australian experiences of the Western Front.

**2.1** Describe what each shows.



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## ACTIVITY 2 >>



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**2.2** Which ones fit the image you recorded in Activity 1? \_\_\_\_\_

**2.3** Which ones challenge that image? How? \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**2.4** Do any of these images surprise you? Explain why or why not. \_\_\_\_\_

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\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**2.5** What questions do these images raise in your mind about the nature of the war experience of Australians on the Western Front? For example, for the first image you might ask 'What caused so much damage?' or 'How would soldiers feel about having to live in these conditions?'. Suggest at least two questions that you would ask about each image. Write the questions under each image.



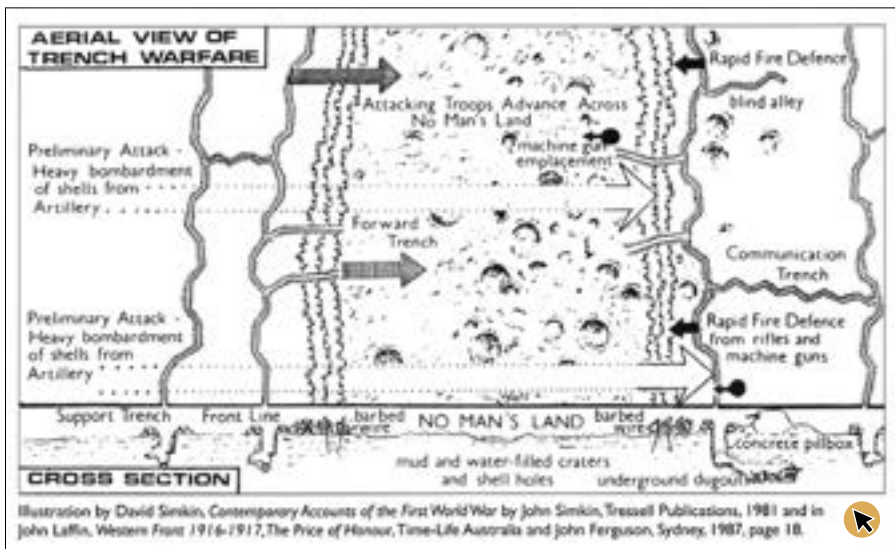
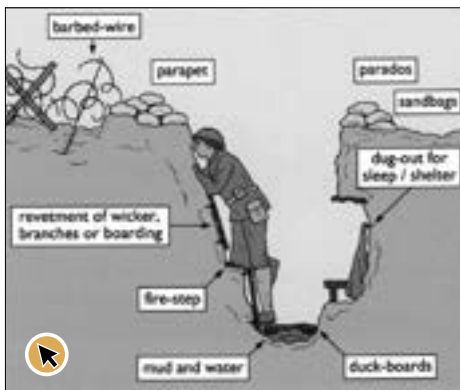
# ACTIVITY

# 3

## Understanding the theory of trench warfare

War on the Western Front was 'trench warfare'.

Look at the following illustrations and answer the questions that follow.



**3.1** What is the main purpose of a trench?

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**3.2** Do you think there would be problems with:

- cooking
- water
- washing
- sleeping
- keeping warm
- hygiene
- boredom

**3.3** List the words that best describe life in the trenches to you.

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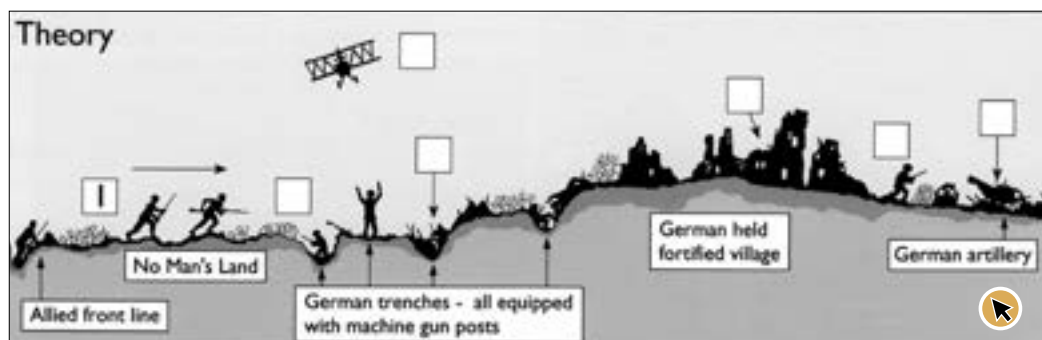


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Look at this sketch, showing the image or **theory** of trench warfare tactics.



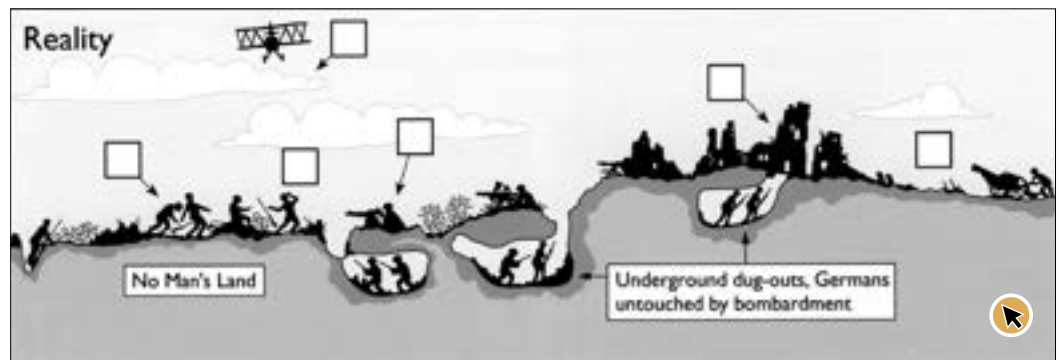
## ACTIVITY 3 >>

3.4

Here are seven descriptions of what the Allied soldiers are doing in the sketch. They are not in the correct order. Number them in the correct order from 1-7 that tells the story of what is happening. One example has been done for you.

- The Allied soldiers have an aeroplane above the area that tells them what is happening.
- The Allied soldiers destroy the enemy trenches and capture the Germans.
- The Allied soldiers destroy the enemy village.
- 1 Allied soldiers are advancing.
- The Allied soldiers cut the enemy barbed wire.
- The Allied soldiers destroy the German guns.
- The Germans run away.

Now look at this second sketch showing the **reality** of trench warfare tactics.



3.5 It compares the theory of trench warfare with what it says is the reality. Write in number 1 to 6 in the empty boxes, and explain what is happening at each stage to make the attack fail.

1 \_\_\_\_\_

2 \_\_\_\_\_

3 \_\_\_\_\_

4 \_\_\_\_\_

5 \_\_\_\_\_

6 \_\_\_\_\_

3.6 Why did the defenders have such a great advantage against attackers in trench warfare?

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# ACTIVITY

# 4

## What was battle like for the soldiers?

The illustration in Activity 3 shows what it says was the reality of trench warfare. But what was the experience of the Western Front really like for the Australian soldiers?

Soldiers were in the front lines for perhaps 15 per cent of the time, in rear trenches about 40 per cent of the time, and out of the fighting – kilometres away, resting in a village, flirting with the local women, enjoying a drink, playing cards with their mates, fussing over village children, on leave in Britain – about 45 per cent of the time. And not all troops were front line infantry – there were engineers, cooks, medical orderlies, clerks, laundrymen, bakers, signallers, drivers. But most soldiers were infantrymen near the front, and most experienced at least one attack.

**4.1** Look at the evidence that follows about that experience and use it to create a **summary table (see next page)** about the various aspects or features of trench warfare on the Western Front. As you work through the evidence you should print the **Background material A, B and C** and keep it with you.

Start by looking at the 9 images in Activity 2, and discuss what they tell you about the various aspects of war on the

Western Front.

Then the best way of summarising the remaining evidence is to divide the evidence pages among small groups, and have every group report back to the whole class on what their evidence showed. Everybody can then summarise the findings on their own summary table.

**4.2** When you have completed the table discuss these questions:

- Were all soldiers brave? Did all show courage?
- How could soldiers have continued to accept these conditions, and keep fighting?
- Would you say the nurses showed courage? Explain your reasons.
- How did visits to England influence Australian attitudes towards the English?
- How did visits to England influence Australian identity?
- For soldiers who survived the war, what problems can you anticipate they might face after the war?

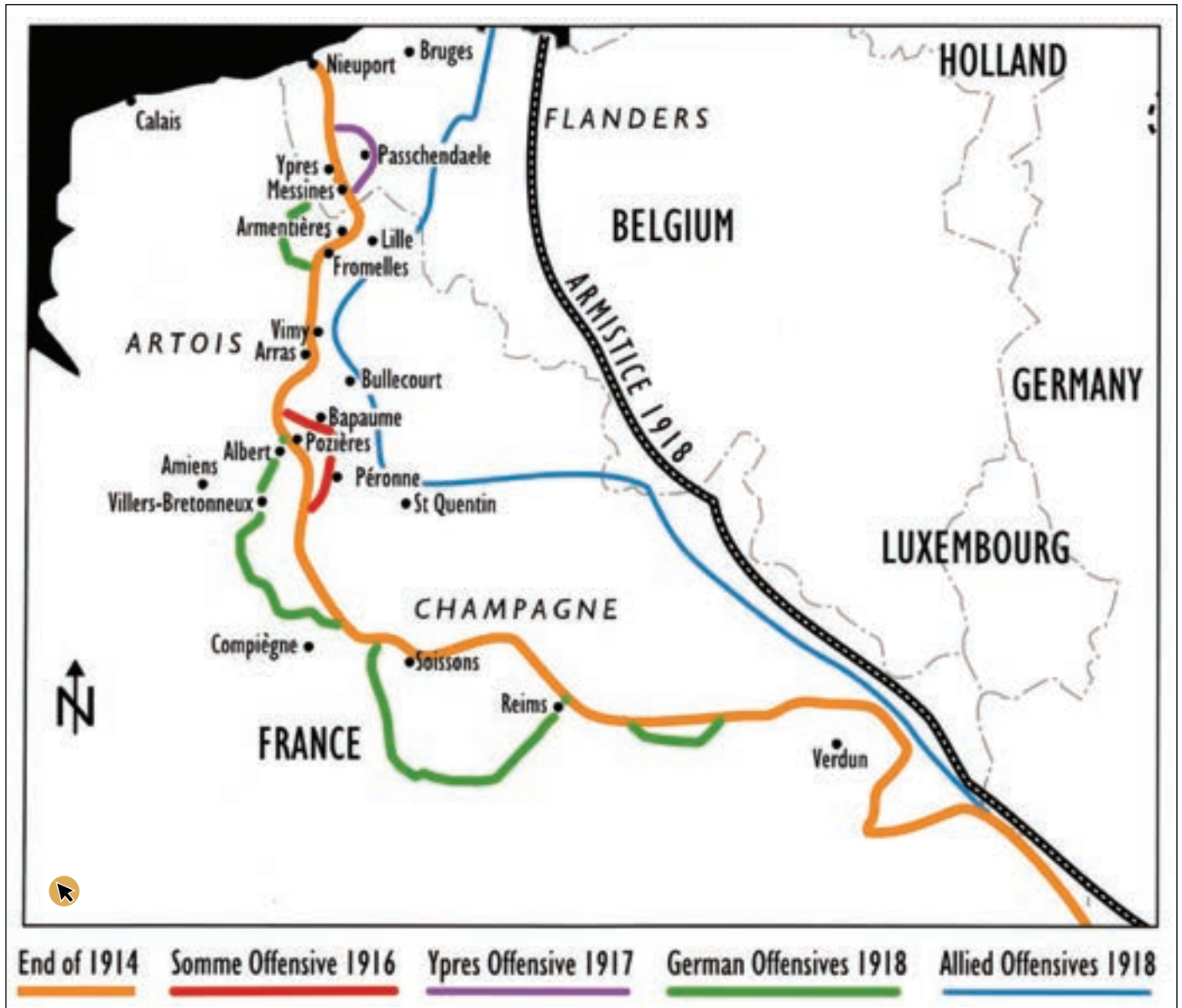




Aspect of the Australian Experience of the Western Front	Questions to Decide	Your Comments
<b>ATTITUDE TO ENEMY</b>	What was the attitude to the enemy?	
<b>BATTLE INJURIES</b>	What were the main causes of injuries?	
<b>ATTITUDES TO THE WAR</b>	How did soldiers feel about the experience?	
<b>CLIMATE/ WEATHER</b>	What was the climate like? How did it affect the soldiers' experience?	
<b>TRENCH LIFE</b>	What was life like in the trenches	
<b>BEHIND THE LINES</b>	What was life like out of the trenches?	
<b>WEAPONS AND WAR</b>	What was the nature of the fighting on the Western Front?	
<b>FOOD</b>	What food was available to the soldiers?	
<b>HEALTH AND HYGIENE</b>	Were the conditions hygienic? Did this affect the soldiers' health?	
<b>MEDICAL</b>	What was the medical system like for the wounded and ill?	
<b>NURSES</b>	What was life like for the nurses on the Western Front?	
<b>STRETCHER BEARERS</b>	What was the role of the stretcher bearers?	
<b>SUPPLIES</b>	How were supplies provided to the troops?	
<b>IN ENGLAND</b>	How did leave in England influence the soldiers' sense of national identity?	


As you work through this unit you should refer to this map of the changes that occurred to the location of the front lines between 1914 and 1918, and to the overview of the stages of the war, and Australians' participation in it.

**A** CHANGING FRONT LINES



**B AN OVERVIEW OF THE WAR AND AUSTRALIA'S PARTICIPATION**

Note: the numbers beside the Australian battles refer to Map C.

YEAR	OVERVIEW	MAP "C" REFERENCE — see page 13
1914	<p>In August 1914 the Germans tried to win a quick victory over France which would then let them move their forces east, to fight the huge but cumbersome Russian army. (See Map 1.) They did this by avoiding the heavily defended French-German border, and invading France through its undefended borders with Belgium and Luxembourg – an invasion which brought Britain into the war.</p> <p>The Germans failed to overwhelm the Allies in a series of actions fought in northern France and in Belgium. By late 1914, the Western Front existed – the dividing line between the Germans, and the British and French. The meeting point between the British and French lines was near Compiègne. For the next four years, both sides sought to break through the enemy's positions with a war-winning campaign that would lead to victory in the west.</p>	
1915	<p>During 1915 and the early months of 1916, a number of major attacks were launched by both sides seeking this elusive break-through. None of these attacks gained significant ground, and casualties were heavy.</p>	
1916	<p>In 1916, Britain and France planned a joint major offensive in the Somme area, but the Germans struck in February with a huge attack on French forts at Verdun. The French had to pull many of their forces out of the proposed Somme offensive, but the British went ahead with the attack, to take the pressure off Verdun.</p> <p>The AIF was sent to the area to be part of the British offensive. The AIF had increased after Gallipoli to four divisions—1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Divisions—each with 12 infantry battalions of approximately 1200 men, along with artillery, transport, supply and medical units. Another division, the 3rd, was formed in England but did not enter service until mid-1917.</p> <p>The AIF was soon pulled into this struggle. Its first major involvement, at Fromelles on 19-20 July, was a slaughter. Within twenty-four hours, the Australians were forced to retreat to their start lines and the division suffered more than 5000 casualties (that is, dead and wounded).</p> <p>Between 23 July and 3 September, the AIF's 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions mounted a series of major attacks in this area to capture Pozières village, the heights to the east and then positions to the north and west towards Mouquet Farm. In general, all the Australian objectives were taken, but at a frightful cost on both sides. The Germans regarded Pozières and the heights as vital positions, and subjected the AIF to massive artillery bombardment and many desperate counter-attacks. In all, the four Australian divisions suffered more than 23 000 casualties in six weeks—a total about equal to the casualties suffered on Gallipoli in eight months.</p>	<p>6 <b>Fromelles</b> July 1916 The 5th Division suffers a disastrous defeat in the first major Australian operation on the Western Front.</p> <p>8 <b>Pozières</b> July–August 1916 1st Anzac Corps captures Pozières village and the heights beyond.</p> <p>9 <b>Mouquet Farm</b> August–September 1916 Australian defeat – After Pozières, 1st Anzac Corps fails to capture Mouquet Farm.</p> <p>15 <b>Guedecourt</b> November 1916 Rested after Pozières, 1st Anzac Corps returns to the Somme, making limited gains.</p>
1917	<p>The year 1917 saw the pattern continue, with major campaigns seeking a decisive breakthrough in France, and in Belgium, around Ypres and Passchendaele. The early fighting in Belgium saw advances, but then the weather broke and persistent rainfall turned the low-lying battlefield into a sea of mud, and the advance bogged down. Between August and November 1917, all five divisions of the AIF fought at Ypres, suffering 33 699 casualties of whom 11 260 were killed.</p> <p>In 1917, the United States entered the war on the Allied side, though troops did not arrive until 1918. Revolution broke out in the Russian Empire, and the Bolshevik Government started negotiating to end the war with Germany.</p>	<p>16 <b>Lagnicourt</b> April 1917 The Australians repulse a German counterattack between the First and Second Battles of Bullecourt.</p> <p>7 <b>Bullecourt</b> April–May 1917 During the Battle of Arras, the first Australian attack on Bullecourt fails, the second succeeds.</p> <p>5 <b>Messines</b> June 1917 Australian victory – 3rd Division's first major battle.</p> <p>3 <b>Polygon Wood</b> September 1917 Australian victory at 3rd Battle of Ypres.</p> <p>4 <b>Menin Road</b> September 1917 Beginning of the Australian participation in 3rd Battle of Ypres – Australian victory.</p> <p>1 <b>Passchendaele</b> October–November 1917 Failed Australian attack in the final phase of 3rd Battle of Ypres.</p> <p>2 <b>Broodseinde</b> October–November 1917 Australian victory, the third in a series of successes after the Battle of Menin Road.</p>

## 1918

In March 1918 the new Bolshevik government under Vladimir Lenin took Russia out of the war by signing a separate peace treaty with Germany. This made it possible for the Germans to strengthen their armies on the Western Front, and they planned a great offensive for early 1918 to crush the British and the French forces before the United States could build up a large army in France.

On 21 March 1918, the Germans began a series of offensives aimed at pushing a wedge between the British forces in the north and the French armies to the south, and breaking the Allied defences.

Initially, the Germans had great success and the British army was forced back many kilometres across the old Somme battlefield. The AIF divisions, which had wintered in the trenches in Belgium, were rushed south to help stem the German advance. The Australians held off strong enemy attacks and helped stabilise the British line. Australians also helped to halt another German offensive to the north of Armentières, during April. Further to the south, east of the major centre of Amiens, units of the AIF were instrumental in halting German thrusts at two actions around the town of Villers-Bretonneux on 4 April and 24–25 April. These actions were later interpreted by the local French population as having saved Amiens. By late July 1918, the German attempts to break the Allied line had failed and the enemy was now decidedly on the defensive.

The nature of the war now changed as the Allies mounted one last great offensive. This time the war became one of progress across firm ground, not the bogged-down trench warfare in a blasted landscape that characterised the earlier years. The ANZACs were part of a final push that broke open the last German defences, the Hindenburg Line, and forced Germany to surrender.

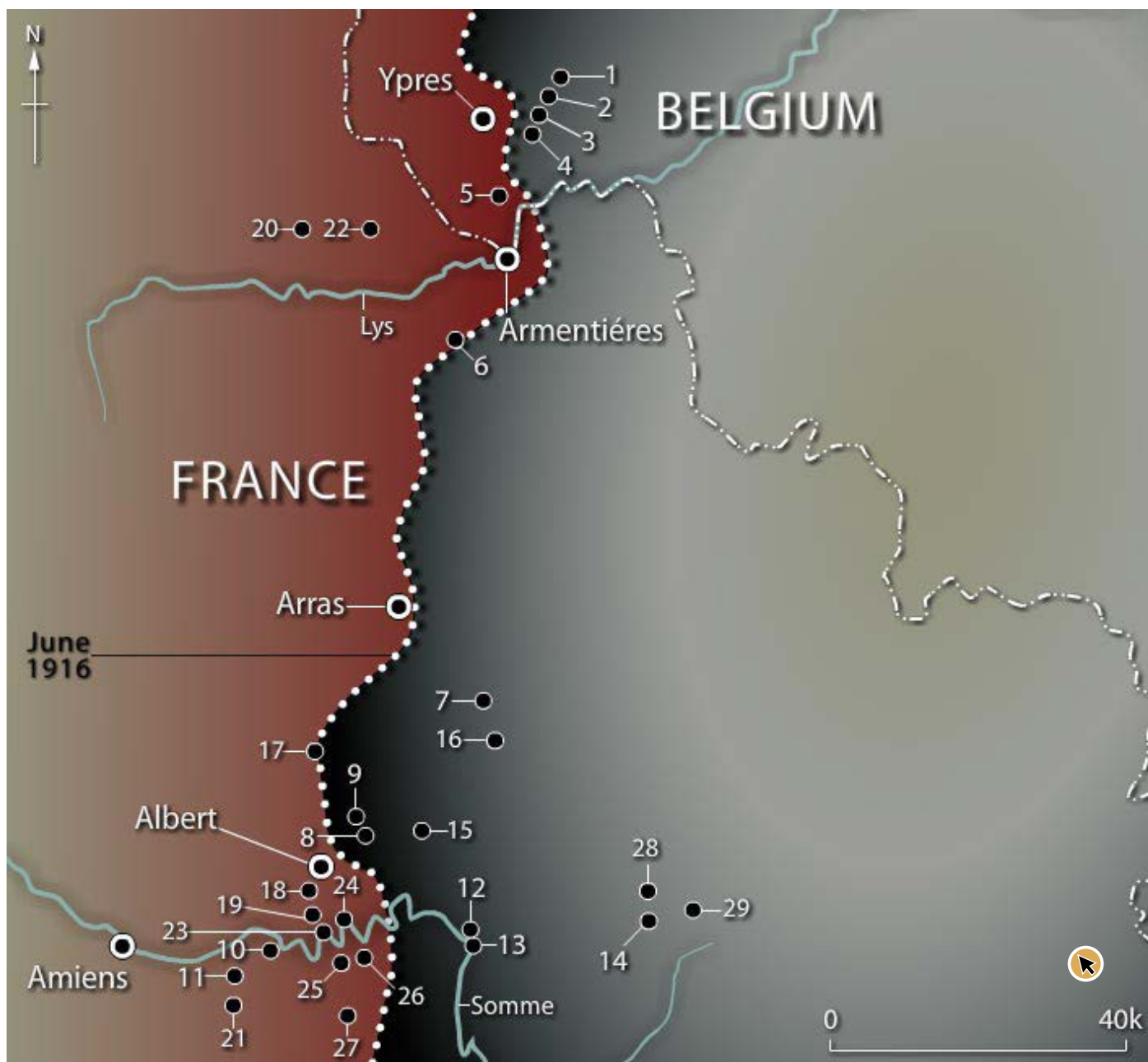
On 11 November 1918 the war ended with an armistice, and a peace treaty was signed the following year.

- 17 Hébuterne March–April 1918  
4th Australian Division defensive victory.
- 18 **Dernancourt** March–April 1918  
Australian defensive victory south of Albert.
- 19 Morlancourt March–June 1918  
Between the Aisne and Somme rivers 2nd, 3rd and 5th Australian Divisions in turn advance towards Morlancourt.
- 11 **Villers-Bretonneux** April 1918  
At the second battle of Villers-Bretonneux the Australians recapture the village.
- 20 Hazebrouck April 1918  
1st Australian Division holds Hazebrouck against the German Sixth Army.
- 21 Hangard Wood April 1918  
South of Villers-Bretonneux the Australians failed to capture Hangard Wood.
- 22 Merris May–June 1918  
1st Australian Division, in a series of small operations, recovers ground lost in the German offensive.
- 10 **Le Hamel** July 1918  
Brigades from 2nd, 3rd and 4th Australian Divisions capture Le Hamel.
- 23 Etinehem August 1918  
13th Brigade (4th Division) captures Etinehem.
- 24 Bray August 1918  
The Australians capture Bray as part of the general advance from 8 August.
- 25 Proyart August 1918  
Several days after the commencement of the 8 August offensive, the Australian 10th brigade (3rd Division) captures Proyart.
- 26 Chuignes August 1918  
Australians capture Chuignes ridge overlooking the Somme during the Second Battle of Albert.
- 27 Lihons August 1918  
1st Australian Division captures Lihons.
- 28 Bellicourt September 1918  
The Australian Corps breaks through the Hindenburg Line.
- 12 **Mont St Quentin** September 1918  
2nd Australian Division captures Mont St Quentin.
- 13 **Péronne** September 1918  
South of Mont St Quentin, Péronne is taken by 5th Australian Division.
- 14 **Bellenglise** September 1918  
4th Division captures the Hindenburg Outpost Line in its last battle of the war.
- 29 **Montbrehain** October 1918  
The last phase of the Hindenburg Line breakthrough and the Australian infantry's last battle.



The battles in **red** are hotlinked to <http://www.ww1westernfront.gov.au/australian-remembrance-trail/where-australians-fought.php> where you will find much more detail.

**C** WESTERN FRONT - MAIN AUSTRALIAN BATTLES



**KEY:**

- |                 |                       |                 |
|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Passchendaele | 11 Villers-Bretonneux | 21 Hangard Wood |
| 2 Broodseinde   | 12 Mont St Quentin    | 22 Merris       |
| 3 Polygon Wood  | 13 Péronne            | 23 Etinehem     |
| 4 Menin Road    | 14 Bellenglise        | 24 Bray         |
| 5 Messines      | 15 Guedecourt         | 25 Proyart      |
| 6 Fromelles     | 16 Lagnicourt         | 26 Chuignes     |
| 7 Bullecourt    | 17 Hébuterne          | 27 Lihons       |
| 8 Pozières      | 18 Dernancourt        | 28 Bellicourt   |
| 9 Mouquet Farm  | 19 Morlancourt        | 29 Montbrehain  |
| 10 Le Hamel     | 20 Hazebrouck         |                 |

**Source 1A Cause of AIF casualties April 1916 – March 1919**

Weapon	No. casualties	% of total casualties
High velocity bullets (rifle and machine-gun)	48 309	33.93
Shell fragments and shrapnel pellets	72 513	50.93
Hand bombs and grenades	2 714	1.90
Bayonets	396	0.28
Burial by shell burst, and aeroplane crash	Nil	Nil
Fire (flame-thrower)	Nil	Nil
Gas	16 822	11.82
Shell concussion ('shell shock')	1 624	1.14
Total	142 378	100.00

A.G. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services* Vol 2, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1940.  
For a monthly breakdown of statistics see [www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/~rmllett/AIFcasualties.html](http://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/~rmllett/AIFcasualties.html)

**Source 1B**

The country around here is very much knocked about by Artillery and shell holes are the worry of our lives – one cannot walk 10 metres in the dark without tumbling into one. Barbed wire entanglements are scattered about, and at night we have to keep our eyes open, otherwise we get caught in it. ... Grave yards are everywhere and no matter where one looks he sees little white crosses.

K Lyall, *Letters From an Anzac Gunner*, KM Lyall, 1990 page 72

**Source 1C**

You have no idea of the hell and horror of a great advance, old fellow, and I hope you never will have. We fought and lived as we stood, day and night, without even overcoats to put on at night & with very little food. The place was not littered but covered with dead & as we were under continuous fire & were moving about a lot, and when still were in very narrow, shallow trenches, we could do no burying. The last meal I had was one I took from a dead German.

JM Raws, AWM 2DRL/0481

**Source 1E**

They lay in heaps behind the parapet ... [or] crouched close under cover ... Chaos and weird noises like thousands of iron foundries, deafening and dreadful, coupled with the roar of high explosives ... ripped the earth out of the parapet, ... we crept along seeking first of all the serious cases of wounded. Backwards & forwards we travelled between the firing line and the R.A.P. with knuckles torn and bleeding due to the narrow passage ways. 'Cold sweat', not perspiration, dripped from our faces and our breath came out only in gasps ... By the time we had completed 2 trips [each of 5 kilometres] ... we were ... completely exhausted.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, MUP, 2010, page 164

**Source 1D**

When I commenced my work, I hardly knew where to begin. My first patient was a dear Scotch lad with his skull and right leg fractured, his left leg and one arm amputated. Minor wounds covered his body. He talked to me as I attended him, but never uttered a word of complaint. When the ordeal was over, I stood for a moment, feeling his pulse. He said:

'How is it, sister?'

'Fine. How do you feel now, laddie?'

'I feel fine, too, thanks, sister.'

Next morning he died.

May Tilton, *The Grey Battalion*, Angus & Robertson, 1933, pages 198-9



Australian nurses

AWM P1064-006

**Source 1F**

We ... were given the job of delivering [bombs] ... each of us carried our own equipment, 220 rounds of ammunition, 3 day's rations, rifle, and in each hand a box of bombs weighing about 30 lbs. I suppose the full load was about a hundredweight, and with this we had to travel about half a mile through a narrow gap, with a veritable hail of shells falling round us the whole length of it ... Some of the fellows dropped out, others dropped part or the whole of their load, but most of us saw the distance out, realising that the delivery of the bombs was ... life or death to the men in the line.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 168

## Source 2A The impacts of war on the Western front on towns and communities



Aerial view of the town of Zonnebeke, 7 June 1917, before a major action



Aerial view of the town of Zonnebeke, 14 September 1917, after a major action

## Source 2B

24/8/16

Dearest Beat and Bill,

Just a line you must be prepared for the worst to happen any day. It is no use trying to hide things. I am in terrible agony. ... Tomorrow I shall know the worst as the dressing [on his wounded leg] was to be left for 3 days and tomorrow is the third day it smells rotten. I was hit running out to see the other officer who was with me but badly wounded. ... I got two machine gun bullets in the thigh. ... The Stretcher Bearers could not get the wounded out any way other than over the top and across the open. They had to carry me four miles with a man waving a red cross flag in front and the Germans did not open fire on us. Well dearest I have had a rest, the pain is getting worse and worse. ... So cheer up dear I could write on a lot but I am nearly unconscious. Give my love to Dear Bill and yourself, do take care of yourself and him.

Your loving husband  
Bert.

*(Lieutenant H.W. Crowle died a few hours after writing this letter.)*

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, MUP, 2010, page 172

## Source 2C

This afternoon we got 15 German Red Cross prisoners, they were marched down & searched & 13 of the dogs were found to be carrying daggers and revolvers they [were] promptly put against the wall & finished.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 258

## Source 2D

Nothing could exceed the bravery of those boys. The first wave went down like 'wheat before the reaper'. When the time came for the second wave to go over there was not a man standing of the first wave, yet not a lad faltered. Each glanced at his watch and on the arranged tick of the clock leaped over. In many cases they did not get any farther than the first wave. The last wave, though they knew each had to do the work of three, were in their places and started on their forlorn hope at the appointed moment.

Patrick Lindsay, *Fromelles*, Hardie Grant Books, 2008, page 10

## Source 2E

We had to get up as close to the parapet as possible anybody who did not do this was simply courting death for shells were falling all round ... there were dead and wounded everywhere ... I had to sit on top of a dead man as there was no picking and choosing ... I saw a shell lob about twelve yards away and it ... lifted [two men] clean up in the air for about 6 feet and they simply dropped back dead ... one or two of the chaps got shell shock and others got really frightened it was piteous to see them ... One great big chap got away as soon as he reached the firing line and could not be found ... I saw him in the morning in a dug out he was white with fear and shaking like a leaf. One of our Lieuts. got shell shock and he literally cried like a child, some that I saw carried down out of the firing line were struggling and calling out for their mother, while others were blabbering sentences one could not make out. For one to get shell shock it is worse than a wound, a wound will heal, but a chap when he has lost control of his nerves takes a lot before he has got mastery of them again, and it is doubtful if he would be able to be relied on again. It is a thing everyone has to fight against, and if he gives in at all he is practically done for as a fighter.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 165

## Source 2F

The Australian casualties have been very heavy – fully 50 per cent in our brigade, for the ten or eleven days. I lost, in three days, my brother and two best friends, and in all six out of seven of all my officer friends (perhaps a score in number) who went into the scrap – all killed. Not one was buried, and some died in great agony. It was impossible to help the wounded at all in some sectors. We could fetch them in, but could not get them away. And often we had to put them out on the parapet to permit movement in the shallow, narrow, crooked trenches. The dead were everywhere. There had been no burying in the sector I was in for a week before we went there.

JM Raws, AWM 2DRL/0481

## Source 3A

I shall never forget the mad intoxication one seems to be in [during battle] ... you see absolutely no danger & will do almost anything, for the roar of the guns are ringing in your ears, & you can smell the salty fumes from the powder stinging your nostrils, & ... the shouts of the boys & the ... ghostly lights of the many coloured flares ... these are moments when I reckon a man lives 10 minutes of this seems to be at the time worth a year of ordinary life, but the reaction sets in afterwards & nearly all men feel a faintness come over them ... but this don't last long either & you are soon itching for another smack at the rotten Hun.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, MUP, 2010, page 256

## Source 3B

My battalion has been at it for eight days and one-third of it is left – all shattered at that. And they're sticking it still, incomparable heroes all. We are lousy, stinking, ragged, unshaven, sleepless. Even when we're back a bit we can't sleep for our own guns. I have one puttee, a dead man's helmet, another dead man's gas protector, a dead man's bayonet. My tunic is rotten with other men's blood and partly splattered with a comrade's brains. It is horrible but why should you people at home not know.

JM Raws, AWM 2DRL/0481

## Source 3C

When we switched on our torches, we found the floor literally covered with a mass of wounded; men being sick, moaning in pain, or crying out for a drink; pleading to remove their boots which, in some cases, had not been off their feet for over a week. The stretcher-bearers were carrying them in out of the pouring rain and rushing away again. We set to work, lifting the stretchers into some sort of order and searching for cases of haemorrhage, while the wounded held the torches to guide us.

As the bearers brought in patients, we lifted stretchers out ready for them to carry away again the urgent cases requiring immediate surgical attention. It was bending work, and when our backs refused to hold us up any longer, we sat on the floor and cut the boots and socks off the stone-cold and swollen feet, wrapping them in bundles of cotton wool and bandages. The patients used their boots or tin hats as pillows while they patiently and uncomplainingly waited to be attended to. ... [In the operating theatre] there were twelve operating surgeons, with theatre teams, working on six tables continuously for twenty four hours. The theatre staff worked the longest hours; the routine was sixteen hours on and eight off duty.

Sister May Tilton, *The Grey Battalion*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1933, pages 259-63

## Source 3D On leave in London



AWM H15635

AWM J02936

## Source 3E

Crump! Bang! Crash! The shells fall. Zipzipzip-zipzip! Machine-gun bullets kick up the dirt around them. A lull and they rush off again. Zipzip! Bang! Another twisted heap of khaki hits the ground.

It is Ted. He does not move. His cobbers crawl over to his side. 'Where d'you get it?' they ask him. His lips move, but they do not hear his reply. His arm is shattered and blood is gushing from his side. He cannot last much longer-they think he is going west. His eyes ask them to do something. Stan rolls him on to a groundsheet and drags him yard by yard towards the trench.

Shell splinters tear through the sheet. The ground rocks from a nearby shell-burst which almost covers them with mud. Stan drags him on. Ted is in mortal fear of being hit again. At last they come to the sally-port and he is carried on a duckboard into the trench.

They give him the worst possible thing. He gulps down some rum, chokes, coughs blood, loses his breath; blood bubbles from his side, he is in the throes of death. He quietens. They give him water. If they can stop the bleeding he might survive. With a bandaged lead pencil they probe back his lung and plug the wound with a field-dressing and pieces torn from a greatcoat. They fix a tourniquet and bind his arm to a piece of duckboard. This completes their rough but honest first aid.

Peter Pederson *The Anzacs, Gallipoli to the Western Front*, Viking, 2007, page 137



## Source 4A

Falling everywhere & the boys struggling through the mud bogged nearly to the knees ... [In the German wire, I] got badly cut all over & ended up by getting hung up in the staff for all the world like a sack of wool chucked onto a heap of barb wire, but I felt nothing at the time for my blood was running hot & we only thought of getting in their trench, the fighting by this time was very fierce, shells, mortars, & worse than all liquid fire bombs were falling among us like hail ... I had one of the most thrilling minutes of my life for I was rushing ... down a shallow trench ... when ... a Hun rushed out at me & made a desperate lunge at my body. ... his bayonet slid down my rifle & stuck in the fleshy part of my leg ... a sharp stinging pain went through my body ... but I kept my block & before he could draw his rifle back for another attempt I shot him dead.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 181

## Source 4D

We lost some men going over to the enemy's lines and you could hear the moans of the wounded and dying wherever you went. I got over the parapet ... [and] made for a big hole and rested there while we got our breath ... after that we made a dash but had to drop into any sort of hole we could find for machine guns were turned on to us and the bullets were just skimming over our heads ... We got to Fritz's front line trenches eventually ... [and then] to the portion of trench which was behind their front line ... and stayed there till 5.30 a.m. when we were forced to retire ... The Germans got somehow or other into their own front line while we were between their first and second lines and there was grave danger of our being cut off, so we had to make a bolt for it and a good few were hit coming back ... but the bullets happened to miss me somehow or other.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 165

## Source 4B

There was a chap, a big, tall man, you know, and he had his jaw shot away, and he's got another bloke with broken legs or something and he's got this chap on his back. He's staggerin' back along the road, and when they saw me, they had to [salute]. It made me very near cry to think of it. And I used to go up and pat 'em on their back, and then they'd point to their big bottle that they had and it was full of coffee and cognac and I'd have a drink of this ... and give them some, and then they'd sit down and pull out their post-cards and they'd show you their photos of their wives and their children and the farms they were in. And when I saw all these things I thought, well blimey, what's it all about? ... It's all right for people that are victorious, to march in, but think of the defeated people going back, to the horror of it all.

Bill Harney, *Harney's War*, Currey O'Neil, 1983, page 52

## Source 4E

Capt Gibbins was the marvel – he kept walking up and down the lines never showing any sign of fear, encouraging people and helping them. Towards dawn our flanks were being attacked by enemy bombers so Capt Gibbins led an attack against them over 'No Man's Land' and drove them back, but back they came and still again. Bombs and bombers were called for and still more bombs but our officers were becoming less. Mendellson was blown up on the right. Jock Mathews was shot. Toliard was wounded. Denoon had been shot through the shoulder.

Quoted in Patrick Lindsay, *Fromelles*, Hardie Grant Books, 2008, page 98

## Source 4C

Staggering through the gloom we saw a man ... Poor beggar I have seen worse looking mess-ups but he was bad enough – his left eye was gone ... he was a mass of blood and looked as if he had been through a sausage machine. He pleaded something in German ... it was a moan, or a prayer – so I gave him my hand to hold and said as nicely as I could 'All right old chap.' ... The thought struck me 'How can men be so cruel' ... and we helped him along.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 227



## Source 5A

The mud was so bad that last time we were here one of our officers rode into a shell hole and he disappeared. He had to be pulled out by ropes.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, MUP, 2010, pages 183

## Source 5B

All day long the ground rocked & swayed backwards and forwards from the concussion ... men were driven stark staring mad & more than one of them rushed out of the trench over towards the Germans. Any amount of them could be seen crying and sobbing like children their nerves completely gone ... we were nearly all in a state of silliness & half dazed but still the Australians refused to give ground. Men were buried by the dozen, but were frantically dug out again some dead and some alive.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 170

## Source 5C

To-morrow we hope to be on the road to Berlin ... we are ready, fit, and well, and with God's help we will punish the Bosch [Germans] for his cruelty to the weaker races.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 162

## Source 5E

Scores of stammering German machine-guns spluttered violently, drowning the noise of the cannonade. The air was thick with bullets, swishing in a flat, criss-crossed lattice of death. There were gaps in the lines of men - wide ones, small ones. The survivors spread across the front, keeping the lines straight ... The bullets skimmed low, from knee to groin, riddling the tumbling bodies before they touched the ground.

Hundreds were mown down in the flicker of an eyelid, like great rows of teeth knocked from a comb, but still the line went on, thinning and stretching. Wounded wriggled into shellholes or were hit again. Men were cut in two by streams of bullets [that] swept like whirling knives. And still the line went on.

Peter Pedersen, *The Anzacs, Gallipoli to the Western Front*, Viking, 2007, page 130

## Source 5F

One Lewis gun crew stuck to it to the last and after all the rest had fallen back they could still be heard firing. We could see the Bosche working along the trench on both their flanks towards them but they still stuck to their posts and the gun kept firing. We saw some stick bombs thrown into their little stronghold - then silence! Their job had been done at the expense of their lives.

Paul Cobb, *Fromelles 1916*, The History Press, 2007, page 90

## Source 5D

**Historian Bill Gammage, who studied letters and diaries of men in the AIF, wrote:**

England was ... head and heart of the Empire, the source of everything great and secure, Australia's shield, and to many Australians, Home. Some had been born there, others were sons of Englishmen, almost all had learnt of England's glories at school. They were impatient to see the old country ... 'How often have I heard your glories blazed abroad throughout, Old England, and now, and now I view your coasts, thy shore line, your hills and valleys ... tears welled in my eyes at the sight of the Home Land ... there is no land so sweet, no spot so hallowed as the spot of land we call Britain.'

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 210



## Source 6A

I am on my way to hospital suffering trench feet due to being up to my knees in water for 72 hours.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, MUP, 2010, page 201

## Source 6B



AMM ART03645

## Source 6C

I had been sent by Capt Cameron with a party for two nights to get the barbed wire ready. We were supporting when the charge was made, the battalions who went over met with too hot a reception and suffered severely; the distance was too far. When we came up... we did a 200 yard sprint across the open... for the next three days we did great work getting in the wounded from the front and I must say Fritz treated us very fairly though a few were shot at their work. Some of the wounded were as game as lions and got rather roughly handled but haste was more necessary than gentle handling and we must have brought in over 250 men by our company alone. It was not light work getting in with a heavy weight on your back especially if he had a broken leg or arm and no stretcher bearer was handy you had to lie down and get him on your back then rise and duck for your life with the chance of getting a bullet in you before you were safe. One foggy morning in particular I remember, we could hear someone, over towards the German entanglements calling for a stretcher bearer; it was an appeal no man could stand against; so some of us pushed out and had a hunt; we found a fine haul of wounded and brought them in, but it was not where I heard this fellow calling so I had another shot for it and came across a splendid specimen of humanity trying to wriggle into a trench with a big wound in his thigh; he was about 14 stone weight and I could not lift him on my back, but! managed to get him into an old trench and told him to lie quiet while I get a stretcher then another man about 30 yards out sang out 'don't forget me cobber'. I went in and got four volunteers with stretchers and we got both men to safety.

Paul Cobb, *Fromelles 1916*, The History Press, 2007, pages 102-103

## Source 6D

## Stages in removing wounded from the battlefield

**1 Stretcher-bearers on the battlefield**

Stretcher-bearers in the infantry battalions collected the wounded, bandaged their wounds and carried them to the Regimental Aid Post for treatment by the battalion's medical officer. The soldiers admired the stretcher-bearers. Unarmed and protected only by their 'SB' armbands, they often worked under fire, carrying wounded men to safety.

**2 Regimental Aid Post**

At the battalion's Regimental Aid Post, the medical officer changed dressings and gave morphine (pain-killer), before sending men to the rear. The blankets above the dugout entrance would be lowered during a gas attack, to prevent gas seeping into it.

**3 Advanced Dressing Station — walking wounded**

Two kilometres from the front an Advanced Dressing Station for walking wounded might be dug into a slope. Wounded men have been treated and are boarding a 'GS' [General Service] wagon to be taken to a Main Dressing Station or direct to a Casualty Clearing Station.

**4 Advanced Dressing Station — stretcher cases**

Advanced Dressing Stations, staffed by brigade field ambulance units, were located as far forward as possible. Patients were given anti-tetanus injections and treated for the shock which many suffered after wounding. Only urgent operations were performed. From the Advanced Dressing Station, wounded men were taken by ambulance to the Main Dressing Station.

**5 Main Dressing Station**

Wounded from several Advanced Dressing Stations converged on one Main Dressing Station. Here serious cases could be resuscitated and gassed men could be treated, but most of the wounded were passed through to the Casualty Clearing Station.

**6 Casualty Clearing Station**

About nine kilometres from the front was this Casualty Clearing Station, where wounded were first treated by surgeons. Here, also, the wounded first encountered nurses of the Australian Army Nursing Service. As soon as possible, wounded were again transported, often by hospital train, to a General Hospital.

**7 General Hospital**

General hospitals could house around one thousand patients. They held wounded men until they were able to be evacuated to Britain or return to their units.

**8 Hospital Ship**

Most seriously wounded men were evacuated by hospital ship to Britain to face perhaps months of treatment and convalescence. Those who recovered eventually returned to the front, perhaps to be wounded again. Those badly injured — men who had lost arms or legs, been blinded or maimed, or badly shell-shocked — eventually returned to Australia, to be discharged and pensioned off.

You can see an interactive version of this at <http://www.ryebuck.com.au/elearning/> and go to BATTLEFIELD CASUALTIES – AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE

## Source 7A

In one trench I saw three or four Germans pinned in. The side of the trench had closed in pinning them as they stood. The tops of their heads were blown off with machine guns. It was a horrible sight. Blood and brains had trickled down their faces and dried ... I was filled with delight to see so many Huns killed and could not help laughing.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, MUP, 2010, page 228

## Source 7B

**Historian Bill Gammage:**

Yet at some point during [their touring] Australians realised a truth. England was cold, wet, and sunless, and mainly a repository for barren camps and bleak hospitals ... 'I will have a better idea of the country after we finish our leave but so far our chaps wonder why the Hell the English did not let [Kaiser] Bill have the blanky place & move out of it' [wrote one] ... Many in the AIF never loved their country better than after they had left it, and they longed to return to the sunlit land they had quit so readily ...' and an Australian soldiers' paper wrote,

When God knocked off one night said He:  
'This world's a rotten failure.'  
Lor Lumme, though, He'd let 'em see —  
Next day He made Australia.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 212

## Source 7C

It was awful. My thoughts I can hardly explain, my heart thumped with fear and my face must have been white. Now I was to lead and show an example to 20 men who carried three guns. I can never forget it - I prayed and all my hope was in 'Him'. At last the time was drawing near, I drew my revolver and placed my whistle in my mouth ... I blew my whistle, gave a shout of 'forward'... I dashed out along the railway line [trench railway]. I had only gone about 50 [metres] when I tripped and fell. 'Hard luck' exclaimed some of the 55th thinking I was shot but I sprung up and rushed on... rushed bang into barbed wire... I heard the bullets smacking the ground about me. Picking my way through the wire made me go slower and I thought of the awful position I was in. 'Oh! God help me' were the words I uttered. At last I was free...

Paul Cobb, *Fromelles 1916*, The History Press, 2008, page 90

## Source 7D

Sister Edith 'Queenie' Avenall, who worked in many hospitals, summed up her experiences:  
*I am sorry for Australia for it will be nothing but broken down men after the war.*

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 193

## Source 7E

We got away as best we could. I was again in the rear going back and again we were cut off and lost. I was buried twice, and thrown down several times – buried with dead and dying. The ground was covered with bodies in all stages of decay and mutilation, and I would, after struggling free from the earth, pick up a body by me to try to lift him out with me, and find him a decayed corpse. I pulled a head off – was covered with blood. The horror was indescribable.

JA Raws, AWM 2DRL/0481

## Source 7F

I couldn't stop urinating, and we were all anxious for the barrage to begin. When it did begin, it seemed as if the earth opened up with a crash. The ground shook and trembled, and the concussion made our ears ring. It was impossible to hear ourselves speak to a man lying alongside. It is strange how men creep together for protection. Soon, instead of four paces interval between the men, we came down to lying alongside each other, and no motioning could make them move apart.

Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, page 168

## Source 7G

Conditions were primitive, compared with the ordered life of hospitals in England, but the sense of adventure, of being at the forefront of things, with the possibility of meeting one's own loved ones, more than compensated for the hardships endured.

For several hours each day I assisted in the acute gassed wards. Most of the poor boys died, but those who still lived, to die later, suffered intensely. This mustard-oil gas burned their bodies. Such frightened expressions met our eyes as we bent over them, working to relieve the pain, bathing their poor, smarting eyes with bicarbonate of soda and inserting cocaine to relieve the agony. We kept them dark with pads and bandages. A sister worked, one on each side of the ward, continuously. As soon as she reached the lower end, she commenced at the top again, while two more sisters endeavoured to relieve their distressed and difficult respirations by administering oxygen for ten minutes every half-hour. ... We were unable to work for any length of time in these gassed wards. Stooping over our patients, we soon became affected by inhaling the gas. Our throats became sore and set us coughing, while our eyes became weak and watery. The odour of the ward was in our nostrils for weeks.

May Tilton, *The Grey Battalion*, Angus & Robertson, 1933, pages 254-5

# ACTIVITY

# 5

## Comparing two battles on the Western Front

Were all battles on the Western Front the same? Look at this comparison of two battles involving the AIF. One is the Australians' first battle, at Fromelles in 1916. The other is at Le Hamel, early in the last great August 1918 offensive that pushed the Germans to surrender.

Read the details of each, and prepare a comparative table.

FROMELLES 1916	ASPECTS OF BATTLE	LE HAMEL 1918
	ENVIRONMENT	
	LEADERSHIP	
	USE OF ARTILLERY	
	USE OF INFANTRY	
	USE OF AEROPLANES	
	USE OF TANKS	
	ROLE OF ALLIES	
	GERMAN OPPONENTS	
	COMMUNICATIONS	
	PLANNING	
	SECRECY	
	BRAVERY	

- It took place from the afternoon of 19 July 1916 to the morning of 20 July.
- Was intended as a diversion to stop German reinforcements from the Fromelles area being sent to the major battle of the Somme taking place 80 kilometres away.
- The attack involved Australian artillery, and a joint attack by the British 61st Division and the Australian 5th Division – about 20 000 troops – along a 3200 metre front, against the German 6th Bavarian Reserve Division troops.
- The land was flat and with a high water table, and criss-crossed by drainage ditches and a drainage channel.
- Germans occupied the high ground in front of Fromelles, and 600 metres behind the German front line, and with a good view (though only 30 metres high) of all activities in the British lines.
- No Man's Land between the lines varied from 100 metres on the left to 400 metres wide.
- There were two German salients — areas where the enemy trenches protruded forward into No Man's Land, which meant those who did attack troops had to go past these protrusions and were then subject to the enemy firing into their rear if the enemy defences were not destroyed. The two salients were known as the Wick and the Sugarloaf salients.
- The Australian 5th Division was mainly recruits who had trained in Egypt, and had no combat experience.
- The Australian artillery was not fully trained.
- The British 61st Division was a recently arrived second line territorial division, under strength.
- The Germans were well dug in, with strong defences, well protected from artillery.
- The German troops had been there since 1915 and knew the area well, held the high ground, and had carefully measured out their artillery range and machine gun arcs of fire into No Man's Land and the forward British trenches.
- The British plan of attack at Fromelles was:
  - gather the attacking infantry in their own front trench area, ready to advance in 4 waves;
  - start a long and heavy artillery bombardment of the German front line to cut the wire in No Man's Land and to destroy enemy machine-gun emplacements;
  - stop the bombardment several times, to trick the enemy into coming out in expectation of an infantry attack, and then resume the bombardment and hopefully kill many of the defenders;
  - while the bombardment is going on, have troops advance as far as possible into No Man's Land towards the forward German trenches;
  - stop the bombardment at a set time and have the infantry attack and take the enemy front line (including the vital Wick and Sugarloaf salients) before the defenders can organise their resistance;
  - hold this line while the next waves of attackers about 100 yards apart bring supplies forward and then advance and take the second line of enemy trenches about 100 yards forward.
- All this was to be a surprise or secret attack. For it to succeed it needed:
  - accurate artillery fire on the enemy front line to destroy its defences;
  - perfect timing between the end of the bombardment and the infantry attack;
  - the infantry to move as close to the enemy front line before the bombardment stopped;
  - sufficient numbers of troops attacking.
- However:
  - the Germans knew the plan and could see the preparations for the attack;
  - communications during the attack were difficult once an attack started. Runners could be sent back, but were subject to snipers. Telephone wires were laid, but were cut by artillery and feet. Aerial messages were not clear. By the time messages were received could be out of date and therefore inaccurate.
- Most of the British troops were badly hit by German artillery during the forming-up phase, and most did not get to attack.
- Those that did were raked by German machine gun fire.
- Only a few got close to the front line objective.
- Heavy German artillery shelling and machine gun fire weakened the Australian force available to attack.
- Many of those who did attack were mown down by German gunfire from the Sugarloaf salient.
- Some attacked and took the German front line, then moved forward looking for the second line of trenches. These did not exist, and with many officers killed, the troops were uncertain how far to advance, and many became trapped in 'islands' with Germans all around them
- The German positions had not been destroyed by the artillery barrage, and they quickly organised a counter-attack.
- There were not enough Australian troops to continue to take the second line – many of the reserve troops had been used to supplement the first waves devastated by the German bombardment.
- A new plan was made to attack Sugarloaf again by British and Australian troops – but the Australians were not told of its cancellation, and the 58th and 59th attacked alone and unsupported on the right, and were mown down. They did not get to within 100 metres of the objective.
- Those who had advanced in the first wave were now in isolated pockets, and were threatened on their flanks and even in the rear.
- A proposed truce to gather the wounded was vetoed by senior officers, so wounded men had to get back to their own lines any way they could. Stretcher bearers came forward to help, but were also subject to enemy fire.
- Next morning the attackers had to get back to their own lines any way they could and under constant threat from Germans all around them.
- Casualties were 572 British dead, 2057 Australians dead and 470 captured, and 3146 wounded.

**Create your summary in the table.**

The war was entering a new phase – one of dry land not previously churned up by artillery shells and mud. The new front was firm, dry, and mostly open farmland with patches of forests not yet destroyed by artillery. The Australian force was led by General John Monash.

#### THE AVAILABLE AUSTRALIAN FORCE:

- **Soldiers** — About 7000 Australian and 1000 American. The Australians were battle veterans, the Americans untried as yet.
- **Tanks** – 60 new Mark V ones, untested in battle yet, but much better than the old ones that had let the Australians down badly at Bullecourt, and were not trusted.
- **Artillery** — about 640 guns of various size.
- **Terrain** — mostly flat and firm, gently sloping dry fields and waist-high crops towards higher ground, with few existing shell holes, and no mud, but with some strong trenches, a heavily defended village, Hamel, and dangerous woods that could conceal enemy artillery and machine guns.
- **Aeroplanes** – about 24 available.

#### THE ENEMY:

- **Soldiers** — many of them very good ones, though some were very young.
- **Artillery** — in a position to fire on the Australians.
- Machine guns — their key weapon, lots of them, well sited. Could cause great damage.
- **Defensive positions** — trenches, barbed wire, observation posts.
- **High ground** — the enemy had the high ground so could see any preparations for an attack.
- **Aeroplanes** — Germans had a number.

#### GENERAL:

- The enemy front line of trenches was about 400 metres ahead of the Australian front line.
- There was then a 1000 metre gap until the next line.
- Resistance could be expected from five strong areas: The town of Hamel, Vaire Wood, Vaire Trench, Hamel Wood, Pear Trench and Accroche Wood. The Australians knew what forces were at each of these, except Accroche Wood.
- Monash organised for very noisy aeroplanes to fly in the area as the tanks were assembling, so the enemy only heard the aeroplanes and did not realise that the tanks were assembling.
- Monash had ordered that artillery occasionally fire at the enemy each day for two weeks before the attack. This artillery barrage always included some gas shells as well as explosives. The Germans learned to expect the gas when artillery shells fell, so automatically put on their masks — which gave them less vision and ability to respond to attacking troops. On the morning of the attack the artillery barrage included smoke, but not gas. The Germans were therefore tricked into putting on their masks, without the attacking troops also needing them. Many Germans who were captured still had their masks on.

- The plan included some 'feints' or minor attacks in other places that were designed to make it look like they were part of a main attack. This meant that the Germans could not afford to move troops from one place to another to support the soldiers under main attack.
- Monash sent all the troops to see and work with the tanks. They saw how they operated, palled up with the crews, were given 'joy rides', were able to fire weapons at the tanks to show how secure they were against enemy fire, were even able to drive them. The fear and mistrust was broken down, and the diggers adopted the tanks and their crews as their own — even painting affectionate nicknames on the tanks.
- General Monash spread his troops over a 6000 metre front, to advance about 2000 metres.
- The troops from 7 battalions were supported by 48 assault tanks, which would advance with them, and 12 in reserve. There were also 4 tanks specifically to bring forward supplies.
- He set a target line to be reached in 90 minutes, and then the troops were to stop and go no further, regardless of the lack of opposition that might exist by then.
- The attack started with an artillery barrage at 3:10 am, followed by a stepped or 'creeping barrage' as the troops advanced. The heavy artillery barrage went forward in five big lifts, while the smaller field artillery moved in a series of nine smaller ones. These were timed and a set distance was covered, and troops moved forward a set distance for a set time to keep behind the falling shells. The barrage and the troops rested for 10 minutes at a set spot about half-way there, and then moved forward again. At the same time heavy machine guns were also firing in advance of the attacking troops.
- The barrage included smoke shells to hide the advance from the enemy. Planes circled and bombed and strafed enemy troops, and dropped ammunition by parachute.
- A plane flew over the advancing line and sounded a klaxon, and soldiers under cover would light matches or small flares to show where they had advanced. The navigator would mark this on a map, and fly back to the rear lines, drop the map, which would be rushed to HQ by a motor cycle despatch rider. In this way the HQ would have almost 'real time' information on the progress of the attackers.
- The tanks were used to attack machine gun strong points, as identified by the infantry leaders on the ground.
- The tanks were in the advance, firing at the enemy, with the infantry following to 'mop up'. As a machine gun opened fire against attacking troops the soldiers dropped to the ground and pointed out the machine gun position to the tanks (whose visibility was very limited). The tanks attacked the machine guns. The machine gun bullets could not damage the tanks, so the machines rolled forward and literally crushed the guns and the men firing them.
- The soldiers had white tape. If a soldier was wounded he or a mate would dig his rifle bayonet first into the ground and tie white tape to the stock, which would then be above the crop height. No wounded man was run over by tanks.

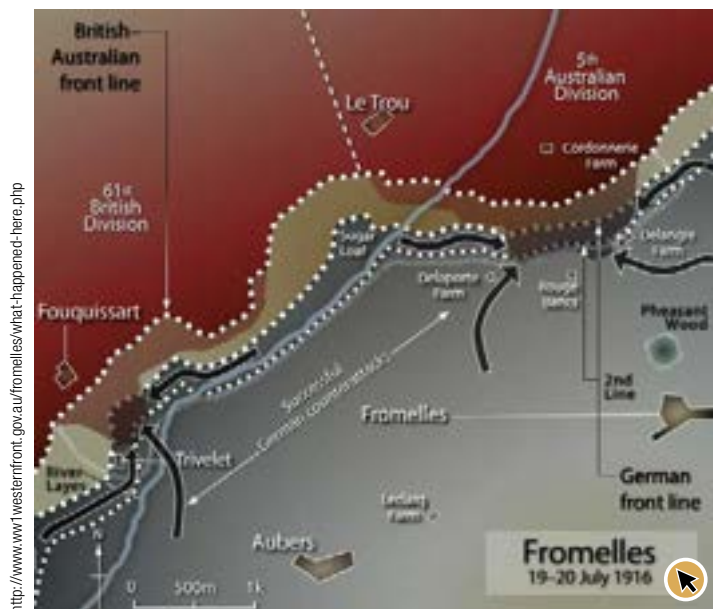
- Three tanks that had been tasked to attack the strong point of Pear Trench got lost in the dark and the smoke. This meant that the infantry had to attack without their support. This was the scene of the greatest casualties of the attack.
- In other places the tanks advanced with the troops and were directed to other machine gun posts. The tanks lumbered forward and fired at the emplacements, with the machine gun bullets unable to harm the tanks. The tanks would then crush the machine gun posts by 'pirouetting' over them.
- At the same time there was a 'feint' attack north of the main attack. This was designed to make sure no German reinforcements were sent to the real attack. These feints worked, and tied up large numbers of German troops, though the attackers suffered casualties.
- As expected, the Germans organised a counter-attack. Allied planes and tanks brought ammunition and defensive equipment forward — the attack tanks carried rifle and machine gun ammunition, and the four supply tanks could

bring forward as many supplies as 1200 men at a time, more quickly, and without these supply troops being placed in danger. The Australians and Americans were able to hold off the counter-attack.

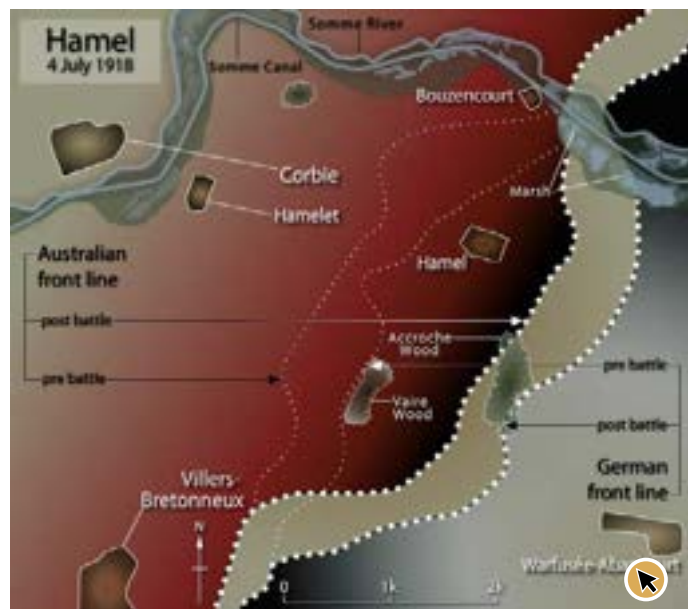
- Hamel and the enemy trench were taken in 93 minutes — Monash had planned it for a 90 minute outcome.
- There were 1400 casualties among the 7000 attacking troops, including about 300 men killed. Only one tank was disabled by the enemy. The Germans suffered an estimated 2000 casualties, 1500 prisoners were taken, and a large amount of weapons taken. The Australian soldiers enjoyed 'rattin' the dead, wounded and captured — taking any possession from them that they wanted.

### Create your summary in the table.

What were the biggest differences between the disastrous battle at Fromelles in 1916, and the successful one at Hamel in 1918? Discuss your ideas.



Fromelles 1916



Hamel 1918





# ACTIVITY

# 6

## Representations of the Western Front

**6.1** Look at the following visual representations of war on the Western Front as experienced by Australians and answer these questions on each one:

- What does the image show?
- Who is in it?
- What are they doing?
- What are your reactions to it?
- What message do you think the image gives to the viewer?
- What does it help you understand about the Australian experience of warfare on the Western Front?



Fred Leist, *Australian infantry attack in Polygon Wood*



Will Longstaff, *Night attack by 13th Brigade on Villers-Bretonneux*



A Henry Fullwood, *Attack on Peronne*



H Septimus Power, *Stretcher bearers*



H Septimus Power, *The Gunners*



H Septimus Power, *Battle of Menin Road*

## ACTIVITY 6 >>



H Septimus Power, *Bringing up the ammunition*



H Septimus Power, *Saving the guns at Robeca*



Charles Wheeler, *The Battle of Messines*



H Septimus Power, *First Australian Division Artillery going into the 3rd Battle of Ypres*

**6.2** How valuable are the works of war artists as evidence of what happened on the Western Front, and in helping us understand the nature of that experience for the Australian troops involved? Discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

**6.3** Add any further information to the summary table.

## CONCLUSIONS

**6.4** Go back to Question 4.2 on page 8. Would you now add anything to your answers?

**6.5** Gallipoli is seen as the birth of the Anzac Spirit, but many people now say that the Western Front experience was the more important one for developing that Anzac Spirit, and should get more emphasis in Anzac Day commemorations and awareness. Do you agree? Explain your ideas.

## FINDING OUT MORE

You can find more information and interactive resources on Australians on the Western Front at <http://www.ryebuck.com.au/elearning/>

Look for:

- BATTLEFIELD CASUALTIES – AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE WEBSITE
- INFANTRY MAN – AN INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE WEBSITE