FROMELLES AND THE SOMME
AUSTRALIANS ON THE WESTERN FRONT – 1916
Front Cover: The battlefield where the Australians attacked around Mouquet Farm, showing the devastation caused by the fighting, photographed in October 1916. (AWM E00005)

Inside Front Cover: ‘Cobbers’, The Australian Memorial Park, Fromelles. (Photographer: Peter Burness)

Inside Back Cover: Scattered graves marked by simple white crosses on the Somme battlefields. (AWM P03631.216, photographer: Frank Hurley)

Back Cover: Stretcher bearers at Pozières, 28 August 1916. (AWM E04946)

ISBN 978 1 920720 69 8

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Published by the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, Canberra, 2006.
Reprinted June 2015.

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The year 1916 was the mid-point of the Great War, and from late March it marked the arrival of the first Australian divisions in France, leading to their entry into the great battles of the Western Front. There were among the men some who had fought in the Gallipoli campaign the year before. All the troops were fit and keen, and eager to prove themselves worthy of the Anzacs’ reputation for bravery and initiative. But here, on the main battle front, they were about to discover a new kind of warfare.

In France and Belgium the Australians would face the powerful German army, and the fury of the big battles would test each man to the limits of his mental and physical endurance. Before the year was out many of them would die in an ill-conceived attack at Fromelles, while the blood of others would soak the fields around Pozières; in the final months, the troops would enter the bitterly cruel winter trenches. By the end of December the sad lists of those who were killed reached over 10,000 names and a further 30,000 had been wounded.

The Australians had come from Egypt, used as a base during the Gallipoli operations, where they had large camps. Early in 1916 the two Australian divisions there had been increased to four. They drew their numbers from the veterans of the existing 1st and 2nd Divisions recently evacuated from Gallipoli, together with reinforcements already in the country and drafts arriving from Australia. Another division, the 3rd, was raised at home and went straight to Britain. The battalions in the newly formed 4th and 5th Divisions were considered the offspring of the oldest ones (1st–16th Battalions) as they contained men transferred over from them to provide a core of experience.

France is a beautiful country and at first the Australians travelled through green and productive areas untouched by war. However, the absence of young men who were away fighting at the front, or who had been killed, was noticeable in the villages.

Captain Eric Wren, historian of the 3rd Battalion, recalled his troopship’s arrival:

*The approach to the French coast was made in beautifully clear weather. A ferry boat passed close. There were many women among the passengers, and it was observed that everyone appeared to be in black. It gave a first impression of France, ‘a nation in mourning’.*
The Australians saw a lot of the country as they travelled by train almost the length of France towards the region of the Belgian border in the north. Behind the front lines, the accommodation and training areas were more agreeable than those in Egypt and there were villages with cafes or estaminets selling eggs, chips, beer and wine to the soldiers. However, comforts were basic and the troops found that their billets were usually in barns, lofts or stables.

The arrival of the Australian divisions coincided with major changes in the British Expeditionary Force. The small regular army that had come across the Channel in 1914 had almost fought itself to extinction and its battalions were full of reinforcements. In 1915, Territorial battalions at first and then Territorial divisions joined the regular divisions on the Western Front. Now a new volunteer ‘Kitchener’s Army’, within it those men who had responded to the famous ‘Your Country needs YOU!’ appeals, was taking the field in strength. These would be followed by conscripts. Not only had the British Army expanded, it was about to play a far greater role in the war.

As the Australians settled into training and gained familiarity with the trenches in the sector of the front around Armentières called ‘the nursery’, great battles had been taking place at Verdun, east of Paris. There, in February, the Germans had launched a massive offensive. The enemy strategy was simple—it had the object of ‘bleeding France to death’. The French responded, declaring, ‘they shall not pass’. It had become a war of attrition on a mighty scale and the ongoing fighting would place enormous strain on both nations.

Other Australians were also now in Britain. The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) established an administrative headquarters in London, while depots were set up on the Salisbury Plain to train the new drafts of reinforcements. The men going to units in France would now come from here. The 3rd Australian Division would begin to arrive from mid year and an Australian, Major-General John Monash, who would later win renown as a leader, was appointed to command it. The division would continue its training and not cross to France until November. At least this would spare this division from the big battles of 1916.

Back in Flanders, from April, the 2nd Australian Division, followed by the 1st, had been the first to go into the trenches, and they were followed by the 4th Division in late June and the 5th in early July. The introduction to the front line consisted of trench
routine, occasional shelling, sniping and raids. Private Roy Smith was unimpressed with trench life, telling those at home:

_There are thousands of rats in the trenches. They run all over us when we are sleeping and they are nearly as big as rabbits; they pinched our candle one day._

Front line life in the nursery sector may not have been as intense as the forthcoming battles, but it was the real thing, with the Australians holding a section of the front amid periods of sharp fighting. On 25–26 June, Private John Jackson of the 17th Battalion gained the first Victoria Cross awarded to the AIF on the Western Front. He was a member of a raiding party that came under heavy fire. Jackson helped bring in the wounded although his arm was so badly damaged by a bursting shell that it was later amputated. By the end of June more than 600 Australians had been killed.

At this time the British front line extended 150 km, from Ypres in Belgium south to the Somme River in France. A joint British–French offensive had already been planned for the Somme region where the two armies met, but now the French were calling on the British to take up a larger part to relieve the pressure on them at Verdun. The French Army had suffered almost two million casualties since the war began.

Eventually the Somme offensive would become mainly a British one, under General Sir Douglas Haig, who had been appointed commander-in-chief of the British forces in December 1915.

The Battle of the Somme began on 1 July 1916. British and French troops attacked the enemy’s deep defences on a 20 km front astride the Somme River, 30 km from the city of Amiens, after an artillery bombardment that lasted a week. The battle has gone into British military history as ‘the First Battle of the Somme’, or more simply as ‘the Big Push’ and is remembered for the scale of the losses for the little ground gained. There were 58,000 British casualties on the first day.

The British regular 29th Division was one of those that made the initial attack. Many Australians had formed an enduring bond with this division which had shared the Anzacs’ ordeal of the landings on the Gallipoli peninsula on 25 April 1915. Men from the 29th fell thickly on the Somme.

Eventually the Battle of the Somme became a series of bloody battles that continued for almost five months and caused more than a million casualties on both sides. Towards the end of these actions much of the ground that the British had fought for was captured, but there was no breakthrough. Despite their own heavy losses,
the Germans continued to resist determinedly, holding the British along a line in front of Bapaume until their withdrawal to the Hindenburg Line the following year.

It was not long before the Australians became a part of this mighty battle. With more troops needed on the Somme, the 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions of I Anzac Corps, under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood, were ordered south, while the 5th Division remained in Flanders. Then, on 13 July, the 5th’s commander, Major-General James McCay, got the news that his division, not the others, would be the first to go into a full-scale battle, and that it would be on the local front.

The newly arrived 5th Division was probably the least prepared for what followed. Earlier plans for an attack on the Fromelles – Aubers Ridge area were being dusted down and revised. Assaults here had failed in 1915. This time the idea was for a diversionary attack to draw the enemy’s attention away from reinforcing the Somme. It would become a subsidiary battle in which two inexperienced divisions fighting side-by-side—the 5th Australian and the 61st British—were to suffer shocking losses in a very short time. In a period of twenty-four hours there were 5500 Australian casualties, including 470 who became prisoners of war.

The division was crippled for several months and no ground was captured.

At Fromelles the opposing trench lines faced each other across a boggy overgrown no-man’s-land through which ran a stream and muddy ditches. Because of the high water table, the Australian trenches were mostly built up as breastworks above ground, under observation from the low ridge and the ruins of Fromelles village standing beyond the German forward lines. Of deadly concern was the ‘Sugarloaf’ salient, where the enemy’s positions, heavily manned with machine-guns, jutted towards the British line. Fire from here could enfilade any Allied troops advancing towards the ridge. The enemy held the high ground and all the advantages.

A teenage soldier of the 30th Battalion, Private Rowley Lording, who would receive ghastly wounds from which he would never fully recover, later wrote of the time before the attack:

_The gunfire merges into a continuous roar above which are heard only the sharp explosions of nearby shells. To make themselves heard in the din, men have to shout. The Boys are all hugging whatever cover they can find, tensely awaiting their fate. Will the order to move or a shell come first?_
The attack, with the British on the right and the Australians on the left, began at 6 pm on 19 July. Tragically, the artillery preparation had failed to destroy much of the enemy’s defences. Worse still, attempts to capture the Sugarloaf failed and the British division and the 15th Australian Brigade came under murderous fire. Over on the left of the Australian assault, the 14th and 8th Brigades took the German trenches, but then mistook a water-filled ditch as the enemy’s third line. Darkness soon fell and the fighting continued through the night, with German machine-guns and artillery maintaining a heavy fire. Then the counter-attacks came, overcoming positions, surrounding some groups and forcing others to fight their way back to their own lines leaving the dead and wounded behind.

The next day this ground presented a harrowing scene. There were many hundreds of wounded men lying out amongst the debris and wire or sheltered in craters. Their pitiful cries could be clearly heard, growing thinner as men succumbed. Fortunately the Germans respected the work of the brave stretcher bearers, and the battlefield became mostly silent of gunfire. At one point, Australian and German troops watched over the parapets as officers from both sides tried to negotiate an armistice to collect the wounded. In the end, permission was not given, however the lull had allowed the bearers to do some useful work.

The commander of the 15th Brigade, Brigadier-General HE ‘Pompey’ Elliott, was deeply distressed by his losses. He wrote:

*We attacked in four waves and there was not the least hesitation ...
One of the best of my Commanding Officers was killed and practically all my best officers, the Anzac men who helped to build up my Brigade are dead. I presume there was some plan at the back of the attack but it is difficult to know what it was.*

Meanwhile, more than 100 km away on the Somme, the main offensive was continuing and ground to the south had been wrested from the enemy. Towards the centre, after three weeks of fighting, the front line had advanced to the outskirts of the shattered village of Pozières, just a few kilometres from where it had started. This was the important high part of a ridge and a couple of British attacks to take it had already been repulsed.

The main Somme fighting had been conducted by the British 4th Army of General Sir Henry Rawlinson. Under this general, Australian divisions would later win important battles in 1918. But for now, I Anzac Corps operated under the British Reserve Army (later named...
the 5th Army) of General Sir Hubert Gough, who had a reputation as an aggressive leader. Gough decided to use the Australians for the capture of Pozières, although Sir Douglas Haig was not sure that they were ready for such an important task. For the Australians’ part, they would display great bravery in action; it was Gough who would never gain their confidence.

While the 5th Division was in action at Fromelles, the 1st Australian Division was moving up towards Pozières to take its turn in battle. Captain Eric Wren, 3rd Battalion, would recall the march up towards the front line:

_The day was fine and warm, and the route at first ran through pleasant cornfields almost ready for harvest. The spirits of the men were high. As the marching ‘fours’ approached Albert, the cornfields were replaced by... endless horse-lines, batteries of artillery, piled-up shells, dumps of every description, and troops representative of all arms of the service._

Closer to the battlefield, moving up from the shell-battered town of Albert and through Sausage Valley, the scene changed. War debris and unburied dead lay around everywhere and the smell of gas hung in the air. At intervals the ground would erupt with the burst of an enemy shell. The 1st Division took over the trenches facing Pozières and, with a mixture of anticipation and dread, awaited their entry into battle.

Although he initially had orders to make a quick attack, the Australian division’s commander, Major-General HG ‘Hooky’ Walker, demanded more time. Finally, at 12.30 am on 23 July, the division assaulted in waves—not frontally, but from the south-east. The troops were supported by a tremendous barrage of crashing fire from the British, Australian and French artillery, that had been growing in intensity since the previous evening.

On the jumping-off tape, each man had readied himself. Rifles were gripped firmly, new steel helmets were pulled on tight, while hanging over each man’s shoulder was a cotton satchel holding a cloth anti-gas helmet. These early gas masks were simply a chemically impregnated hood, and they had already been needed. A cloth patch had been sewn on each man’s back to assist identification in the dark. In the 1st Battalion it was noticed that the men had their sleeves rolled to the elbows. Earlier, in some battalions at least, there had been an issue of rum.

The massive concentration of supporting firepower, experienced for the first time, would be a long-held memory for many of the troops. As it grew in noise and intensity the Germans signalled their alarm by shooting coloured signal flares into the black sky, creating a fireworks display. Sergeant Ben Champion recorded:
It seemed as if the earth opened up with a crash. The ground shook and trembled, and the concussion made our ears ring. It is strange how men creep together for protection.

The order came: ‘Fix bayonets ... Advance’. Troops struggled forward in the dark—the forms of the men silhouetted for a moment against the fiery background. It was difficult to keep direction over ground broken by shellfire, while from different directions long bursts of machine-gun fire came from enemy posts. The German gunners seemed to have been immune from the preparatory shelling and their fire took a heavy toll on the advancing men.

As time went on the stiffest resistance came from the enemy on the east of the village, where their defences included the double lines of old German trenches called ‘OG1’ and ‘OG2’, and where the ground was torn up and cratered, like that of a choppy sea. A wild bomb-fight with hand grenades ensued. On the western end of the line the Australians succeeded in taking the ruins of the village and holding their gains against counter-attacks. The ground taken included the high concrete observation post—the only dominant standing feature—named ‘Gibraltar’.

Meanwhile, the battalions’ headquarters were busy and officers in dugouts or old shelters waited anxiously for news of progress. Buzzers in the signalling section were going at full speed, runners were coming and going with messages, and the wounded were trickling back. Slowly, reports began to come in that objectives had been reached and that the troops were digging in.

Some of the combat was at close quarters, and grenades or ‘bombs’ were mostly used rather than, as is often imagined, bayonets. In the heavy exchanges on the right, one Australian, Private John Leak, gained the Victoria Cross for attacking a strong enemy post with bombs and bayonet while under heavy machine-gun fire. Later, when the Germans fought back, he continued gamely throwing his bombs.

Daylight brought an even greater test for the weary troops. Now it was the German artillery providing an awesome display as the ground shuddered with explosions. Often men were covered over as trenches collapsed, and some were buried alive. It was hard to reach the wounded and many daring stretcher bearers died during attempts. In one case, a tough 44-year-old former bushman, Private E ‘Darkie’ Jenkins, worked with the wounded with great tenderness, carrying them to cover, erecting shelter, sharing water, and trying to lift their spirits. He did this until he was blown to pieces by a shell.
Seeing the destruction, Lance-Corporal Morgan wrote:

*The scene is terrible. Dead and dying men lay one on top of the other. Many of them were blown to pieces where they lay on the ground, while others lying helpless in the trenches were buried alive.*

Shells fell heavily on Dead Man’s Road, which was the main route to the front trenches for the parties carrying water, rations and ammunition, and for the returning stretcher bearers. Charles Bean, the Australian Official Historian, recorded:

*On its shattered banks the corpses of both the Australians and of the British who had preceded them lay sprinkled over with the dust of shell explosions, which painted roadside, tree trunks, and foliage with one dry dun self-colour.*

The division had done well in its first mighty test on the Western Front. For four days the Australians fought on, striving to extend the ground taken and hold on to it, while all the time exposed to dreadful artillery shelling. Under this fire the troops dug when they could or found what little shelter there was. Men were continually being killed, wounded or buried. By the time the division was relieved, on 27 July by the 2nd Australian Division, it had suffered 5300 casualties.

A young farmer, Private H ‘Squatter’ Preston, recalled coming out of the fighting:

*A scarecrow mob marched through Albert. We saw the 7th Brigade march in. They gave us a cheer, which I am sure was more out of sympathy for our appearance than for anything we had done.*

Lieutenant Ted Rule of the 14th Battalion saw the remnants of the 1st Division when they reached the village of Warloy:

*We had our eyes opened when we saw these men march by. Those who watched them will never forget it as long as they live. They looked like men who had been in hell. Almost without exception each man looked drawn and haggard, and so dazed that they seemed to be walking in a dream, and their eyes looked glassy and starey.*

The 1st Division had captured Pozières, and now the 2nd Division had to take its turn in the fight. Unlike the other two divisions in the corps, this one was commanded by an Australian, Major-General James Legge. Unfortunately, he was pressured into making a night attack, which commenced in the early minutes of 29 July with too little preparation. Troops moved into a maelstrom of machine-gun fire, smoke, dust and uncut barbed wire. The 7th Brigade took terrible punishment—*many fell dead on the wire.* The enemy artillery barrage joined in with high explosive and gas shells. Some ground was taken but most of it was
lost again, and the whole awful venture cost the 2nd Division about 3500 men.

A soldier of the 17th Battalion, Private David Roberts, wrote:

*Men blinded and cut to pieces also German wounded come down together ... I had a couple of near goes with the big shells, it is worse than hell. A fellow may go at any moment. There is dead lying everywhere the smell is awful. Can’t shift the dead men and have to walk over them.*

The depleted division made another big attack just before darkness on 4 August, and this one was successful. Again the fighting was heavy and the shell-fire deadly. Finally, this eastern push had reached the site of the old Pozières windmill, one of only a few battlefield landmarks. Here was only a shattered mound of heavy rubble where the village mill had stood in more peaceful times. The Germans had developed its foundations into deep concrete fortifications.

The 2nd Division fought to near exhaustion. Lieutenant Alec Raws, who, together with his brother, was later killed at Pozières, recorded:

*My battalion has been in it for 8 days, and one-third of it is left. 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. Several of my friends are raving mad. Poor devils.*

The 4th Australian Division, under Major-General Herbert Cox, now began to relieve the remnants of a division which had just suffered greater losses than any Australian division in a single tour in the front line, then or since. In twelve days the division had 6800 casualties. Sergeant Rupert Baldwin recorded:

*We came out this morning as best we could. We are a very shaken lot. I saw some awful things although I never got a mark, we are all on edge all our nerves are wrecked, we lost some fine men.*

On the morning of 6 August, while the relief was underway, the Germans made a counter-attack, which was beaten off. But the intense artillery bombardment continued and in the dim dawn of the next morning the enemy came on again, overrunning some posts. This was the last concentrated German effort to take back the Pozières ridge. Many brave and desperate actions were fought.

It was at this time that Lieutenant Albert Jacka, who was already a national hero for having gained the AIF’s first Victoria Cross on Gallipoli, made a decisive attack, *fighting like a wild cat*, that turned the tables on some of the enemy. It was a bold act in which he was badly
wounded and for which he was awarded the Military Cross. Many considered he should have received a second VC. Charles Bean, in the official history, wrote that Jacka’s counter-attack stands as the most dramatic and effective act of individual audacity in the history of the AIF.

As fighting continued, Sergeant David Twinning became one of the few survivors of a ‘last stand’ action, when his post was cut off and became surrounded for over two days. In his account he said:

*After the first twelve hours we took off our putties and used them to bandage the wounded. By the end of 24 hours most of us had our coats off and were trying to use them on the wounded.*

Holding on, the Australians were now ordered to push their attacks northwards towards a large farm, seeking to drive a wedge behind Thiepval, where the British had been stuck for weeks. This was Mouquet Farm, whose buildings were in ruins but whose cellars had been developed into a fortress by the enemy. To get to the front line, the troops now had to cross the ground already fought over and try to move along trenches lined with dead that were being constantly churned up and destroyed by the enemy shelling. Charles Bean said:

*The whole area was flayed and pounded into a veritable sea of shell-craters.*

The artillery fire at Pozières was worse than anything the Australians would ever experience again, and more than men could be expected to endure. Bean observed the terror of it:

*The men are simply turned in there as into some ghastly great mincing machine. They have to stay there while shell after shell descends with a shriek close beside them, each one an acute mental torture. Every man in the trench has that instant fear thrust upon his shoulders—I don’t care how brave he is—with a crash that is physical pain and strain to withstand.*

In a week of fighting, the 4th Division drove its attacks towards Mouquet Farm and reached its edge. The troops advanced repeatedly, becoming increasingly exposed to the artillery fire each time they got further forward. High explosive shells blew in trenches while shrapnel burst in the air, pelting down deadly pellets. Several times the positions changed hands. By the time it was relieved the 4th Division had lost 4600 men.

Three divisions had now gone into the battle of Pozières. As each one came out of the fighting, many of the men felt that their losses had been so great that they would not have to be used again. However, their commanders had planned otherwise. After a short rest, each division, built up only to two-thirds strength, had to go into the battle once more.
Out of the line, Sir William Birdwood—the same British general who had become popular when he commanded the Anzacs on Gallipoli—met the divisions. The troops listen grimly as he praised them and said how he knew they wanted to get back to kill more Germans. ‘Birdie’s bull’ they called such talk. Later, after more heavy casualties, some men felt that not enough was done to spare them from the further ordeal, and the general’s popularity began to wane.

On 16 August the 4th Division was relieved by the 1st Division on its second tour. In a week of striving to take Mouquet Farm, the division had 2600 casualties before handing over to the 2nd Division once again on 22 August. During a further five days of fighting, they took Mouquet Farm but could not hold it—one of a couple of times that the farm was taken then lost to heavy enemy counter-attacks.

Private Henry Turner described the nature of the fighting:

_We had orders to take Mouquet Farm. We got into the enemy trench but the Germans came up from behind and [a group] got cut off. The sergeant took shelter in shell holes and all fought to a finish. They were determined not to be taken alive._

This time the 2nd Division lost 1300 men. Finally, on 27 August the 4th Division took over once more, fighting on, and suffering 2400 further casualties before they came out on 5 September, ending the Australian involvement. Only the day before, the Potter family of Wilmington, South Australia, lost three sons in the action.

Afterwards soldiers fought for words to tell of their experience at Pozières. The horror of it defied proper description. Often they said that it was ‘hell’ or ‘worse than hell’. The loss of mates was an enduring memory for many. After one of the attacks, Private Norman Mackie recorded: _The second morning was the saddest sight of all, the beginning of the burying of the dead—but that’s best left unwritten about._

The Pozières battlefield had quickly become a dusty smouldering wasteland of craters, the remnants of folded-in trenches, the debris of buildings reduced to rubble, shattered weapons and broken equipment. In many places a grave was marked by anything that was at hand. Mostly the dead lay out exposed and rotting. The acrid smell of explosives was mixed with smoke and the pungent odour of decay.

Over these tortured fields moved the stretcher bearers, runners and signallers doing their vital work. They were constantly exposed to deadly fire. Private Mackie observed: _Our despatch runners were very unlucky and hardly_
ever returned as they went out. Sergeant Fred Hocking wrote: "The stretcher bearers are the men who should get the praise. They worked splendidly under fire and were shot down right and left."

The Australian Official Historian would later be critical of the decision to have each division spend two tours at Pozières. It overstrained the units and took a heavy toll on the physical and mental condition of the men. He added: "it is not surprising if the effect on some intelligent men was a bitter conviction that they were being uselessly sacrificed."

The Australians’ ordeal at Pozières finally ended and they handed over to the Canadians. In six weeks they had suffered 23,000 casualties, among whom were 6750 dead. Over a period of forty-two days the Australians made nineteen attacks, sixteen of them at night. As a proportion of the forces involved, this was the highest casualty rate ever experienced by Australian troops. Not counted among the wounded were many men who, through constant strain and exhaustion, reached a stage of mental and physical collapse for which there was no cure.

In October, the survivors of Pozières were in Flanders when they got the grim news that they were returning to the Somme. Bolstered by reinforcements, they went back to the old battlefield, although by now some of the front line had advanced and Pozières was some distance behind. This time they were to be joined by the 5th Division, which would be seeing the Somme for the first time. The warm dusty days of mid year were gone and autumn rains were beginning to turn the whole place into a quagmire. A brave Australian officer, Lieutenant Allan Leane, who was killed in the following year, wrote to his mother:

*I... am thoroughly sick of the mud, slush, blood, etc and sincerely hope that it comes to an end shortly. I am so heartily sick of this orgy of killing and lust for blood, it is degrading and demoralising.*

In November, the Australians made some attacks near Gueudecourt and Flers, but already the weather and the mud were making it impossible to conduct battles. While British operations finally had success near Thiepval, over ground which had been fought for since July, no more could be done. Not long after this, on 18 November 1916, the main Somme offensive ended on a day marked by the first fall of snow.

From now on the rain, mud and cold of one of the worst winters in living memory meant that no more big battles were possible until the following spring. Conditions became appalling as trenches filled with water and thick slimy mud; the spirits of the men
declined. It was impossible to keep warm and dry, and water froze in water-bottles. Private David Roberts recalled: *We are over our knees in mud and water and our feet are all swollen and without feeling. Trench foot and frost-bite became widespread.*

Still the shelling and raiding continued. However, the weather became the greatest enemy for both sides, particularly for the British and Empire troops. The Germans had intact fields, roads and villages close behind them, but to get to the British lines you had to cross many kilometres of torn-up fields of mud and the desolation of the recent battlefields. All supplies had to come up through this, and the wounded had to be taken out the same way. Many men died along the route to the casualty clearing stations.

The dreadful conditions made progress to and from the front line slow and exhausting. On 12 November Brigadier-General Duncan Glasfurd, the commander of the 12th Australian Brigade, was wounded by a shell while looking over the trench lines. His evacuation to an advanced treatment post became a ten-hour stretcher journey. It was to no avail; he became the most senior AIF officer killed that year.

Rations had to come along the same route through the mud-fields, and occasionally there was warm food.

War artist Will Dyson saw the arrival of stew in insulated boxes:

*The precious fluid, the hope giving potion, the stew from the wagon lines, the last evidence on earth of any civilisation or culture that the battalion will know for some days.*

Throughout the battles of 1916 the Australian casualties were generally no greater than for the adjoining British units. However, beyond the immediate tragedy, they had an extra impact because they were from across virtually the whole of Australia’s force on the Western Front. Replenishment of these losses was a major problem. In Australia, Prime Minister WM ‘Billy’ Hughes, who had visited the troops in France before the July battles, held the view that conscription should be introduced by Australia just as Britain had done earlier in the year. Now he was more convinced, although he lacked support within his own Labor Party and knew that his proposal would not get the approval of the Senate.

A referendum to introduce conscription went before the Australian public on 28 October 1916. It was narrowly defeated, although, contrary to popular belief, the soldiers voted narrowly in its favour. The issue split the Labor party, causing Hughes to form a breakaway coalition government. He would try again the
following year, and a second referendum was similarly defeated. The bitterness of the debate caused serious divisions that were long-standing within the Australian population.

Those who had survived the battles of Fromelles or Pozières, or had served through the winter on the Somme, could never forget the horrors and suffering they had endured. Some were permanently maimed or scarred. At home, thousands of households had been thrown into mourning. The small French villages, once of no consequence to Australians, had given their names to tragic battles that were now part of the young nation’s history.

After the war Fromelles and Pozières, and the surrounding villages, were rebuilt and the former battlefields were returned to crops. But even before the construction began at Pozières, the 1st Australian Division erected its monument—a tall stone obelisk—close by the ruins of the old Gibraltar blockhouse, proclaiming its pride in having captured this ground. At the other end of the village the rubble-strewn mound of the old windmill was left uncultivated. This small area of untouched land was eventually purchased by the Board of the Australian War Memorial and has since passed into the care of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission.

There today, beneath French and Australian flags, a stone tablet bears the words:

_The ruins of Pozières windmill which lies here was the centre of the struggle in this part of the Somme battlefield in July and August 1916. It was captured on August 4th by Australian troops who fell more thickly on this ridge than on any other battlefield of the war._

Modern Fromelles is also a place of memories. An Australian memorial called VC Corner was erected there after the war and carries the names of the 1299 ‘missing’ from the battle. Under the lawn there are 410 unidentified soldiers buried in unmarked graves. It is a sombre and unique patch of ground. Generally, in France the identified dead are in the numerous war cemeteries, under headstones bearing their names and units, while the names of the missing are recorded on memorials. Apart from those at Fromelles, the names of 11,000 Australians missing from Pozières and all the other battles are engraved on the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, just as the 6000 Australians missing in Belgium are recorded on the Menin Gate at Ypres (Ieper).

On 5 July 1998, eight-two years after the battle, a new Australian memorial was unveiled by the Australian Minister for Veterans’ Affairs on the former Fromelles battlefield, not far from VC Corner.
This sculpture shows Sergeant Simon Fraser, a stretcher bearer who was later killed at Bullecourt in 1917, rescuing a wounded man. Created by the Melbourne sculptor Peter Corlett, it is titled Cobbers, recalling the plea of one poor soldier at Fromelles to Fraser, don’t forget me cobber.

Earlier, on 11 November 1993—the 75th anniversary of the end of the Great War—the body of the Unknown Australian Soldier was brought from France and entombed in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial. While the soldier represents all who have died in Australia’s wars, during the ceremony soil gathered from the Pozières windmill mound was sprinkled on the coffin. It may have been symbolic, but in its own way it was also an acknowledgement that Pozières, in the words of the official historian, Charles Bean, was more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth.
Australians on the Western Front 1916

Infantry units

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<tr>
<th>Division</th>
<th>Brigade</th>
<th>Battalions</th>
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<tr>
<td>1st Division</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Walker)</td>
<td>2 Bde</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3 Bde</td>
<td>11–12 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd Division</td>
<td>5 Bde</td>
<td>17–20 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Legge)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>7 Bde</td>
<td>25–28 Battalions</td>
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<td>33–36 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Monash)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11 Bde</td>
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<td>5th Division</td>
<td>8 Bde</td>
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<td>(McCay)</td>
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<td>15 Bde</td>
<td>57–60 Battalions</td>
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Australian Victoria Cross Awards
JUNE–AUGUST 1916

Private JWA Jackson
near Bois-Grenier, 25–26 June 1916

Private J Leak
Pozières, 23 July 1916

Lieutenant AS Blackburn
Pozières, 23 July 1916

Private T Cooke
Pozières, 24–25 July 1916, posthumous

Sergeant CC Castleton
Pozières, 28 July 1916, posthumous

Private M O’Meara
Pozières, 9–12 August 1916
Off to be a soldier: Private Arthur Greenham of the 48th Battalion in camp at Blackboy Hill, WA. He enlisted on 23 July 1915 and was killed at Pozières a year later, on 6 August 1916. (AWM P00858.010)
Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood, commander of I Anzac Corps, addresses the troops sailing from Alexandria, Egypt, bound for Marseilles, France, in late March 1916. They were soon to join the fighting on the Western Front.

(AWM G01527)
Men of the 2nd Australian Division on a roadside in France. This division, which contained some troops who had served in the latter part of the Gallipoli campaign, was the first to arrive in the new war theatre. (AWM E07016)
A French veteran of the 1870 Franco-Prussian war shakes hands with Sergeant Robert Potter and another member of the 6th Battalion soon after their arrival in France, June 1916. (AWM E70034)
Australians billeted in a farmhouse make friends with local children around a water pump in June 1916. The soldiers’ accommodation was usually in the local barns, stables and lofts. (AWM E70036)
Men of the 6th Australian Brigade, 2nd Division, recently arrived on the Western Front from Egypt, show off their newly issued steel helmets. Many were veterans of Gallipoli, but at least half were reinforcements. (AWM EŻ0003)
A platoon of fresh Australian troops makes its way along the duckboards behind the protective breastworks in northern France. (AWM E70048)
Wrapped in his overcoat, an Australian sleeps on the duckboards behind the breastworks at Bois–Grenier in the ‘nursery’ sector where the troops got their introduction to local trench warfare during June 1916. (AWM EZ0052)
In the front line with bayonets fixed, men of the 53rd Battalion, 5th Division, are captured by the camera only minutes before taking part in the disastrous attack at Fromelles on 19 July 1916. (AWM H16396)
Men of the 53rd Battalion, 5th Division, wait to don their equipment for the attack at Fromelles. Three of the men in this photograph came out of the action alive, though wounded. The rest did not survive. (AWM A05042)
Human remains and scattered remnants of personal equipment still lay among the grass and weeds of the old battlefield at Fromelles two years after the battle. (AWM E04037)
Germans reoccupy a trench on the morning following the Australian attack at Fromelles. Some of the Australians who had fought for the position are lying dead in the mud and water in the foreground. *(AWM A01562)*
Wounded Australian prisoners of war wait at a German collecting station near Fromelles on the morning of 20 July 1916. For the 5th Australian Division, which lost more than 5500 men killed, wounded, missing or taken prisoner, this first significant Australian battle on the Western Front was devastating. Official historian Charles Bean wrote that the Division was ‘crippled by the fight’ and took months to rebuild and be deployed again. (AWM A01551)
Vehicles and men of the 2nd Australian Division, including an ambulance and tenders carrying materials for building duckboards, share a busy road during the Australians’ move to the Somme region. (AWM EZ0118)
Between Albert and the front line, Australian gunners at an 18-pounder field gun provide fire in support of the Australian attacks at Pozières, July 1916. (AWM E20141)
A few kilometres behind the battle front, Australian artillerymen break for a meal while manning a gun position in support of the Australians’ advance. (AWM C00474)
Members of the Australian Army Medical Corps treat wounds at an Australian dressing station established in an old chateau at Becourt to receive the many casualties from the fighting at Pozières in July 1916. (AWM E0066)
Wearing a German helmet known as a ‘pickelhaube’ and balancing his mirror on a pile of other captured equipment, an Australian shaves after the fighting at Pozières. The official historian Charles Bean made use of the men’s adeptness at scrounging battlefield souvenirs, encouraging men to collect significant items to start the collection of what became the Australian War Memorial. *(AWM E70137)*
The grave of Lieutenant Alan Kerr at Pozières. Kerr was killed by a shell when the 2nd Division went into the line on 27 July 1916. A year later, in October 1917, his brother Eric was killed at Broodseinde, Belgium, while serving with the 11th Field Ambulance. *(AWM P03668.002)*
Private Thomas Cooke was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for his bravery in remaining at his Lewis Gun under intense artillery fire until he was killed, at Pozières on 28 July 1916. (AWM A02649)
George Swanton with his wife Nellie and daughter Joan, before he departed for the war. Private Swanton, 24th Battalion, died of wounds on 28 July 1916, after the 2nd Division took over at Pozières. His brother Jack had been killed on Gallipoli and another brother, Henry, was killed in action at Pozières in November 1916. (AWM DA09050)
British commander-in-chief General Sir Douglas Haig conducted the operations throughout the Battle of the Somme in 1916. *(AWM H06963)*
Lieutenant-General Sir William Birdwood, who had led the Anzacs at Gallipoli, was the commander of the I Anzac Corps—1st, 2nd and 4th Australian Divisions—during the fighting at Pozières. (P03717.009)
Sir William Birdwood addresses some men of the 1st Australian Division near Vadencourt after they completed their first tour of duty at Pozières. (AWM E20085)
Brigadier-General John Gellibrand (third from left), commanding the 6th Brigade, with a group of officers of the 2nd Division having breakfast in a shell-hole in Sausage Valley behind Pozières, 1 August 1916. (AWM E70075)
German shells fall at the rear of Australian troops who are moving up towards Pozières, following the route from Sausage Valley to Dead Man’s Road, 1 August 1916. (AWM E00084)
Near the Chalk Pit, between Sausage Valley and Pozières, Australians of a trench mortar battery prepare to fire a heavy round against the German positions, 2 August 1916. (AWM E70149)
Graves of some of the 2nd Australian Division men who had been wounded at Pozières and later died at the casualty clearing stations established at nearby Puchevillers. *(AWM J00052)*
On 10 August 1916, during a visit to the Somme, King George V watched the distant fighting at Pozières.  
*(AWM H15924)*
The remnants of the 2nd Division march towards their billets in the village of Warloy, soon after coming out from their first tour at Pozières, 10 August 1916. They are watched by troops of the 1st Division, who would shortly head for their second tour of duty at Pozières. (AWM EZ0092)
The burial of Australian Pozières casualties at Warloy in August 1916. These men probably died of their wounds in the dressing station established nearby. (AWM A00016)
A chaplain reads the burial service over an Australian who had been mortally wounded at Pozières and had died at the casualty clearing station near Becourt Wood in August 1916. (AWM EZ0064)
Studio portrait of Mrs Mabel Powell and her seven children, Deniliquin, NSW, c1906. Her son Edward Powell, seated at right, would die of wounds after the battle of Pozières on 14 August 1916. He and his mother were the subjects of a piece written by poet John O’Brien called ‘The Parting Rosary’, which tells of the farewell party given for Edward prior to his embarking for service overseas. (AWM P02248.002)

’Twas the green months when you left me; now the brown, brown months have come, Stand the ripe crops in the paddocks, but the harvesters are dumb. There’ll be flowers again in plenty, and a carpet o’er the plain - Oh, it’s hard you won’t be comin’ when the green months come again!
Slow film exposure records German flares bursting above their trench lines at Pozières. Coloured flares, known as Verey lights, were used for illumination in areas where a raid was expected and for signalling at night. (AWM EZ0080)
Australians of the 7th Brigade pass the ‘Gibraltar’ blockhouse as they trudge through the devastated area near Pozières, heading towards where the fighting is raging around Mouquet Farm, 28 August 1916. The blockhouse had been captured five weeks earlier. (AWM EZ0098)
Throughout July and August 1916, Sausage Valley was a busy thoroughfare for the troops and supplies going up to the fighting at Pozières. It was a dangerous place, often coming under enemy artillery shelling. *(AWM E0113)*
In his diary, Charles Bean recorded watching this scene of stretcher bearers at Pozières walking erect behind a man carrying a makeshift and unauthorised white flag, 28 August 1916. (AWM E04946)
The desolate and seemingly abandoned landscape of the Pozières battlefield on 28 August 1916. In fact, it is likely that within this scene dozens of troops are sheltering from shellfire in trenches, in dugouts or under any available cover.

(AWM E70067)
Three soldiers crouch in the ‘Centre Way’ communications trench at the edge of Pozières as shells burst in German lines in the distance towards Mouquet Farm, 28 August 1916. (AWM E70100)
The old trenches at Pozières, abandoned after the frontline had moved forward a few kilometres, as they appeared in October 1916. *(AWM E00007)*
The battlefield where the Australians attacked around Mouquet Farm, showing the devastation caused by the fighting, photographed in October 1916. (AWM E00005)
Prime Minister WM ‘Billy’ Hughes speaks in favour of conscription during a rally in Martin Place, Sydney, in late 1916.

(AWM A03376)
A recruiting train seeks more men for service in France at Wallumbulla, Queensland, in 1916. The AIF relied on voluntary enlistments throughout the war. (AWM H02211A)
Australian soldiers returning from the trenches to a rest area get a lift on an army wagon, France, 1916. (AWM E70107)
Reinforcements for the 1st Australian Division arrive at a railway siding at Dernancourt, near Albert, in December 1916. They are about to move up to the front line near Flers. (AWM E00037)
Men of the 5th Australian Division, some of them veterans of the battle of Fromelles in July, arrive on the Somme during the winter in December 1916. (AWM E00017)
Members of the 8th Battalion in the winter trench lines near Gueudecourt in December 1916; the German trenches are only 300 metres away. (AWM E00103)
Members of the 38th Battalion return from the trenches through Houplines, a village on the outskirts of Armentières, in December 1916. (AWM E00106)
A working party of the 40th Battalion, 3rd Division, return to their billets through Houplines, near Armentières, in December 1916. The division crossed to France and served in Flanders after the other four Australian divisions had moved to the Somme. (AWM E00105)
Members of the AIF stop for a warm drink at an Australian Comforts Funds (ACF) tent at Longueval, along the muddy route to the winter frontline trenches, December 1916. The ACF was formed in August 1916 to coordinate fundraising and the provision of comforts. Troops expressed a deep gratitude for its work, with the 22nd Battalion’s historian remembering: ‘Their soup kitchen was the goal to which even the weariest man persevered during the dreadful outward journeys from the line’. (AWM E00051)
Recently arrived in Flanders, men of the 3rd Division share coffee in the frontline trenches near Armentières, December 1916. *(AWM E00085)*
An Australian soldier of the 2nd Battalion in billets at Flesselles finds time to write a letter home, December 1916.

(AWM E00030)
Private James Johnston (left) and Lance-Corporal Edgar Moodie of the 3rd Pioneer Battalion look through a shell hole in the wall of a ruined house in Armentières, December 1916. (AWM E00109)
Stretcher bearers bring out wounded of the 4th Division from the front line near Delville Wood, Longueval, in December 1916. Often the wounded from the winter trenches had to be carried by teams of stretcher bearers over long distances in appalling conditions. Many died before reaching vital attention. (AWM E00049)
Part of the journey for some of the wounded being brought from the frontline winter trenches in December 1916 was by a light railway near Longueval. *(AWM E00080)*
Troops of the 14th Field Ambulance carry men suffering from trench foot to a hospital transport at Bernafay, France, in December 1916. Walking in front is Lance-Corporal William James, followed by Private John Sturrock. Both went on to be awarded the Military Medal in 1918 for rescuing and attending to wounded men under fire. (AWM E00081)
A wounded Australian arrives from the winter trench lines for treatment at No. 38 Casualty Clearing Station at Heilly, December 1916. (AWM E00003)
Sister Ada Smith, Australian Army Nursing Service, stands outside her tented quarters at the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing Station (CCS) at Trois Arbres, France, in 1916. Describing her work in the front line of medical care on the Western Front, she recalled: ‘all those healthy men came in dead, dying, unconscious or moaning’. The saddest ward in a CCS was the resuscitation or ‘moribund’ ward. In this ‘hopeless, heartbreaking place’ nurses like Smith would battle to restore warmth and life to men in shock from severe wounds, ‘saturated and covered in mud ... stone cold and pulseless’, before they could even be considered for surgery. (AWM P00156.058)
An ambulance of No. 1 Australian Auxiliary Hospital (AAH), Harefield, England, 1916. This hospital treated more than 50,000 patients during World War I, mostly surgical cases and blinded men from the Western Front. No. 2 AAH, at Southall in London, specialised in treating amputees; No. 3 AAH, at Dartford in Kent, took victims of ‘shell shock’, a form of neurosis caused by the trauma of war. (*AWM P02402.006*)
British troops move past the shell-damaged basilica of Notre Dame de Brebières in Albert, only a few kilometres behind the front line, late in 1916. All troops serving on the Somme in 1916 were familiar with the statue of the Virgin and Child hanging precariously over the town square. (AWM C05062)
Near Albert, comrades stand by the graves of men who died months earlier during the Somme battles of mid 1916.

(AWM E00166)
Early in 1917 the old battlefield at Pozières lay under snow. In the foreground is the grave of Captain Ivor Margetts of the 12th Battalion, killed on 24 July 1916, aged 24. He had been a prominent officer in the dawn landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915 before his service on the Western Front. (AWM E00193)
A group including the official war historian Charles Bean, with John Masefield and the artist Will Dyson (holding drawing board), inspect the former battlefield at Pozières in May 1917. (AWM E00509)
Men and officers gather in a cemetery at Pozières on 8 July 1917 for the unveiling of a memorial to fallen members of the 1st Australian Division. (AWM EZ0126)