

WARTIME SNAPSHOTS

Centenary of the Somme

Following the 1915 Gallipoli campaign, most of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) served on the Western Front in France and Belgium. There, Australian soldiers and airmen fought in each of the major British campaigns between 1916 and the end of the war in 1918. Of almost 300,000 Australians to have served on the Western Front, some 46,000 lost their lives. Such were the conditions in which they fought that more than 18,000 of those fallen had no known grave.



Background

Australian troops, including new recruits and men who had served in Gallipoli, began arriving in France from Egypt in March 1916. After the barren Gallipoli peninsula and the desert sands of the camps outside Cairo, France seemed to be paradise to many in the AIF. A member of the 24th Battalion, Sid Burvett, wrote: 'things could be a lot worse and comparing this place with Anzac it is a heaven and the boys know it too'. In France there were green fields and picturesque farms. Behind the lines men could visit villages, buy food and drink and mingle with civilians – experiences unknown to the men who had fought at Gallipoli.

During its first months in France, the AIF manned what was known as a 'nursery' sector, a relatively quiet part of the front near Armentières where fresh troops could become accustomed to life in the trenches opposite the German army. There were raids and casualties, but the Australians had yet to experience a major Western Front battle.

On 19 July at Fromelles, the 5th Division, with some of its men having spent just a few days in France, became the first Australian formation to take part in an assault on the German trenches. Attacking across a waterlogged no-man's-land against a heavily fortified position, they were unsuccessful. By the next morning there were more than 5000 casualties. On the night of 23 July the 1st Division began Australia's involvement in the Somme campaign with an attack on the German positions at Pozières. They succeeded in driving the Germans from the village, but were subjected to fierce counter-attacks and an artillery barrage more powerful and more destructive than anything the Australians had experienced on Gallipoli or would experience again on the Western Front.

Over the weeks that followed, the 1st, 2nd and 4th Australian divisions rotated through the fighting at Pozières and across the high ground between the village and the town of Mouquet Farm. In just over a month from the end of July, the Australians launched nine separate attacks. Always under devastating shell and machine-gun fire, they could only inch forwards, suffering heavy casualties in every action. Some became ill, unable to bear the strain; others were buried under soil when artillery fire destroyed trenches and dug-outs; the dead lay on the ground and the wounded counted themselves fortunate to survive. By the time they withdrew from the line after six weeks of fighting at Pozières and Mouquet Farm the AIF had lost some 23,000 men, almost as many dead and wounded as the force had suffered in the eight months on Gallipoli.

References

- *Australians on the Western Front*, Department of Veterans' Affairs publication, 2006, www.anzacportal.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-attachments/p01238.pdf
- *Volume III – The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1916* (12th edition, 1941), www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG1069752/
- *Australians on the Western Front*, Department of Veterans' Affairs series, 2005-2008, www.anzacportal.dva.gov.au
- Roll of Honour, Australian War Memorial, www.awm.gov.au/people/roll-search/roll_of_honour/

Teaching Activities

1. Look at the two Anzac Day posters on the Centenary of the Somme.
 - a. What can you see?
 - b. What are the similarities and differences between the two photographs?
 - c. What do you think happened before and after each image was taken? Discuss these differences.
2. The photographs in the posters were taken at Fromelles and Vignacourt in 1916, both on the Western Front. Fighting continued until 1918. Using the website *Australians on the Western Front*:
 - a. Identify the countries that the Western Front ran through;
 - b. Look at the map:
 - i. What do you notice about the changes in the front line from 1916 to 1918?
 - ii. How might the soldiers have felt about the gains and losses over the period?
3. Read the background information. Why did newly arrived Australian troops think France seemed like 'heaven' in comparison to Gallipoli?
4. Mephisto, the only known remaining German A7V First World War tank, was captured by Australian and British troops on 14 July 1918 near Villers-Bretonneux. The tank is 7 metres long by 3 metres wide and 3 metres high. Using the Australian War Memorial's article on Mephisto, answer the following questions:
 - a. How many men crewed Mephisto?
 - b. Measure out its area in your classroom to create your own impression of the tank. Discuss what it would have been like to be a crew member. (hints: environmental, physical and emotional considerations)
5. Using the Australian War Memorial website, read the 53rd Battalion war diary entry for 19 July 1916. Page 4 describes Australian soldiers attacking a German trench during the Battle of Fromelles. Based on the diary entry:
 - a. Identify the order and timing of events. Note the length of the artillery bombardment. Does this surprise you? Why or why not?
 - b. Consider the waves of the attack and the ability of the AIF to prepare, given the impact of the artillery bombardment on their own positions and those of the German army. What does this tell you about the nature of warfare on the Western Front?
6. The Australian Flying Corps served on the Western Front from 1916–1918. Read Chapter 4 of *Australians in World War I: Australian Flying Corps*. How did the experiences of airmen differ from the experiences of soldiers fighting in the trenches on the Western Front?
7. One of the posters depicts preparations of the 53rd Battalion just prior to the Battle of Fromelles. Using the website, *Australians on the Western Front*, go to the Remembrance Trail at VC Corner, where there is a memorial to commemorate the 1299 fallen soldiers with no known grave. Listen to the audio-cast or read the audio-transcript and discuss why it is important to commemorate the service of these unknown soldiers.

Websites

Use the links below to answer the teaching activities above.

Department of Veterans' Affairs

- Q2 www.ww1westernfront.gov.au/australian-remembrance-trail/where-australians-fought.php
- Q6 www.anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/publications/australians-world-war-i-australian-flying-corps/chapter-4-western-front
- Q7 www.ww1westernfront.gov.au/fromelles/on-this-spot-australian-memorial-park-fromelles.php

Australian War Memorial

- Q1 www.awm.gov.au/search/
- Q4 www.awm.gov.au/mephisto/
- Q5 www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG1006865/