YPRES
AUSTRALIANS ON THE WESTERN FRONT – 1917
In just over five months, from June to November 1917, the nation lost more than 12,000 dead and suffered thousands of wounded.
Australians on the Western Front – 1917

Ypres
At two minutes past eight on the morning of 4 August 1914, soldiers of the Imperial German Army began pouring across the Belgium border near Gemmerich, 50 kilometres from the city of Liège. They were initially opposed by a couple of Belgian policemen, who shot at their new enemy from sentry boxes—some of the first bullets to be fired in anger in an area of battle that was soon to be called the ‘Western Front’. Germany had already declared war on France and was hurrying to put its plans into operation, which would bring their armies through hitherto neutral Belgium, sweeping down towards Paris. The aim was a quick victory, knocking the French out of the war and freeing the German armies for what was thought would be the main struggle: the battering down of the supposedly mighty Russian Empire in the east. In all of this, Germany took a risk that Great Britain, her empire and her self-governing overseas dominions, including Australia, might not stand aside.

Britain did not stand aside. An ultimatum was delivered personally by the British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir William Edward Goschen, to the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, that if German forces did not forthwith quit Belgium, then Britain would regard herself in a state of war with Germany. The ultimatum expired at midnight on 4 August 1914. Bethmann Hollweg was horrified. Britain was going to war, he declared, with a ‘kindred nation’ just for a word, ‘neutrality’, for a ‘scrap of paper’. This ‘scrap’ was the Treaty of London, signed in 1839 by the European powers, including Britain and the precursor state of the German empire, the Kingdom of Prussia, in which all signatories guaranteed the independence and neutrality of the recently established Kingdom of Belgium.

To the British ultimatum the Germans made no reply and, at 12.30 pm Australian Eastern Standard Time on 5 August 1914, the Governor-General of Australia, Sir Ronald Munro-Ferguson, was informed simply by telegram from London, ‘War has broken out with Germany’. Australia’s position in the developing crisis had already been made clear by the leaders of all political parties but was summed up in the words of the leader of the Labor Party, Andrew Fisher, in an election address at Colac, Victoria, on 31 July 1914:

* Australians will stand beside our own [Great Britain] to help and defend her to our last man and our last shilling

Within months the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) had been raised—20,000 soldiers—and was on its way to Europe to honour this pledge. The first steps had been taken that would bring Australians to Belgium to fight for the last remaining part of that nation not under German occupation. By late 1914, this was a small section of countryside stretching southwards 40 kilometres from the North Sea coast at Nieuwpoort to the town of Ypres (Ieper) in the province of West Flanders.
The abomination of desolation

Ypres, 1914–1915

By the time the five divisions of the AIF came to participate in major operations in Belgium, the country had experienced two and a half years of war. During that time military events in Belgium and the plight of its citizens had rarely been out of the news in Australia. Considerable sums of money were raised throughout the nation to help the thousands of Belgian refugees who had fled to France, Britain and Holland in the wake of the advancing German armies in 1914. In Yass, New South Wales, for example, in response to a letter from the Belgian consul in Sydney, the local Australian Red Cross was busy in September 1914 collecting ‘warm winter clothing for the distressed Belgians’. But it was the town of Ypres itself, in British and French hands, which became the very symbol of the British Empire’s cause in the war.

On 22 November 1914, the Germans surrounding the town began bombarding it. Dame Mary Columban, an Irish nun, witnessed the beginning of the town’s destruction:

> With a shudder, we started on our errand. We had not gone a hundred yards when, whiz … bang, another—then another—and another. Half way down the street a British officer on horseback cried out to us: ‘Mes Soeurs … à la maison!’ [Sisters, go home!] … we hurried on. While crossing the Grand Place [Grote Markt] a perfect hail of shells and shrapnel came down on all sides. Explosion followed explosion. The soldiers and civilians crouched down by the side of the house whenever a shell burst but we, ignorant of the risk we were running, walked bravely on. [Dame M Columban, OSB, The Irish nuns at Ypres: an episode of the war, London, 1916, p. 71]

The First Battle of Ypres was fought from late October to mid November 1914, as the Germans struggled desperately to break through British and French defences. This savage action came at the end of those operations in which the German armies, thwarted in their efforts to encircle Paris and defeat the French in August–September 1914, tried to push back the Allied lines from the Belgian and northern French coasts before winter set in. They failed, but for most of the remainder of the war German soldiers sat on the heights of the low lying ridge that surrounds Ypres. Here there was a decided semi-circular bulge in the British line, which became infamous to the hundreds of thousands of British Empire soldiers who fought there as the ‘Ypres Salient’.
When you got beyond a certain line on your way up, that was the end of the world you came from and you just didn’t bother to think about what was laid before you. You just did your job and with any luck you came back. It’s difficult to tell other people what it was like … the salient was unimaginable. [Corporal STH Ross, Royal Engineers, quoted in Lyn Macdonald, They called it Passchendaele: the story of the Third Battle of Ypres and the men who fought in it, London, 1978, p. 186]

On 22 April 1915, as the AIF prepared to land at Gallipoli, the Germans carried out the first major release of poison gas on the Western Front, on the French lines in the north-eastern sector of the Salient. What was intended as a tactical assault to gauge the effects of this new weapon turned into the Second Battle of Ypres, as French, Canadian and British soldiers struggled to prevent a major German breakthrough in the wake of the panic caused by the gas. The line was stabilised but the area of the Salient was greatly reduced. The town itself was now finally evacuated and turned over to the military, as German shelling reduced buildings that had survived from the Middle Ages to ruins. Among the last to leave was a Catholic priest, Father Delaere:

It was truly terrible! All the time shrapnel was exploding above the town. Four horses lay bathed in their own blood in the Grande Place at the corner of the Rue de Lille and all along the Rue de Beurre we could see bloodstains everywhere, but not a living soul. Everything is in flames … and it’s rare to see a whole wall standing among the heaps of brick and rubble … It is truly the abomination of desolation. [Father Delaere, quoted in Lyn Macdonald, 1915: the death of innocence, London, 1993, p. 278]

Father Delaere was not to witness it, but worse was to come for the battered town and region.

The Flanders Offensive, 1917

From late 1914 to mid 1917 the war did not go too well for those fighting the Germans in Europe—Great Britain, France and Russia: the Allies. In 1915 the Gallipoli campaign failed to destroy the Ottoman Empire and no real headway was made against the Germans in France despite terrible British and French casualties in largely forgotten actions such as Neuve Chapelle and Loos. In 1916, losses mounted during huge battles at Verdun and on the Somme, where the AIF entered the fighting first at Fromelles and then at a place called Pozières. The first months of campaigning in 1917 again brought little success. The opening British offensive at Arras, in which the AIF fought with devastating losses at Bullecourt in April and May, spluttered to a halt, and even worse befell the major French attack under General Nivelle. This failure
temporarily disabled the French army and forced it to
stand on the defensive for the rest of the year. Only the
British seemed capable of attacking on the Western
Front and the British commander in chief, General Sir
Douglas Haig, now turned his attention to the one area
where he thought British arms might achieve a decisive
result—the Ypres Salient.

Haig’s strategic plan for a ‘Flanders Offensive’ was
simple. It would begin with a seizure of the German
line opposite the village of Messines, south of Ypres,
where the German line bulged out into the British line.
If any major attack was mounted east of Ypres it was
necessary to take out this bulge to shorten the enemy
line on the British right flank of operations. After
Messines would come the major attack east of Ypres,
aimed at breaking through the German positions all
the way up to the heights of the ridge at Passchendaele
and releasing the British cavalry into the rear towards
the Belgian coast. On that coast were bases from
where, since the declaration of unrestricted submarine
warfare by Germany in early 1917, enemy submarines
had been able to roam out easily into the north
Atlantic. That submarine activity had almost brought
Great Britain, so dependent on its seaborne imports of
foodstuffs and war materials from America, to its knees.

Fruitless attempts to
embrace us

Messines, 7 June 1917

The first Australians to become involved in the
preparations for Messines were the miners of the
1st Australian Tunnelling Company. The British surprise
being prepared for the Germans at Messines was the
simultaneous detonation of nineteen great mines
being dug under the enemy front lines all the way from
Hill 60, just south of Ypres, to St Yves, 10 kilometres
away. The tunnellers took over the workings of the
Hill 60 mine in November 1916 and protected the
shafts and the explosive charge against German
counter-mining for six months, until the beginning
of the great offensive.

The protection of the Hill 60 mine was a dangerous
task. Aware of the British tunnelling activity, the
Germans sent out a host of exploratory shafts at
different depths to seek out the mine. A typical action
at Hill 60 was that fought on 25 May 1917, just two
weeks before the long awaited attack at Messines.
Discovery at this point would have been disastrous.
On that day the Germans fired a small mine in a shaft
whose position was almost directly above the main
Hill 60 gallery. The explosion entombed two Australian miners, Sappers Edward Earl and George Simpson, who had been on listening duty for enemy activity. Given up for dead, Earl made a will and wrote a letter to his mother as well as making signals to assist with his rescue. He could hear Simpson’s signals, so he knew his mate was still alive, but he soon stopped his own signals lest the Germans were directed on to the location of the great mine. On 27 May, both men were finally dug out and the mine remained safe. Earl later died of asphyxia. At 3.10 am on 6 June 1917 the Hill 60 mine, and all the other mines, were detonated:

*The whole hillside, everything rocked like a ship at sea … when we got a look at the craters there were lumps of blue clay as big as a small building lying about. Our Hill 60 crater was 100 yards [90 metres] across from lip to lip and still 45 yards [40 metres] deep … We thought the war was over.* [Sapper Roll, 1st Australian Tunnelling Company, quoted in Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, London, 2001, p. 51]

For the infantrymen of the 3rd Australian Division, massing in and immediately behind the front line south of Messines village near Ploegsteert Wood, the war was far from over. Throughout the night of 6–7 June the attack battalions of the division had been coming up through the wood in the midst of one of the most severe enemy gas shell bombardments to which the AIF was ever subjected. The air was soon rendered poisonous and, while men could avail themselves of gas masks, pack horses and mules were seen everywhere gasping for life. Along the track of the 39th Battalion (Victoria) through ‘Burnhill Row’ and ‘Mud Lane’ men collapsed in an effort to keep going despite the deadly fumes and, as high explosive shells erupted among the gas shells, many men never lived to participate in the coming battle. The gas attack at Ploegsteert Wood is estimated to have put between 500 and 1000 men out of action.

As the mines went up near Ploegsteert Wood at 3.10 am on 7 June 1917, the Australians advanced, seizing the German front line within minutes—so overwhelming had been the effects of these explosions. As Charles Bean, Australia’s official historian, later described the scene:

*Everywhere, after firing a few scattered shots, the Germans surrendered as the troops approached. Men went along the trenches bombing the shelters, whose occupants then came out, some of them cringing like beaten animals. ‘They made many fruitless attempts to embrace us,’ reported Lieutenant [William] Garrard of the 40th [Battalion, Tasmania], ‘I have never seen men so demoralised’. [Charles Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917*, Sydney, 1941, p. 595]*
Back north towards Messines village the New Zealand Division had seized the ridge, and further to the north, British attacks were also getting forward. By 5.30 am the initial objectives had been reached. Here, men, as ordered, dug in and fortified the new line against an expected enemy counter-attack. There was now a pause in the advance, to allow troops coming from a greater distance away to march up and get into position. The 47th Battalion (Queensland and Tasmania), already in place for the next attack, had to wait out the hours in an exposed area on the Messines ridge, south of the village. Here, sheltering in craters, they came under heavy small arms and shell fire and Captain Francis Davy was hit and killed. Lieutenant Clifford Mendoza witnessed Davy’s death:

*It was just at midday and during a temporary halt at a rallying line. Capt Davy went along giving instructions to platoon commanders. He had just returned to position when a shell got him and killed him straight away. He was buried in the field behind the line south east of Messines.* [Captain Francis Davy, Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau file, Australian War Memorial]

That afternoon German resistance at Messines stiffened. The Australians began to encounter what was, for them, a new element in the German defences: concrete blockhouses, popularly known as ‘pillboxes’. These tough structures could withstand any but the most direct hit from a large shell, and inside, machine-gunners and others were comparatively safe from the massive British artillery bombardments which preceded attacks at Ypres. Rather than a series of trench-like front lines, the German defences here depended on the siting of these pillboxes in depth right up the ridge lines, with carefully placed barbed wire funnelling any advancing infantry into the interlocking fields of fire set up by the machine-gunners from the loopholes of the pillbox, or from positions they had established outside once the bombardment stopped. The need to capture these pillboxes was a central feature of the fighting at Ypres for the Australian infantry over the coming months.

Actions around pillboxes on the afternoon of 7 June 1917 were vicious and bloody. East of Messines village, the 47th Battalion was held up near a blasted tree-lined road colourfully called ‘Hun’s Walk’. Two Australian Lewis gunners sprayed bullets on to the sides of the pillbox until enemy fire ceased from its loopholes. Creeping past these flanks, other Queenslanders engaged the obstacle from the rear:

*[They] poured shot after shot into the garrison huddled inside, so that the shrieking men melted into a groaning heap which gradually fell silent. To make sure that no one was left in the place, the bodies were dragged into the light and lay for days afterwards piled outside.* [Charles Bean, *The AIF in France 1917*, Volume IV, The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918, Sydney, 1941, p. 625]
Such ‘official’ descriptions by Charles Bean about these actions at Messines did not hide the brutality of it all. Aware, perhaps, that some readers would find the graphic nature of his words distasteful, he wrote, close to where he had painted that terrible picture of the destruction of the Hun’s Walk pillbox by the Australians, that ‘Where such tension exists in battle the rules of “civilised” war are powerless’. When men have watched their comrades die by fire from the safe position of ‘several feet of concrete’ little mercy was shown to those who, however bravely, operated the offending weapons.

By late afternoon on 7 June 1917 the Battle of Messines was over. Most of the British objective had been seized, but fighting, which involved the 3rd and 4th Australian Divisions, went on for days to consolidate the new line. Between 7 and 14 June 1917, at Messines, the Australian divisions suffered 6799 casualties, killed and wounded. But after so many years of frustration on the Western Front, it was a victory, no matter what the price. As the 40th Battalion marched wearily away from the battlefield on 9 June 1917, they met Belgian newspaper boys flourishing English papers with the headline ‘Capture of Messines–Wytschaete Ridge. Great British Victory’.

Menin Road and Polygon Wood

The prelude to the great battle for the Ypres Salient began on 15 July 1917. A wounded British soldier in a casualty clearing station some kilometres behind the line felt the vibration of the earth as 3091 guns began firing shells at the rate of 4.75 tons per metre on German artillery positions and other defences. The soldier grasped the arm of a passing nurse: ‘Listen, Sister. Do you hear it? It’s started’.

The Australian artillery was in the thick of it. On the flats around the Zillebeke lake, south of the hellish Menin Road that led east out of Ypres through the Menin Gate, they set up their medium and heavy trench mortar batteries. Soon joined by the 18-pounders of the field artillery, they began a seemingly endless round of loading and firing. They fired at wire and trenches, drenched the Germans with gas shells and sought out the enemy gun positions. At night round after round was sent against tracks where German soldiers tried to bring up rations to the frontline troops that were hiding away in the pillboxes against such incessant shelling. ‘When we ceased firing’,
said Acting Bombardier Reginald Hannaker, 13th Field Artillery Brigade AIF, ‘the guns were so hot you could have boiled water on them!’

These artillery positions and back areas of the British lines were exposed to enemy fire, and the gunners soon experienced it:

*We were next to the Anzacs, splendid fellows. I remember looking south of Zillebeke lake and seeing the Boche fairly pounding it there; and all the time the Anzac guns kept on firing away, and we wondered how they could do it—how on earth they weren’t blown to blazes. Right in the thick of it you would see them firing every time.* [British artillery officer, quoted in Charles Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917*, Sydney, 1941, p. 705]

Many Australian artillerymen were killed by German counter-shelling, among them Lieutenant Arthur Walker, 1st Division Signals Company, who was killed on 31 July 1917 while trying to connect telephone lines to a forward position. On that day twenty-six Australian gunners are recorded as having been killed in action at Ypres as they fought in support of the great British infantry attack—the opening attack of the Third Battle of Ypres.

Throughout August and early September the British battered at the German lines. North of Ypres some progress was made, but in the vital southern sector, where the Australian artillery was in support, little was achieved. What defeated any quick advance was the summer rain, which poured down, turning the battlefield and the heavily shell-cratered approaches into a landscape of mud. Haig urged his generals on, but the impossibility of getting ahead in this weather was obvious. It was decided to wait for drier conditions and to bring in fresh troops, among them the 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Australian Divisions, whose task would be to assault and hold the enemy positions on the ridge east of the Menin Road.

For days before the attack thousands of Australian engineers, pioneers, signallers and service corps personnel laboured to prepare the approaches to the jumping off positions. Much of the transport work was done at night, but it was a hazardous undertaking as the area was frequently shelled and doused in mustard gas by the Germans. When explosions tore up the one-way road in front of them, the Australian wagon drivers had to sit motionless with their animals until it was repaired. Major Russell Manton of the 15th Battery, Australian Field Artillery, recalled the ordeal of the horses:

*… the animals came to know when a shell was coming close; and if, when halted, the horses heard the whine of an approaching*
salvo, they would tremble and sidle closer to their drivers, burying their muzzles in the men’s chests. [Russell Manton, quoted by Charles Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917*, Sydney, 1941, p. 729]

At 5.40 am on 20 September 1917, as the Battle of Menin Road began, the battalions of the 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions lay spread out along a 1.8 kilometre front. Protected by an intensive artillery screen, they were to advance about 1.3 kilometres to seize the German defensive positions, mainly concrete pillboxes where the enemy machine-gunners would be sheltering against the bombardment. By 10.15 that morning the Australians had taken all their objectives, aided significantly by the success of the covering artillery barrage and softening-up bombardments on the days leading up to the attack. Indeed, the artillery also crushed German counter-attacks when their soldiers were seen assembling later that day beyond the captured Australian positions. ‘The advancing barrage’, wrote Charles Bean, ‘won the ground; the infantry merely occupied it, pouncing on any points at which resistance survived’. That resistance cost Australia more than 5000 casualties, killed and wounded.

One Australian observer who went forward with the infantry at the Menin Road was the AIF’s official photographer, Captain Frank Hurley. While Hurley, as patriotically Australian as anyone, rejoiced in his countrymen’s victory, he also captured on film and in his diary the suffering and anguish of a great Western Front battle:

*I pushed on up the duckboard track to Sterling Castle, a mound of powdered brick and from where there is to be had a magnificent panorama of the battlefield. The way was gruesome and awful beyond words. The ground had been recently heavily shelled by the Boche [Germans] and the dead and wounded lay everywhere. About here the ground had the appearance of having been ploughed by a great canal excavator and then reploughed and turned over again and again. Last night’s shower too made it a quagmire and through this the wounded had to drag themselves, and those mortally wounded pass out their young lives.* [Frank Hurley, diary 20 September 1917, National Library of Australia]

For the survivors, however, it had been a successful day of soldiering. One of them, Private George Radnell, 8th Battalion (Victoria), summed up the Battle of Menin Road in a few words:

The success at Menin Road was followed up quickly by a further attack on 26 September 1917: the Battle of Polygon Wood. For this action the men of the 1st and 2nd Divisions were replaced by those of the 4th and 5th Divisions. During the night of 25–26 September the assaulting battalions reached taped lines laid across the south-western third of the blasted tree stumps of Polygon Wood. At 5.50 am on 26 September the guns opened up in front of the Australian infantry, who immediately moved forward behind its protecting wall of shells:

*Our artillery opened in a single magnificent crash and thousands of shells screamed through the air and burst in a long, straight line of flame and destruction about 200 yards [180 metres] ahead of the waiting infantry ... the 4,000 men of the six attacking battalions dashed forward at a run. Somewhere behind the line of destruction lay their victims, shuddering in their pill-boxes, staggered by the sudden commotion, dazed by the concussion of the shells ... then, slowly, very slowly it [the barrage] crept forward ... thousands of machine gun bullets cut the air as they whistled shrilly past on their destined way, and the strident din of many Vickers guns throbbed through the troubled morning air ... Thus ... was the Division launched into the Battle of Polygon Wood.* [Captain Alexander Ellis, *The Story of the Fifth Australian Division*, London, 1919, pp. 244–245]

As at Menin Road it was all over comparatively quickly, as the two Australian divisions seized and held the German positions, protected by the immense artillery barrage which was working well in the now dry conditions. Attempted German counter-attacks were also beaten off by the artillery. But advancing and clearing up enemy positions on such a battlefield brought its casualties, and many Germans fought tenaciously. Lieutenant Sidney Gullett, 29th Battalion (Victoria), saw one enemy machine-gunner who ‘kept his thumbs on the firing button until a bayonet drove into his chest’.

The advance of 26 September was marked by isolated actions throughout Polygon Wood and in the more open country to the south, against well defended German positions. Just outside the wood, on the Australian southern flank, lay a farm house: Jerk House. Here the Germans had built a series of pillboxes, and the men of the 31st Battalion (Queensland and Victoria) suffered severe losses in their attempts to capture them. Lieutenant John Brodie drove his men forward, waving a stick and shouting ‘We must charge it’ [the pillbox]. He was shot through the head.

During these desperate actions near Jerk House, Private Patrick Bugden, 31st Battalion, of South Gunderimba, New South Wales, twice led attacks against pillboxes, which he silenced with grenades before capturing their
garrisons at bayonet point. Over the next two days Bugden carried out many other acts of bravery, including five forays under heavy machine-gun fire to bring in wounded men. He was killed on 28 September and posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

All in all, 5452 men were killed or wounded in the two Australian divisions at Polygon Wood. The 5th Division alone suffered 545 killed, 172 missing and 2303 wounded. In attacks like those at Polygon Wood, officers led their men forward into enemy fire. Charles Bean, in the official history, mentions by name thirty-two of the Fifth Division’s officers who were killed or died of wounds between 24 and 28 September, the period of the Polygon Wood battle. One he singled out was Lieutenant Colonel Oswald Croshaw of the Queen’s Yeomanry, an English officer attached to the division to command the 53rd Battalion (New South Wales). The battalion was the lead unit in the advance, and Croshaw, described by Bean as ‘one of the noblest British officers in the AIF’, led from the front and was killed. Bean reported that Croshaw had a premonition of his fate, and addressed these words to his brother officers:

_Gentlemen, your men before yourselves. Look to your flanks. God bless you lads till we meet again._

This polluted damned ground

Passchendaele

The so-called ‘bite and hold’ battles of Menin Road and Polygon Wood had taken the British armies on to the main ridge east of Ypres. From there, for the first time since 1914, British soldiers could look out on the German rear lines beyond the ridge. Haig was becoming increasingly convinced that German morale was beginning to crack under his artillery’s massive bombardments and the capacity of his infantry, in dry weather, to take enemy strongholds under cover of these walls of shells. On 4 October 1917, the Australian divisions were moved slightly north-east of Polygon Wood and positioned for yet another bite and hold exercise: the Battle of Broodseinde. Capturing the Broodseinde Ridge would bring Haig’s men within a couple of kilometres of a great prize—the top of the ridge at Passchendaele village—and, perhaps finally, to that breakthrough to the rear which had been the purpose all along of the ‘Flanders Offensive’.

For the men of the AIF, Broodseinde was always regarded as one of their greatest victories. Four Anzac divisions—the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Australian and the
New Zealand Division—for the only time in the war, fought side by side that day, a boost to morale described by Charles Bean:

*But this night [3 October] four Anzac divisions were marching to the line together. There were indications that the British command had caught some glimpse of the true reason lying behind the constant importunings of the Australian authorities that their troops should be kept together … but it certainly had no conception of all that this meant to the troops then making their way through the dark.* [Charles Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917*, Sydney, 1941, p. 840]

In the centre of the attack on Broodseinde was the 40th Battalion, the only all Tasmanian battalion in the AIF. The 40th was the final attack battalion and, just short of where Tyne Cot cemetery stands today, the Tasmanians went through the 39th Battalion (Victoria) and began the final assault on German trenches and pillboxes on the ridge:

*From the 39th Battalion objective a stiff fight against the heaviest opposition began. On top of the ridge the trench system and line of pillboxes along it seemed alive with men and machine guns … The only possible way to advance was from shell-hole to shell-hole by short rushes. To add to our difficulties, there was a thick belt of wire immediately in front of us, which had very few gaps in it.* [FC Green, *The Fortieth: a record of the 40th Battalion, AIF*, Hobart, 1922, p. 76] Men bunched up at these gaps, as the enemy intended they should, and many were killed and wounded. Under this withering fire most of the officers tried to provide a lead, and Captain Cecil McVilly ‘stood out, calling his company until this gallant officer was seriously wounded’. Finally, Captain William Ruddock worked his company around the side of a strongpoint known as ‘Hamburg’ and was able to bring fire across the German positions. This encouraged the Tasmanians, and Sergeant Lewis McGee, pistol in hand, charged forward at a pillbox in front of the strongpoint. A machine-gunner on top of the pillbox was holding the Australians down into shell-holes; McGee raced over 50 metres of open ground into what looked like certain death, and shot the machine-gun crew. For his bravery Sergeant Lewis McGee was awarded the Victoria Cross. ‘Hamburg’ now fell to a direct assault, although Lieutenant Norman Meagher was killed in the rush. Nothing now seemed to hold the Tasmanians from their objective—the wire, the pillboxes and the trenches of Tyne Cot itself:

*The honour of getting on to the objective first … was won by Corporal ED [Edwin Dubrelle] Weston who beat everybody else over 100 yards [90 metres] of open ground. He was wounded during the race, but that did not stop his offensive spirit, for he captured the first pillbox single handed.*
and was then reinforced by his section … after a short fight the enemy surrendered. [FC Green, *The Fortieth: a record of the 40th Battalion, AIF*, Hobart, 1922, p. 77]

At Broodseinde the Australians could look back to the ruins of Ypres and feel that all the struggle and sacrifice might just be worthwhile and that the British were finally driving the Germans back. While the battle cost the AIF a further 6400 killed and wounded, they would have fervently hoped that, in the words of a Belgian priest who had witnessed the massive build-up for the offensive behind the lines, ‘in a few short weeks Flanders will be delivered’. One Australian officer, however, looking back towards Ypres from Broodseinde ridge unwittingly put his finger on what was now to turn victory into stalemate and virtual defeat:

… to look back where we came from, to Ypres … There was devastation. Then I could see why our own gunners had had such a gruesome time. You could see the flashes of the guns from Broodseinde right back to the Menin Gate. [Captain William Bunning, 22nd Battalion (Victoria), quoted in Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, *Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground*, London, 2001, p. 210]

It was that devastated hinterland of the Ypres battlefield, in combination with the heavy and incessant rains that descended upon it after Broodseinde, that was to defeat British hopes of pushing the offensive further. Captain Frank Hurley, trying to take his photographs, described the battlefield:

*The … rains have made the place a great slough. One dares not venture off the duckboard or he will surely become bogged, or sink in the quicksand-like slime of rain filled shell craters. Add to this frightful walking a harassing shellfire and soaking to the skin, and you curse the day you were induced to put foot on this polluted damned ground.* [Frank Hurley, diary 11 October 1917, National Library of Australia]

In these conditions, bringing up the vital artillery to shield the infantry in further advances proved next to impossible. Guns became hopelessly bogged, slid off their supporting platforms or simply sank in the mud after firing a few rounds. Bringing up ammunition, food and supplies was equally hazardous. Added to this was the struggle it took for men to get across this treacherous quagmire:

*In some cases it took 17 hours to make the journey from the waggon lines to [our] position … in normal times this trip could be done comfortably in an hour … Very often men were dragged out of the mud minus their boots and breeches.* [Unnamed Australian soldier, quoted in Charles Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917*, Sydney, 1941, p. 906]

The effect of all this on men’s stamina, health and morale can only be imagined. But despite it all, Haig decided to press on. It was a tragic decision.
On 9 October 1917, the Battle of Poelcappelle was fought. By this stage, so deep and enveloping was the mud that the barrages which had shielded the troops at Menin Road, Polygon Wood and, to a lesser extent, at Broodseinde, were almost useless—shells simply fell harmlessly into the mud. That day, the Australian 2nd Division went forward to their first objectives, only to be driven back to their original positions for the loss of 1200 casualties, dead and wounded. Beside the Australians, the 66th British Division suffered severely, especially the men of the Manchester Regiment. Some of them were found on 10 October by Lieutenant William Fisher, 42nd Battalion (Queensland), as he reconnoitred forward of a prospective further attack:

_The slope ... was littered with their [the Manchester’s] dead, both theirs and ours. I got to one pillbox to find it just a mass of dead and so I passed on carefully to the next one ahead. Here I found about fifty men alive ... never have I seen men so broken or demoralised. They were huddled up close behind the box in the last stages of exhaustion and fear. Fritz had been sniping them off all day and had accounted for 57 that day—the dead and dying lay in piles. The wounded were numerous—unattended and weak, they groaned and moaned all over the place ... some had been here four days already._ [Lieutenant William Fisher, 42nd Battalion, quoted in Charles Bean, _The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917_, Sydney, 1941, p. 906]

Despite this failure, yet another attack was ordered for 12 October 1917: the Battle of Passchendaele. According to Charles Bean, the artillery barrage which was supposed to protect the infantry in its advance towards the German pillboxes was ‘imperceptible’. On the Australian left, the New Zealand Division suffered what was undoubtedly its worst day of the whole war, when hundreds died by uncontested German machine-gun fire at barbed wire which the artillery had been unable to destroy:

_... what was left of us made an attempt to get through the wire and a few actually penetrated as far as his [the German] emplacements only to be shot down as fast as they appeared. Dozens got hung up on the wire and shot down before their surviving comrades’ eyes._ [A survivor, Otago Battalion, quoted in Glyn Harper, _Massacre at Passchendaele: the New Zealand story_, Auckland, 2000, p. 70]

Some small progress was made towards Passchendaele by units such as the 34th Battalion (New South Wales), and German pillboxes were captured. Captain Clarence Jeffries of the 34th Battalion led his company forward into a dawn described by Charles Bean as ‘a whitish streak on the eastern horizon’. Mud held them back all the way and soon the fire from a pillbox sent them to ground. Jeffries, assisted by Sergeant James Bruce, got some men together, outflanked the pillbox and charged it from the rear, capturing twenty-five
Germans and two machine-guns. The battalion was now nearly on its objective, but had lost heavily in the advance, there being wide gaps in its line and only three surviving officers. As the advance was about to recommence, another German machine-gun opened up ‘with deadly effect’. Jeffries, again accompanied by Bruce, led a party out to silence the Germans. As it was firing in only short bursts Jeffries was able to work his way close to the gun and, seeing it begin firing in another direction, rushed it with his men. Suddenly, the gun swung back, Jeffries was killed and his men sent to ground—but they recovered and eventually captured another twenty-five of the enemy and two more machine-guns. Bean wrote that Jeffries’ ‘gallant and effective action removed the chief danger to the advance’. Captain Jeffries was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

But any advance that was being made soon came to a halt in the mud, faced by unrelenting enemy fire causing heavy casualties. The failure of the New Zealanders to get forward on the Australian left allowed the German gunners to pour bullets into the Australian flank. Finally, only small parties were left pushing forward from shell hole to shell hole. Captain Henry Carr, 35th Battalion (New South Wales), sent back a telling message:


Amazingly, a small detachment from the 38th Battalion (Victoria), about twenty strong, actually reached Passchendaele church. They found no Germans in their immediate vicinity but, being totally unsupported, withdrew. Back down the ridge at 3.45 pm, having held out as long as they could, Captain Carr ordered, ‘The 35th Battalion will retire’. Further back, other frontline commanders had reached the same conclusion—that the situation was hopeless—and all along the line the Australians fell back. The Australian attempt to take Passchendaele was over.

For the next few days the thousands of wounded streamed back from the battlefield. Stretcher-bearers worked to exhaustion to carry their burdens across the mud, along the slippery duckboards, and back to where they could be loaded on ambulance wagons and taken to casualty clearing stations in the rear. At No. 3 Australian Casualty Clearing Station at Poperinghe, west of Ypres, Sister May Tilton of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) went in search of her quarters in the dark and pouring rain. Along with
another nurse they sought shelter in what they thought was an unused ward, but as they went in Sister Tilton tripped over a stretcher:

_When we switched on our torches we found the floor was literally covered with a mass of wounded men; 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._

[Sister May Tilton, AANS, nurses narratives, AG Butler papers, Australian War Memorial]

Eventually, after another three weeks of heavy fighting, with some support from the AIF, Canadian divisions took Passchendaele on 6 November 1917. Here the offensive came to an end and Flanders would have to wait a further twelve months for its deliverance from German occupation. Canadian losses in these final operations were terrible and one soldier commented, ‘My impression was that we had won the ridge but lost the battalion’. In the great offensive it has been estimated that some 475,000 soldiers, from all nations which took part, were killed, wounded or missing. The Australian divisions between June and November 1917 suffered some 40,498 killed, wounded and missing. For Australia the worst month of the whole war was October 1917, when the AIF lost 19,914 casualties, of whom 6405 were killed in action or died of wounds.

It is no wonder that for a generation in Australia men flinched and women bowed their heads at the mention of places such as Menin Road, Polygon Wood, Broodseinde and, most of all, Passchendaele.

_He is not missing_

**Remembering Ypres**

Early on the morning of 24 July 1927 a great crowd moved through the partially reconstructed town of Ypres. There, where hundreds of thousands of men from the British Empire and its dominions had marched during four years of war, they crossed the Grote Markt beside the Lakenhalle (Cloth Hall) and walked down the narrow Meensestraat. Ahead of them lay that gap in the old ramparts so well known to those who, in 1917, had passed through it on their way to fight along the Menin Road, at Polygon Wood, Broodseinde or Passchendaele—the Menin Gate. Now, instead of a shell blasted opening out to the devastated countryside of the old Ypres Salient, there stood a great memorial, with 14-metre-high arches spanning the ramparts. This was the new ‘Menin Gate’, the Empire’s tribute to all who had fought and died at
Ypres to honour Britain’s pledge that Belgium would be defended against any invader.

At 10.30 am the service to unveil the memorial began. As the first hymn, *O God our help in ages past*, ended there came to the platform Field Marshal Lord Plumer, now elevated to the British peerage as Plumer of Messines, a commander well known to the AIF in 1917 as the one who had been in command of those operations which took them from the Menin Road to Passchendaele. Plumer spoke of what had brought this great crowd to Ypres. No message, he said, had been more tragic for those families who had received it during the war than the one which contained the words ‘missing believed killed’. For relatives of the missing there was no grave to visit, no stone on which they might have had inscribed some last personal message, no spot on which to place flowers knowing that the remains of a loved one lay beneath.

Facing Plumer as he spoke of these irreparable wounds of war was a special group among the crowd. These were the members of the St Barnabas’ Pilgrimage of the mothers of England, poor women each of whom had a son or husband among the missing of Ypres and who had been able to afford the journey to Belgium only with charitable assistance. Perhaps with these women in mind, Plumer, stretching out his hand and pulling the rope to release a large British flag from the top of the memorial, spoke these words:

*He is not missing, he is here.*

‘Here’ meant the stone panels that covered the walls beneath the great arches and stretched up two stairwells to loggias on either side of the Menin Gate. On these panels were cut, unit by unit, the names of British Empire soldiers who had died at Ypres and who had ‘no known grave’—more than 54,000 names. Among them are 6198 men of the AIF. Virtually all of these Australians died in battle in Belgium in 1917.

The names run on and on across the stone. Private John Anderson is remembered among the other 170 missing Queenslanders and Tasmanians of the 47th Battalion AIF. Anderson simply disappeared at Messines on 7 June 1917, when the last anyone saw of him he was sitting down wounded, shortly after his battalion had started their attack. Listed among the 105 New South Welshman of the 17th Battalion AIF are two brothers, Privates George and Theo Seabrook, who served in 13 Platoon, D Company. They were going up the line on 20 September 1917 when the same shell killed both of them. A third brother, Lieutenant William Seabrook, died on 21 September of wounds received the day before, and he lies buried.
in Lijssenthoek Cemetery. For Mrs Fanny Seabrook, of Five Dock, Sydney, that was three sons dead in 24 hours. And among the ninety-two Western Australians of the 51st Battalion is 39-year-old South African (Boer) War veteran Private George Jones, who died on 26 September 1917. Later that year, in far away Collins Street, Kalgoorlie, Western Australia, George’s wife Annie received a letter from his mate, George Martin. Passing on the contents of this letter to the Australian Red Cross, Annie wrote:

[George Martin] saw my husband crawl out of a shell hole but he was unable to walk so he just said good bye and had to advance and leave my husband lying there, that was somewhere in France.

Somewhere out in the fields and woodlands beyond Ypres today lie the remains of that lost legion of the ‘missing’. There too are the cemeteries—Menin Road South, Hooge Crater, Buttes New British, Tyne Cot and many more—more than 350 in the area of the 1917 battlefield alone. Headstones name the soldier beneath, display his regimental badge, his date of death and sometimes his age. Where the family asked for it there is an epitaph at the bottom of the stone, sometimes obscured by flowers or the Flanders dirt—A Soldier and a Man, The Bravest Lad, Our Dear Jack, One of Nature’s Gentlemen, A Career So Brilliant, Goodnight Dear. The Australian headstones carry the rising sun of the Australian Imperial Force but, sadly, 2683 of these proclaim the stark message that here lies ‘An Australian Soldier of the Great War—Known Unto God’.

Lance Corporal Ernest Radford, 12th Company, Australian Machine Gun Corps, killed on 26 September 1917, lies among the pine trees at Buttes New British Cemetery in Polygon Wood. After the war, Ernest’s mother wrote on her son’s Honour Roll Circular for the Australian War Memorial:

His CO [Commanding Officer] wrote he had gone through so many actions faithfully, courageously and fearlessly. He was actually firing at the time he was killed. He adds no one has ever done his duty better.

Rising above the cemetery, on the old buttes of Polygon Wood, is the Fifth Australian Division Memorial. This was the only Australian division which elected to build its memorial in Belgium—not surprisingly, perhaps, given the words of the divisional commander, Major General Talbot Hobbs, read out after the Battle of Polygon Wood, on 26 September 1917:

Comrades of the 5th Division.
With the invaluable help of our splendid artillery, but under
extremely trying and difficult conditions, you have during the past week’s operations, with complete success, carried out the task assigned to the Division ... We have fought the Boche [Germans] to a finish, defeating him, inflicting on him very heavy losses ... We are justified in hoping that Australia, too, will be gratified and proud of the success that has crowned our efforts.

Sapper Leslie McKay of 15th Field Company, Australian Engineers, might have welcomed his division’s success at Polygon Wood, but took a rather different view of the battle:

*My God it was terrible. Just slaughter. The 5th Division was almost annihilated. Mates I have played with last night and joked with are now lying cold.*

From Polygon Wood the road winds on to Zonnebeke, then up the rise to Tyne Cot Cemetery. Just beyond is the Belgian village whose name became synonymous with that slaughter, in the decades after World War I: Passchendaele. The impact of Tyne Cot is hard to grasp at one viewing, for here are more than 11,000 headstones and a memorial at the back of the cemetery with a further 35,000 names of the ‘missing’, British soldiers who died hereabouts after 15 August 1917. It was not possible to include these names on the Menin Gate, so the Tyne Cot Memorial was built. Tyne Cot is also the largest Australian war cemetery in the world, with 1369 burials, 791 of which remain unidentified.

The headstones reveal dates of death that include all the major battles fought by the AIF in the Ypres Salient in September and October 1917: 20 September, Menin Road; 26 September, Polygon Wood; 4 October, Broodseinde; 9 October, Poelcappelle; and 12 October, Passchendaele.

In mid May 1922, King George V, on his personal battlefield tour, visited Tyne Cot. The place was described in a subsequent publication about the King’s pilgrimage as ‘in the midst of what was the most desolate and terrible of all battlefields—the Passchendaele marshes’. In 1922, the Imperial War Graves Commission (later the Commonwealth War Graves Commission) was busy constructing this largest of all ‘concentration’ cemeteries, bringing in remains from all over the area and placing them under temporary wooden crosses. The King chatted with the workers and gardeners and lingered for a moment by the cross of one of his most far-flung subjects: Sergeant Lewis McGee VC, 40th Battalion AIF, killed in action at the Battle of Passchendaele on 12 October 1917. His Majesty was impressed by the three large German concrete pillboxes within the cemetery and, pointing to the largest of them suggested that it be preserved as a memorial to all who lay in Tyne Cot, ‘a massed multitude of silent witnesses to the desolation of war’.
The King’s wishes were carried out and on top of the central pillbox the Cross of Sacrifice was built, that emblem of pain and suffering towering above this cemetery like no other in the Commission’s care. A small piece of the original concrete of the pillbox can be observed on the face of the base of the Cross. Underneath is the inscription:

This was the Tyne Cot blockhouse captured by the 3rd Australian Division 4 October 1917.

So at the very heart of Tyne Cot is a reminder that Tyne Cot was an Australian battlefield and that this now sacred ground was seized during the Battle of Broodseinde by men of the Australian Imperial Force. Looking out over this city of headstones the bitter words of decorated soldier poet Siegfried Sassoon, written about the Menin Gate, come to mind:

Here was the world’s worst wound.

From the great Cross at Tyne Cot the view is back 6 kilometres to the towers and spires of Ypres. Here, nightly, the buglers of the Last Post Association, men of the local volunteer fire brigade, sound the Last Post under the Menin Gate. It was first sounded out over that memorial on 24 July 1917, after Field Marshal Plumer had finished his dedicatory address. As the bugle notes died away, a lone piper of the Scots Guards, from the top of the great memorial, played a lament. He played the ‘Flowers of the Forest’, a dirge written to remember the more than 10,000 Scots, their King among them, who perished at the Battle of Flodden Field in 1513. It was said that no house in Scotland escaped the sorrow and despair of Flodden Field, just as no part of the British Empire and Commonwealth was spared the loss inflicted by the Empire’s struggle at Ypres between 1914 and 1918.

As the notes of the piper swirled around the arches and columns of the Menin Gate and out over the fields towards Tyne Cot, many in the crowd wept. Some may have recalled the words of ‘Flowers of the Forest’, and felt them as an epitaph for a generation of men who had perished in the Ypres Salient:

The flowers of the forest, that fought aye the foremost,
The prime of our land lie cauld in the clay.
The Menin Gate lions guard the entrance to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.
Australians in Belgium 1917

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>
<td>1 Bde</td>
<td>1–4 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Walker)</td>
<td>2 Bde</td>
<td>5–8 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 Bde</td>
<td>9–12 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Division</td>
<td>5 Bde</td>
<td>17–20 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Smythe)</td>
<td>6 Bde</td>
<td>21–24 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7 Bde</td>
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<td>33–36 Battalions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Monash)</td>
<td>10 Bde</td>
<td>37–40 Battalions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>11 Bde</td>
<td>41–44 Battalions</td>
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<td>4th Division</td>
<td>4 Bde</td>
<td>13–16 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Holmes – killed 2 July)</td>
<td>12 Bde</td>
<td>45–48 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Sinclair-Maclagan)</td>
<td>13 Bde</td>
<td>49–52 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>5th Division</td>
<td>8 Bde</td>
<td>29–32 Battalions</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Hobbs)</td>
<td>14 Bde</td>
<td>53–56 Battalions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>15 Bde</td>
<td>57–60 Battalions</td>
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NB: Commanders shown are those holding appointments between June and November 1917

Australian Victoria Cross Awards
JUNE-OCTOBER 1917

Captain RC Grieve
Messines, 7 June 1917

Private J Carroll
Messines, 7–11 June 1917

Second Lieutenant F Birks
Glencorosse Wood, 20 September 1917, posthumous

Private RR Inwood
Polygon Wood, 20–21 September 1917

Sergeant JJ Dwyer
Zonnebeke, 26 September 1917

Corporal PJ Bugden
Polygon Wood, 26–28 September 1917, posthumous

Lance Corporal W Peeler
Broodscinde, 4 October 1917

Sergeant L McGee
Broodscinde, 4 October 1917, posthumous

Captain CS Jeffries
Passchendaele, 12 October 1917, posthumous
A market in the Grote Markt (great market square) of Ypres (Ieper) in front of the Cloth Hall (Lakenhalle) before World War I. The Cloth Hall was built in the 13th century as a warehouse and market for the cloth industry which was the economic staple of the Flanders region. The building’s dominant feature is the central belfry, with its well-known clock chimes. Two fragments of the original belfry bells are in the collection of the Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

(Photo Antony, Ypres, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
Belgian soldiers march through the Menin Gate (Meensepoort) at Ypres on 28 May 1914, just months before the German invasion of Belgium in August 1914. The old medieval ‘gate’ was by this time merely a gap in the 17th century defensive ramparts of the town, from which the road ran to the town of Menin. The two stone lions, one of whose paws supports a shield displaying the emblem of the town, are now at the entrance to the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.

(Photo Antony, Ypres, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
British troops in the Grote Markt at Ypres, 13 October 1914. The Germans had entered the town briefly the week before and twenty or so cavalrmen, Uhlans, had camped in Father Camille Delaere’s church hall: The next day I saw that they had written in French on the blackboard—the Germans fear God but apart from him they fear nothing in the world. Germany for ever! (Father Camille Delaere, quoted in Lyn Macdonald, 1914: The Days of Hope, London, 1989, p. 345. Image: Photo Antony, Ypres, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
The belfry of the Cloth Hall in flames, 22 November 1914. The Germans started shelling Ypres in late October as the First Battle of Ypres raged outside the town. Although the inhabitants were not yet forced to evacuate, conditions in the town became desperate: *There was no water, no manpower to help put the fires out and the shells went on whistling down. The very sky was on fire. The flames were leaping everywhere and our lovely buildings were turned into volcanoes.* (Father Camille Delaere, quoted in Lyn Macdonald, 1914: The Days of Hope, London, 1989, p. 407. Image: Photo Antony, Ypres, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
Another view of the burning Cloth Hall, taken from Lille Street (Rijselstraat) on 22 November 1914. Pictorial newspapers made good propaganda use of the German destruction of Ypres by publishing images of the ruined and burning town. In May 1915, the *Sydney Mail* carried a photograph of the ruined cathedral in Ypres with the following caption: *Nothing but the bare walls is now left of Ypres Cathedral. The ruins remain a disgraceful testimony to Germany’s petty policy of ‘frightfulness’ and ‘vengeance’.* (Sydney Mail, 5 May 1915. Image: Photo Antony, Ypres, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
Postcards showing the ruins of French and Belgian towns bombarded by the Germans were a feature of the 1914–1918 war. This card shows the ruins of the convent of the Irish Benedictine nuns in Ypres. The nuns, who had been in the town since the late 17th century, were shelled out of it in late 1914. They never returned. (Collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
After the initial German bombardment of Ypres in late 1914, not all the inhabitants left. This photograph shows temporary fresh water barrels set up beside the Menin Gate, from which local people were obliged to fetch their drinking water when typhoid broke out due to the polluted nature of the nearby lake water from Zillebeke and Dickebusch. The Belgian official standing to the right is the Ypres Chief of Police, Pierre Vandenbraambussche, who was responsible, along with others, for inaugurating the nightly ceremony of sounding the Last Post under the Menin Gate memorial.

(Photo Antony, Ypres, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
A shopkeeper and her patisserie among the ruins of Ypres, 20 March 1915. Captain WHL Watson, a British officer, remarked on the survival of such places in Ypres before the final evacuation of civilians in April–May 1915:

... in the Rue de Lille a fashionable dressmaker had turned her atelier into a tea-room. She used to provide coffee or chocolate, or even tea, and the most delicious little cakes. On an afternoon you would sit on comfortable chairs at a neat table covered with a fair cloth and talk to your hostess. (Captain Watson, quoted in Siegfried Debaeke, Ieper: Before, During and After the Great War, Deklaproos, 2006, p. 53. Image: Photo Antony, Ypres, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
The ‘last fugitives at Ypres’ cross the Grote Markt on 28 April 1915. After the German gas attack on 22 April which began the Second Battle of Ypres, all civilians were ordered to leave the town. Local resident Aimé van Nieuwenhove departed on 5 May 1915: *Our first stop was in front of the hospital on the Vlamertinghe road. I got out of the car and looked towards the derelict railway station. I could see the shells exploding on the town, then, as I got back into the car, I bade a sad, tearful farewell to our dear little city.* (Aimé van Nieuwenhove, quoted in Lyn Macdonald, 1914: The Days of Hope, London, 1989, p. 277. Image: Photo Antony, Ypres, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
Volunteers raise money in Macquarie Street, Sydney, on ‘Belgium Day’, 14 May 1915. On that day £100,000 was collected in New South Wales for Belgian relief, an enormous sum by today’s standards. The plight of Belgium and its hundreds of thousands of refugees was well publicised in Australia right from the start of the war, and used as a means of drawing attention to German actions in that country: *The lively sympathy universally felt in Australia for Belgian and French civilians under the German heel was a national reaction of horror and disgust at a ruthless policy of frightfulness.* (Sydney newspaper editor, quoted in Ernest Scott, *Australia During the War*, Sydney, 1941, p. 728. Image: collection of the Australian War Memorial (AWM) H16143)
Private Desmond Morris, 2nd Pioneer Battalion AIF, a sawmill hand of West Warburton, Victoria, is farewelled from Australia on 23 November 1916. Desmond Morris was killed at the Battle of Menin Road, Ypres, on 20 September 1917. Just nineteen days later his brother, Private William Morris of the 6th Australian Machine Gun Company, was killed at the Battle of Poelcapelle. Desmond Morris’ body was never recovered for burial and his name is commemorated on the Menin Gate. William Morris lies buried in Belgian Battery Corner Cemetery, Ypres, under the words requested by his widowed mother, Margaret Morris, to be cut on his headstone: ‘Too dearly loved ever to be forgotten’. (AWM H16139)
Battery Commander’s dugout, Hill 60, by Will Dyson, 1917, lithograph on paper, 52 x 78 cm. From November 1916 to June 1917 the men of the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company were responsible for maintaining the great mines under Hill 60, south of Ypres, and for defending them against counter-mining. It was dangerous work and tunnellers such as Sapper Edward Earl were sometimes entombed by explosions: “It was first believed that Earl had been buried, but on the day after the explosion Sapper G Goodwin heard his signals … Earl had made his will, written to his mother and continued to listen at the tamping … after his own signals had been heard he gave no more for fear of disclosing the position of the mine, but went to the end of his gallery and slept.”

Officers of the 1st Australian Tunnelling Company AIF. These men were responsible for the firing of the mine at Hill 60, one of the nineteen great mines detonated under the German lines at 3.10 am on 7 June 1917, at the start of the British attack at Messines. Official historian Charles Bean described one of these explosions: … a huge bubble was swelling, mushroom-shaped, from the earth, and then burst to cast a molten, rosy glow on the under-surface of some dense cloud low above it … During twenty seconds the same thing happened again and again, from the right to the far left. (Charles Bean, The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917, Sydney, 1941, pp. 592–593. Image: AWM P02333.002)
Hunter’s Avenue, one of the tracks through Ploegsteert Wood, along which the men of the 3rd Division AIF made their approach to the front line on the night of 6–7 June 1917 before the Battle of Messines. As the Australians came through the wood the Germans drenched it with gas shells: For troops in [gas] masks the mere effort of marching in under the load of rifle, ammunition, tools and rations and the excitement of the occasion, caused heavy breathing and consequent distress. This, in addition to the half blindness of the troops in masks ... slowed the pace ... Horses and mules were passed on the road gasping piteously in the poisonous air.

Lieutenant William Gocher MM and Bar, 45th Battalion AIF, aged 25, of Redfern, Sydney. Gocher, who had served on Gallipoli with the 13th Battalion, was killed in action at the Battle of Messines on 7 June 1917 and buried in Messines Ridge British Cemetery, Belgium. His mother received her son’s identity disc from the AIF authorities in 1920 and wrote: *Poor fellow must have been riddled [with bullets] by the state of his disc.* (Letter, Elizabeth Gocher, 12 July 1920, AIF Dossier Gocher WW, Series B2455, NAA. Image: AWM H15284)
Australian transport drivers and horses head for Messines during the Battle of Messines, 7 June 1917, carrying engineering equipment for the consolidation of newly captured positions. Quick supply of such material was essential and transport vehicles often came up through heavy German artillery fire. *(AWM E00479)*
An Australian stretcher bearer helps a wounded German soldier at the Battle of Messines. During operations at Messines between 7 and 11 June 1917 the Australian Army Medical Corps personnel of the 3rd Australian Division assisted some 3000 ‘walking wounded’ cases. When these men reached so-called ‘collecting posts’ well behind the front line they were given hot drinks and something to eat and then moved on as quickly as possible out of the operational area. (AWM E00481)
A view of the area known as Hun’s Walk, on the road east out of Messines village, where Australian troops operated on the afternoon of 7 June 1917 at the Battle of Messines. To the right of the road is one of the German defensive concrete blockhouses or ‘pillboxes’ which Australians encountered for the first time at Messines: … they would withstand the direct hit of all but the heaviest shells. Thus the garrison had a good chance of surviving even the heaviest bombardment and of emerging with its machine guns as soon as the barrage passed. (Charles Bean, The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917, Sydney 1941, p. 623. Image: AWM E01295)
A view across the Messines battlefield with a British bombardment in progress on 8 June 1917. The preliminary British bombardment at Messines, in which Australian artillery was involved, lasted for seven days: ... days of gloriously fine, bright weather—the landmarks on its [the Messines ridge] slopes disappeared in a waste of shattered earth crowned by the now formless ruins of the village. (Charles Bean, The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917, Sydney, 1941, p. 583. Image: AWM H12264)
A battlefield memorial to the men of the 35th Battalion AIF killed in action at the Battle of Messines on 7 June 1917, and in subsequent action on the following days. Among the sixty-seven names is that of Second Lieutenant Robert Perrau, a 21-year-old assistant surveyor of Newcastle, New South Wales. Of Perrau’s death on 11 June 1917, one of his friends wrote to the Australian Red Cross: *He was killed by an HE [high explosive] shell … He was my personal friend as well as Platoon Commander … A brave soldier and a gentleman respected by all who knew him.* (Lieutenant Robert Perrau, Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau file, 1DRL/0428, AWM. Image: AWM E01649)
Driver Francis Stephenson, 2nd Australian Machine Gun Battalion, with one of the pack horses used to transport the battalion’s heavy Vickers machine-guns into the forward areas at Ypres, 29 August 1917. The conditions under which men and horses had to work were arduous, as shown by the recommendation for the Military Medal for Driver Alexander Campbell, Australian Army Service Corps: At that place [Chateau Wood on 16 November 1917] heavy shell fire was falling … This driver remained at his post controlling his restive horses … and by his coolness and ability under fire prevented congestion of traffic and had a marked steadying effect on working parties in the area. (Driver Alexander Campbell, Recommendations file for honours and awards, 16/11/1917-16/12/1917, 5th Australian Division, AWM 28. Image: AWM E00668)
A howitzer of the 2nd Australian Siege Battery at Ypres, September 1917. The gun crew are wearing gas masks against German counter battery shelling with gas. The AIF’s artillery was involved in the opening bombardments for the Third Battle of Ypres in mid-July 1917 and operated until the end of the Flanders Offensive in November. A British report emphasised the danger to the gunners: The conditions under which the artillery were working can hardly have been worse: battery positions were heavily shelled both by day and by night, and the casualties … were severe … Rest at night was usually impossible owing to hostile gas shelling. (Quoted in Charles Bean, The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917, Sydney, 1941, p. 710. Image: AWM E00693)
Two aerial views of the railway crossing west of the village of Zonnebeke on the approach to the ridge of the Ypres Salient in 1917. The first was taken on 7 June, a month before the opening of the two-week British bombardment, in which Australian artillery participated, of German positions in the area prior to the infantry attack of 31 July 1917. The second was taken on 14 September 1917, by which time the country had been churned into a wilderness of shell craters and mud. This was the landscape across which the infantry had to fight between 31 July 1917 and the end of the Flanders Offensive in early November 1917. The 16th Battalion historian described the Zonnebeke area: *The ground which the 16th Battalion occupied near Zonnebeke defied description. It had been fought over for years and every yard of it was churned up by shell-fire. The area was ordinarily marshy. Now, with every shell hole full of stagnant water, barbed wire plentifully strewn around, broken vehicles and guns, dead horses and dead men, it was a forbidding waste indeed.* (Captain C Longmore, *The old Sixteenth*, Perth, 1929, p. 155. Images: AWM J00188 and J00189)
A view of Ypres from the window of the ruins of the post office in Lille Street, September 1917. This was one of the early images of the town taken by Captain Frank Hurley, official photographer to the AIF. On 3 September 1917, Hurley visited Ypres: *I took some images from the Post Office ... Roaming amongst the domestic ruins makes me sad. Here and there were fragments of toys—what a source of happiness they once were. Bedsteads broken and twisted almost into knots lay about, almost hidden with brick dust ... roofs poised on almost shot away walls ... they seemed to defy the laws of equilibrium and gravitation.* (Frank Hurley, diary, 3 September 1917, MS883, National Library of Australia. Image: AWM E00703)
Walking wounded and a stretcher case outside the Australian Army Medical Corps advanced dressing station on the Menin Road just outside Ypres, September 1917. There were two dressing stations at this location, one for walking wounded and another for the more seriously wounded stretcher cases. The stations were in the cellars of ruins reinforced with sandbags, and outside the YMCA 'formed a very efficient buffet'. Enemy shells fell on this area, and on 20 September 1917, during the Battle of Menin Road, Lieutenant-Colonel James Nicholas of the 5th Australian Field Ambulance was killed by shellfire whilst supervising loading outside this dressing station. (AWM E01909)
Two men of the 47th Battalion AIF carry water to the front line east of Ypres, September 1917. White tape has been laid across the mud to indicate the safest route to the front. A British soldier described what it was like to carry rations forward in these conditions: But it [the mud] stuck to you all over, it slowed you down. It got into the bottom of your trousers, you were covered with mud. The mud there wasn’t liquid, it wasn’t porridge, it was a curious kind of sucking kind of mud. When you got off this track with your load, it ‘drew’ at you, not like a quicksand, but a real monster that sucked at you. (Lewis Gunner Jack Dillon, quoted in Nigel Steel and Peter Hart, Passchendaele: The Sacrificial Ground, London, 2001, pp. 164–165. Image: AWM E00771)
An artillery limber passes the ruins of the Cloth Hall in Ypres, 14 September 1917. This, and the next photograph, formed part of a series taken by Frank Hurley featuring a well-known approach road for Australians to the front line in mid-September 1917—through the ruined town of Ypres and out the Menin Gate along the Menin Road. (AWM E00717)
Soldiers walk up the Menin Road beyond Ypres, 14 September 1917. The weather is clearly mild, as they are wearing shorts. Frank Hurley wrote of this scene: *It [the Menin Road] is notorious and being enfiladed by the enemy’s fire is decidedly the hottest ground on the whole front. The way is strewn with dead horses, the effect of last night’s shelling and battered men’s helmets that tell of the fate of the drivers.* (Frank Hurley, diary, 14 September 1917, MS883, National Library of Australia. Image: AWM E00700)
Australian soldiers at the town ramparts at Ypres, 19 September 1917. Dugouts were cut into the sides of the ramparts to provide cover from shelling. Captain Walter Belford, 11th Battalion AIF, recalled the battalion’s encampments along the ramparts near the Menin Gate: In spite of the constant shelling and bombing, the swans still lived in the moat … There were also coots and water hens. It was wonderful how little notice these birds took of the shells which sometimes fell in the water. (Walter Belford, Legs-eleven, Perth, 1940, p. 508. Image: AWM E04608)
Australian soldiers with supplies and stretchers pass a well-known feature, Hooge Crater, on the approach to the front line during the Battle of Menin Road, 20 September 1917. This had been a much fought over area of the battlefield before the 2nd Division AIF attacked here on 20 September. Before the war the chateau of Baron de Vinck stood in this area: 

*Hooge ... had totally ceased to exist. The trees in the wood and round the lake had been reduced to leafless shattered stumps. Beyond the site of the stables, two vast mine craters ... glowered from the bare earth.* (Lyn Macdonald, They called it Passchendaele, London, 1979, p. 109. Image: AWM E01036)
A plank supply dump along the Menin Road, 20 September 1917. These planks were used by Australian pioneer battalions for constructing the great ‘plank road’ through the mud and craters which led off the Menin Road and around the Bellewaarde Lake at Hooge. The men building these roads were in constant danger: *The circuit roads had to be made whatever the cost. The forward one [plank road] lay in ground always heavily shelled … In the early stages the pioneers constantly suffered from small burns due to mustard gas shelling … [and] the drain of more serious casualties continued steadily. (Charles Bean, The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917, Sydney, 1941, p. 794. Image: AWM E00861)*
A scene on the Menin Road near Hooge, 20 September 1917. The wounded are waiting for clearance to the advanced dressing station further back down the Menin Road towards Ypres. The soldier with his arm in a sling in the centre of the photograph is Major George Heydon, Regimental Medical Officer, 8th Battalion AIF, with members of the 1st Field Ambulance AIF. Shortly after Major Heydon passed this point a shell landed at that same spot killing many of the men on the stretchers. (AWM E00711)
German prisoners help carry Australian wounded near Hooge, 20 September 1917. On that day the 5th Field Ambulance AIF was active in clearing casualties from the front line back to the Menin Road: *It was not until 8.30 am [a couple of hours after the start of the Battle of the Menin Road] that the wounded began to come through to the collecting posts in large numbers; from then on there was a constant stream, but the bearers were quite able to cope with the work, and German prisoners of war were made free use of … In less than ten hours nearly 600 stretcher cases were cleared without any congestion.* (War diary, 5th Field Ambulance, quoted in Colonel AG Butler, The Western Front, The Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, Vol II, Canberra, 1940, pp. 207–208. Image: AWM E00746)
Members of the 3rd Australian Field Ambulance treat a wounded Australian in the advanced dressing station on the Menin Road, 20 September 1917. Three to four medical teams worked in these specially prepared cellars, where stretcher cases were slid down an ‘inclined plane’ to the operating area. On 20 September 1917, during the Battle of Menin Road, casualties were ‘taken in rotation to the four tables, splints adjusted, haemorrhage treated, resuscitation done’ and then evacuated on further behind the lines to a casualty clearing station. (AWM E00714)
Scene showing the results of a high explosive shell at a concrete blockhouse known as Stirling Castle, 20 September 1917. Frank Hurley witnessed a similar sight on that day: *Five Boche [German] prisoners were carrying in one of our wounded to the dressing station, when one of the enemy’s shells struck the group. All were almost instantly killed, three being blown to atoms. Another shell killed four and I saw them die, frightfully mutilated in the slime of a shell crater.* (Frank Hurley, diary, 20 September 1917, MS883, National Library of Australia. Image: AWM E04677)
A postcard depicting a drawing by A Pearse of the placing of an Australian flag on the German concrete blockhouse known as ‘Anzac’ by Lieutenant Arthur Hull, 18th Battalion AIF, during the Battle of Menin Road, 20 September 1917. The card was wrongly captioned at the time, ascribing Hull’s action to the Battle of Polygon Wood, which took place six days later. ‘Anzac’ was a two-storey blockhouse, the top storey being an artillery observation-post, and Hull obtained a ‘miniature Australian flag’ from the Australian Comforts Fund to place there. It was blown away in enemy shelling on 21 September 1917 and Hull himself was killed at the Battle of Poelcapelle on 9 October 1917. (AWM H00563)
The ‘Anzac’ blockhouse on which Lieutenant Arthur Hull, 18th Battalion AIF, placed the Australian flag on 20 September 1917. When the battalion attacked this position the German garrison was attempting to evacuate the blockhouse, dragging their two machine-guns with them. The Germans were overpowered and captured. (AWM E02321)
The Seabrook brothers of the 17th Battalion AIF, left to right: Private Theo Seabrook, Staff Sergeant (later Second Lieutenant) William Seabrook and Private George Seabrook. Theo and George were killed in action at the Battle of Menin Road on 20 September 1917 and William died one day later of wounds received in the same battle. (AWM H05568)
Members of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion AIF construct the plank road around Bellewaarde Lake at Hooge, 26 September 1917. The rapid construction of these roads after the Battle of Menin Road on 20 September 1917 was essential to allow artillery and supplies to be brought up to continue the offensive as soon as possible. The lines of old roads were barely discernible in the cratered wasteland of the battlefield, and new roads were an absolute necessity. Many of the planks for this road were carried by soldiers from dumps supplied by wagons back along the Menin Road. (AWM E00800)
Australian infantry attack in Polygon Wood, by Fred Leist, 1919, oil on canvas, 122.5 x 245 cm. The scene depicted by Leist was a common one at the Battle of Polygon Wood, fought by the 4th and 5th Divisions AIF on 26 September 1917, as men struggled to capture those German blockhouses where the enemy had not been intimidated into surrender by the fierce bombardment. The 5th Division’s historian described the seizure of one of these strong points: … a couple of Lewis [machine] guns would open up on the defenders, and rifle bombers would drop their volleys of grenades all around them. Under cover of this fire a couple of parties would work round the flanks of the obstruction and in a few moments further resistance was impossible. (Captain Alexander Ellis, The Story of the Fifth Australian Division, London, no date, p. 246. Image: AWM ART02927)
Captain Harold Wanliss DSO, 14th Battalion AIF, aged 25, killed at the Battle of Polygon Wood on 26 September 1917. Wanliss had been regarded as one of the ablest young leaders in the AIF and official historian Charles Bean lamented his death by quoting a number of Wanliss’ comrades regarding this young man’s potential: Many brave men, many good men, I have met but he was the king of them all. (Lieutenant Colonel John Peck, quoted in Charles Bean, The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917, Sydney, 1941, p. 828. Image: AWM DASEY1210)
The crossroads on the Menin Road outside Ypres, 27 September 1917. This spot was known as ‘Hellfire Corner’ and from the heights a few kilometres away German artillery observers could see the constant traffic passing along the Menin Road to the front lines. A British transport driver described Hellfire Corner: … when I got to Hellfire Corner it was chaos. A salvo of shells had landed in among the convoy. The lorries were scattered all over the place and even those that hadn’t been directly hit had been run off the roadway … the road was littered with bodies and debris and shell-holes all over the place. (Driver LG Burton, Army Service Corps, quoted in Lyn Macdonald, They Called it Passchendaele, London, 1979, p. 92. Image: E01889)
Stretcher bearers of the 57th Battalion AIF at work near the Butte in Polygon Wood, 28 September 1917. So successful was the Australian 5th Division’s attack here on the morning of 26 September 1917 at the Battle of Polygon Wood that, after the war, the division built its battle memorial for the Western Front on top of the Butte. Of the Butte’s capture, the 5th Division’s historian wrote: … the Butte was promptly rushed and captured after a brief fight. Numerous dugouts were found around this position, and sentries were placed at all exits, while parties of moppers-up descended and worked along the galleries and passages with bombs. (Captain Alexander Ellis, The Story of the Fifth Australian Division, London, no date, p. 246. Image: AWM E01912)
A water carrying party of the 1st Division AIF passes through the ruins of the Menin Gate into Ypres, 28 September 1917. The gate was not regarded as safe: These gates were places of evil omen. The enemy had the exact range of them, and knew when working parties would be likely to be passing them … [the Menin Gate] was always one of the most terrible spots in Ypres. People were killed there every day. To go past the Menin Gate was considered to be asking for it. (Thomas Hope Floyd, quoted in Siegfried Debaeke, Ieper: Before, During and After the Great War, Deklaproos, 2006, p. 113. Image E04678)
The military cemetery at Vlamertinghe, west of Ypres, 3 October 1917. A number of Australian soldiers were buried here, among them members of the artillery killed to the south of Ypres at Zillebeke, where many of the Australian batteries operated. Among those in Vlamertinghe is Sergeant George Harrison, 8th Brigade, Australian Field Artillery, killed on 20 October 1917 when a shell struck his gun position. Harrison was a young sergeant, aged 21 years. (AWM E00847)
One of the narrow-gauge light railways built to carry ammunition along the Menin Road during the later stages of the Third Battle of Ypres, 3 October 1917. Australian engineers laid 10 km of track east of Ypres but the lines were constantly being broken by enemy shelling and bombing. Horse, mule and human transport remained the main way in which war supplies reached the front lines across the devastated wasteland of the Ypres battlefield. (AWM E00913)
Lieutenant Philip Howell-Price, 1st Battalion, with a dud Turkish shell in the trenches of Gallipoli, May 1915. Howell-Price rose to be a major, and during his military career on the Western Front was awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) and the Military Cross (MC). He was killed on the morning of 4 October 1917 as a heavy German bombardment descended on the battalions of the 1st Division AIF waiting to attack at the Battle of Broodseinde. He was one of five Howell-Price brothers decorated for their service during World War I, three of whom died on the Western Front. (AWM C02052)
Pioneers of the 1st Division AIF lay a duckboard track near Zonnebeke, 5 October 1917. Between September and November 1917 AIF and British road parties laid more than 10 km of plank road in the rear areas across indescribable acres of mud and shell-cratered landscape. Losses among these troops were heavy and on 29 September, as a platoon of the 2nd Pioneer Battalion AIF was standing around a Comforts Fund stall on the Menin Road, eighteen men were killed and ten wounded by a bomb. (AWM E00837)
One of the most famous of the Australian official photographs taken by Frank Hurley at Ypres, depicting troops of the 1st Division AIF on a duckboard track near Hooge on 5 October 1917. These men were proceeding up the line to the support of the Australian divisions that had been engaged the previous day in the Battle of Broodseinde.

(AWM E00833)
The ruins of the Cloth Hall and Cathedral, Ypres, 8 October 1917. On first encountering the wreckage of the Cloth Hall, Frank Hurley wrote: *Most regrettable of all is the ruin of the famous Cloth Hall. This magnificent [building] … is now a remnant of torn walls and rubbish. The fine tower is a pitiable apology of a brick dump, scarred and riddled with shell holes. Its beautiful carved facades are ‘small-poxed’ with shell splinters, not a vestige of the carving having escaped … Oh, it’s too terrible for words.* (Frank Hurley, diary, 3 September 1917, MS983, National Library of Australia. Image: AWM E01115)
Cloth Hall at Menin Gate, by Henry Fullwood, watercolour and gouache with charcoal, 38.9 x 56.8 cm. Fullwood, an official Australian war artist, painted this in 1919 and it seems to depict a rather lifeless and exhausted scene, suggesting perhaps that Ypres was a place where men had fought themselves to a standstill. The American writer Edith Wharton visited the town and caught something of the mood which pervades Fullwood’s painting: We had seen evacuated towns … but we had seen no emptiness like this. Not a human being was in the streets. Endless lines of houses looked down on us from vacant windows. Our footsteps echoed like the tramp of a crowd; our lowered voices seemed to shout. (Edith Wharton, quoted in Siegfried Debaeke, Ieper: Before, During and After the Great War, Deklaproos, 2006, p. 133. Image: AWM ART02452)
Portrait of Lance Corporal James Lane, 24th Battalion AIF. Lane, a 19-year-old cabinet maker of Moonee Ponds, Victoria, volunteered for the AIF in January 1916 and went missing at the Battle of Poelcapelle on 9 October 1917. Private William Peters, a member of Lane’s platoon, informed the Australian Red Cross that they had been in support ‘at the front of Broodseinde Ridge on the right of Zonnebeke Lake’ when Lane was killed by a shell. When asked in the mid-1920s where her son had been killed, his mother, Frances Lane, wrote: ‘Front of Broodseinde Ridge on the right of Zonnebeke Lake’. (AWM P00223.001)
Stretcher bearers of the 9th Field Ambulance AIF sleep on a railway embankment, 10 October 1917. These men had been carrying for over 60 hours in conditions of rain, mud, cold and shellfire. Major Eric Hutchinson, AAMC, wrote: … the work was so heavy that for a large part of the time 6 men had to carry one stretcher—8 and even 12 men were used in parts. Under these conditions the stretcher bearers become exhausted and rapidly so after 24 hours … some 36 and even 48 hour shifts were done. (Major Eric Hutchinson, quoted in Colonel AG Butler, The Western Front, The Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, Vol II, Canberra, 1940, p. 234. Image: AWM E00941)
Gunners at camouflaged field guns at Anzac Ridge near Zonnebeke, 10 October 1917. After 4 October 1917 the rain came down, turning the approaches to the front line into a morass. However, to continue the offensive it was essential to bring up the field guns behind the infantry. Special platforms had to be built: *The guns sank lower and lower into the mud with each shot. But planks … timber, and sandbags were secured from all around the district, and eventually fairly good platforms were obtained. Further forward down hill … our other four batteries had to get in. In front of them the country was an absolute quagmire and impossible to occupy.* (War diary, 29th Battery, Australian Field Artillery, quoted in Charles Bean, *The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917*, Sydney, 1935, p.904. Image: AWM E04645)
The position occupied by the 16th Battery, Australian Field Artillery, near Hooge, 11 October 1917. The cross was erected to the memory of gunners killed by German shelling. A New Zealand gunner wrote of such episodes: … the shell landed only four yards away … The shock was so great, the sight too awful. When the smoke had cleared away, there lay four of our boys —dead. Then came the cries of the two wounded. Brown had both legs shattered and Lieutenant Chirnside was simply riddled with wounds. We carried them to the dressing station and Brown stayed there with his brother until he was taken away. (Gunner BO Stokes, New Zealand Field Artillery, quoted in Lyn Macdonald, They Called it Passchendaele, London, 1979, p. 203. Image: AWM E04533)
Dead and wounded Australians and Germans lie in the railway cutting on Broodseinde Ridge, 12 October 1917. This was one of the most telling and tragic images to come out of the Australian participation in the Passchendaele fighting, and Frank Hurley witnessed the scene: *I noticed an awful sight … Under a questionably sheltered bank lay a group of dead men. Sitting by them in little scooped out recesses sat a few living; but so emaciated by fatigue and shell shock that it was hard to differentiate. Still the whole was just another of the many byways to hell one sees out here, and which are so strewn with ghastliness.* (Frank Hurley, diary, 12 October 1917, MS833, National Library of Australia. Image: AWM E03864)
Australians make their way along a duckboard track, 12 October 1917. The landscape is typical of that through which soldiers had to proceed to get to the front. It could be fatal to fall off the duckboard, especially during a night approach: Often we would have to stop and wait for up to half an hour, because all the time the duckboards were being blown up and men being blown off the track or simply slipping off ... We were loaded like Christmas trees, so of course an explosion near by ... would knock a man off balance and he would go off the track and right down into the muck. (Lieutenant P King, East Lancashire Regiment, quoted in Lyn Macdonald, They Called it Passchendaele, London, 1979, p. 197. Image: AWM E00985)
The original grave marker in Tyne Cot Cemetery, Ypres, of Company Sergeant Lewis McGee VC, 40th Battalion AIF, killed in action on 12 October 1917. McGee’s Victoria Cross was awarded for his bravery on 4 October 1917 when his unit captured the Tyne Cot area of the battlefield. The recommendation for his VC read, in part: His platoon suffered heavy losses and was held up by an enemy Machine Gun firing from a Pill-Box. Sergeant McGee rushed forward himself, shot the Machine Gunners with his revolver and captured the strong point. (Company Sergeant Lewis McGee, Recommendations file for honours and awards, 1/10/1917-10/10/1917, 3rd Australian Division, AWM 28. Image: AWM P00735.005)
Wounded Australians lie outside an aid post near Zonnebeke, 12 October 1917. The evacuation of the wounded from Passchendaele in mid-October 1917 was a nightmare involving long carries over devastated and waterlogged countryside. The following are some comments made by Australian medical officers working in the area: All my men are done … a good few cases will have to remain out all night … send every available man up at 5 am tomorrow … it is impossible to carry now, too dark and no tracks … bearers physically exhausted … the country over which the bearers are working is one continuous sea of shell-holes and full of soft mud. (All quotations from Colonel AG Butler, The Western Front, The Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services, Vol II, Canberra, 1940, pp. 239–240. Image: AWM E01202)
Studio portrait of Junior Cadet John Longworth, aged 16, circa 1911. Longworth was a member of the Australian Coronation Contingent which went to London in 1911 for the crowning of King George V. Lieutenant John Longworth, 34th Battalion AIF, aged 22, of East Maitland, New South Wales, was killed in action at the Battle of Passchendaele on 12 October 1917. Private William McMillan, 34th Battalion, wrote to the Australian Red Cross: [Longworth] was killed while rushing a MG [machine gun] emplacement at Passchendaele, receiving a bullet wound in the abdomen which proved fatal. He met his death in ‘No Man’s Land’. (Lieutenant John Longworth, Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau file, 1DRL/0428, AWM. Image: AWM P03553.001)
Illuminated portrait of Private Joseph Hughes, 36th Battalion AIF, who enlisted in the AIF on 12 July 1916 and embarked for overseas on the troopship Borda at Sydney on 17 October 1916. He joined his battalion in France in April 1917 and was killed in action at the Battle of Passchendaele on 12 October 1917. Hughes’ body was never identified for burial and his name is commemorated on the Menin Gate memorial. His brother, Sapper Robert Hughes, 1st Australian Tunnelling Company, died of wounds in Belgium on 28 May 1917. (AWM P04020.001)
Australian drivers and horses attempt to pull a wagon out of the mud, October 1917. Official historian Charles Bean quoted Major Russell Manton, 15th Battery, Australian Field Artillery, on the steadfastness of the wagon drivers: These Australians had won for themselves a special name on the battlefield for the way in which they went straight through the nightmare barrages laid on the well-known tracks which they and their horses had to follow. While many might hesitate, these men realised that the loss would be less, and the job better done, if they pushed on without hesitation. (Major Russell Manton, quoted in Charles Bean, The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917, Sydney, 1941, p. 729. Image: E01054)
A mule team bogged in the mud on the road to Zonnebeke, east of Ypres, 19 October 1917. Soldiers were conscious of the sufferings of the pack animals: *The mules used to scream when they got wounded*. You hear very little about the horses but by God, that used to trouble me more than the men in some respects. We knew what we were there for; them poor devils didn’t, did they?

Australian soldiers pass through Ypres with the ruins of the Cloth Hall in the background, 25 October 1917. This photograph by Frank Hurley has become one of the classic images of Australians at Ypres during the Flanders Offensive. For most Australians it would have been difficult to form any opinion of the town for it was simply a pile of rubble, empty of people. Many who passed through Ypres might have echoed the words of British journalist Alfred Gardiner: 

*It is midday as you pass through its [Ypres] streets but there is no moving thing visible among the ruins. The very spirit of loneliness is about you—not the invigorating loneliness of the mountain tops, but the sad loneliness of the grave.* (Alfred Gardiner, quoted in Siegfried Debaeke, *Ieper: Before, During and After the Great War*, Doklaptops, 2006, p. 107. Image: AWM E04612)
The plank road leading to a location known as Idiot Corner, Westhoek Ridge, 29 October 1917. Captain Walter Belford praised the men of the transport unit that kept the 11th Battalion supplied in these conditions: *It was a firmly fixed principle of all first line transport, no matter what happened, that it must not let the front line troops down, and the 11th Battalion transport, right through its career, carried out this principle in a manner worthy of the best traditions. A finer body of men it would have been hard to find.*

Dumping munitions on the Menin Road, October 1917. A peaceful enough scene but enemy shelling could turn it quickly into chaos. Frank Hurley was on the Menin Road when a shell hit a similar dump: *We eluded shells until … a terrific angry rocketlike shriek warned us to duck. This we did by throwing ourselves flat in a shell hole … immediately a terrific roar … and up went timber, stones, shells, and everything else in the vicinity. A dump of 4.5 shells had received a direct hit, the splinters rained out on helmets and the debris and mud came down in a cloud. The frightful concussion absolutely winded us.* (Frank Hurley, diary, 26 September 1917, MS883, National Library of Australia. Image: AWM E01991)
Australian 1st Division Pioneers try to get a howitzer forward near Hannebeek, October 1917. After the coming of the rains in early October 1917 the Australian artillery struggled to bring up their guns to provide the vital support for the infantry in its attacks on Passchendaele. One observer painted a bleak view of his battery’s situation: *All dugouts and gun platforms were soon flooded … men slept on wet blankets or at best on sodden straw … Our numbers are dwindling down fast. The few remaining old hands have to bear the whole brunt of the tremendous work of serving and firing the guns, on mud platforms, keeping ammunition clean, and keeping guns in action.* (Unnamed observer, quoted in Charles Bean, The Australian Imperial Force in France: 1917, Sydney, 1941, p. 906. Image: AWM E01076)
An Australian soldier rescues a comrade, Chateau Wood, Hooge, Belgium, October 1917: 

*Chateau Wood must have been a glorious spot with its lake on one side and heavy foliaged timber. It is now so lonely and desolate that one feels as if death alone dwelt there ... here and there along the lonely duckboard track lies a stricken soldier. One does not linger more than necessary in this place over which hangs the pall of gloom and death.* (Frank Hurley, diary, 28 September 1917, MS883, National Library of Australia. Image: AWM E04599)
Australians in Chateau Wood, Hooge, Belgium, October 1917: We succeeded in reaching the infamous Chateau Wood without incident when a fleet of 14 Taubs and Gothis came over us [German bombers]. They dropped their bombs vigorously a few hundred yards away and peppered the roads with machine gun fire. We took refuge beside a big tree stump and escaped the machine gun fire ... Our safety was but momentary, however, for a 5.9 shell lobbed only 15 paces off and showered us with mud—a narrow squeak. (Frank Hurley, diary, 28 September 1917, MS883, National Library of Australia. Image: AWM E01220)
Sister Josephine Hubbard of the Australian Army Nursing Service (AANS) prepares a patient for an operation at the 1st Australian Casualty Clearing Station at Outersteene, France, 24 November 1917. Three Australian casualty clearing stations operating in the area received the thousands of wounded men from the Ypres battlefields. Sister May Tilton wrote of the trauma of these places: *While I attended one poor boy who had begun to haemorrhage, the next patient ... commenced coughing and spluttering. I turned my torch on him revealing a German bleeding profusely from a horribly shattered lower jaw. Both men were immediately carried out in the rain again for the operating table.* (Sister May Tilton, Nurses narratives, AG Butler Papers, AWM 41, AWM.

Image: AWM E01305)
A ward in the 2nd Australian Casualty Clearing station, Steenvoorde, France, 30 November 1917. During the fighting at nearby Ypres the 3rd Australian Casualty Clearing Station was shelled and Sister Mary Kelly AANS was awarded the Military medal for her courage under fire: *Her quiet courage and clever resourcefulness enabled the nerve-shattered men to come through the ordeal with cheery confidence. In order to give them a feeling of safety she placed enamel wash basins over their heads as there were no helmets available. She remained at her post until the bombardment was over.* (Matron Evelyn Conyers, quoted in Jan Basset, Guns and Brooches, Melbourne, 1992, p. 65. Image: AWM E04623)
King Albert and Queen Elizabeth of Belgium enter Bruges in Flanders on 23 October 1918. Bruges, just north of Ypres, was one of the first major towns in the country to be liberated from four years of enemy occupation. Belgian poet Emile Cammaerts was there: *That Bruges should be the first large town in which King Albert made his entry is also a wonderful coincidence. For Bruges is the very gate of peace, the narrow gate sanctified by centuries of tradition and worship. In spite of the large guns and motor-vans stationed in the square, the old atmosphere was preserved, and the helmeted soldiers tramping in the moonlight did not seem out of place.*

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow;
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Essex Farm Cemetery on the Yser Canal bank at Ypres, 1919. It was hereabouts in May 1915 that Major John McCrae, First Brigade Artillery, Canadian Army, composed ‘In Flanders Fields’ in memory of his friend Lieutenant Alexis Helmer, killed in action on 2 May 1915. (AWM J00639)
The German blockhouse over which the Cross of Sacrifice has been built in this cemetery, carries this inscription:

_This was the Tyne Cot blockhouse_
_captured by the_
_3rd Australian Division_
_4 October 1917_

Tyne Cot Cemetery, Passchendaele, photographed in the 1920s before it received its permanent headstones. Of the nearly 12,000 burials in Tyne Cot 1369 are Australians, of whom 791 are unidentified, their headstones carrying the words: ‘An Australian Soldier of the Great War, Known Unto God’. (AWM H12653)
Two Victoria Cross recipients of World War I, Australians Joe Maxwell (left) and John Hamilton, look at the grave of Company Sergeant Lewis McGee VC, killed in action on 12 October 1917, in Tyne Cot Cemetery. Maxwell and Hamilton had come to Europe to attend celebrations in London for the centenary of the inauguration of the Victoria Cross by Queen Victoria in 1856. Today Tyne Cot is the most visited Commonwealth War Graves cemetery along the old Western Front in France and Belgium. (AWM P01312.003)
One of the two stone lions that stood on either side of the Menin Gate before World War I stands in the rubble of Ypres after the war. In 1936, Australia’s High Commissioner in London, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, himself a war veteran, suggested to the Burgomaster of Ypres that the town donate the damaged lions to Australia. This was done and the restored Menin Gate lions now guard the entrance to the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. (Collection of the Art Section AWM)
A scene at the inauguration of the Menin Gate memorial to the missing in Ypres, 24 July 1927. The flag has fallen away from the inscription under the lion at the top of the memorial and Field Marshall Plumer has finished his address with the words ‘He is not missing, he is here’. Soon the lone piper will play the ‘Flowers of the Forest’.

(Collection of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission)
Buglers sound the Last Post at the Menin Gate, circa 1960s. That the Last Post should be nightly sounded under the Menin Gate was the idea of the Ypres Chief of Police Pierre Vandenbraamhussche, and in 1929 the Last Post Association was formed at Ypres to ... ensure the sounding of the Last Post each evening for all time at the British memorial at the Menin Gate in honour of the soldiers of the British Empire who fell at Ypres or in the neighbourhood during the war of 1914–1918.

(Collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)
Menin Gate at midnight, by Will Longstaff, 1927, oil on canvas, 137 x 270 cm. Longstaff was present at the inauguration of the memorial and, unable to sleep that night, he returned to the gate, where he claimed to have had a vision of dead soldiers rising from the soil around him and heading off towards the front line. Returning to London, he painted Menin Gate at midnight in one session. It hangs today in a specially darkened room at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. (AWM ART09807)
A mourner lays a wreath at the Menin Gate, circa 1930. This is an Australian section of the stone panels where more than 6195 men of the AIF who lost their lives in Belgium in World War I and have ‘no known grave’ are listed. Beneath her wreath is the name ‘Fraser TH’. Sergeant Thomas Fraser, 2nd Pioneer Battalion AIF, was killed by a shell on the evening of 15 September 1917 whilst working on one of the plank roads leading off the Menin Road towards Westhoock Ridge. Buried initially beneath a wooden cross, his grave was subsequently lost, and Fraser’s remains lie to this day … *in Flander’s fields.* (Foto Daniel, collection of the Stedelijke Musea, Ieper)