More than 76,000 Australians became casualties on the Western Front in 1917, including some 22,000 who were killed. No year in Australia’s wartime history has been more costly. In this poster Australians march through Ypres in late October 1917 toward the end of the massive British offensive known as the Third Battle of Ypres. The Australians fought in five major battles here: Menin Road, Polygon Wood, Broodseinde, Poelcappelle and Passchendaele. Images from this offensive are among the best known of the Western Front, and the Third Battle of Ypres has come to symbolise the muddy horror and waste of the First World War. The survivors of the fighting here faced another year of war before the Armistice brought an end to hostilities.

Background

In the second half of 1917 after three years of war, armies on both sides were exhausted. With the Germans on the defensive along the length of the Western Front, the Allies sought a way to break the stalemate. British commander General Sir Douglas Haig decided to launch his next offensive from Ypres in Flanders. His ambitious goal was to inflict heavy casualties, break through the German lines, liberate occupied territory and capture the German U-boat bases at Zeebrugge and Ostend.

An assault on Messines Ridge in June 1917 preceded the offensive, which began on 31 July. The Germans were well prepared to meet it. Reinforced strong points known as pillboxes, armed with machine guns, sited to cover each other and protected by artillery, were dotted around the battlefield. Large areas of the British front and the rear areas were under German observation and enemy shellfire and gas bombardments made the places where troops and equipment had to pass deadly dangerous.

The offensive was more than a month old when Australian troops joined the fighting in late September. In dry weather the 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions took part in the Battle of Menin Road on the 20th of that month. The 4th and 5th Divisions went into the Battle of Polygon Wood on 26 September, and on 4 October the 1st and 2nd Divisions were again in action, this time at Broodseinde. Then soaking rains began to fall, turning the shell-torn ground into a clinging morass.

Senior Allied commanders, believing the Germans were close to collapse, ordered further attacks. When the 2nd Australian Division went into the Battle of Poelcappelle on 9 October the assault foundered in the mud and ended in failure. A similar fate befell the 3rd and 4th Divisions in the attack on Passchendaele on 20 October.

Finally on 26 October elements of the 4th Division supported a Canadian attempt to seize the village before the Australians were withdrawn from the fighting. The offensive dragged to an end in November. There had been no breakthrough, little territory was liberated, the Belgian ports remained firmly in German hands and some half a million men on both sides were killed or wounded. Approximately 38,000 Australians became casualties in eight weeks at Ypres.
Teaching Activities

Use the posters, background information, and websites listed below to answer the following questions:

1. a) Look at the poster to see the ruins of the central belfry of the Cloth Hall. What was the Cloth Hall used for? What happened to it and the people of Ypres during the war?
   b) Where is Ypres?
   c) What has become of the Cloth Hall in Ypres today?

2. Frank Hurley, a well-known war photographer, captured the image used in this poster.
   He was renowned for his composite printing.
   a) What are composite prints?
   b) Why do you think they were controversial?

3. The Third Battle of Ypres was actually a series of battles. What was the objective of the battle as proposed by the British Commander in Chief, General Sir Douglas Haig?

4. The Third Battle of Ypres was preceded by the Battle of Messines, in which Australian tunnellers played an important role. Where and what was Hill 60 and what were the tunnellers trying to achieve there?

5. a) Describe the conditions in which Australian troops were fighting during the Third Battle of Ypres.
   b) Write your own diary entry describing one day in the front line.

6. Seven Australians were awarded the Victoria Cross for their valour in attacks on German pillboxes in 1917.
   a) What were the notorious German pillboxes? What were they used for?
   b) Select one of the Victoria Cross recipients listed and find out why they received their Victoria Cross.

7. Theo Seabrook and his two brothers died within a day of each other while attacking German positions at Westhoek, Belgium, in September 1917. Theo and George are commemorated on the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing, in Ypres, and Keith was buried in Lijssenthoek, Belgium. Why are Theo and George listed on this memorial?

8. There are thousands of Australians listed on the Menin Gate Memorial whose bodies were never found. Taking this into account and comparing the two Anzac Day 2017 posters, what can you conclude about the nature of warfare on the Western Front?

Websites