



Education Services 2016

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Members of the 14th Australian Field Ambulance
carry men with trench foot across the mud at
Bernafay, France. AWM E00081
Red Cross armband. AWM REL41510



1916:

Australians on the Western Front

... on the Somme the sentries, standing steadfastly along their muddy ditches, might have been looking out on the dawn of the world; a region colourless except for the grey-blue sky and the bare brown wilderness of formless mud.

Charles Bean, Australian official First World War historian

By the time the Australians arrived at the main battle front in 1916 the French, British, and Germans had been fighting for almost two years. In 1914 the Germans had invaded Belgium and northern France, and almost reached Paris before being stopped. In the developing deadlock each side had tried to outflank the other, resulting in a line of trenches that eventually stretched from the Belgian coast to the Swiss border. This line was named the "Western Front".

Spring and summer, with their clear skies, warm weather, and firm ground, were the offensive seasons; in autumn and winter the armies were more likely to hold the line as they became almost immobile in the cold, mud, and water. More Australians would lose their lives in the heavy fighting on the Western Front than in any other theatre of the war.

"Will the order to move or a shell come first?"

Private Rowland Lording, 30th Battalion

After arriving in France the Australian divisions spent time in Flanders, near the Belgian border in the so-called "nursery sector", a quieter part of the line where troops could gain experience in the conditions of the Western Front. Near the French village of Fromelles, the most recently arrived and least prepared division, the 5th, became the first to go into a major battle. This was intended as a diversion to draw enemy attention away from the allies' Somme offensive.

On 19 July 1916 the 5th Division and the British 61st Division made an evening attack. With too little artillery preparation, and coming under intense enfilading machine-gun fire, their assault was cut to pieces. Facing fierce counter-attacks, they were forced to withdraw. In this bloody encounter the Australians suffered 5,500 casualties over little more than 24 hours.

Soon afterwards three other Australian divisions (the 1st, 2nd, and 4th) fought around Pozieres on the Western Front, wresting a small devastated area of the Somme from the enemy, but at a staggering cost. Over 42 days the Australians made 19 attacks against the German line 16 of which were conducted at night. The final casualties totalled an appalling 23,000 men. The losses sustained throughout that exhausting period were almost unsustainable for a volunteer army.

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

Charles Bean, Australian official First World War historian

The year 1916 was one of significant change. Australian infantrymen new to the Western Front, who had once been taught that "the bullet and bayonet are the deciding factors in fighting", now saw the destructive power of artillery on the battlefield. Modern artillery defined the nature of trench warfare on the Western Front, influencing the tactics, operations, and strategies of all the major armies. Technological and industrial advances made during the war allowed heavier shells to be fired longer distances and with greater accuracy. Bombardments of high-explosives, shrapnel, and gas shells were unprecedented in their scale and intensity.

Smoke and fumes covered the battleground, and to these could be added choking gas. Chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas were widely used, and the Australians were to encounter all three on the Western Front. A heavy dose could cause burning, blistering, vomiting, and choking, and could extend to collapse and suffocation. However, even with less exposure there were often severe enduring effects, particularly lung and bronchial ailments, which could last well beyond the war years.

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

Will Dyson, Australian official First World War artist

The demand for rations for the troops, fodder for the horses, and ammunition for the guns never ceased. From 1916 the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) divisions were part of a British army of about two million men on the Western Front, and the daily provision of supplies, mostly sourced from Britain, was an enormous undertaking. About 6,000 Australian civilians were sent to Europe as war workers to assist Britain in her expanding war industries.

Huge warehouses, workshops, and bakeries were established close to the Channel ports for shipping to the continent. Wagons, drawn by horses or mules, were essential for the further movement of stores, although motor transport was developing rapidly. Even double-decker London buses were adapted for the movement of soldiers. The shipment of supplies from bases to the front line was continuous, arduous, and very often dangerous.

AWM RELAWM08072



Sergeant George Parry, 1916.

AWM PD086002



Private Reuben Parry, 1916.

AWM PD0351001



Private Frederick Parry, 1916.

AWM PD086001

Duckboard recovered from the trenches at Fromelles once manned by Australian soldiers, 1916. - AWM RELAWM04091

Discussion questions

1. **Research the Australian Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau. How did this bureau provide assistance to families waiting to hear about the fates of their loved ones?**
2. **Why do you think it took so many years to recover the remains of those killed in the battle of Fromelles?**

"We are over our knees in mud and water and our feet are all swollen and without feeling ..."

Private David Roberts, 17th Battalion

The European winter of 1916-17 was one of the worst on record, and the major battles came to a grinding halt as both armies became bogged down in the mud. Respiratory diseases, rheumatism, and frostbite were common, and trench foot, caused by prolonged exposure to damp, unsanitary, and cold conditions, became a problem on a massive scale.

The war was becoming a heavy burden for all Australians. Thousands of households had been cast into mourning, and by the end of 1916 there was still no victory in sight.

1916 IN SUMMARY

Enlisted: 124,402

Strength: 208,670

Wounded: 29,851

Prisoners of war: 1,037

Deaths: 14,170

These boots belonging to Lieutenant Reg Hunter were sent home to his mother after his death in 1918.

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Discussion questions

1. **Research the battle of Pozieres. What happened to this village? Why did both the allies and the Germans want to take control here?**
2. **Prime Minister Billy Hughes saw conscription as a solution to the dwindling number of AIF volunteers, but the Australian public was deeply divided. What is conscription? Would you vote for or against it? Why?**
3. **At least 2,000 nurses served abroad between 1914 and 1919. What kinds of challenges do you think they might have faced in this role on the Western Front?**
4. **Many Australians saw joining the army as an exciting opportunity to travel overseas, earn a decent wage, and fight for King and country. How do you think the reality measured up to their expectations?**



AWM E00081

Captured in time

The photograph on the cover was taken at Bernafay, north-east of Amiens, as 1916 drew to an end and a harsh winter set in. Carrying the injured soldiers are 28 year old Private John Sturrock (left) and 23 year old Lance Corporal William James (right). Both had enlisted in Melbourne some 18 months earlier, and were assigned to the 14th Australian Field Ambulance. In spite of severe wounds sustained in the course of their service, both survived to return to Australia, and were awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the final year of the war.

How do you think Sturrock and James might have been feeling when this photograph was taken?

Desert fighting in Sinai

While most allied troops were transferred to the Western Front in 1916, some, including the majority of the light horse regiments, remained in Egypt, where their first task was to protect the Suez Canal. It was hot, thirsty, and dirty work that placed an incredible strain on both men and horses.

In early August the Turks made their last serious attack towards the Suez Canal at Romani. This battle marked the beginning of the allies' pursuit of German and Ottoman forces out of Egypt and into Palestine.

From mid-1916 No. 1 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, provided aerial reconnaissance and bombing support to light horse regiments on the ground. By the end of the war five men of the squadron had been knighted and 15 of its pilots had become aces.

Septimus Power, The incident for which Lieutenant F.H. McKinnara was awarded the VC, 1924 (oil on canvas, 171.5 x 262 x 81.5 cm)



Enrich your students' learning

Before you visit the Australian War Memorial, book a facilitated program for your school group. Aligned to the *Australian Curriculum: History*, these programs provide a deeper learning experience for visiting students and are designed to suit your classroom and curriculum needs.

Programs available:

Program	Year level
<i>Cobber's tales</i>	Preschool and Foundation
<i>Anzac legacy</i>	Primary
<i>The past in the present</i>	Primary
<i>Discovery zone</i>	Primary
<i>Australians and the First World War</i>	Secondary
<i>Australia in the Second World War</i>	Secondary
<i>The Vietnam era</i>	Secondary
<i>Science and war</i>	Both
<i>Strange but true</i>	Both
<i>We will remember them</i>	Both
<i>Go back to the source</i>	Both
<i>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wartime service</i>	Both
<i>School wreathlaying ceremony</i>	Both

A German sign showing the way to Fromelles, salvaged by the Australians in 1916.

AWM RELAWM07583

Memorial Box outreach program

Memorial Boxes are rich learning resources for school students. They contain real and replica historical artefacts that students can handle, and uniforms that can be tried on. Digital content that links to the *Australian Curriculum: History* can be found online at www.awm.gov.au/education/memorial-boxes. Boxes are available for loan Australia-wide from agents located in each state and territory.

Commemorative Crosses project

When you book a *We will remember them* program, students will each have the opportunity to write a personal commemorative message on a wooden cross, which will then be placed on the grave of a fallen serviceman or servicewoman in a cemetery overseas.



AWM RELAWM00544

The search for the missing

"He was wounded ... bleeding badly. I am his brother and was with him ..."

Private Reuben Parry

As it did for so many other Australians, the events of 1916 changed everything for George Parry and his family. At 53 years of age, Parry was too old to enlist in the Australian Imperial Force, but two of his sons, 21 year old Reuben and 19 year old Frederick, joined the excited crowds queuing to volunteer for service in the wake of the Anzac landing on Gallipoli.

For the two young labourers, the opportunity to travel overseas, earn a decent wage, and be in the thick of an action must have seemed like a grand adventure. The brothers were inseparable; they signed up together on 12 July 1916 and embarked four months later on the troopship *Ascanius* for the long journey to the other side of the world.

The ship docked in Egypt in early December, and a few weeks later the Australians were withdrawn from the Gallipoli peninsula. By early 1916 the AIF was training in Egypt in order to take its place fighting on the Western Front. The Parry brothers arrived in France with the 29th Battalion in June 1916, and just under a month later took part in what was to be their first and last battle, near the village of Fromelles.

After a seven-hour bombardment that churned the ground into a wasteland, the Australians attacked. There was some initial success, but heavy fire from well-placed German machine-guns and artillery took an enormous toll. The fight went on into the night, and the darkness brought no reprieve.

The Parry brothers met up on the battlefield. Frederick was badly wounded in the fighting, so Reuben sent him back to get help while he stayed with the battalion. That was the last time they ever saw each other.

George Parry received word that both sons were missing in action. Weeks later he enlisted for service with the Australian Army Medical Corps Sea Transport Staff, helping to return sick and injured men to Australia. He was discharged in early 1917, but immediately re-enlisted for home service duty.

In late 1916, more than six months after his sons' first foray into battle, Sergeant George Parry finally learned their fates: Private Frederick Parry had been killed in action as he made his way to safety, while Private Reuben Parry had been captured along with around 470 other Australians and interned in a prisoner-of-war camp in Germany.

The British and Australian dead and wounded from the disastrous attack on Fromelles numbered in the thousands. Reuben believed the Germans had buried his brother close by the battlefield, but despite his father's desperate enquiries this grave could not be located. Reuben Parry survived the war and eventually returned home to Australia, where his father was carrying out his home service caring for incapacitated soldiers.

Ninety years later private research indicated that many bodies buried by the Germans in graves near the village might still be there. The Australian Army undertook an investigation at the nearby Pheasant Wood, and in 2009 some 250 bodies, mostly Australians, were recovered. Among those identified was Private Frederick Parry, who was later re-interred at the new Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery.



Education at the Australian War Memorial
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