

Frank MacDonald MM Memorial Prize

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Question 2:

We near the centenary of battles fought by Australians on the Western Front during 1916; many of which were described as 'disastrous and futile'. Use primary resources to outline your view of these events and how we should commemorate them in 2016.

Word Count: 1192 (excluding quotes and footnotes)



Left: <http://battlefieldmemorialtravel.com.au/tours/western-front-day-tours-belgium-and-france/>
Right: <http://www.inmemories.com/Cemeteries/vccomeraustralian.htm>

The Great War lasted four years from 28 July 1914 until November 11th 1918. A total of 416,809 men aged between 18 and 44 comprised the 38.7% of Australian men who enlisted in World War One.¹ Many of these young boys, eager at the prospect of the 'big adventure' before them, served in the horrific battles of the Western Front. Australia accepted the call of duty when on the 4th August 1914 their mother country, England, called for aid. Little did they know how few of their brave men would return. The Western Front was a major series of battles where most of the fighting took place. I believe that many of these battles were futile and resulted in a huge unnecessary loss of lives. It is important, however, to commemorate the disastrous battles of 1916 because they have not only a large place in Australia's history but in society today. We should remember the soldiers not just on Anzac Day, but every day. Their sacrifices, so we can live in peace, should affect how we live our lives.

Some 295,000 Australians served on the Western Front.² Over 46,000 of these men died in its numerous battles and a further 134,000 were either taken prisoner or wounded. The Western Front consisted of a series of trenches 700 km long, extending from the Swiss border to the Belgian coast.³ The biggest battle of the Western Front was the Battle of the Somme, a huge Allied offensive. The Battle of Pozieres, part of the Somme, lasted two weeks. Its objective, to claim a ridge 500m east of the small French village of Pozieres, was successful giving the allied forces the upper hand and a menacing position to the Germans. The Allies' capture was at a bloody cost.

They looked like men who had been in Hell... drawn and haggard and so dazed that they appeared to be walking in a dream and their eyes looked glassy and starey.⁴

Although combined forces claimed Pozieres Ridge, the Battle is primarily known as an Australian one. The Australian 1st and 2nd Divisions claimed Pozieres Village and

¹ <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1/>

² <http://www.ww1westernfront.gov.au/australian-remembrance-trail/where-australians-fought.php>

³ <http://www.Anzacday.org.au/history/ww1/overview/west.html>

⁴ Sergeant E. J. Rule, *Jacka's Mob* (Angus and Robinson: Sydney, 1933) P. 61

Pozières heights between 23 July and 5 August 1916.⁵ Ten days later, after continuous action they reached Mouquet Farm which remained free of capture until 26th September 1916. The Australian forces' casualties were devastating. In less than seven weeks three Australian divisions lost 23,000 casualties; 6,800 of these men died as a result of their wounds or were killed.⁶

The losses at Pozières were little different than the losses of the 1915 Gallipoli campaign over eight months.⁷ Anzac Albert Jacka VC described Pozières as *'without doubt...the heaviest, bloodiest, rottenest stunt that ever the Australians were caught up in...we were literally walking over the dead bodies of our comrades.'*⁸ Australian war historian Charles Bean said that Pozières Ridge was *'more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth.'*⁹ The Battle of Pozières gained some advantage, but were the small successes worth the losses? *'I couldn't help wondering whether it was worth it; whether there is anything gained in this war that justifies such sacrifices,'*¹⁰ questioned Charles Bean. I believe such small gains, a few metres of dirt, do not justify the horrific mass destruction of human life.

*'I was buried twice, and thrown down several times-buried with dead and dying. The ground was covered with bodies in all stages of decay and mutilation, and I would, after struggling free from the earth, pick up a body by me to try to lift him out with me, and find him a decayed corpse. I pulled a head off was [sic] covered with blood. The horror was indescribable.'*¹¹

Unlike the Battle of Pozières, where the Australians received their objective, the earlier Battle of Fromelles was a complete disaster. The two day battle, labelled the worst day

⁵ <http://www.awmlondon.gov.au/battles/pozieres>

⁶ <http://www.awmlondon.gov.au/battles/pozieres>

⁷ <http://www.awmlondon.gov.au/battles/pozieres>

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QVb9waYGDRc>

⁹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Pozi%C3%A8res

¹⁰ 'Gallipoli to the Somme; the story of C.E.W. Bean,' Sydney, 1983, p.24

¹¹ Lieutenant John Raws, quoted in Charles Bean, *The AIF in France, 1916*,

<http://www.w1westernfront.gov.au/pozieres-windmill/on-this-spot-the-windmill-pozieres.php>

in Australian history, took place from the 19th to 20th July 1916.¹² In just one night, the Australians suffered 5,533 casualties with around 2,000 dead. The Fromelles toll was equivalent to the Australian casualties in the Boer War, Korean War and Vietnam War combined.¹³ Commander of the 5th Brigade, Harold Edward (Pompey) Elliott, profoundly concerned the battle was futile and would result in a huge massacre, tried to prevent it. Although delayed, the battle still went ahead.¹⁴ W.H.'Jimmy' Downing who served in Pompey Elliott's Brigade recorded this:

*'Stammering scores of German machine-guns spluttered violently, drowning the noise of the cannonade. The air was thick with bullets, swishing in a flat criss-crossed lattice of death ... Hundreds were mown down in the flicker of an eyelid, like great rows of teeth knocked from a comb ... Men were cut in two by streams of bullets [that] swept like whirling knives ... It was the charge of the Light Brigade once more, but more terrible, more hopeless.'*¹⁵

The Battle of Fromelles was a feint, making no progressive impact on the Battle of the Somme.¹⁶ When the Australian 5th Division and the British 61st attacked they were mowed down by German machine-gunners being out numbered 2:1,¹⁷ it was the '*most awful scene of slaughter imaginable*' noted Lieutenant Dave Doyle.¹⁸ The Australian and British forces attacking in broad daylight, in direct view of the Germans exemplifies Fromelles' futility.¹⁹ Before they left the trenches the casualties were already rising.²⁰ '*If you had gathered the stock of a thousand butcher-shops, cut it into small pieces and strewn it about, it would give you a faint conception of the shambles those trenches were,*' wrote a 59th Battalion corporal, Hugh Knyvett.²¹ It is believed that in the Battle of Fromelles, the Australian 5th Division occurred the greatest loss of a single division in

¹² <http://www.worst-day-australian-history.Anzac-day.net/>

¹³ <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1/>

¹⁴ <https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/36/article.asp>

¹⁵ <https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/36/articie.asp>

¹⁶ <https://www.awm.gov.au/military-event/E159/>

¹⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_the_Somme

¹⁸ <https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/36/article.asp>

¹⁹ https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/44/page18_ekins/

²⁰ https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/44/page18_ekins/

²¹ "Over There" with the Australians By Capt. R. Hugh Knyvtt

any 24 hour period in World War One.²² Major General Pompey Elliott, was devastated by the events and what happened to 'his boys.'

*'Ordinary sandbagged trenches were now heaps of debris, and it was impossible to walk far without falling over dead men, [but] Pompey went from battalion to company headquarters and so on right along the line. A word for a wounded man here, a pat of approbation to a bleary-eyed digger there, he missed nobody. He never spoke a word all the way back to advanced brigade [headquarters] but went straight inside, put his head in his hands, and sobbed his heart out.'*²³

Though some German trenches were captured by the 8th and 14th Australian Brigades they were forced to withdraw due to no support and fierce counter attacks.

The worst winter France had seen for 40 years²⁴ turned already bloody and agonizingly slow battles into a massacre in which no guns were involved. At worst, the temperature dropped to -15°C escalating the suffering. Lieutenant Frederick Chapman, 3rd Field Company 1st Division AIF, commented that *'[it] was the coldest winter they'd [the French] had for thirty-five years when we were there. Oh yes the ground was frozen. When you went...to dig a trench you'd see the sparks fly off the pick ...you wouldn't believe it until you got through about three or four inches then you get on to earth that's how you do before you could dig your trench.'*²⁵ The ground was slippery and uneven. Mud-filled shell holes were dangerous. A soldier's back could be broken when being extracted from a pitfall. If left there he could drown or die of exposure. Some primary dangers were frostbite and trench foot, claiming 200 men weekly in November 1916.²⁶ Corporal Morehead described the soldier's agony; *'With our feet and ankles in water for days at a stretch, we began to suffer. One or two became delirious, others groaned with pain, as rheumatism or cold began to take effect...'* Soldiers became desperate,

²² <https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/36/article.asp> / https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Battle_of_Fromelles

²³ Lieutenant J.D. Schroder, <https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/36/article.asp>

²⁴ THE ANZACS – GALLIPOLI TO THE WESTERN FRONT By Peter Pederson, Chap't. 10 CHASING FRITZ – P.184

²⁵ In their own Words - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HEKJ4a2z0I>

²⁶ THE ANZACS – GALLIPOLI TO THE WESTERN FRONT By Peter Pederson, Chap't. 10 CHASING FRITZ – P.184

sometimes shooting themselves. Moving to the front was difficult for ration parties and stretcher bearers. Walking through the trenches was exhausting, dense thick mud sucked their boots off. *'Standing stock still to the knees in mud and water, leaning against the parapet of mud, drenched to the skin with rain, fed on cold rations ,movement was practically impossible, and if one moved the mud practically held you to the spot and being very weak, every effort was a pain...Sleep was impossible. Through sheer exhaustion one dozed standing up. Owing to the muddy nature of the trench, dugouts could not be dug, tho' here and there a man was able to scratch out a ledge to sit on.'*²⁷ During November 1916 the Australians still attacked in these dreadful conditions. Soldiers lost hope.

*'Idealism perished on the Somme. The enthusiastic volunteers were enthusiastic no longer. They had lost faith in their cause, in their leaders, in everything except loyalty to their fighting comrades. The war ceased to have a purpose. It went on for its own sake, as a contest in endurance.'*²⁸

Reflecting on 1916's disasters, we see many as futile. Desperate soldiers fought in ill-conceived battles that went terribly wrong. *"...distinguished more often than not by military and political incompetence; because the waste of human life was so terrible that some said victory was scarcely discernible from defeat.'* As the Battle of the Somme dragged onwards, Allied efforts to overtake impending German forces only resulted in lives lost. According to English historian A.J.P Taylor *'the Somme set the picture by which future generations saw the First World War: brave, helpless soldiers; blundering obstinate generals; [there was] nothing achieved. After the Somme, men decided that the war would go on forever.'*²⁹ No efforts and strategies seemed wrong when they were fighting for land they loved, despite how disastrous and futile they really were. World War One and its effects shaped Australia as we know it today. It did not only make a

²⁷ THE ANZACS – GALLIPOLI TO THE WESTERN FRONT By Peter Pederson, Chap't. 10 CHASING FRITZ – P.184

²⁸ The First World War: an Illustrated History By A.J.P. (Alan John Percivale) Taylor, Berkley Publishing Group. 1972. P. 129

²⁹ The First World War: an Illustrated History By A.J.P. Taylor (1906 - 1990) Berkley Publishing Group. 1972. P. 129

nation mourn for all it had lost, it made Australia one. It united us. During the war, indigenous Australians became a part of the nation, fighting beside non-indigenous soldiers. With the mourning, there was also pride, accomplishment and friendship. Despite the futility of the 1916 battles, we need to commemorate them, not for the losses, but for what we can learn from ordinary men and women in extraordinary situations.

'On all sides they were the heroes of that war; not the generals and the politicians but the soldiers and sailors and nurses – those who taught us to endure hardship, to show courage, to be bold as well as resilient, to believe in ourselves, to stick together'.³⁰

We need to make the most of what they fought for and cherish what they died to give us. Remembering the futility of this war empowers us to strive for world peace.

World War One, aptly described as *'a mad, brutal, awful struggle'*,³¹ was a far cry from the 'big adventure' many Australian men hoped for. With a 64.8% casualty rate of those who enlisted, Australia suffering was amongst the highest.³² Progress was measured not in miles made but by the lives lost.³³ In 1916 no side made significant headway other than participating in an indescribable battle. Poor planning, insufficient resources and lack of experienced men and leaders caused many battles to spiral out of control with devastating consequences. We need to remember what the Anzacs died for, and always strive for peace. We remember them best by the way we treat and look out for others, following their example. Finally, we must persevere when things look their worst. The brave way the Australians fought in 1916 are an example of how we should live our own lives today.

³⁰ Prime minister, The Hon.P.J. Keating MP Remembrance Day Speech - 1993 Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/talks-speeches/keating-remembrance-day-1993/>

³¹ Prime minister, The Hon.P.J. Keating MP Remembrance Day Speech - 1993 Australian War Memorial <https://www.awm.gov.au/talks-speeches/keating-remembrance-day-1993/>

³² <https://www.awm.gov.au/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1/>

³³ listening recording

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