8.7 The Western Front

After Gallipoli, the Anzacs returned to Egypt to be joined by fresh troops. The Light Horse remained in the Middle East along with Australians serving in the Imperial Camel Corps and the Australian Flying Corps. For the remainder of the war, these soldiers took part in desert warfare against Turkish forces. Most Australian troops left for France in 1916, where for three years they experienced the horrors and savagery of the war on the Western Front.

Fromelles and Pozières

On 1 July 1916, the First Battle of the Somme began. The British and French attack on the Somme was intended to draw German troops away from their massive attack on French positions at Verdun. On that first day of the Somme offensive, the British army suffered the worst day in its history with 57 470 casualties (troops killed or wounded).

The Australian 5th Division suffered over 5000 casualties on 19 July in a feint at Fromelles, north of the Somme, which was meant to divert German reserve troops. On the Somme, the AIF suffered almost 23 000 casualties taking and holding the town of Pozières in a battle that began on 23 July. For seven weeks Australian soldiers were blown apart or buried alive as they fought to hold the captured town under a German artillery bombardment that pounded Pozières into a wasteland of rubble.

When the Battle of the Somme ended as the autumn rains filled the trenches, neither side had been able to break the stalemate. Nothing had been gained but Germany had lost 450 000 men, France 200 000 and Britain 420 000.

Source 1

Major W. G. M. Claridge, writing from hospital after the Battle of Pozières, quoted in Bill Gammage, The Broken Years, 1975, p. 164

... God knows what we went through, was Hell itself. We just had to grit our teeth and go ahead and do our job. I am not going to tell a lie and say I wasn’t afraid because I was and who wouldn’t be with Death grinning at you from all round and hellish 5.9 shells shrieking through the air and shrapnel dealing death all round. I don’t know how I stood it for so long without breaking.

Bullecourt and Ypres

The spring offensive of 1917 followed the coldest winter in forty years. In April the United States of America joined the war on the Allied side, although it would be many months before its troops would be ready to play a role. The Germans had pulled back to the strongly fortified Hindenburg Line and most soldiers on both sides were war-weary with little enthusiasm left for fighting.

In April, Australians were sent to attack the German trenches near Bullecourt but the tanks that were meant to spearhead the attack broke down, the Australians were struck by a misdirected British artillery barrage as well as German counter-attacks, and the attacking force suffered 80 per cent casualties. Despite this, in May the Australians captured and held Bullecourt. In Belgium in September and October, the AIF suffered 38 000 casualties in the terrible Third Battle of Ypres, in which each side lost about half a million men.

Victory in 1918

In 1918 the end of fighting on the Eastern Front enabled Germany to move many more troops to the Western Front. In March, the Germans threw everything they
This painting depicts an attack, during the Third Battle of Ypres, in which Australian troops were trying to capture a German pillbox, a fortified concrete blockhouse with machine guns firing from loopholes. Pillboxes could be taken only by infantry attacking closely behind their own artillery barrage.

had into a last offensive aimed at gaining victory before US troops could arrive in sufficient numbers to make a German victory impossible. Australians played a key role in turning back this offensive through their fierce resistance at the French village of Villers-Bretonneux. Then, in July, Australians made the first large Allied attack of 1918. The AIF fought its last battles in October and when the fighting was ended with the Armistice of 11 November 1918 it was recognised that they had achieved more than any other British Empire troops and had suffered more casualties in proportion to their numbers.

The human cost

Of the 417 000 men who enlisted in the AIF, about 324 000 served overseas and approximately 295 000 of these served on the Western Front. Nearly 65 per cent became casualties and around 60 000 Australians died on active service. It was a terrible sacrifice for a young nation.

EXPLANATION AND INTERPRETATION

1. Use Source 2 and information in this spread to list some of the main battles in which the AIF fought on the Western Front.

2. Outline some of the reasons for high Australian casualties at Pozières and Bullecourt.

3. Look back at the paragraph headed 'The human cost'.
   a. Calculate the approximate number of Australian casualties in World War I.
   b. What impact do you think such losses would have had on a country of less than five million people?

ANALYSIS AND USE OF SOURCES

4. In Source 1, Major Claridge describes the Battle of Pozières as ‘Hell itself’.
   a. Describe the features of this battle that would justify that description.
   b. How reliable do you think this source would be? Give the reasons for your answer.

PERSPECTIVES AND INTERPRETATIONS

5. Look closely at Source 3 and imagine that you are one of the survivors of this attack. Write a letter to your family in which you describe what happened and your own feelings during the fighting.