THE Simpson PRIZE

A COMPETITION FOR YEAR 9 AND 10 STUDENTS

2017 Winner
Tasmania

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"The experience of Australian soldiers on the Western Front in 1916 has been largely overlooked in accounts of the First World War."

To what extent would you argue that battles such as Fromelles and Pozières should feature more prominently in accounts of the First World War?
It has been engraved into our national identity to commemorate the sacrifice of those who have participated in conflict, but perhaps one of the greatest tragedies of how we remember World War 1 is that details of battles on the Western Front have eluded the Australian public. Gallipoli, ANZAC Cove and Lone Pine usually dominate the national conversation on ANZAC Day, but the Western Front deserves greater recognition. The loss of a loved one on the Western Front is not an uncommon story, with approximately 45,000 Australian’s being killed. The Australian soldiers faced a monumental struggle in France and Belgium, with an immense death toll and unspeakable conditions. It is not only the conditions that were faced that justify the need for a more prominent commemoration of the battles on the Western Front, but they are also very important in the formation of the ANZAC spirit. When Australians think of the ANZACs, we think of tremendous courage, mateship and heroism, qualities that were displayed in abundance on the Western Front, especially at Fromelles and Pozieres. By preserving the legacy of those who served at Pozieres and Fromelles we can remember the lessons they taught us and strive for the qualities they demonstrated.

World War 1 began as a result of lingering international tension and was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the Austrian heir. Australian men from all over the country volunteered to be part of this great adventure and to represent King and Country. The landing at ANZAC Cove and assaults at Gallipoli are a very important aspect of the Australian Imperial Force’s involvement in World War 1 and a great deal of casualties ensued. Private Sidney Stanfield believes that despite their importance, “by lionising Gallipoli…they do overlook the severity of fighting and the extent of suffering on the Western Front.” While these conflicts attract greater attention in todays society, the fighting at The Western Front led to notably more Australian deaths and therefore should be thought of with the same level of significance. 5,482 were killed in action at Gallipoli between April 1915 and January 1916, a figure largely overshadowed by the 9,186 killed in action on the Western Front between July and November 1916. Gallipoli may have marked the beginning of a very important chapter in Australian history, but it did not possess the extremities of the fighting and losses that were seen on the Western Front.

On the 19th and 20th of July 1916, the Australian troops made their first impressions on the Western Front. The overnight tragedy of Fromelles resulted in 5,533 Australian casualties and is remembered as "the worst 24 hours in Australia's entire history". It was a failed attempt to distract and deceive German forces, and by 8am on the 20th the Australians were forced to withdraw after intense shell fire and a vast amount of deaths. Corporal Hugh Knyvett described the scene at Fromelles, stating that;

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“The sight of our trenches that next morning is burned into my brain. Here and there a man could stand upright, but in most places if you did not wish to be exposed to a sniper’s bullet you had to progress on hands and knees. 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.”

Pozieres was an area of great military importance during World War 1, considered by General Sir Henry Rawlinson as “the key to the area.” 7 The battle took place from July 23rd to August 7th and saw the Australians working to destroy Germany’s manpower. The soldiers of Pozieres were described as being; ... like men who had been in hell. Almost without exception each man looked drawn and haggard, and so dazed that they appeared to be walking in a dream, and their eyes looked glassy and starey. 8

One in eight Australian soldiers who fought in World War 1 were killed during the six week campaign at Pozieres. 9 Those who did survive were likely to be effected psychologically by what they saw at Pozieres, with July and August 1916 seeing a large number of soldiers ‘wounded’ by shell shock. A total of 386 men were effected by this mental injury in these months 10. It is difficult to imagine what was seen on the battlefields in France. Some men were blown to pieces, others buried by the shellfire, some not to be seen again until many years later.

For Private Russell Bosisto, this was to be his fate. Bosisto came from a close and loving family in South Australia and wrote to them weekly during the war. He survived Gallipoli, but he was to send his final letter at Pozieres. He was killed by a shell on August 4th, 1916 and his body was not recovered. Private Bosisto had no marked resting place and his family was left wondering for decades what had happened to him. There was no resolution to this tragic tale until 1998, when a French farmer found the Private’s remains while plowing near the Pozieres windmill. In July of the same year, Private Bosisto was finally laid to rest in a named grave during a ceremony watched on by his two weeping nieces. His immediate family never got the closure of knowing his fate or if he would ever return, their only son had gone and there was no grave for them to visit and remember him. This is just one of the stories of family being left hoping and hopeless due to the fighting on the Western Front. A story like this surely deserves to be looked upon and commemorated with significance.

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The family of Private Russell Bosisto experienced a feeling all too common to those involved with men serving on the Western Front. This grief was not only felt at home, but on the front as well. A member of the Australian Army Nursing Service, Sister Alice Ross King was left feeling distraught after her intended, Lieutenant Harry Lowry Moffitt of the 53rd Battalion, was killed at Fromelles. She detailed her emotions relating to his death in her diary, stating that:

*I expect I must pick up life again and go on. I do not know how to face the lifeless future though. I feel Harry’s presence constantly with me and my love is growing stronger and deeper ever since his death. I cannot really believe the news yet and each day I long for a letter telling me he is only wounded. How am I to bear life?*

As of 2015, the body of Lieutenant Moffitt still has not been identified. It is almost unimaginable the pain she must have felt losing her beloved in such a horrific way. Private Bosisto and Lieutenant Moffitt are just two of the 45,000 killed on the Western Front. Often we are presented with statistics that represent those killed during conflict and we become desensitised to this cruelty. The incredible death toll at Fromelles and Pozieres is significant in many ways, especially because of the immense sadness of those who were left grieving for them. It is only when we begin to learn about the individuals who served on the Western Front that we can comprehend that each one had their own story.

Victorian Lance Corporal Albert Jacka is remembered as a man with outstanding ANZAC spirit. At Pozieres, Jacka was responsible for returning Australian soldiers captured by Germans and was awarded the Military Cross. Charles Bean described his efforts as; “the most dramatic and effective act of an individual in the history of the AIF”\(^\text{13}\). Because of Jacka’s courage and leadership, the 14th Battalion became widely known as “Jacka’s Mob”. Historian and Sergeant, Edgar J. Rule, said that “the 14th Battalion never ceased to be thrilled when we heard ourselves referred to in the estaminet [French public house] or by passing units on the march as ‘some of Jacka’s mob’”.\(^\text{14}\) Jacka showed characteristics paramount to the ANZAC spirit in his bravery and sacrifice. A story like his is a true representation of what it means to be Australian. If we overlook the Western Front in our accounts of World War 1, we will be neglecting stories such as this that give us an insight into what it meant to be an ANZAC and an Australian.

It is important when reflecting on battles, such as the Western Front, that we don’t only remember the brutality, but understand the lessons that can be learnt. The Australian soldiers faced horrific conditions and suffered tremendously at Fromelles and Pozieres, but out of these tales of sacrifice and devastation we can find many characteristics attributed to the ANZAC spirit. Every year on ANZAC Day we hear stories of mateship, courage and of servicemen and women putting others needs above their own. These characteristics are now associated with and define the ANZACs. Captain Albert Jacka is just one example of someone who


showed these iconic characteristics on the Western Front. The ANZAC spirit is something which is now seen to be a very important aspect of Australian culture. The importance of these attributes to the ANZAC identity is another example of why we should be remembering the Western Front with more prominence.

On the passing of their centenary, I hope that Fromelles and Pozieres attract greater attention. We must remember what we lost on the Western Front and the sacrifice of some of the most courageous ANZACs. Private Russell Bosisto, Sister Alice Ross King, Lieutenant Harry Lowry Moffitt and Lance Corporal Albert Jacka’s stories are not to be forgotten as they taught us so much about what was lost on the Western Front and the ANZAC spirit. The acts of heroism, the vast death toll and the battle’s significance in the formation of the ANZAC legend justify why we should be speaking of the Western Front, especially Fromelles and Pozieres, with greater significance.

Lest We Forget.
References:


Pedersen, P. *ANZACs on the Western Front*. John Wiley & Sons Australia, Queensland, (2012).


