THE Simpson PRIZE
A COMPETITION FOR YEAR 9 AND 10 STUDENTS

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“The experience of Australian soldiers on the Western Front in 1916 has been largely overlooked in accounts of World War One.”

To what extent would you argue that battles such as Fromelles and Pozières should feature more prominently in accounts of World War One?

Australians pride themselves on their values of mateship, heroism and ingenuity that are foundational in their national identity; these national characteristics having been described in years as being born in efforts in the First World War. However, Australian accounts, written, verbal or visual, of the First World War have overlooked and failed to recognise the sacrifice and experiences of Australian soldiers on the Western Front and their importance to Australian identity; this can be contributed to a lack of, specifically, Australian recognition. As a country, Australia has neglected the experiences of Australian soldiers on the Western Front in 1916, which deserve full recognition in national memory.

At the heart of Australian national identity lies the Anzac image; an image projected by Australian accounts that glorifies its countrymen and the events that occurred in Australia’s first war effort at Gallipoli. This glorified and publicised portrayal of the Gallipoli campaign, in consequence, overshadows Australia’s efforts on the Western Front.

The Gallipoli campaign has been described as the place where ‘the feeling of nationhood began’\(^1\), where the often discussed values of ‘mateship, heroism and ingenuity’\(^2\) in Australia’s national identity were born. The Gallipoli campaign acted as one of the first defining steps for the young country eager to solidify itself as a nation, however, this first action has been accounted by media and accounts in a way that heightens Gallipoli, presenting Gallipoli as Australia’s single ‘identity, achievement and existence’\(^3\) in the war.

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\(^1\) Stephens, T. (2009) The Last Anzacs, Fremantle Press, Western Australia, p 120
Dr Peter Stanley wrote of how the ‘massive interest’\(^4\) in Gallipoli can be credited to the ‘result of careful marketing’\(^5\) that has had an influence on its more profound impact. Heroic folk tales such as Simpson and his Donkey arose out of the Gallipoli legend but have been accounted falsely, as in fact, Simpson Kirkpatrick was an Englishman who is debated to ‘not have saved any lives’\(^6\). Other cases where media has depicted Gallipoli in false positive terms was the description in the Sydney Morning Herald of how ‘the first stage of the Gallipoli campaign had been carried out with a degree of rapidity and success hardly hoped for’\(^7\). However, the Australians arrival to Gallipoli was unsuccessful, as they were bombarded by 80 Turkish snipers on their arrival. These ‘romantic notions of military life’\(^8\), as described through media, depict the events at Gallipoli as a heightened legend. The Australians efforts in Gallipoli rightly deserve recognition, but the glorification and attention given to the Gallipoli campaign, the naming of the actions that took part on those cliffs as where Australia’s ‘nationhood began’\(^9\), without giving the same recognition to the soldiers on the Western Front, without crediting them also with being where national identity began, is overlooking their important role in Australia’s national identity and their involvement in the war. Whether this one-sided credit to our soldiers is intentional or not, it neglects Australia’s importance on the Western Front, to the war and to national identity; but instead should recognise Australia’s entire involvement in World War One as integral to national identity.

The arrival of the Australian soldiers on the Western Front in 1916 heralded these men’s entrance to the war’s centre battle stage; a place in which the brutal realities of war should be ever remembered in Australian militarism and history. ‘Gallipoli . . . was a picnic,’\(^10\) noted Fred Kelly of the 1st Battalion Reinforcements, when illustrating the contrast between his experience at Gallipoli and on the Western Front. He was one of many Australian men to


have fought at Fromelles, 19th July 1916, where the ill-planned diversion, intended to attract German troops from the Somme Offensive, took place. This attack inevitably failed with 5,333 casualties in the 5th Australian division within 27 hours. These casualties equal to Australian casualties in the Boer War, Korean War and Vietnam War put together. According to historian Ross McMullin, Fromelles was 'the worst 24 hours in Australian history . . . Not the worst in Australian military history, the worst 24 hours in Australia's entire history.'\(^{11}\) Fromelles was predicted to be 'a bloody holocaust'\(^{12}\), and so it inevitably proved to be due to inexperienced soldiers, rushed preparations and Germans taking high ground. Lieutenant Dave Doyle described Fromelles to be the 'most awful scene of slaughter imaginable'\(^{13}\).

Four days after the battle at Fromelles, the Australians were ordered to attack the town of Pozieres. The battle took place from the 23rd July to 5th August, resulting in 24,140 casualties on the Australian force; 6,741 of these being deaths; comparable to the 8,709 deaths that occurred during the eight month Gallipoli campaign. Australia's Official Historian witnessed the battle at Pozieres; a place 'more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth'\(^{14}\).

“The winter was so cold that I felt like crying . . . I’d never felt like it before, not even under shell fire . . .”\(^{15}\), the 1916 winter proved to be the ‘worst in living memory’\(^{16}\), causing the men not only to battle the enemy, but battle the uncontrollable winter. The Western Front was described as a ‘dark, mildewed hole in the earth’\(^{17}\) where continuous frost and snow rained for months. Casualties caused by the winter were almost equal to those caused in battle with 20,000 Australian soldiers being evacuated from the Front due to the extremity

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\(^{11}\) Ross McMullin (date unknown) Wartime Issue 36 – Disaster at Fromelles, retrieved 27/05/16 from https://www.awm.gov.au/wartime/36/article/
\(^{13}\) McMullin, R. (2002) Pompey Elliott, Melbourne
\(^{14}\) C.E.W. Bean (1983) Anzac to Amiens, Australian War Memorial, Canberra
\(^{16}\) Australian War Memorial (date unknown) Life in the Trenches, retrieved 29/10/16 from https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/anzac-voices/life-trenches/
\(^{17}\) Australian War Memorial (date unknown) Life in the Trenches, retrieved 29/10/16 from https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/anzac-voices/life-trenches/
of the conditions. The mud was impassable, in consequence, cases of soldiers being buried alive were reported\(^\text{18}\).

The realities of war had become clearer on the Western Front; no longer was war a novel, unaccustomed idea, the excitement of war had dissolved upon the men. The strain of these battles, namely Fromelles and Pozieres, differed from the stories and symbol of courage present at Gallipoli. The greater number of casualties, fighting, horror and loss they were witness to on the Western Front during 1916 brought great horror and long-lasting impacts. The Western Front was witness to the reality that the true horrors of war can be a match for the triumph of courage; ‘the ordeal at Pozieres, both physical and mental, was more than men could put up with for very long. Courage made little difference, what each man needed was endurance and luck.’\(^\text{19}\) The Western Front also witnessed how the events and battles that took place on the Western Front tested the courageous Australian soldier stigma; Sergeant Harry Preston writes ‘. . . a man alongside of me was crying like a child and saying ‘we will never get out of this!’’, showcasing the great mental tests on the Western Front.

The battles that took place on the Western Front were larger in their destruction in every way. The sacrifice and loss of lives to ill-fated, poorly planned battles, to cold and harsh conditions and the loss of the ideals and state of boyhood to the horrific revelations of war make the Australians’ effort on the Western Front both immense and devastating. This destruction and devastation that took place deserves full recognition, yet, this overwhelming sacrifice remains neglected in Australian history. The devastation endured by Australians on the Western Front, without deserved recognition, is forgetting important sacrifices and devastation integral to Australian history and memory.

Remembrance of one’s past is a foundation in Australian identity, however, Australians have failed to recognise their own past; recognition of Australia’s Western Front war efforts being appreciated to a greater extent in other nations. ‘I realise, dear Australian friends . . . the

\(^{18}\) Australian War Memorial (date unknown) Life in the Trenches, retrieved 29/10/16 from https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/anzac-voices/life-trenches/

\(^{19}\) Australian War Memorial (26/05/16) Australians on the Western Front 1916 – 100 years ago, retrieved 25/07/16 from https://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2016/05/26/australians-western-front-1916-100-years-ago/
sacrifice of your fathers and grandfathers . . . has forged indestructible links between our two communities,’ noted Fernand Demilly when describing the importance of the Australian effort on the Western Front to the people of France. The full extent of French recognition is shown through towns such as Villers-Bretonneux, where the main memorial to Australians killed on the Western Front is located. The traditions at the Victorian school in Villers-Bretonneux are overwhelming in their continual remembrance to Australia. A large sign reading ‘Never Let Us Forget Australia’ is written, images of Australian wildlife are present, an Australian flag flies at the town hall and the main street is named Rue de Melbourne. These are only tangible characteristics of the town’s appreciation for Australia’s efforts; the inscriptions and reminders of Australia’s efforts are a part of their history and a history they continue recognise and commemorate, which is unlike any town or city within Australia. No inscriptions or daily traditions such as those at Villers-Bretonneux are displayed to such a degree in Australia, not even when those on the Western Front were Australia’s own countrymen. Lack of Australian recognition was also evident in 1938 when King George VI who was present at the opening of the memorial at Villers-Bretonneux was the one to speak of the ‘suffering and sacrifice on the battlefields’ and of the ‘nation’s involvement’ in the Great War. Not the Prime Minister at the time, who was absent, nor the Deputy Prime Minister spoke of Australia’s sacrifice; again showing commemoration and recognition from other nations of Australia’s efforts on the Western Front, and lack of Australian appreciation and recognition.

The loss and sacrifice Australian soldiers on the Western Front is one vital to Australian memory, history and identity, yet, overlooked to the greatest degree by Australians. Whether this negligence be intentional or not, the glorification and publicised image that our nationhood began at Gallipoli, and the lack of Australian recognition of its own soldiers

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20 France in Australia (30/05/16) The Somme, a must for visiting Australians, retrieved 05/11/16 from http://www.ambafrance-au.org/The-Somme-a-must-for-visiting
on the Western Front contribute to the soldiers’ experiences, throughout a devastating year at war, being overlooked. This needs to change. Australia needs to take greater recognition and responsibility for its past and history, because without giving deserved recognition to the soldiers who fought on the Western Front in 1916, Australia loses an important piece of history detrimental to the future identity of Australia and its individuals, as what we know of our past shapes our future.

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