



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 students

2018 Winner
Queensland

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The outbreak of the Great War saw many Australian men desperate to enlist, fuelled by a romantic perception of life as a soldier.¹ This glorified image was soon forgotten however, when the new Anzacs experienced their first conflicts and discovered the horrendous reality of war. Although all four years of the Great War were characterised by hardship for the young nation, none brought quite so much suffering to Australia and its people as 1917. Prolific casualties and horrific fighting conditions debilitated troops on the front line, while those left at home were devastated by the deaths of loved ones and divided by the conscription debate. Furthermore, by the end of 1917, the Allied forces had achieved no significant progress to show for the sacrifice of Australian soldiers. The extreme tragedy and futility of the year's military endeavours has caused 1917 to be regarded as the worst year of the Great War for Australia and Australians.

The immense loss of Australian life experienced during the Great War was heightened during 1917. This period saw more members of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) killed than in any other year of the war, as of the 58,160 Australians who died throughout the Great War, 21,736 were killed in 1917 (See Appendix 1).² Battles such as Passchendaele and Bullecourt made great contributions to this total, but are also remembered for the appalling conditions in which they were fought. During the battle of Passchendaele, in which 38,000 Australians became casualties,³ persistent rain turned the ground 'into a quagmire', hindering transport and bogging artillery.⁴ Daryl Lindsay's cartoon 'Optimism' (See Appendix 2), captures the added burden and psychological strain experienced by the soldiers in such miserable conditions.⁵ The battles of Bullecourt were also characterized for Australians by heavy losses and gruesome fighting conditions. So much so, that in his memoir of the Great War, Sergeant Walter Downing described the French town as the place that "... represents for Australians a greater sum of sorrow and honour than any other place in the world".⁶ The two days over which these battles were fought saw approximately 10,670 Australians killed, wounded or taken prisoner.⁷ The fighting itself was a gruesome affair. No cover was provided for the infantry, who were to advance some 1,000 yards across ground that was "as flat as a billiard table".⁸ These soldiers provided easy targets for German gunners, who could "within a few seconds, [reduce] one section of 15 men ... to just three".⁹ Although such horrific scenes are not unique to the battles of 1917, the enormous number of Australians who experienced them during this year is an unprecedented tragedy worthy of recognition.

¹ M. Caulfield, *The Unknown Anzacs*, Hachette Australia, Sydney, 2013, p. 3.

² A.G. Butler, ed., *The Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914-1918*, Australian War Memorial, Melbourne, vol. III, 1943, p. 900, cited in 'The Simpson Prize 2018', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 2 September 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson-prize>

³ C. Tibbitts, 'Passchendaele: an almost universal experience', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 6 October 2007, viewed on 3 October 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/passchendaele-an-almost-universal-experience>

⁴ G. Harper, *Massacre at Passchendaele*, Harper Collins, Auckland, 2000, p. 51.

⁵ D. Lindsay, *Optimism*, Art, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1917, cited in 'The Simpson Prize 2018', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 2 September 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson-prize>

⁶ P. McLady, 'Australian lives lost during Bullecourt', in *Stanthorpe Border Post*, 28 March 2017, viewed on 21 October 2017, <http://www.pressreader.com/australia/stanthorpe-border-post/20170328/282007557224826>

⁷ D Coombes, *A Greater Sum of Sorrow The Battles of Bullecourt*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport, 2016, pp. 186, 367.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 142.

⁹ *ibid.*, p. 147.

Whilst the soldiers suffered foremost from the perilous fighting and its tragic outcomes, these events also had considerable effects on their friends and family at home. Relatives of the 21,736 Australians killed in 1917 experienced emotional turmoil and financial hardship following their loved one's death, and women often had to assume burdens that were previously carried by men.¹⁰ While some lucky soldiers did return to their families, many were left disabled or shell-shocked. This not only increased pressure on families who had to care for them, but also caused distress to those who witnessed often disturbing behavioural changes. In addition to this grief, the conscription debate that isolated many members of society peaked in 1917. Enlistment had plummeted, with rates falling from 35,000 in July 1915 to consistently less than 5,000 each month throughout 1917 (See Appendix 3)¹¹, despite a government statement that 7,000 new recruits would be required each month to maintain the Australian divisions serving at the time.¹² A second referendum was therefore organised, to decide whether to introduce conscription in Australia. Campaigners exploited the guilt of the public to promote their conflicting viewpoints; leaflets such as 'The Blood Vote' (See Appendix 4)¹³ were used to promote the 'No' campaign, while 'A Mother's Lament' (See Appendix 5)¹⁴ garnered 'Yes' votes through sympathy for suffering soldiers and fear of the enemy. The resulting controversy quickly escalated, causing public discontent, bitterness and conflict. Australian historian Joan Beaumont describes the divisions which threatened social cohesion:

Despite the rhetoric of democracy, those with dissenting views were demonised ... it was not a rational debate about the military need for conscription, but a deeply personalised contest of values and ideology. Paranoia and suspicion invaded public discourse, eroding the trust that is central to civil society and bringing the country ... to the point of serious civil violence.¹⁵

Such social instability and distrust coupled with the grief of losing loved ones resulted in a year of increased adversity for those Australians left at home.

Compounding the effects of such immense loss of life in 1917 was the decided lack of strategic advancement. This period saw the most Australian casualties of the war, but also saw the least Allied progress made. Although minor victories were achieved, none gave the Allies any significant advantage over their enemies. One such victory was the capture of Gaza on the 26th of March, after which a shortage of water prompted a withdrawal. Ottoman reinforcements rendered re-entering the battle futile, so the Allies were forced to abandon the territory they had

¹⁰ W. Frew, '100 years on: How the bloody battle of Bullecourt changed the Leane family', in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 April 2017, viewed on 31 October 2017, <http://www.smh.com.au/nsw/100-years-on-how-the-bloody-battle-of-bullecourt-changed-the-leane-family-20170405-gve47p.html>

¹¹ Adapted from Ernest Scott, *Australia during the War*, vol. XI, 1936, pp. 871-72, in C.E.W. Bean, ed., *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 12 vols, 1921-36, cited in 'The Simpson Prize 2018', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 30 September 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson-prize>

¹² J. Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2013, p. 374.

¹³ E. Dempsey, C. Marquet & W. Winspear, *The Blood Vote*, Leaflet Collection 2/1/1, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1917, cited in 'The Simpson Prize 2018', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 2 September 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson-prize>

¹⁴ F. Morris, *A Mother's Lament*, Leaflet Collection 2/1/1, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1917, cited in 'The Simpson Prize 2018', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 2 September 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson-prize>

¹⁵ Beaumont, op. cit., pp. 378-379.

fought so hard to gain.¹⁶ The Messines offensive is another example. Despite being arguably the best planned and most successful Allied operation of 1917, “It is rarely acknowledged how little [this offensive] actually achieved.”¹⁷ British revisionist historian A.J.P. Taylor corroborates this view in his account of the Great War:

It was a remarkable success, and a beautiful exercise in siege warfare. But it had disquieting aspects. Two years of preparation and a million pounds of explosive had advanced the British front at most two miles. How long would it take at this rate to get to Berlin?¹⁸

Although the value of such victories is questionable, they are incomparable to two of the most devastating campaigns ever seen in Australia’s history. The offensives at Bullecourt and Passchendaele were fought in horrific conditions, incurred immense casualties and ultimately resulted in Allied failure. It was not only the formidability of opposing forces that led to this defeat, but incompetent, and uncompromising leadership. During the battles for Bullecourt, the British 5th Army, including four divisions of I Anzac Corps, was commanded by General Hubert Gough,¹⁹ of whom “Heavy losses and complete failure [were] very typical.”²⁰ True to this reputation, Gough’s planning was utterly flawed. Strong and prepared German defences, inadequate artillery and an insistence on the use of unreliable and cumbersome tanks had the offensive doomed before it even began.²¹ As the British official historian said of the battle, “In the whole course of the War few attacks were ever carried out in such disadvantageous circumstances against such defenses.”²² The tanks failed, leaving troops completely exposed and prompting their withdrawal, but not before over 3,000 were slaughtered.²³ Even after this disaster, Gough decided to try again to take the Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt. Although this battle was eventually successful, some 4,000 more Australians were killed for the sake of one kilometre of ground.²⁴ Australian official historian Charles Bean describes the attitudes of Australian troops to this rash leadership: “Bullecourt, more than any other battle, shook the confidence of Australian soldiers in the capacity of the British command; the errors ... were obvious to almost anyone.”²⁵ This irresponsible leadership was also very much embodied in the Passchendaele offensive, under the command of Douglas Haig. Although horrendous conditions saw “the battle ended with troops almost at their starting line”²⁶ in the first offensive

¹⁶ ‘Battles of Gaza’, in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 5 October 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E136>

¹⁷ Beaumont, op. cit., p. 324.

¹⁸ A.J.P. Taylor, *The First World War: An Illustrated History*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 1963, p. 175, cited in J. Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, 2013, p. 324.

¹⁹ C. Tibbitts, ‘The Battles for Bullecourt’, in *The Australian War Memorial*, 3 April 2007, viewed on 4 October 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-battles-for-bullecourt>

²⁰ Coombes, op. cit., p. 61.

²¹ *ibid.*, p. 102.

²² Beaumont, op. cit., p. 291

²³ C. Miranda, ‘Battle of Bullecourt: Search to find missing tanks that led to Digger Disaster’, in *news.com.au*, 3 September 2016, viewed on 4 October 2017, <http://www.news.com.au/technology/science/archaeology/battle-of-bullecourt-search-to-find-missing-tanks-that-led-to-digger-disaster/news-story/cc433c89ca3668a1f89b95035c118415>

²⁴ C. Tibbitts, ‘The Battles for Bullecourt’, in *The Australian War Memorial*, 3 April 2007, viewed on 5 October 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-battles-for-bullecourt>

²⁵ C.E.W. Bean, 1917, cited in ‘Bullecourt: Stalemate in the Trenches’, in *AWM London*, viewed on 10 October 2017, <http://www.awmlondon.gov.au/battles/bullecourt>

²⁶ Beaumont, op. cit., p. 355.

on 9 October, Haig ordered a second to be made on the 12th.²⁷ This resulted in another costly failure, with an Australian fatality rate of 62% and little gained.²⁸ These and other failed campaigns of 1917 resulted in a great loss of Australian lives, and brought the Allies no closer to their final goal. It has even been said that, “as the year closed the general strategic situation seemed worse than before.”²⁹ The incompetent leadership displayed by Gough, Haig and other commanders, and their seemingly careless use of troops supplied by the AIF in the face of hapless circumstance arguably resulted in thousands of Australian Diggers losing their lives in vain.

1917 was, for Australians, the epitome of the suffering caused by the Great War. Life for those at home worsened as the conscription debate divided neighbours and an increase in casualties devastated families. Troops on the front line experienced during this year a hell more intense than in any other, being killed at unprecedented rates, in conditions comparable to the very worst in history. Yet for this massive sacrifice, the Allies had nothing to show by the end of 1917, as inept leadership managed to botch almost all significant offensives carried out during this year. Despite their courage and endurance, even the best efforts of Australian troops couldn't change the events that have caused 1917 to be regarded, by Australians, as the worst year of a terrible war.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 355.

²⁸ *ibid.*, p. 358.

²⁹ *ibid.*, pp. 389-390.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Source 1: Statistics

b) Table Showing Deaths in the A.I.F. Abroad

Year	From Battle Casualties	From Non-Battle Casualties	Total	Progressive Total
1914	-	14	14	14
1915	7,819	655	8,474	8,488
1916	12,823	873	13,696	22,184
1917	20,628	1,108	21,736	43,920
1918	12,553	1,687	14,240	58,160
1919	27	597	624	58,784
1920	-	6	6	58,790
Total	53,850	4,940	58,790	58,790

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Appendix 2

Source 5: Cartoon

Daryl Lindsay, *Optimism*, 1917.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

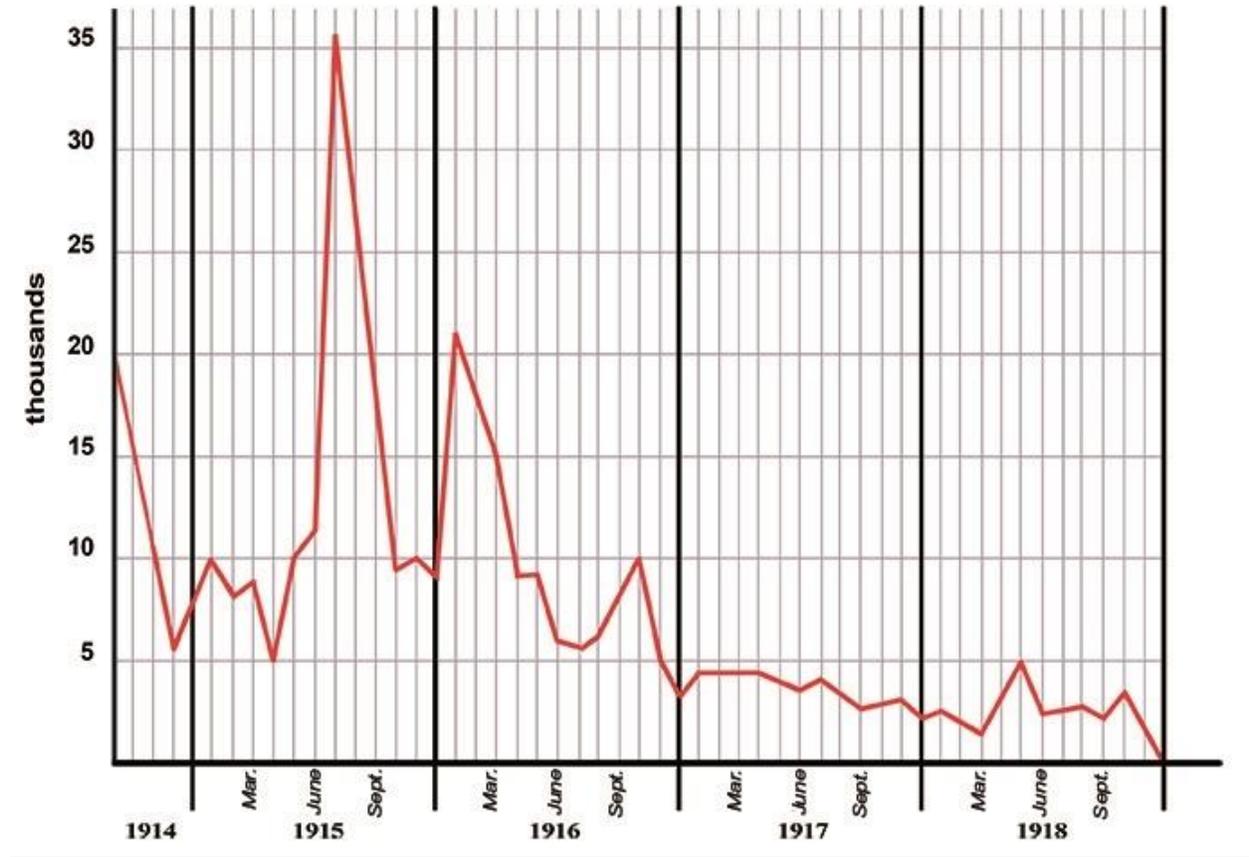
ART02948

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Appendix 3

Source 1: Statistics

a) Graph showing rates of Australian enlistment 1914-1918

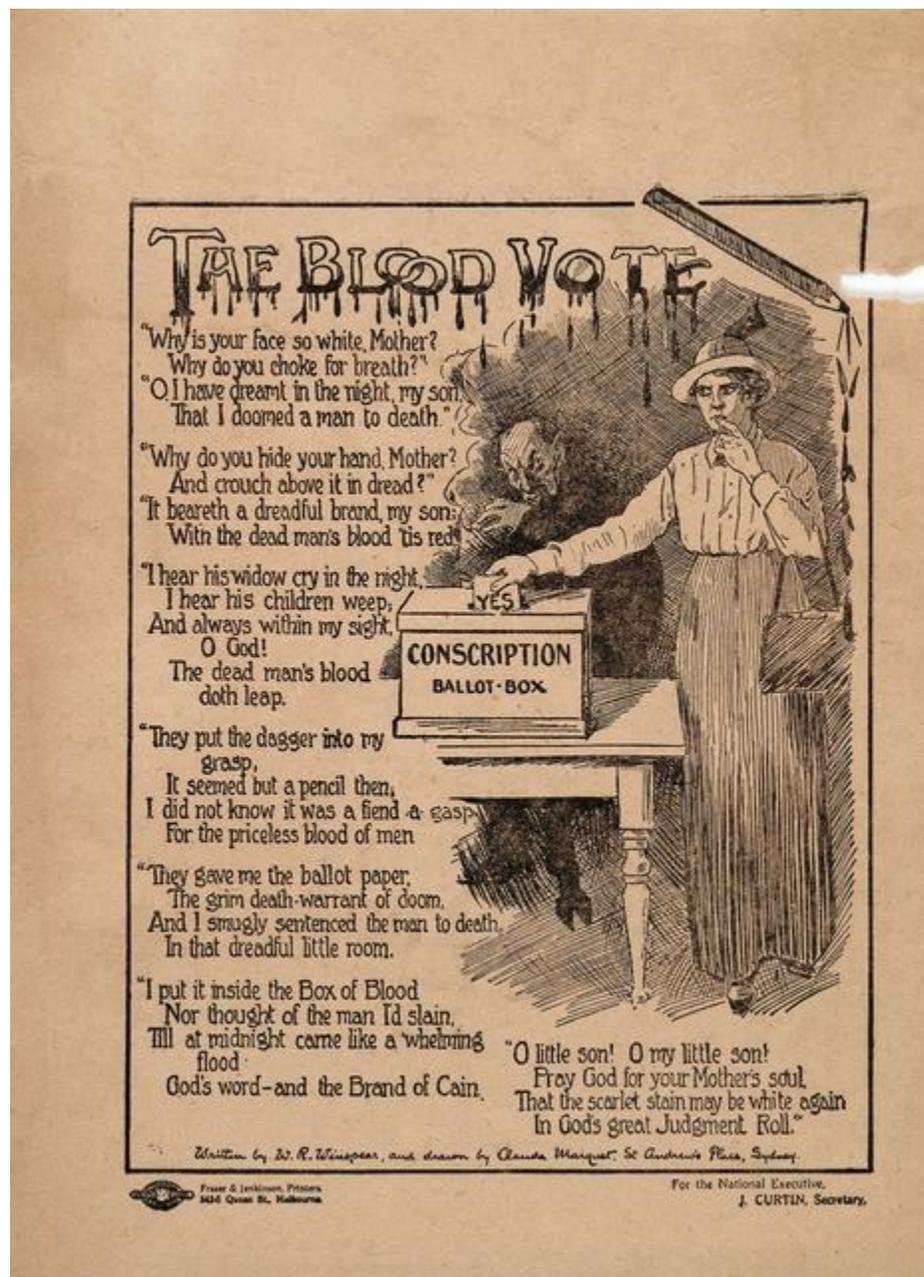


Adapted from Ernest Scott, *Australia during the War*, vol. XI, 1936, pp. 871-72, in C.E.W. Bean, ed., *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-18*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 12 vols, 1921-36, cited in 'The Simpson Prize 2018', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 2 September 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson-prize>

Appendix 4

Source 8: Leaflets

a) E.J. Dempsey, Claude Marquet & W.R. Winspear, *The Blood Vote*, 1917.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Dempsey, E, Marquet, C & Winspear, W, *The Blood Vote*, Leaflet Collection 2/1/1, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1917, cited in 'The Simpson Prize 2018', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 2 September 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson-prize>

Appendix 5

Source 8: Leaflets

b) Fred P. Morris, *A Mother's Lament*, 1917.



A MOTHER'S LAMENT.

I dreamed I saw a mother,
And her head was bowed in shame;
Her heart was wrung with anguish,
And her eyes had lost their flame.
Long brooded she in silence,
In her bitter, abject woe,
Then shrieked she in her hopeless grief:
"My God! I voted 'No.'"

I said, "Come, tell me, mother,
Of the burden on thy soul;
What is it that hath bowed thee
In this grief beyond control?"
Said she: "My eyes were blinded,
That the truth I did not know,
These hands of mine with blood are red—
My God! I voted 'No.'"

"Men called for reinforcement,
And I let them call in vain;
The word I should have spoken,
I can never speak again.
Fools whispered 'Life is sacred,'
And although I held it so,
I thought of only those at home—
My God! I voted 'No.'"

"I thought not of the mothers
Of three hundred thousand men,
Who bore the brunt of battle
For the curs I sheltered when
I strode up to the ballot
For the few my love to show,
And sacrificed these mothers' sons.
My God! I voted 'No.'"

"Should this fair land be blighted,
Should Australia meet her doom—
Befouled, outraged, like Belgium—
In the shadow, in the gloom?
Through all the years before me,
As in solemn file they go,
Burnt in my brain will be the stain:
My God! I voted 'No.'"

—FRED. P. MORRIS.

No. 28.

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AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Morris, F., *A Mother's Lament*, Leaflet Collection 2/1/1, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1917, cited in 'The Simpson Prize 2018', in *The Australian War Memorial*, 2017, viewed on 2 September 2017, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson-prize>