



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

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“How do lesser known stories from the Western Front expand our understanding on the Australian experience during the First World War?”

In 1914, Australia was involved in a conflict that the world had never witnessed before- The Great War, otherwise famously known as The War to End All Wars.¹ Men and women around the globe eagerly joined, promising their families that it would be ‘over by Christmas’.² Unfortunately, the conflict continued for years before the Treaty of Versailles was finally signed. Many soldiers were fortunate to return home, but others were not, their fighting place becoming their final resting place. Every year, Australians unite to commemorate the fallen, who gave their lives for a better tomorrow. However, it is frequently forgotten that beneath the stereotypical themes of heroism, endurance, mateship and success, there are lesser known stories that can teach us much more.³ Many stories of those who deserved to be glorified as heroes were lost, and those who are celebrated often have deeper stories below the surface. Over a century after the war, as we delve deeper, it is evident that these lesser known stories from the Western Front expand our understanding of the Australian experience during the First World War.

As the war was nearing its anticipated end, court martials were slowly on the rise. As the horrors of war multiplied, the disciplinary level that Australian soldiers were required to maintain began to drop. In 1918, rising tensions could no longer be tolerated for many Australians, and by October, the Australian monthly total for court martials surpassed 716 cases, the highest for the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) for the war.⁴ At the time, the Hundred Days Offensive, was raging on.⁵ This operation was a counterattack to the Spring Offensive that had occurred earlier in 1918, causing the first peak of increased court martials. With the planned coordination of the Allies, The Hundred Days Offensive successfully ended the First World War. Prior to the Western Front, the AIF had taken part in a turmoil of endless battles, including the unsuccessful Gallipoli campaign. Moreover, during the 33 months at the Western Front, more than 30 battles were fought.⁶ These include the Battle of Fromelles, which is ‘believed to be the greatest loss... in 24 hours during the entire First World War’.⁷ This was followed by the costly but successful Battle of Pozières, where Australians triumphantly managed to capture the Pozières village, the attack on Bullecourt, another disastrous battle with 10,000 men lost for the AIF and more.⁸ Such battles left soldiers with severe injuries and took a toll on the soldiers psychologically, often leaving them traumatized with shell shock.⁹ This ‘affected the military morale and discipline’ of soldiers.¹⁰ The accumulation of these factors could be a cause of the decreased discipline as seen in Source 7 from the AWM. As the AIF was a voluntary force, members saw themselves ‘as a civilian that had come to do a job...not...as a regular soldier that was... used to parade ground rigours and rules’.¹¹ Therefore, the peak of increased court martials reflect on the greatest period of operational stress for the Australians.¹² While members of the AIF who were court martialled at the Western Front are highly disapproved of,

¹ Milzarski, E., n.d. *Why WWI Was Once Called 'The War To End All Wars' - We Are The Mighty*. [online] We Are The Mighty. Available at: <<https://www.wearethemighty.com/mighty-history/war-to-end-all-wars/?rebelltitem=1#rebelltitem1>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

² Imperial War Museums. n.d. *Voices Of The First World War: Over By Christmas*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-over-by-christmas>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

³ Wheatley, R., n.d. *Teaching The Untold Stories Of World War I*. [online] The Conversation. Available at: <<https://theconversation.com/teaching-the-untold-stories-of-world-war-i-10576>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

⁴ Simpson Prize Source 7 *Court martial (book extract and graph)* Awm.gov.au. n.d. *The Simpson Prize 2021 | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

⁵ National WWI Museum and Memorial. n.d. *100 Days Offensive | National WWI Museum And Memorial*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/wwi/100days>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

⁶ Anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au. n.d. *Australia On The Western Front*. [online] Available at: <<https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/western-front/index.aspx>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

⁷ Awm.gov.au. n.d. *Battle Of Fromelles | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/fromelles#:~:text=Over%205%2C500%20Australians%20became%20casualties, tragic%20event%20in%20Australia's%20history.>>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

⁸ Awm.gov.au. n.d. *The Battles For Bullecourt | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-battles-for-bullecourt>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

⁹ World War 1 - Experiences on the Western Front. n.d. *Impact On Soldiers And Their Families*. [online] Available at: <<https://experiencesonthewesternfront.weebly.com/impact-on-soldiers-and-their-families.html>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

¹⁰ Encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net. n.d. *War Psychiatry And Shell Shock | International Encyclopedia Of The First World War (WW1)*. [online] Available at: <https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_psychiatry_and_shell_shock> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

¹¹ Following the Twenty-Second. n.d. *Discipline Within The AIF On The Western Front*. [online] Available at: <<https://anzac-22nd-battalion.com/discipline-within-the-aif-on-the-western-front/>> [Accessed 5 November 2020].

¹² Loc cit 4

people often overlook the fact that soldiers were also humans, yearning for a better life than the miserable situation they found themselves during the First World War.

The Australian War Records Section is another lesser known aspect of WW1. While war is almost always depicted with glorious soldiers patriotically fighting for their country, without this particular military unit, Australia would have had very limited knowledge of the war. The Australian War Records Section (AWRS) was established in London in May 1917, led by John Treolar, a young army officer at the time, under the incentive of Charles Bean, Australia's official war correspondent.¹³ The AWRS trophy store, the place where war souvenirs were initially collected was built in Peronne, France in 1918.¹⁴ As the relentless tragedy of loss and bloodshed continued, foundations of the present day Australian War Memorial were being laid. The AWRS initially began with just four staff members, with the task of collecting and organising documentary records of the Australian force.¹⁵ By the beginning of 1919, the employee force of the AWRS was over 600, both military and civilian, and the vision had expanded to collecting works of art, vehicles, weaponry and many other souvenired material.¹⁶ Treolar, being a soldier himself, assumed the challenge by distancing his emotions from his work and devoted the rest of his life to this work, becoming the Memorial's longest serving director.¹⁷ While Bean prompted the initiation of the AWRS and the Australian War Memorial because he felt 'that the records and 'relics' that reflected Australian achievements and sacrifice should be collected and shipped home for the Australian people', it was the combined effort of Bean's passion and Treolar's leadership that led to the immense analysis of the treasured collection of artefacts at the Memorial.¹⁸ As Treolar often said 'a good description transforms a piece of salvage into an interesting relic', which was why through him and his unit, stories of our men and women were explored through the artefacts.¹⁹ Although stories of the soldiers on the Western Front fascinate and play a huge part in the Australian experience, it is often forgotten that it is because of individuals like Charles Bean and John Treolar, unknown sides of the Australian experience on the Western Front are uncovered. Therefore, lesser known stories of many individuals which have been unpacked by the AWRS unit help us expand our understanding of the Australian experience.

Involvement of Indigenous soldiers at the Western Front is another lesser known story. Primarily think about the white soldiers' victories which are acknowledged. However, it is estimated that over 1,000 Indigenous men and women volunteered for the AIF during WW1.²⁰ Of those 1,000 soldiers, the efforts of hundreds remain hidden from the nation's eyes, while thousands of white soldiers are recognised and rewarded. An example of this is John Fitzgerald, an Indigenous man who enlisted in the AIF. His records are marked with numerous illnesses but despite this he re-joined after treatment and worked on the Western Front with the AIF Tunnelling companies.²¹ Such efforts should be recognised. Indigenous soldiers ardently enlisted with the hope that their endeavours would give birth to the acknowledgement of their race, while others enlisted for the same reasons as their white counterparts: passion driven by patriotism.²² Initially, the Defence Act excluded Aboriginal soldiers from enlisting as their skin was not seen 'white enough'.²³ But as enlistment numbers decreased, restrictions were eased. After enlistments, Indigenous soldiers were treated without racial prejudice as 'bullets know no discrimination and nor did the men in the trenches'.²⁴ 'Once in the service, as an indigenous soldier, you were treated as an equal; you have the same options

¹³ Awm.gov.au. n.d. *The Australian War Records Section | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: < <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-australian-war-records-section> > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

¹⁴ Simpson Prize Source 1a Photograph Awm.gov.au. n.d. *The Simpson Prize 2021 | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: < <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021> > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Awm.gov.au. n.d. *The Centenary Of The Australian War Records Section | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: < <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/centenary-of-awrs> > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Loc cit 13

¹⁹ The Australian: The Great War. n.d. *The Great War - Part Two: The Western Front — Museum, Archive, Shrine*. [online] Available at: < <https://specialreports.theaustralian.com.au/569671/museum-archive-shrine/> > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

²⁰ State Library Of Queensland. n.d. *Researching Indigenous Soldiers In WW1*. [online] Available at: < <https://www.slq.qld.gov.au/blog/researching-indigenous-soldiers-ww1#:~:text=it%20is%20estimated%20that%201%2C200,for%20the%20AIF%20during%20WW1.> > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

²¹ Anzacportal.dva.gov.au. n.d. *Australian Indigenous Service During World War I | Anzac Portal*. [online] Available at: < <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/personnel/indigenous-service> > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

²² Guides.sl.nsw.gov.au. n.d. *Research Guides: World War I And Australia: Indigenous Australian Soldiers*. [online] Available at: < https://guides.sl.nsw.gov.au/wwi-and-australia/indigenous_soldiers > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Abc.net.au. 2020. *Help Needed To Name One Of The Soldiers Australia Nearly Forgot*. [online] Available at: < <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-29/putting-a-name-to-unknown-indigenous-soldier-from->

for pay. When you are in the trenches, you don't have the option of disliking the person behind you,' quotes Gary Oakley, Indigenous liaison officer at the AWM.²⁵ Source 3 shows Private Alfred Coombs in the snow with fellow soldiers.²⁶ This source demonstrates the equality that Indigenous soldiers found whilst serving. Yet on their return home, their expected triumphant arrival was replaced with the same discrimination and hardships that society had punished them with prior. Indigenous soldiers were denied access to soldier settlement schemes, pensions and some weren't even allowed to attend military funerals and ANZAC services to honour their comrades.²⁷ While Australia looks into the victories of soldiers that made sacrifices for their country, the heroic accomplishments by Indigenous men have mostly gone unrecognised.

The lesser known stories of the Western Front open up unread chapters of the Australian experience during the First World War. Although, it is thought that everything about Australia's involvement is known, countless stories of individuals are yet to be revealed. This makes us realise that there is more to the prosperous history of our nation yet to be understood. The Australian experience that is commonly known does not include the tales of those who devotedly collected military records, to ensure that soldiers' stories were forever remembered in the heart of the Australian experience nor of those who bravely endured despite receiving no recognition or thanks on their return home. Efforts of soldiers who were court martialled are often misunderstood but they should still be recognised. No matter how big or small each story is, all of them have helped to shape the history of our nation. It is these lesser known stories that give us a new perspective on the Australian experience, helping us define what the First World War means to individuals and ignites the ANZAC legend to forever live in the hearts of all Australians.

[wwi/12295386#:~:text=Send%20this%20by&text=He%20remains%20anonymous%2C%20one%20of,to%20fight%20in%20its%20name.>](#) [Accessed 5 November 2020].

²⁵ Nest. n.d. *Anzac Day: More Than One Story*. [online] Available at: < <https://www.latrobe.edu.au/nest/anzac-day-more-than-one-story/> > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

²⁶ *Simpson Prize Source 3: Photograph* Awm.gov.au. n.d. *The Simpson Prize 2021 | The Australian War Memorial*. [online] Available at: < <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/Simpson2021> > [Accessed 5 November 2020].

²⁷ Libraries.tas.gov.au. n.d. *Aboriginal Soldiers*. [online] Available at: <

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