



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

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How significant was Australia's contribution to the Allied military victory on the Western Front in 1918?

Before Britain's formal declaration of its entry into World War I, the Opposition leader for Australia, Andrew Fisher announced that "should the worst happen, after everything has been done that our honour will permit, Australians will stand beside the mother country to help and defend her to our last man and last shilling" (Monument Australia). However, Fisher and his associates would have never fathomed how much Australia would actually give to the war. After the First World War had begun in 1914, it soon became clear to many soldiers that this battle was not only about fighting German invaders with their French, Belgium and American counterparts; they would be putting themselves in mortal peril. The 1918 Western Front in Europe was the resting place for many Australian soldiers, who fought against the Germans that were moving into France. Their sacrifice was portrayed in a painting by Will Longstaff, *Menin Gate at Midnight* (Source 1). His painting of thousands of Australian soldiers standing among the wildflowers at Menin Gate on the Western Front depicts the men who, still to this day, have no known graves. Australia had lost 14.76% (AWM, Statistics) of the young men who had originally enlisted, and thousands had suffered physical and mental wounds. These numbers barely represent the hardships of the war. Despite these losses, many Australian soldiers persevered during the war, staying strong to their values and beliefs in the midst of warfare, inspiring the ANZAC legend. Years later, the ANZAC spirit is still respected, yet the contribution of Australian soldiers, is still underestimated. The small number of Australian enlistments is constantly being compared to other massive nations, and our quiet achievements, such as the battles at Amiens and Mont St Quentin have been overshadowed by the campaigns of larger nations. Australian soldiers deserve the recognition of their extremely significant contribution in the Western Front victory, as they extended their help to other people of need, used their skills to overturn the odds in the heat of a battle and led the frontline for many of their battles.

Australian soldiers on the Western Front not only contributed to the Allied victory by defeating enemy troops, but they also saved many lives before and after 1918, and their actions are remembered even after a century has passed. Even though the overall battle was between the Allied military force vs the Central Powers, the soldiers also fought for the civilians who were living in war-torn towns. The towns they saved were not of the mother country they had been "fighting for", yet Australian soldiers still were able to inspire hope during a time when people needed it most. The soldiers had the ability to empathise with and understand the civilians fleeing for their lives, regardless of their race, sex or nationality, earning them the respect of many. While en route to the villages of Heilly and Franvillers, the soldiers were met with "open arms, and sometimes tears" and cries of "Vive l'Australie!" (Source 7), translating to "Long Live Australia!". The hope that the Australians would defend them from the enemy carried on to the victory at Amiens, and later on the whole Western Front. From August 8th to October 5th, 1918, Australian Corps had recaptured 116 towns and villages in France and continued to defend them (Source 4). The uplifting spirit they created is still remembered to this day, where in the village of Amiens, a memorial plaque was erected two years after the war ended to acknowledge "the memory of the soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force who valiantly participated in the victorious defence of Amiens...and gave their life for the cause of justice, liberty and humanity." (Source 8) This plaque recognised their actions of courage and empathy, risking their lives for complete strangers in foreign territories. These acts of compassion may be deemed as "wannabe heroism" or an "act of pity" by some, but Australian soldiers will always be remembered as not just the soldiers who fought for a war, but the young men who saved civilians, for "the cause of justice, liberty and humanity". The Australian soldiers created a

legacy that was an intangible, yet significant contribution to the Allied military victory by defending innocents caught in the crossfire.

Despite being from a new country, Australian soldiers proved their worth in battle. During World War I, Australia took the lead in frontlines along the Western Front and contributed to the success of the Allied forces with their leadership. Australia's military were tiny in comparison to the other forces, making up only 4.8% of the British Empire's troops (Source 2), but the soldiers' leadership shone through in their major battles. This was seen in the Battle of Amiens, also known as the conflict of "hundred days". The effective leadership of Australian soldiers meant that in two hours, they accomplished all their objectives (AWM, Amiens), which were to gain positions in the villages of Villers-Bretonneux and Hamel and prepare for the charge against the German's frontline. Together with Allied forces, the Australian soldiers captured many of the enemy's guns, artillery and soldiers, even through the terrible weather conditions they faced. This was not Australia's only display of leadership. The Battle at Mont St Quentin was an extremely significant conflict, as it was the beginning of victory for the Allies, pushing the German forces to their last line of defence at the Hindenburg Line (AWM, Mont St Quentin). The Australian soldiers played a major role in this conflict, as within the first two hours of fighting, the 2nd Australian Battalion had already recaptured the village and area of Mont St Quentin, all without Allied support. Despite the conditions being unfavourable for the soldiers (as the territory was all uphill and on open ground), under Sir John Monash's leadership, they conducted an attack from an unlikely position and surprised and overcame enemy retaliation. This quick-thinking and brilliant leadership is what made Australian soldiers so significant in World War I, and especially in the battles that lead to the victory at the Western Front.

Australian soldiers in World War I had unique skillsets that they utilised in battle, using their determination and strength to help them on the battlefield, significantly helping the fight against enemy soldiers at the Western Front. Before they were seen on the battlefield, Australian soldiers were labelled as "undisciplined and slovenly" (THGW) and were considered as rowdy young men from a new country, completely unaccustomed to the horrors of warfare. However, this was far from the truth. The men were not, in fact, weak or slow; despite not being used to the frigid, wet conditions of the trenches, they were very physically able, as many soldiers were familiar with the heavy, manual labour back at home. And like the saying, *don't judge a book by its cover*, despite their "untidy and improper" appearance, the soldiers were intelligent and had a determined mindset as commended by their superiors: "I do hope that we shall hear no more of this 'indiscipline' of these extraordinary Corps, for I don't believe that for military qualities of every kind their equal exists. Their physique is wonderful and their intelligence of a high order." Their perseverance served them well on the frontline, as even though the men had to endure horrific conditions in the trenches and fight in almost suicidal battles, they kept fighting. Australian soldiers especially valued independence, which was valued by many of their British commanders, one reporting that an Australian officer had once said "Tell us what to do sir, but you must let us do it our own way." It was their independence and determination tied with their physical and mental strength that made them formidable soldiers on the battlefield, especially on the Western Front. Their perseverance was also what gave the men a sense of "mateship". Despite their easy-going behaviour and "poor discipline", Australian soldiers were brilliant soldiers that contributed significantly to the military achievements on the Western Front as they combined physical and mental skills, with the treasured bond between fellow mates.

During the start of World War I, many Australian soldiers enlisted in the hopes that they would defend their "mother nation" from the enemy and prove their worth on the battlefield. These

soldiers were just ordinary young men, some teenagers, who at the time had little to no idea of what they had signed up for, nor of the horrific warfare that lay ahead. Yet they overcame the oppressing life on the battlefield, rising up with their fellow mates with one goal in mind: to finally win this war – by beating back the enemy at the Western Front until they were forced to surrender. And they achieved exactly that, by honing their skills, saving as many as they could, and leading their troops to triumph, turning Australia's reputation as a "new nation" into a strong country that had been an extremely significant contribution to the Allied victory at the Western Front.

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Source 1: *Menin Gate at Midnight*, Painting (1927), Will Longstaff

Source 2: Statistics from Rhys Crawley's article 'Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum: Contextualising Australia's Military Effort During the First World War', *Australian Historical Studies*, 2015, p. 79.

Source 4: Extract from *The Australian Victories in France, 1918*, Sir John Monash

Source 7: Extract from C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Vol. V The A.I.F. in France: December 1917-May 1918*, Angus and Robertson Ltd, Sydney, 1941, p. 177.

Source 8: Memorial Plaque, Amiens Cathedral, France, erected 1920