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

There is a common misconstrued narrative popularised by Australia's media, politicians and authors, that Australia played a major role in the Allies' victory on the Western Front in World War One. This is arguably linked to Australia's coming of age; achieving nationhood which is memorialised around the country. However, an examination of the war through a non-partisan lens, particularly the battles fought along the Western Front, and noting that the Australian military comprised less than 5% ('Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum: Contextualising Australia's Military Effort During the First World War', Australian Historical Studies, 2015, p. 79.) of the combined Allied Forces, allows for a very different narrative to emerge. How significant Australia's role in the Allied Forces' victory is difficult to determine, as it is difficult to accurately hypothesise the outcome had Australia not participated.

There were 27 countries in total (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2017) as members of the Allied forces, with Australia only making up a very small percentage of these. The Australian troops were one of seven nations that comprised the British Forces, making up 4.8%, far less than Canada with 7.3%, India with 16.8%, and the British with 66.4%. ('Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum: Contextualising Australia's Military Effort During the First World War', Australian Historical Studies, 2015, p. 79.) According to the pie chart included in Reece Crawley's article 'Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum: Contextualising Australia's Military Effort During the First World War,' the other countries were the British Isles, South Africa, New Zealand, and a number of colonies, including Newfoundland and the West Indies. (Crawley, 2015). It would be naive to think that Australia alone would have made a difference because '*Australia was a very small player in a very large war.*' (Crawley, 2015b) It is significant that although Australia only made up 4.8% of the British Forces, the number of Australians who partook in the war compromised 8.5% of the Australian population. (Cabinet, n.d.) Perhaps of more significance was the fact that New Zealand sent 12% of their population to support the allies. As the Western Front was located in France and Belgium, these two countries were at war with the Axis powers. To put that in perspective, the Allied Forces were mostly soldiers from France, Belgium and other countries; leaving Australia as a small cog in the military operations along the Western Front.

Unlike other countries fighting on the Western Front, Australia did not have sufficient military numbers to defend a line alone, whereas the British Empire, a far more major player in the Allied Forces, did. The 1918 map of the Western Front, extending from Belgium in the north to Switzerland in the south, clearly shows the troop positions of the Allied Forces. French forces held much of the Front. Fighting alongside them were 23 American divisions. '*The heaviest fighting for Australians was up on the north side of the Western Front above Villers Bretonneux.*' (Genge St, n.d.) This took place on the 4th and 5th of April 1918 'when Australian and British troops repelled a determined German attack.' (Sir John Monash Centre, 2018) to hold the town. However, were we to believe our

politicians, Australia was alone in fighting this battle. In 1918 the then Foreign Minister Julie Bishop, stated that *"Australian troops saved Villers-Bretonneux 'in the defence of freedom,'"* yet failed to mention the French soldiers or any other nations that partook in that battle (Crawley, 2015) Clearly, however, Australia did play a role, and that is remembered and commemorated in places like Villers-Bretonneux, but this is an exaggerated success, glorified by our politicians despite the historical reality.

As part of the British Empire Forces, Australians fought in many battles along the Western Front, some more significant than others. Australia played a major role in the breaking of the Hindenburg line and it was essential that they capture Montbrehain. This occurred on the 29th of September 1918, and along with American and British soldiers the battle commenced. *'The battle began poorly, but with help from the adjoining British division the Germans were forced to withdraw,'* (Australian War Memorial, Breaking The Line, WW1 Exhibit) revealing the narrative that Australia did not win battles alone but fought alongside the Allied Forces who played potentially more major roles. Another major conflict that the Australian divisions were involved in was the 'The Black Day' battle, also known as the Bellenglise battle, in which *'The Australians under Sir John Monash had an important role:..'* (Australian War Memorial, 'The Black Day', WW1 Exhibit) Australia fought with the Canadian soldiers on the right and the British's corps on the left (Australian War Memorial, WW1 Exhibit) and this was the 'turning point' in the view of the German General Ludendorff. He stated that it was *'...the black day of the German army in the history of this war'.* (Translated Statement, General Ludendorff) If we assume Ludendorff's statement to be correct, the Australian troops certainly played a role in turning the war towards victory for the Allies. Another significant battle was the battle of Hamel, in which American and Australian soldiers launched an attack with British tanks to regain the town of Le Hammel in the north of France. This gave the Allies a foothold in capturing the town of Somme. Australians played their part in a well-run collective group. They were successful in many conflicts along the Western Front but not without the support of other Allied soldiers.

Some may argue that Australia was not present on the Western Front when the actual victory occurred, detracting from their contribution. While this is true, General Sir John Monash, an Australian Commander, was still very much planning out the next sequence of battles. (Australian War Memorial, Breaking The Line, WW1 Exhibit) Without Monash the Allied Forces would not have been as successful in winning. Monash played a role not only on the front line of the Western Front but also in making decisions as a part of a team of commanders in France. He did not do this on his own.

The Australian Troops arrived on the Western Front two years after the initial fighting had commenced, missing out on some of the major conflicts on the Western Front, so in fact they did not assist the Allied forces until 1917. When visiting the Australian War Memorial and reading the texts about the battles that Australia fought in, it is easy to be left with the impression that the main battles on the Western Front were those of Villers Bretonneux, Fromelles, Ypres and Montbrehain. In reality, Australia did not partake in crucial battles fought on the Western Front, and was absent from the first battle of the Marne, the battle of Somme and the battle of Cambrai. All three

of these were significant for different reasons. The battle of Marne was the first that commenced on the Western Front. This was a vital engagement to win because the Germans were within 38km of the capital, Paris. (The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). The battle of Somme was fought by the British, French and Indian soldiers with the Canadian soldiers joining after a month, in August. This was a prolonged action as it took them four months to gain only five kilometres, with 60,000 casualties on the first day. (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.) The Encyclopedia Britannica does not, however, acknowledge the Canadian and Indian men that gave their lives in this battle. The battle of Cambrai was key in the use of tanks for the first time. They were very effective compared to the trench warfare that had been used up to this point. This demonstrates that pivotal conflicts were fought and won without Australia.

It is difficult to accurately determine how significant Australia's contribution was to the Allied military victory on the Western Front in 1918. A biased narrative has been promoted through Australian media and through ceremonies that exaggerate the truth. Yes, Australia did send over 8.5% of its then population, but our presence made up only 4.8% of the British Allied forces. Moreover, the British were part of a larger Allied force. Australia did partake in key conflicts but not in all, especially during the early years. When Australia did fight, for example at Villers Bretonneux, it was always alongside other Allied soldiers. When the final victories occurred, Australian soldiers were not present on the Western Front. General Sir John Monash was instrumental in planning and directing the final successful battles, but he did not do so alone. Monash served alongside other Allied generals. Australia played a small part in a big war which is difficult to speculate on and hard to quantify. Australia did have a role to play but when you examine this through a non-partisan lens, it is clear that victory was not won by Australians alone, but by the greater Allied Forces.

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