



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



# SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

2023 Winner | Northern Territory

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DRIPSTONE MIDDLE SCHOOL

## **The Western Front: A war fought with Australians**

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

**SIMPSON PRIZE 2022**

**Orm Skhamthongveun – Dripstone Middle School**

**Essay Word Count: 1,503 (Excluding Footnotes, Bibliography and Appendices)**

Through the effort of *all* countries in the Allied forces, victory was achieved on the Western Front on the 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918, called “Armistice Day.” In the Western Front’s thirty battles, over the course of thirty-three months of fighting, <sup>1</sup> approximately forty-seven percent of the estimated one-hundred and fifty-nine million Allied soldiers were killed or wounded.<sup>2</sup> Australia, being a dominion of the British Empire, joined the war on August 1914, where they fought alongside the Allied powers against the Central Powers.<sup>3</sup> However, throughout history, historians have debated on Australia’s contribution, which has forged an essential question waiting to be answered: “How significant was Australia’s contribution to the Allied military victory on the Western Front in 1918?” For context, 295,000 Australian soldiers in 1916 were assigned to the Western Front to serve France and Belgium. Of those who participated in the campaign, 46,000 were killed in action or by disease, while 100,000 faced life-long injuries.<sup>4</sup> Historians have barely scratched the surface of the true meaning of Australia’s contribution. Amidst of gunfire, death and trenches, the ANZAC spirit was born through the heroic acts of Australians and Australia’s small victories served as a big advantage to the Allied victory. Not only that, Australia has also been greatly recognised for its contribution by other nations as well. Australia did significant things for the Allied powers, even though its force was on a scale smaller than other Allied countries. All these aspects show the significance of Australia’s contribution.

With twenty-seven countries in the Allied and Associated Powers,<sup>5</sup> what made Australia’s contribution significant? With a population of five million, Australia’s infantry was recognised as a “*well-trained and highly effective fighting body*.”<sup>6</sup> However, numerous historians believed Australia depended on Britain’s command, such as Joan Beaumont and Rhys Crawley. For example, Joan Beaumont states that, “*Australia’s role in World War I must be seen as a small part of a much larger British imperial effort*”,<sup>6</sup> whilst Rhys Crawley agrees that “*the AIF and the RAN were both Australian and British... controlled and underpinned by Britain*.”<sup>7</sup> To rephrase, they believed Australia was an insignificant force dependent on Britain’s command. However, Britain could not control how Australia proceeded in the war, nor are their troops noted to have anything similar to the “ANZAC Spirit”. The “ANZAC Spirit” is described as, “*reckless valour in a good cause... enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship, and endurance that will never own defeat*”,<sup>8</sup> aspects the majority of Australian soldiers were seen to have possessed. The ANZAC’s were a force made of volunteers and the experiences of World War I often resulted in mental illnesses or trauma later on in their lives. Sir John Monash, an Australian commander on the Western Front, believed that no other forces had any “*parallel for such as performance in the whole range of military victory*.”<sup>9</sup> Many Australian soldiers, including Victoria

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<sup>1</sup> Queensland Government n.d., *Australia on the Western Front*, Queensland Government, viewed 29 August 2022, < <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/western-front/index.aspx> >.

<sup>2</sup> Beck, E 2021, *Western Front of World War I*, History Crunch, viewed 29 August 2022, < [https://www.historycrunch.com/western-front-of-world-war-i.html#](https://www.historycrunch.com/western-front-of-world-war-i.html#/) >.

<sup>3</sup> Australian War Memorial, n.d., *First World War 1914-18*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 26 October 2022, < <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war#:~:text=When%20Britain%20declared%20war%20against,was%20automatically%20also%20at%20war> >

<sup>4</sup> Australian Government: Department of Veterans’ Affairs 2022, *Western Front*, Australian Government, viewed 27 August 2022, < <https://www.dva.gov.au/newsroom/media-centre/media-backgrounders/western-front> >

<sup>5</sup> Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia 2019, *Allied powers*, Encyclopedia Britannica, viewed 31 August 2022, < <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Allied-Powers-international-alliance> >

<sup>6</sup> Simpson Prize Source 5: Book Extract, Beaumont, J 2013, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 20 August 2022, < [The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>7</sup> Simpson Prize Source 3: Article Extract, Crawley, R 2015, ‘*Marching to the Beat of an Imperial Drum: Contextualising Australia’s Military Effort During the First World War*’, *Australian Historical Studies*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 20 August 2022, < [The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>8</sup> Australian War Memorial n.d., *ANZAC Spirit*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 28 August 2022, < [Anzac spirit | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>9</sup> Simpson Prize Source 4: Book Extract: ‘Monash, J 1920, *The Australian Victories in France, 1918*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 20 August 2022, < [The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

Cross holders Albert Jacka, George "Snowy" Howell and William Ruthven,<sup>10</sup> risked their lives to protect their comrades and stepped up to become leaders when needed. In addition, Australia's volunteer force continued to fight alongside the Allied Powers until Armistice was called in 1918. Through their leadership, courage, and indomitable spirit, Australia's soldiers contributed significantly to the soldiers fighting in the Western Front's trenches and the Allied victory.

On the battlefield, Australia's key contributions are noted as minor victories, however, the results of Australia's feats oppose this statement. This is evident through the AIF's successes in Dernancourt, Morlancourt, Hangard Wood, Hébuterne, Hazebrouck,<sup>11</sup> Pozières and arguably the most crucial battle on the Western Front: The Battle of Amiens. Prior to the Battle of Amiens, Villers-Bretonneux was Allied land was used as a vital railway junction. It was the gateway to Amiens,<sup>12</sup> which was 10 miles east away.<sup>13</sup> There, two battles occurred, and this is where the "German offensive was stalled"<sup>5</sup> and the Germans were defeated by the AIF and British forces. This notably is Australia's greatest "small" victory. In the span of one month, both nations repelled Germany's first attack and counterattacked Germany's second.<sup>10</sup> During Germany's second offence, Australia's 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Brigade's attempted to link-up and fight in the dark-<sup>10</sup> with the 57<sup>th</sup>, 59<sup>th</sup>, 60<sup>th</sup> Australian Battalion and the 4<sup>th</sup> British Division assisting this counterattack-<sup>10</sup> victory was attained on the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1918. In the present time, many claim that America was the Allied Power's key to success in the Battle of Amiens.<sup>12</sup> Geoffrey Wawro states that "*Germany would have won World War I had the U.S. Army not intervened in France in 1918*".<sup>14</sup> It must not be forgotten that America was fresh to the Western Front during the last years of WW1; its population of 103 million<sup>15</sup> would make Australia's 4 million<sup>16</sup> insignificant. As a result of Australia's contribution to Villers-Bretonneux, America and the Allied forces were provided- especially in the "Hundred Days Offensive"- with an indispensable advantage when the ANZAC's stalled and weakened Germany's force. For this reason, Australia's contribution served as a crucial foundation and a significant role in the Allied victory.

It cannot be denied that the larger nations in the Allied Forces contributed more to the Western Front in comparison to Australia. Britain had a population of 88 million,<sup>17</sup> large amounts of supplies, food

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<sup>10</sup> Burness, P n.d., *Inspirational Bravery*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 28 August 2022, < [Inspirational Bravery | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>11</sup> Sir John Monash Center Australian National Memorial France 2018, *The Battle of Villers-Bretonneux*, Sir John Monash Center Australian National Memorial France, viewed 29 August 2022, < [The Battle of Villers-Bretonneux - Sir John Monash Centre \(sjmc.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>12</sup> Victoria State Government n.d., *Villers-Bretonneux*, Victoria State Government, viewed 29 August 2022, < [Villers-Bretonneux - Anzac Centenary Victorian Government \(archive.vic.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>13</sup> World War One Battlefields n.d., *Villers-Bretonneux*, World War One Battlefields, viewed 29 August 2022, < [Villers-Bretonneux - World War One Battlefields \(ww1battlefields.co.uk\)](#) >

<sup>14</sup> Wawro, G 2018, Everything You Know About How World War I Ended Is Wrong, TIME, viewed 24 November 2022, < <https://time.com/5406235/everything-you-know-about-how-world-war-i-ended-is-wrong/> >

<sup>15</sup> Census n.d., U.S. Census Bureau History: World War I Armistice, United States Census Bureau, viewed 24 October 2022, < [https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage\\_archive/2018/november\\_2018.html#:~:text=Following%20a%20U.S.%20Senate%20vote,U.S.%20population%20was%20approximately%20103%2C268%2C000](https://www.census.gov/history/www/homepage_archive/2018/november_2018.html#:~:text=Following%20a%20U.S.%20Senate%20vote,U.S.%20population%20was%20approximately%20103%2C268%2C000) >

<sup>16</sup> NAA n.d., Australian recruitment statistics for World War I, NAA, viewed 24 October 2022 < <https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/war/world-war-i/australian-recruitment-statistics-world-war-i#:~:text=Australia's%20total%20population%20at%20the,aged%20between%2018%20and%2044> >

<sup>17</sup> Guinness World Records n.d, Largest empire by population, Guinness World Record, viewed 24 October 2022, < <https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/largest-empire-by-population> >

and abundance of soldiers<sup>18</sup> as well a colony in India, of 244 million,<sup>19</sup> who assisted. France had the population of 40 million,<sup>20</sup> whose soldiers assisted Britain in the North,<sup>21</sup> and America, as stated before, had a population of 103 million, as well as high demanded supplies, credit and additional soldiers.<sup>22</sup> With only a population of 4 million, Australia's contribution was recognised by these larger power nations, even gaining a reputation to the enemy. In the Battle of Villers-Bretonneux, Brigadier-General George Grogan, of 23rd British Brigade, noted on the efforts of the AIF as *"perhaps the greatest individual feat of the war – the successful counter-attack by night across unknown and difficult ground, at a few hours' notice, by the Australian soldier."*<sup>10</sup> The ANZAC's, shown by the commanding general of 60th U.S. Brigade when he noted that their artillery communications were "astonishingly efficient" and the ANZAC's "would themselves cut anybody else's wire if necessary to keep up communications", were admired and respected by the American troops for their "military efficiency."<sup>23</sup> From this, America deemed Australia a significant force, leading to their modern alliance with Australia. As the country where Western Front was fought, France as immensely grateful for Australia's service. For an instance, Charles Bean's volume recorded the encounters of the AIF with the French civilians, who cheered, "'Les Australiens and les Ecossais sont de tres bons soldats'... 'Vive l' Australie!'... 'Finis retreat- beaucoup Australiens ici,'"<sup>24</sup> which approximately translates to "'Australians and Scots are very good soldiers'... 'Long live Australia!'... 'Finally retreat- Many Australians here...' In addition, the Prime Minister of France would visit the remaining ANZAC's after war in Australia,<sup>25</sup> and France would eventually build a memorial plaque at Amiens Cathedral<sup>26</sup> to remember the ANZAC's. Even today, the villagers in Villers-Bretonneux commemorate the ANZAC's who defended their home, who believe Australia was the miracle who they owe a life debt to<sup>27</sup> Even today, the villagers in Villers-Bretonneux commemorate the ANZAC's who defended their home. One

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<sup>18</sup> BBC n.d., *What role did the British Empire play in the war?*, BBC Bitesize, viewed 30 August 2022, < [What role did the British Empire play in the war? - BBC Bitesize](#) >

<sup>19</sup> The National Archives n.d., 100 India in 1914, The National Archives, viewed 24 October 2022 < <https://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/first-world-war/a-global-view/asia/india/#:~:text=244%2C267%2C542%20people%20lived%20in%20directly,India%20Office%20List%2C%201914> >

<sup>20</sup> Mr.History 2015, How many men were available for military service in Germany and France? Historynet, viewed 24 October 2022, < <https://www.historynet.com/how-many-men-were-available-for-military-service-in-germany-and-france/#:~:text=in%201914%20France's%20population%20was,and%201%2C180%2C000%20stood%20in%20reserve> >

<sup>21</sup> Beck, E 2017, *France in World War I*, History Crunch, viewed 30 August 2022, < [France in World War I - HISTORY CRUNCH - History Articles, Biographies, Infographics, Resources and More](#) >

<sup>22</sup> Showalter, D. E. and Royde-Smith., John Graham 2022, *World War I: The Years of Stalemate*, Encyclopedia Britannica, viewed 31 August 2022, < [World War I | History, Summary, Causes, Combatants, Casualties, Map, & Facts | Britannica](#) >

<sup>23</sup> Blair, D n.d., *"Diggers" and "Doughboys": Australian and American troop interaction on the Western Front, 1918*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 31 August 2022, < ["Diggers" and "Doughboys": Australian and American troop interaction on the Western Front, 1918 | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>24</sup> Simpson Prize Source 7: Book Extract, C.E.W Bean 1941, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Vol. V The A.I.F. in France: December 1917-May 1918*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 31 August 2022, < [The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>25</sup> Museums Victoria Collections n.d, *Leaflet - 'Visit of French Prime Minister to Australian Troops', Hamel, World War I, Jul 1918*, Museums Victoria Collections, viewed 1 September 2022 < [Leaflet - 'Visit of French Prime Minister to Australian Troops', Hamel, World War I, Jul 1918 \(museums victoria.com.au\)](#) >

<sup>26</sup> Simpson Prize Source 8: Photograph, Australian War Memorial n.d., *Memorial Plaque, Amiens Cathedral, France, erected 1920*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 1 September 2022 < [The Simpson Prize 2023 | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

<sup>27</sup> City of Canada Bay Heritage Society 2018, "Do Not Forget Australia", CCB Heritage Society, viewed 24 October 2022, < <https://canadabayheritage.asn.au/blog/2018/04/25/do-not-forget-australia/> >



of the many ways they acknowledge Australia's deep history in Villers-Bretonneux's is by naming their main street, "*Rue de Melbourne*", after the Australian city. They also have the Victoria School which holds a sign that says "DO NOT FORGET AUSTRALIA" in acknowledgement of the children in Victoria, Australia, who donated pennies to rebuild the school after the war.<sup>26</sup> Not only did its allies perceive Australia as a strong force, but the ANZAC's have been acknowledged by the Germans, proved by a letter written by a German soldier to his family: "*We have Australians in front of us here, they are very quick and cunning. They creep up in the night like cats to our trenches so that we don't notice them...*"<sup>28</sup> This demonstrates that Australia, with a population of only 5 million, contributed significantly to the Allied victory on the Western Front, to the point of impacting many larger countries' thoughts and emotions.

Australia's contribution was very significant on the Western Front, even as a small nation. Australia may or may not have been controlled by Britain and can be seen as a minor force in comparison to the larger nations of the Allied Powers; however, a range of other notable aspects can deem Australia's contribution as a significant to the Allied victory on the Western Front. The ANZAC's were a unique, morale-lifting force who remained loyal to the Allied cause from start to end. The ANZAC's small victories contributed to the larger objective – Allied victory – and it is evident that Australia's involvement is deemed by larger Allied nations as significant. This is seen through memorials, records and individual recollections across the world. Australia was as much of a contributor to the Allied victory as any other nation. So, on the 11th of November, when millions around the world pledge one minute of silence to remember those who served in World War I, remember Australia: the small nation that contributed to the Allied forces victory.

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<sup>28</sup> Australian War Memorial n.d., *1918: Fritz - Australian soldiers' relations with Germans*, Australian War Memorial, viewed 1 September 2022 < [1918: Fritz - Australian soldiers' relations with Germans | Australian War Memorial \(awm.gov.au\)](#) >

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