



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



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THE FRIENDS' SCHOOL

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

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The Western Front was the deciding frontier during the First World War, a 640 km long stretch of land snaking from the Swiss border to the North Sea, through France and Belgium. Whichever side was victorious there, either the Central Powers or the Entente, would be able to claim victory for their respective alliance (Krause, 2015). The Western Front was home to an extraordinary 29,150,000 soldiers throughout the duration of the war, 295,000 of whom were Australian (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2022). Yet, despite the small number of soldiers, the Australian contribution to the Allied military victory on the Western Front was by any measure, significant. It could be argued that without the support of the forces fighting from any nation, the Western Front might have collapsed. However, the tactical advantages of the Australian soldiers were unprecedented; John Monash said of their valour, "I doubt whether there is any parallel for such a performance in the whole range of military history" (Monash, 1920). Furthermore, the Australians outperformed all other areas of the British army on paper, in terms of the land, guns, and prisoners they took and the speed with which they took it. In spite of this, the Australian forces were viewed as unreliable and ill-disciplined by high-ranking members of other armies because of their different ways of approaching conflict and command (Monash, 1920).

Australia's contribution to the Western Front must be examined through the eyes of its detractors, for they certainly existed, through its champions, and through cold statistics, which dispassionately describe the Australians' performance. The Australian force was concentrated in northern France and Belgium, in notable battles such as the Battle of Passchendaele, the

bloodiest battle for the Corps throughout the entire war effort. Ten thousand Australians were killed, far from home, at Passchendaele alone (Department of Veterans' Affairs, 2022), (Australian War Memorial, n.d.). Significantly, the Australian force was the only army of the war made up entirely of volunteers, making up five battalions that fought with the other forces from the British Empire (Monash, 1920). It might be said that the Australian contribution to the Allied forces also led to the development of the young country's national identity: larrikinism and individualism are attributes of Australia that were disparaged by many strong military voices, but which first came to be forged on the world stage under the heat of violent battle, in the crucible of World War One.

The Australian Army was a small force, so it is tempting to argue that its impact on the victory on the Western Front must have been insignificant. After all, Australians made up only 4.8% of the British Empire's force, which itself was only 33% of the Allied force defending the Western Front (Crawley, 2015, p. 79). In addition, there was much scepticism from other armies directed towards the Australians. General Haig, commander of the British forces, described them as "ill-disciplined... problematic... and desiring of popularity" (Haig, 1916 - 1918). He also stated that Australian soldiers were far more likely to be incarcerated than men of other British dominions. Indeed, it was reported that 9 in 1000 Australian soldiers were imprisoned at the time as opposed to just 1.1 in 1000 soldiers from the other British Empire forces (Graham, 2014). Australians were also described as reckless: storming enemy positions without support features significantly in individual accounts of the conflict, including Haig's. Furthermore, Australian forces sustained far higher casualties considering the small number of troops compared to other countries in the Allied armies, making up only 4.8% of the force but suffering 6.8% of the casualties (Crawley, 2015, p. 79). Even worse, prior to its time on the Western Front, the Australian Army's assault on Gallipoli was unsuccessful, thus creating no

contribution, by way of diversion, to the victory on the Western Front and furthermore losing 8,141 Australian soldiers (Australian War Memorial, 2017). If the assault had been successful, Australia's contribution might have been astonishing as it may have allowed the Entente to obliterate Turkey from the war completely and to seize control of the Middle East (Imperial War Museums, 2022). Moreover, the Australian soldiers were exceedingly individualistic, especially for members of an army, and especially when juxtaposed with the stoic and regimented soldiers from the British Empire (Following the Twenty-Second, 2017). Australia's contribution to the victory may therefore be argued to have been minimal, due to the small number of troops and their unwillingness to blindly cooperate with the leaders and soldiers of other armies.

However, despite being a small and arguably ill-disciplined fighting force, the Australians were also described as “the most effective of all the forces on the side of the Allies” (Bean, 1983) (Beaumont, 2013, pp. 517-518). Considering their skill and effect on general morale, it is perhaps unwise to mistake boisterousness and rowdiness with poor performance. Closer examination may reveal an Australian force that was indeed significant to the Allied victory on the Western Front. During the final six months of the war, Australia made up only 9.5% of the British Imperial Force engaged on the Western Front. But, when it came to capturing prisoners, territory, and guns, the Australians captured respectively 2.42, 2.24, and 2.47 times the amounts conceded to the other forces of the British Empire. This is a clear indication that the Australian forces, despite their laconic attitude, were nevertheless more efficient fighters who did in fact have better tactics, making them more skilled warriors. Beyond these achievements, Australian soldiers also liberated 116 towns and villages, 1,020 square kilometres of land, and engaged and defeated 39 enemy divisions (Monash, 1920); again incredible when compared to the rest of the British Empire. While there was great scepticism about the discipline and prudence of

the Australians, nevertheless, account after account of the war, both quantitative and qualitative, describes the Australians as truly brave, possessed of skill, and strong of spirit. None other than British Field Marshal William Slim, one of the most respected military men of the modern era, often described as the “soldier’s soldier”, said this of the Australian forces:

“You are straight of limb and clear of eye – and so were they. In my life I have fought with and against many kinds of soldiers, but I have never seen any who carried themselves more nobly in battle, more daringly or more stout-hearted, than those men of Anzac. And when I lay wounded among them, I found that they thought for others more than for themselves; that, like the bravest men I have met since, they were gentle, as well as tough.” (Slim, 1957, p. 67)

These words from Slim, the British Field Marshal who was later honoured to be made Australian Governor-General, describe not an Australian army rife with disorder and disrespect, but one of valour and care, braver than any others on the Western Front, despite fighting not to save their own country and their own people, but those of a foreign land whose plight Australia saw and did not hesitate to aid. Not only this, but Australia had an army, not of reluctant conscripts forced into submission and servitude like the English army, of whom 2.5 million were conscripted and forced to fight for their homeland (UK Parliament, 2012); rather theirs was an army of free willed citizens volunteering to save their allies. The significance of the Australian contribution is exhibited by their bewildering battle statistics and their support for other countries.

The Australian contribution to the military victory on the Western Front was significant; how significant it is hard to articulate. Of course, it could be argued that all armies were crucial and

that without any of the contributing factors the Western Front may have been lost. In addition, the mere idea of the Australian troops, as skilled volunteers reinforcing the Allies even in small numbers, would have been a boost in morale to all those already on the Front. Nevertheless, the notion did take hold that the Australian soldiers could not live up to the standards set by the rest of the British Empire. However, this opinion is quashed by the overwhelming accounts of the successes and nobility of the Australian soldiers. On the whole, given the profuse amount of evidence representing the Australian forces as not only superior in manner and humanity, but also in skill and strategy, it can be said that despite being deployed in small numbers, these men were highly significant to the Allied military victory on the Western Front.

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