

INTRODUCTION

In the Somme Valley on a day in spring in the early twenty-first century, almost a century after the Armistice that ended the First World War, all is peaceful. In the distance giant harvesters, marked by flashing orange lights, crawl through the fields. It is hard to believe that this verdant countryside was once a lunar landscape, the ground pulverised by incessant artillery fire, and the air stank of blood and cordite fumes.

The village of Pozières is located on a slight rise that provides panoramic views across the countryside to the south. In the distance the gleam of the golden Virgin atop the basilica at Albert marks the location of that town while, to the south-east, fields of ripening grain roll away towards the grove of trees around the village of Contalmaison.

The buildings of Pozières straggle along the road that runs from Albert to Bapaume, as they had done in the years before 1914. Although the buildings appear to have been there for centuries, all have been built since the end of the First World War for, by the end of 1916, Pozières was a name on a map, and nothing more. The only indication that a village had once stood there was the slight stain of pulverised brick dust amid the shell craters.

Near the entrance to Pozières on the road from Albert stands an outcrop of shrubs and trees that marks the site of a ruined German blockhouse. Named Gibraltar by the British, it was captured by the Australian 1st Division on the morning of 24 July 1916. From a viewing platform nearby an observer can see why Pozières became the focal point of the fighting in that sector of the Somme. Although the ridge on which Pozières

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is located is relatively low, it commands the country around it. In July 1916 the Germans, who occupied the village, had a clear view over the lower ground to the south and south-east. From Pozières they could overlook the British positions as far back as Albert, and all the preparations for an attack could be observed, and countered.

On the far side of the village, at a site now occupied by a memorial to the 2nd Division, Australian Imperial Force (AIF), stood another German strongpoint built in the shell of an old windmill. This, the highest point in the area around Pozières, commanded the British positions to the south-east.

To the north-west of Pozières the view is dominated by the memorial at Thiepval. The sombre presence of the memorial, built in the early 1930s to a design by the architect Sir Edwin Luytens as a memorial to British and French soldiers killed on the Somme who had no known grave, is an inescapable reminder of the war. It is also a reminder that General Hubert Gough's demands for Australians to push forward from the positions on the heights above Pozières through to Thiepval brought the Australians up against the German strongpoint at Mouquet Farm.

Mouquet Farm in the early twenty-first century appears a benign place. A cluster of farm buildings stand atop a ridge, surrounded by broad, shallow valleys, green with ripening grain. Spring lambs dot the landscape. But, despite the placid appearance of the scenery, it is immediately apparent that the farm buildings atop the ridge command the ground around them. A few well-sited machine guns could sweep the valleys with a curtain of bullets, as had happened almost a century before. Here at Mouquet Farm thousands of young Australian men, the finest of their generation, were thrown into ill-considered piecemeal attacks that gained nothing and saw many of them killed or maimed. Despite the apparent peace of the surroundings, memory of what occurred there casts shadows over the landscape and imbues it with an inescapable sadness and sense of loss.

In 1935 C.E.W. Bean, the Australian official historian of the First World War, wrote that 'no corner of France was ever so thickly sown with Australian dead' as between Pozières and Mouquet Farm, 'but outside of Gallipoli, Pozières is still – though few people are aware of it – Australia's most sacred site'.¹ Yet the memory of Pozières seemed to fade in the years after the war whereas the history of the AIF came to be embodied in the myth of Gallipoli. Paul Fussell has argued that one of the responses to the horror of the First World War was a movement 'towards myth, towards a revival of the cultic, the mystical, the sacrificial,

the prophetic, the sacramental, and the universally significant. In short, towards fiction.² This was as true of Australia as any other combatant, with the landing at Gallipoli soon becoming encrusted, as Robert Rhodes James has suggested, with ‘a mass of legends’.³

It is perhaps unsurprising that the Gallipoli campaign, fought as it was within sight of the Hellespont, the site of so much of the Homeric legend, became a focus of Australia’s own heroic narrative. It is a narrative that would continue to resonate within Australian society. In the mid-1960s, the cleric and writer Sir Irving Benson lauded the ‘great and gallant men in the Homeric Gallipoli Campaign’,⁴ while Les Carlyon, writing at the beginning of a new millenium, considered that ‘Gallipoli has become Australia’s Homeric tale’.⁵ The men who fought at Gallipoli have now become, in the nation’s cultural memory, Homeric heroes and Anzac Day a secular holy day when their feats are lauded and their memories sanctified, making Anzac Day, in the words of David Malouf, ‘the one day that we celebrate as a truly national occasion [a day] . . . that brings us together as a single community, as a single people involved in a shared enterprise’.⁶

Despite the mythology that attaches to the Gallipoli campaign, it was not, and would never be, anything other than a sideshow of the First World War. The outcome of the war would be determined on the Western Front. Here war was fought on an industrial scale; men faced artillery and machine-gun fire of an intensity never experienced by the AIF at Gallipoli. Those who were not buried alive, torn apart or vaporised by high explosives were likely to be killed by bomb, bullet, flame-thrower or poison gas.

By mid-1916, when the first AIF divisions arrived in France, the pattern of fighting on the Western Front had been set. The German armies faced those of Britain and its Empire, France and, in one small corner of the front, Belgium, across no man’s land, which had been churned up by high explosives. Attacks by one side were repulsed by the other, with the attackers suffering heavy casualties. The Australians soon discovered that this was the Valley of the Shadow of Death from which no one could expect to emerge intact.

On 1 July 1916 the British launched an attack against the German lines in the Somme Valley. Almost 60 000 British soldiers fell on the first day.⁷ Before long the Australians were drawn into the fighting. On 23 July 1916 men of the 1st Division AIF launched an attack on the ruined village of Pozières. The assault was at first successful, but the Australians soon came under German artillery fire of unimaginable ferocity. Over the

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next seven weeks the 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions were drawn into the fight. By the time the battle ended in late September 1916 the AIF had lost 23 000 officers and men.⁸

While the AIF, from senior officers down to the diggers in the front line, had learned hard lessons from the fighting at Pozières, the publication of ever-lengthening casualty lists brought the realities of war to their families and loved ones back in Australia. The heavy losses at Pozières left a shortage of trained troops. More men were needed to keep the five AIF divisions in the field, but voluntary recruitment was falling away. The Australian Government, under its Prime Minister, the fractious William Morris (Billy) Hughes, sought to introduce conscription, although many inside the governing Labor Party were unenthusiastic, and some actively opposed to the idea. Pacifists, internationalists and socialists, who regarded the war as a capitalists' trade war, mobilised against conscription. The Catholic Church had little enthusiasm for the war and, following the Easter Rebellion of 1916 in Ireland, most of the clergy and their parishioners, who were largely of Irish background, opposed conscription. In Melbourne the Catholic Archbishop Mannix became a leader of the anti-conscription movement.

Two unsuccessful conscription referenda led to a polarisation of feeling between supporters and opponents of conscription. Campaigns were marred by violence, and anti-conscription protesters were jailed. Sectarianism flourished and the conscription debates left a legacy of anger and distrust which had not abated by the Second World War, when conscription was introduced for Australia's defence.

The heavy casualties at Pozières, and in the following battles on the Western Front, had another effect. In an era when most people attended church, clergy normally had close contact with their parishioners. In the first years of the war, clergymen were often used to notify parishioners of the death of loved ones. By late 1916, as casualty lists lengthened, the sight of an approaching priest or minister was seen by many as a portent of death. Some women, on seeing their parish priest or vicar on their doorstep fainted; others refused to answer the door.

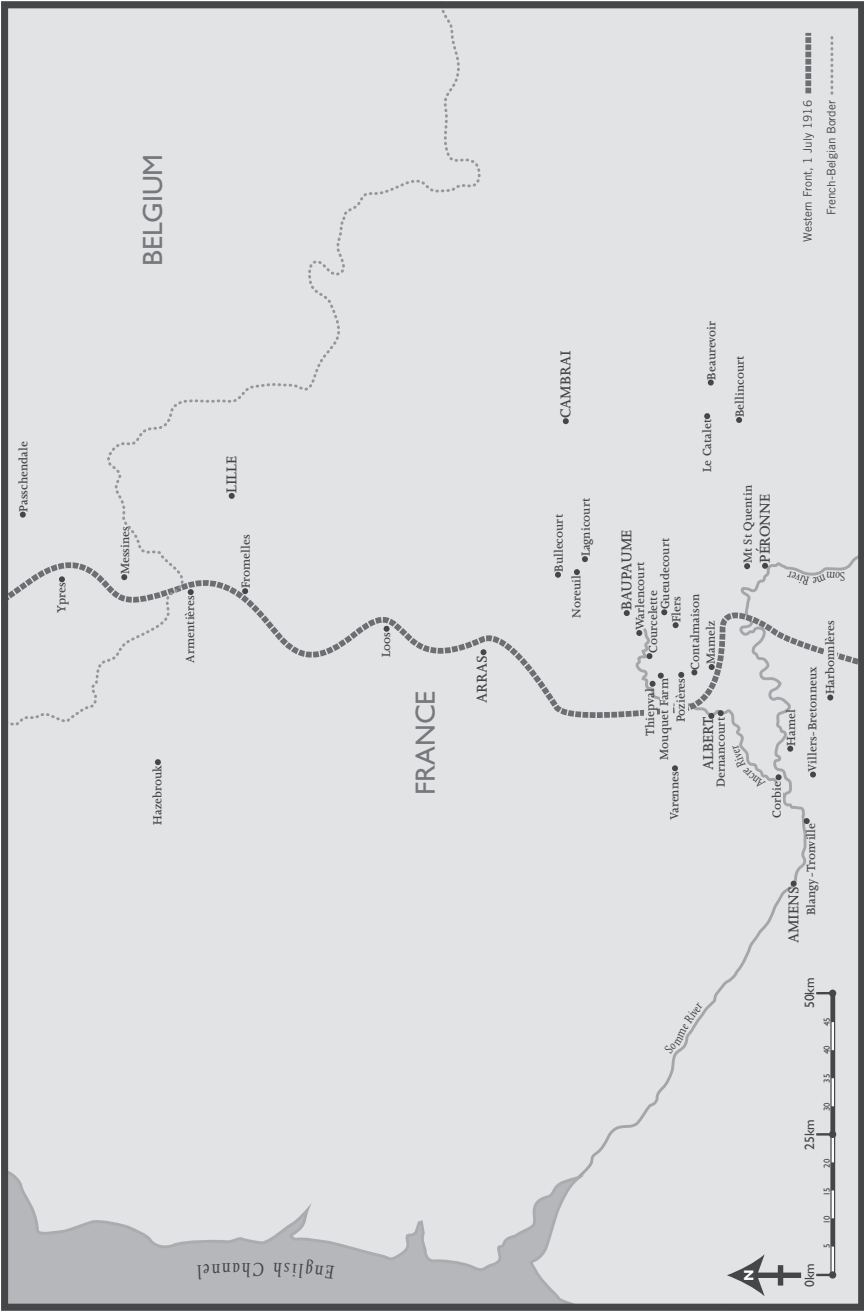
At Pozières, and in the battles that followed, Australia lost many of its best and brightest young men. Those who survived were damaged, mentally as well as physically. Many of the survivors of the war, tortured by memories of what they had seen and experienced, unable to share their memories with those outside their circle of comrades, became like Davey Meredith's father described in *My Brother Jack*, as a man often drunk and enraged, 'muttering to himself and grunting, a gigantic black

silhouette against the dim diffusion of light', as he staggered through the back garden of the family home at night, service revolver in hand, while Davey's mother cowered in the shrubbery.⁹

It seems incontestable that the cumulative effect of losses on the Western Front damaged the national psyche as much as that of individuals. In the years following the First World War, Australia retreated from the outside world. Australians had, as members of the Empire, rallied to defend Britain on the battlefields of Europe. Their experiences had left them disillusioned with the world beyond Australian shores, and introspective. Whereas Britain and Germany produced a literature founded in, and informed by, the wartime experience, Australian writers and poets largely lapsed into silence. It seemed that the horrors of Pozières, and of those other battles large and small that they experienced on the Western Front, were beyond their capacity to assimilate and turn into literature.¹⁰ Artists too found it difficult and, although an Official War Artist program was created by the Australian Government in the last years of the war, modelled on the Canadian scheme, many artists struggled to depict the wartime experience of the mechanised fighting on the Western Front in a meaningful way.

The First World War wrought changes to Australian society, and to the nation in its relationship to the rest of the world. Although those changes cannot be ascribed solely to the horrors experienced by men of the AIF at Pozières and the heavy casualties sustained in that battle, it was the AIF's first major engagement on the Western Front, and was the precursor of all that would follow. At Pozières, the AIF at last met the reality of war as it was fought in the twentieth century; a war of technology in which thousands of men would be mangled and destroyed in the space of a few hours. It would take them, and their loved ones, most of the rest of the century to recover from the experience.

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Map 1 British Sector of the Western Front, 1 July 1916

CHAPTER

PRELUDE TO POZIÈRES

It began as battles have done from time immemorial. Men, trained to seek out and kill their enemy, marched along the sun-soaked roads of Picardy. It was high summer, and the columns of men marched along roads lined with colourful poppies and sunflowers. The marching columns tramped on, past fields of ripening wheat, heavily cultivated farms, tightly planted gardens and orchards, through villages ‘whose streets were bordered by barns with rough timber roof-beams and cracked walls of whitewashed mud and straw’.¹ Clouds of dust marked the passage of the ranks of marching men. As it settled, the dust stained their khaki woollen uniforms, lightly coated their packs and rifles and stuck to the sweat-stained, fur felt ‘slouch’ hats that most of them wore.

In the early stages of the march men whose feet had been softened by months of static trench warfare fell out; others, suffering from the after-effects of too much beer or cheap French wine in their billets the night before, struggled to keep up. But in time, as their feet toughened and hangovers wore off, the troops became more animated as they tramped under the summer sun, singing old marching songs or whistling the latest popular tunes. They struck those who saw them as being physically imposing men of high morale.

Onwards the soldiers marched under the July sun, each one burdened by the full pack and tin helmet carried on his back, while with each passing kilometre the rifle that he could ‘usually throw about like a feather’ began to weigh ‘like a 9.2 inch gun’.² Eventually officers called a halt, and the men fell out. In groups they gathered along the roadside to chat, smoke

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or silently contemplate the future. None of them could ignore the distant but continuous rumble of gunfire that marked their destination.

These men, of the 1st Division, AIF, were on the way to their first major engagement on the Western Front. The division had been in France since March 1916 but initially had been posted to a relatively quiet section of the front at Fleurbaix, near Armentières in north-western France. But now, in mid-July 1916, the 1st Division, together with the 2nd and 4th Divisions of the AIF, were on the move, heading towards the Somme River valley, where British and French forces had been engaged in heavy assaults on German lines since 1 July 1916.

On 19 July 1916 the men of the 1st Division made camp around the village of Warloy. Here they were told what their task was to be. They were to attack the German lines in the vicinity of the village of Pozières, which was soon to gain a reputation with the AIF as ‘a place of sinister name and tragic happenings’.³ Orders were given for the troops to fall in for the last leg of their journey to the jumping-off point for the attack, on the British front line. This time they would march in battle order. Their slouch hats were replaced by steel helmets, and packs were left behind under guard. They would take no changes of clothing, no blankets. Now, in addition to their rifle and ammunition, they carried only an overcoat and waterproof sheet, rolled bandolier fashion and slung across the body, and a haversack containing 48 hours iron rations. Each man was given a piece of pink-coloured cloth to be sewn onto his tunic, high up on the shoulders, so that the Australians could be identified on the battlefield by British reconnaissance aircraft. The men disliked the coloured pieces of cloth, believing they presented obvious targets for the enemy. In readiness for the attack each man was also issued with an extra 220 rounds of ammunition, two (empty) sandbags and two hand grenades.⁴

Preparations completed, the 1st and 3rd Brigades of the 1st Division marched out of Warloy toward the front on a ‘glorious afternoon’. Before long they were in sight of the red rooftops of the town of Albert, nestled in the valley of the Ancre, and its famous ‘leaning Virgin’. Set atop a tower of Albert’s church of Notre Dame de Brebière was a gilded statue of the Madonna clasping the Christ child in her arms. The church had been repeatedly hit by artillery fire, and the statue displaced by a direct hit to the tower, but the metal base prevented it from falling. The statue hung suspended at right angles to the ground, appearing to some as if it were about to dive onto the roadway below. Many of those who marched beneath the Madonna and child found the image fixed forever in their memories,

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Photo I Sausage Valley, the main route from Albert to the front at Pozières, August 1916. (AWM E20113)

so that, long after the fighting had ended, the name Albert ‘still conjures up a picture of the church with the falling statue suspended in mid-air overlooking the battle front’.⁵ Already the golden Virgin had become a subject of myth, with many British and French soldiers believing that if the statue fell to earth the war would end.⁶ The Australians with typical irreverence soon nicknamed the golden figure Fanny Durack, after the Australian female champion swimmer who had won a gold medal at the 1912 Stockholm Olympics.

The Australians marched beneath the prostrate Virgin and child, through the town, which seemed to be ‘very eerie, the houses being shattered and the cobbled road full of shell holes’.⁷ The town may have seemed eerie, but it was not quiet, for the marching columns had to make their way through streets crowded with ‘clattering, roaring streams of traffic and troops, transport, guns, water carts, travelling kitchens, strings of horses, motor cars and lorries so that it was difficult in some parts to get through’.⁸ Leaving Albert by the Bapaume Road the men were in high spirits, ‘singing as we swung along, little realising what lay before and wishful of impressing the Tommies with our martial endeavour’.⁹ Before long they were halted at the foot of a long grassy slope that marked the last

relatively undamaged countryside before they entered the shell-pocked landscape that scarred the Somme battlefield. There the troops rested and ate their tea. Those officers who had accompanied the men on horseback now sent their horses back to relative safety. From now on all movement would be on foot. As darkness fell the men of the 1st and 3rd Brigades waited patiently for guides from the British 68th and 2nd Brigades, whom they were to replace, to come and lead them to the front-line trenches.

At 6pm on 19 July the troops moved off, led by the 9th Battalion (Queensland). They made their way along Sausage Valley, a long shallow depression that was the main route to the front line facing Pozières, and which soon would be dubbed Sausage ‘Gully’ by the Australians. The valley wound for more than two kilometres across landscape covered in old shell holes and the smashed remains of old German trenches that had been fought over only a fortnight earlier. All along the valley, the white chalk and red-brown soil that had been churned up by shellfire was crossed by hundreds of tracks leading in all directions. In the hot summer weather the continuous traffic stirred clouds of dust, but after rain the tracks and shell holes turned to mud, becoming slippery and treacherous underfoot. Units waiting in reserve were bivouacked in old trenches and shell craters that lined each slope of the valley, while on the crest British artillery batteries, ‘seemingly locked wheel to wheel, 18-pounders, howitzers and huge guns . . . everywhere’, kept up a barrage on the German positions, almost knocking over the passing Australians with the noise and blast of their discharge.¹⁰

As the Australians continued down Sausage Valley towards the front they saw increasing evidence of the devastation wrought by war. They passed what once had been the site of an old French village, but now no stone was left unturned. All that remained was ‘a solitary rose climbing from what had been a gateway, its solitary flowering bud turned towards the heavens that had been so unkind to its surroundings’. Scattered all around were ‘heaps of used ammunition, shells and war litter of all kinds, broken rifles, equipment, guns, boxes of biscuits and ammunition . . . strewn everywhere’. Then came the most tangible evidence of war’s destructiveness, as they made their way through an area filled with the sickly smell of death, and ‘half buried men, mules and horses came into view’.¹¹

The valley had received its name from its elongated sausage shape, but Sergeant John Edey of the 5th Battalion believed the name had a more sinister origin, as he looked on the ‘sausage meat of men and horses’