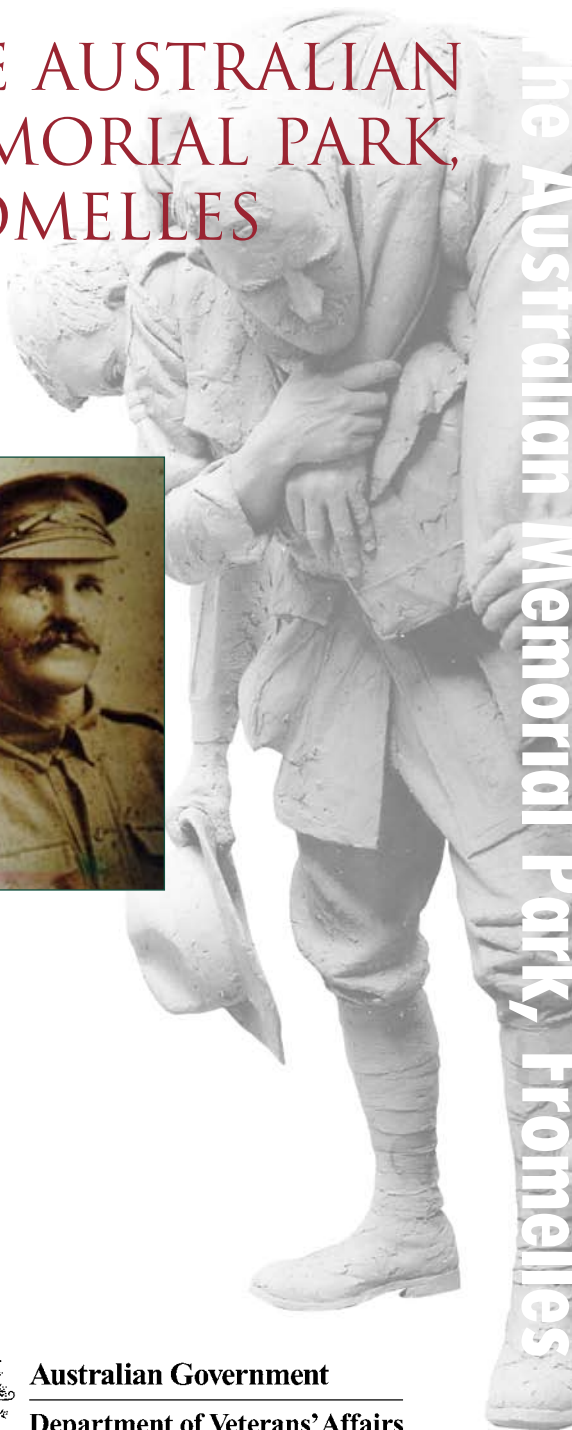
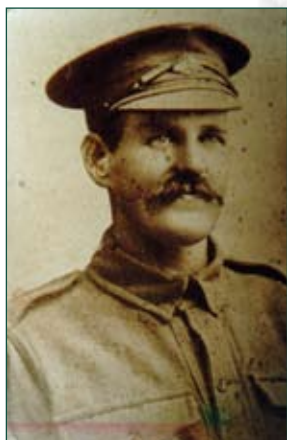


THE AUSTRALIAN MEMORIAL PARK, FROMELLES



Australian Government
Department of Veterans' Affairs

Office of Australian War Graves



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HE BATTLE AT FROMELLES: 19–20 JULY 1916

'The Battle of the Somme' started on 1 July 1916. To reinforce its army, the Germans began to bring troops from other fronts. When battalions from Lille were reported entraining for the Somme, the British devised 'an attack at Fromelles' which would, they hoped, persuade the Germans to keep their men there. The task was given to the XI British Corps which brought together the 61st British Division and the 5th Australian Division for the attack. Both were inexperienced, the Australians having arrived 29 June and the British a month earlier.



*The German block-houses in 1918, now the site of the Australian Memorial
AWM E05787*

In a hurried and poorly planned operation the Divisions attacked on a front of 4 kilometres. The German lines had been consolidated, often behind concrete block-houses, over the previous 15 months, with their artillery ideally placed behind them on the high ground of Aubers Ridge. In contrast the Australian artillery only began to organise on 9 July. Over the next few days the Australian infantry, in full view of German observers, carried forward ammunition, sandbags, picks and shovels, duckboards, a tramline, food,

water and medical supplies, often working 24 hour shifts. The British troops had carried in 1500 gas cylinders (four men to a cylinder). When it was realised there was no wind to blow the gas over the German lines, and that they were a danger if kept unused in the front line, nearly all the cylinders were carried out. Thus, the rank and file were 'on their knees' when the attack was scheduled for the morning of 17 July. That day early mists prevented the artillery from registering its fire onto its targets, and the attack was rescheduled for 19 July at 6 pm in case of further mists.

The Bavarians on the other side held up a notice on 18 July 'Why so long?—you are 24 hours late'—a most revealing event. While the significance of this was lost on those directing the operation, it was not lost on the men in the trenches.



A concrete reinforced observation post in the town of Fromelles
AWM E05787

Because of the low-lying, water-logged nature of the area, the deep trenches used elsewhere on the Western Front were not possible at Fromelles. Breastworks had to be built instead. These were walls up to three metres thick, constructed of bags filled with local mud and built up in front of shallow trenches. These breastworks, often known as

parapets, provided very poor protection from artillery shell fire. It was over these parapets, or through 'sally ports', exits built through the breastworks, that the men had to begin to attack the German Line. The Australian and German lines were separated by a strip of land known as 'No-Man's Land'. In front of the Australians, No-Man's Land ranged in width from 80 to 400 metres. Running through it was a small river much diverted by shell craters. The whole area had become a marsh in which neglected crops and wild grass, about a metre high, hid the treacherous nature of the terrain. Barbed wire was everywhere.

The German machine guns were well sited and covered their entire line. The most formidable installation was at the Sugarloaf, a heavily reinforced building, perhaps once a farmhouse, on 'the elbow' of the line overlooking the widest part of No-Man's Land and so able to provide enfilade fire over more than half the front.

Against such odds, after a heavy but inaccurate artillery bombardment, described by some as worse than anything they had experienced on Gallipoli,



This remarkable photograph was taken by Lance Corporal C. H. Lorking as men of the 53rd Battalion waited to don their equipment for the attack at Fromelles, 19 July 1916. Only three of those here shown came out of the action alive and those three were wounded AWM A3042

the men of the two Divisions (12 Battalions, 2 from each of 6 Brigades) went into battle.

On the far left of the Australian sector was 8th Brigade, next to it 14th and then 15th. On their right the 184th British, then 183rd, and at the far right facing the Wick salient, another substantial blockhouse, was the 182nd. The 8th, 14th and 182nd Bdes were able to capitalise on the relative narrowness of No-Man's Land to their front and penetrate the German lines before dark. The 183rd fell victim to a particularly accurate bombardment, and the 184th faced the full fury of the Sugarloaf's machine guns and was inoperative after 15 minutes. That then allowed all the Sugarloaf's firepower to concentrate on the 15th Bde men trying to work their way over 400 metres of No-Man's Land. It was of course impossible, and they were cut down wave by wave. It is thought that a few men might have reached the wire immediately in front of the Sugarloaf as pieces of Australian uniform were found there after the Armistice.



The view of the Australian trenches from a German observation post in Fromelles, possibly the church AWM A03042

Later in the evening, XI Corps HQ asked whether it was possible for the 184th, supported by the 15th, to mount another attack on the Sugarloaf. This was not possible for the 184th because they were not permitted to use their reserve battalion. HQ Australian 5th Div, however, authorised the use of the reserve battalion in the 15th Bde. A complete

shambles in communications resulted in the 58th Bn and survivors of the first attack (59th Bn) going forward alone. They failed. Only darkness saved them from extinction.

It was the 14th Bde's success that was the most spectacular. They captured their objective and advanced well beyond it, aware that the 8th on their left were also well placed, but unaware of the total absence of any support on their right. A small party moved half a kilometre behind the lines, but they were very much alone. At 5 am on 20 July it was decided by XI Corps HQ to withdraw, leaving the men of the 8th, 14th and 182nd to find their way back. In all instances the Germans had reorganised overnight and came round behind the intruders, so that they had to fight back through a German line to return to their own.

The losses would have been even worse had not the reserve battalions provided assistance but even so some 470 prisoners were taken from 8th and 14th Bdes. On the next day, these, and the few British captured, were paraded in Haubourdin: it is said that the populace came forward and gave them chocolates.



Australian prisoners in Haubourdin on 20 July 1916

AWM C3112

By mid-morning on 20 July there were, by German estimates (later proved to be very accurate), 2000 corpses on No-Man's Land. There were also thousands of immobile wounded sheltering in shell holes, ditches, in the river or in thick grass. Stretcher bearers, together with everybody else who could not withstand the call of broken men, worked continuously bringing the wounded off the battlefield, and in most cases were left by the Germans to do that work. The clearance of the wounded was to Regimental Aid Posts near Petillon and Le Trou, thence to Advanced Dressing Stations at Rouge du Bout, and Croix Blanche, then back to Main Dressing Stations like the one at Bac St Maur. The mention of these is to explain the location of cemeteries near some of these places.

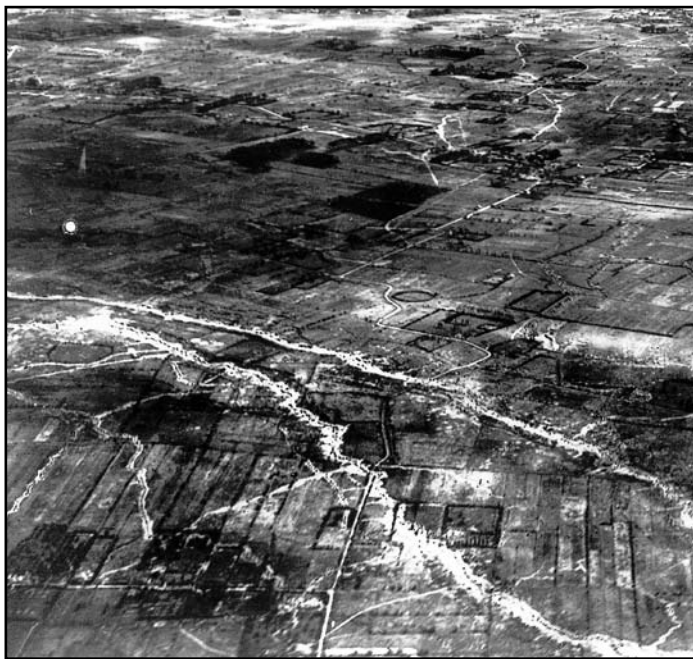
Around noon, opposite 8th Bde's position, a truce was offered by the Saxon Regiment that had relieved the Bavarian Regiment overnight, to enable the dead and wounded to be evacuated. This was rejected by the British and Australian HQs. However, at a lower level, an arrangement was reached whereby the wounded were taken back under cover of darkness. The dead were left where they fell. Later, men were sent out to take from the bodies their identity discs and personal belongings, and these were subsequently posted to the next of kin. This is one reason why there are so many unidentified Australians in the surrounding cemeteries.

Both sides then set about rebuilding their parapets and trenches, in full view of each other, later conducting raids, but little more than that. The 5th Division remained in the line till October when it moved south to the Somme region, where the great battle had now finished.

VISITING THE FROMELLES BATTLEFIELD

The importance of this battlefield in Australian history is that it was here that the 1st Australian Imperial Force (AIF) fought its first major battle in Europe.

The initial impression of the visitor to any of the battlefields of France is the quiet beauty of the war cemeteries. Those around Fromelles are no exception—in fact Le Trou and Le Petillon are two of the most beautiful. All Commonwealth war cemeteries are signposted with a distinctive green and white sign and in most cases car parking is not difficult. At each cemetery there is a Register which describes the site, the origin of the burials and a complete listing of the graves. In many cases, this register gives details of the man's full name, number, battalion, and next of kin. The inscriptions at the foot of most headstones, which were chosen by the next of kin, are not recorded, so visitors wanting to recall some of these most poignant phrases should make their own record.





In other battle areas there are towns, ruins, railways, tunnels and hills to provide points of reference when exploring the place of battle. But at Fromelles only the modest 40 metre high Aubers Ridge provides a vantage point. Thus it is necessary to visit the towns below that ridge to get an idea of how difficult it was, first to win a battle, and then to hold that victory on these flat plains.

The towns of Fromelles, Fleurbaix, Sailly, Aubers, Laventie were all important in the events of the time—look in local shops for copies of old postcards which sometimes include ‘before and after’ views of the town.



THE BATTLEFIELD ON 19 JULY 1916

Taken from over British held territory before the battle and looking southeast, this view reveals the enormous expanse of No-Man's Land between the Australian and German lines. The prominent straight road running up from the bottom of the photograph is Rue Delvas, thus the present day location of VC Corner Cemetery is beyond where it meets the Australian trenches. Where the road cuts through the German lines is the location of the Australian Memorial Park. The road then continues to the town of Fromelles, at the centre of the photo.

AWM ES990



The Fromelles Museum M. Delabarre

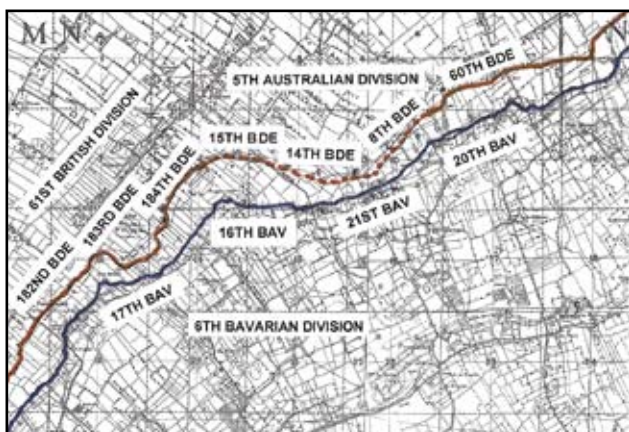
A visit to the churches of Fromelles, Fleurbaix and Aubers, rebuilt in the 1920s, reveal important aspects of local life, as do the memorials to the French dead of the war in the town squares. Although the French Army was not involved on 19/20 July 1916, it did fight nearby at other times, so the huge French War Cemetery of Notre Dame de Lorette at Ablain St. Nazaire, 8 kms west of Lens (30 kms south of Fromelles), is an opportunity to see and understand their loss.

In Fromelles itself, the small museum in the Town Hall dedicated to the Australians and British who fought here, has an excellent display of battlefield artefacts. It is on the initiative of the Mayor of the town, the curator of the Museum and a few members of the Association pour le Souvenir de la Bataille de Fromelles (ASBF) that so much has been done to remember the 19–20 July 1916.

To visit Fromelles in July is to experience the misty mornings, hot days and well advanced crops that the men knew in 1916, whereas up until April the landscape is simply fields of rich brown soil awaiting the first warm sun to bring forth the sugar beet, maize, tobacco and a variety of vegetables—cabbages, potatoes, beans, peas, cauliflowers and chicories—the main crops of the area. After the harvest in September, ploughing is done and, even after 80 years, relics of the battle may still be found.

Dumps of shells, coils of barbed wire and other material might be seen on the roadside prior to being picked up by the Army. Visitors are warned against touching any such items, and directed to local town markets where 'safe' war souvenirs are in plentiful supply.

The general area on the main map saw much action in the Great War and visits to nearby Neuve Chapelle, Festubert, Estaires, Bethune and la Basse, not forgetting of course Armentières, are recommended.



THE TRENCH MAP OF 1916, although greatly reduced, shows clearly the hundreds of farms and woods, as well as the two front lines: the British line in RED, the Australian line in DOTTED RED, and the German line in BLUE.

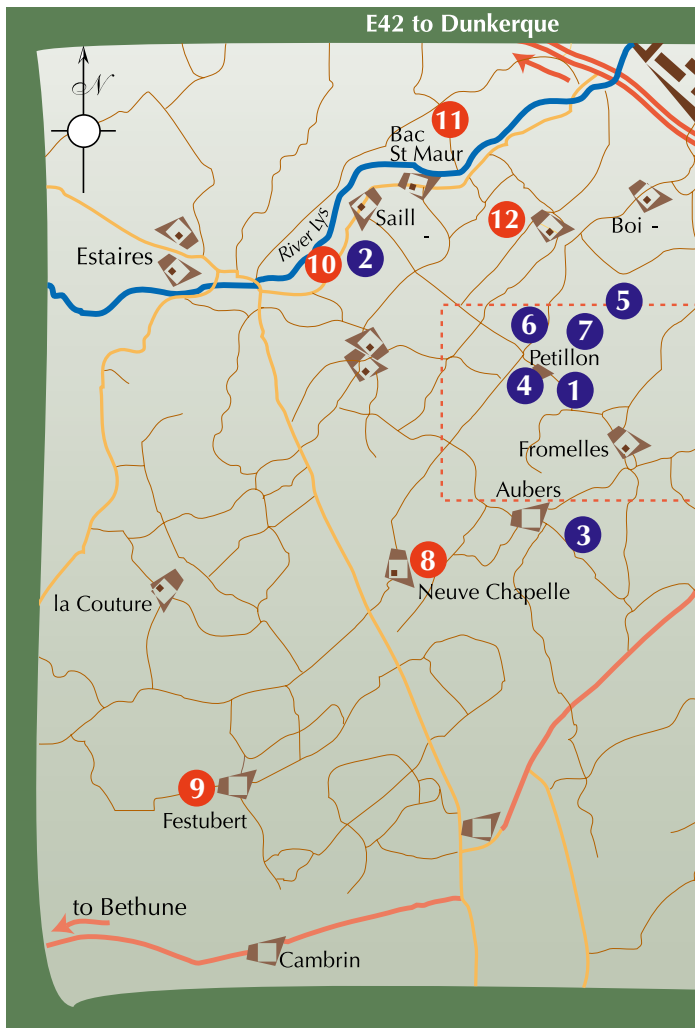
The Sugarloaf, which became infamous during this battle, is the salient, protruding north, occupied by the 16th Bavarian Regiment. It took its name from the similarity of its shape on maps to the locally produced sugarloaves.

The area covered by this map is marked on the main map, and the aerial view on page 8–9 is from the top left corner.

AWM A3042

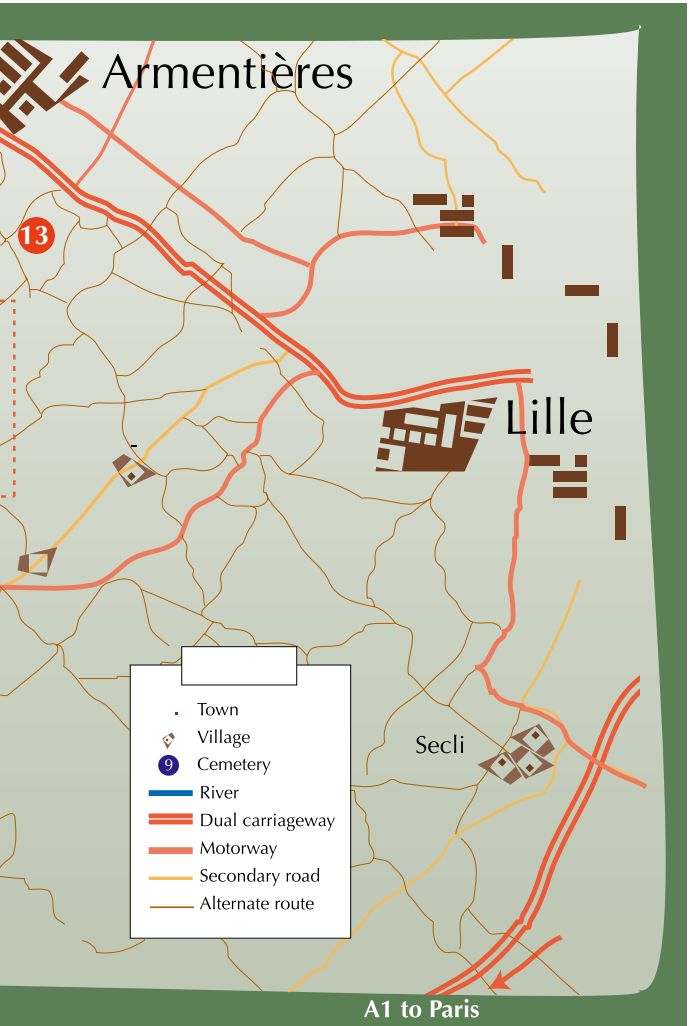
VISITING THE CEMETERIES

The best guide to the area is Michelin Map No 51, specially overprinted with locations of Commonwealth War Graves Cemeteries and Memorials. There are almost 50 marked sites in this area; the following 7 have associations with 19–20 July 1916.



VC Corner Cemetery

Although not at a corner, the cemetery takes its name from a point near the T junction of Rue-du-Bois and Rue Delvas. About 120 metres north of that junction a communication trench ran from Rue-du-Bois, parallel with Rue Delvas for some 600 metres before turning south and connecting with the front line. The trench was known as VC Avenue because in earlier fighting in this vicinity at least 7 VCs were won. As an illustration of the intensity



of the conflict here, no less than 40 of the 144 VCs awarded in Belgium and France up to 19 July 1916 were won within 13 kilometres of Fromelles. None, however, were awarded for the battle of 19–20 July 1916.

VC Corner is the only all-Australian cemetery in France. On the screen wall are the names of those who died in battle and have no known grave. Beneath the two lawn areas surrounded by gardens, the remains of 410 unidentified Australians are buried. A ceremony of remembrance is held here on 19 July, or the nearest Sunday. Wreaths are laid by the towns-people of Fromelles on the actual day and on Anzac Day and Armistice Day—11 November. ①

Anzac Cemetery, Sailly-sur-la-Lys

This cemetery began as a direct result of 19–20 July and there are 111 named Australian graves. Many buried here died upon evacuation from the battle-field as this was a clearing point for the Australian Field Ambulance. An exception was Capt N Gibbins, 55th Bn (I.A.5), who lost his life while directing his men back to their lines over the German parapet. ②

V C Corner Cemetery—the names of 1299 missing Australians are recorded on the wall
R. Leffler



Aubers Ridge British Cemetery

Of the 718 graves here, only 273 are named, and of those 17 are of Australians killed on 19 July, mostly 59th Bn (Plot I). Plot II contains the dead of the 61st British Division. Many were brought in by the Germans, behind whose lines this cemetery was during the battle and for the next two years, but the majority are from smaller burial grounds and concentrated here after the Armistice. ③

Le Trou Aid Post Cemetery

Le Trou itself was 15th Bde HQ. The nearby aid post treated the wounded as they were brought in. This extremely picturesque cemetery, reached by a small bridge over a moat, has 351 graves, 56 of them Australian, probably all from 19–20 July. Only four however are named: two each from 32nd and 54th Bns. ④

Rue David Cemetery

Comparatively few of the 90 or so named AIF graves are from 19–20 July, although there is a group of 60th Bn from that date. It is generally accepted that the vast majority of the 266 unidentified AIF graves are from Fromelles, likewise a large proportion of the unidentified British. Of special interest here is Pte Billy Ellsdale, 47th Bn (I.E.44) probably the first Aboriginal digger killed in France, 7 July 1916. ⑤

Rue-du-Bois Cemetery

Of the 832 named graves, 242 are Australian—two long rows (Plot I, Row B and Plot II, Row A) contain men mostly from 15th Australian Bde and 2/1st Buckinghamshire whose bodies were brought from Fromelles prior to the Armistice in 1918. Major G G McCrae, CO of 60th Bn and of the prominent Victorian literary family is buried here (I.F.33). ⑥

Rue Petillon Military Cemetery

This is a particularly beautiful cemetery and has 1507 graves,



of which 291 are of Australians. Plot I, Row K, has over 30 men from 58th Bn, victims of the German raid of 15 July. Their headstones are close together, signifying a trench grave: Row L has 23 members of 31st Bn, victims of 19–20 July. Nearby (I.K.109) is Sergeant Challis, from the 1915 Carlton Premiership side and veteran of 70 games. Chaplain Maxted MC, (I.K.2) was credited with helping some 150 wounded away from the front line. In 1927 the body of Major Roy Harrison of 54th Bn killed in the battle was found and identified by his silver cigarette case (I.D.20). 7

Other cemeteries containing Australian commemorations are:

Brewery Orchard Cemetery
Estaires Communal Cemetery
Laventie Military Cemetery
Lille Southern Cemetery
Pont du Hem Military Cemetery, Laventie

THER PLACES OF INTEREST

Neuve Chapelle

In March 1915 one of the bloodiest battles of the war was fought at Neuve Chapelle to win what Conan Doyle described as ‘a slice of ground no larger than a moderate (English) farm’. The Indian Memorial, one of the finest in France, numerous British cemeteries and a splendid Portuguese cemetery are nearby and silently give witness to what happened here. 8

Festubert

At the end of 1914 the British held a line from here to east of Armentières which included Fromelles. The area forward to la Bassée was subject to much bitter fighting until the Germans took la Bassée, so securing their line west of Lille and beyond for the next two years. 9

Sailly-sur-la-Lys

HQ of 5th Division, this town was also the main billet for 15th Bde. ANZAC Cemetery and Canadian Cemetery are opposite each other half a kilometre along the road to Estaires. 10

Bac St. Maur

One of the Main Dressing Stations for the battle: nearby Croix-du-Bac Military Cemetery is mainly British. 11

Fleurbaix

As this was an Australian base, the men at the time referred to 'the Battle of Fleurbaix' and that name sometimes appears on Australian memorials. In 1920 when the first full description was published it became known as 'the Battle of Fromelles'. 12

Bois-Grenier

Featured prominently in AIF operations prior to Fromelles, and SE of here on the night 25–26 June Pte W. Jackson, 17th Bn, a 19 year old farmer from NSW won the VC, the first in France by an Australian. Nearby Ration Farm Military Cemetery has many 5th Division men, whilst those in Brewery Orchard Cemetery are 2nd Division. 13

Armentières

A busy industrial town taken by the Germans in their first advance. The British recovered it 17 October 1914 and held it till 10 April 1918. During that time it was hardly damaged and was a popular centre for allied armies. During the German occupation and prior to their departure, it was reduced to a ruin. Armentières was freed on 2 October 1918.

Lille

Occupied by the Germans in October 1916, this large industrial city and rail junction was one of their main centres throughout the war. It was liberated on 14 October 1918 by, among others, the XI British Corps and elements of Australian Artillery. The women and children of the city had been sent by the Germans to block the roads against the advancing troops, but instead they turned into welcoming crowds.

TROOPS AT THE BATTLE OF FROMELLES

The Australians

The 5th Australian Division was formed in Egypt at the beginning of 1916, and for a short period guarded part of the Suez Canal. It came to Marseilles at the end of June and was billeted north of Saily-sur-la-Lys. It had three Brigades (Bdes), each of four Battalions (Bns) usually from one district or area—8th Bde (29th Bn—Victoria, 30th Bn—NSW, 31st Bn—Qld/Vic, 32nd Bn—SA/WA). 14th Bde (53rd, 54th, 55th and 56th Bns—all NSW). 15th Bde (57th, 58th, 59th and 60th Bns—all Victoria).

The Division's 5533 casualties were made up of 1917 killed in action and died of wounds, 3146 wounded, and 470 POWs. In terms of Bns, the casualties were: 29th—216, 30th—352, 31st—544, 32nd—718: 53rd—625, 54th—540, 55th—341, 56th—151: 57th—35, 58th—248, 59th—695, 60th—757.

The British

The 61st British Division (The Secondline South Midland Territorial Division), was brought together in September 1915 and moved to France and La Gorgue area in May 1916. It consisted of three Brigades, each of four Battalions: 182nd Bde: (2/5th, 2/6th, 2/7th, 2/8th Royal Warwickshire); 183rd Bde: (2/4th, 2/6th Gloucestershire, and 2/5th, 2/7th Worcestershire) and 184th Bde: (2/1st, 2/4th Oxfordshire & Buckinghamshire, 2/5th Gloucestershire and 2/1st Royal Berkshire).

The Division had 519 killed and died of wounds, with 61 POWs, and 977 wounded, a total of 1547 casualties. The main British cemeteries as far as 'the attack at Fromelles' is concerned, are Aubers Ridge British Cemetery, Rue Petillon Military Cemetery, Laventie Military Cemetery, and Rue David Military Cemetery.

The Germans

In July 1916 the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division held the line at Fromelles: they had been there since March 1915. It consisted of, left to right, the 17th Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment, 16th BRIR and 21st BRIR. In the 16th, known as the List Regiment (Col. List was its first commander), Adolf Hitler was a runner and on 19–20 July that unit had charge of the Sugarloaf. German casualties totalled around 1500, the 16th had 107 killed, so it is probable that German dead were some 450. The main German cemeteries in respect to 19–20 July 1916 are at Beaucamps-Ligny, Wicres and Fournes-en-Weppes.

After the fall of France in 1940 Hitler and two of his old army comrades toured the area, visiting, among other places, the block-house on the Fromelles-Aubers road. A plaque was erected in 1942 on his former billet, in Rue Froidherbe, Fournes-en-Weppes and that is now in the Fromelles Museum.

Further reading:

C.E.W. Bean—Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18. Volume III.

P. Charlton—Pozières.

R.S. Corfield—Hold Hard, Cobbers. Vol 1.

A.D. Ellis—The Story of the 5th Australian Division.

Researched and written by Robin S Corfield

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to the Sugarloaf

GERMAN FRONT LINE

~

This montage has been compiled from British air photographs, taken from various heights, at times of or near that of the Battle. To the east, Australian troops (circled) cross No-Man's Land. Other groups of Australians (in the squares) from the 8th and 14th Bdes can be seen in the forward position they occupied before dark.

~

An aerial photograph of a landscape, possibly a coastal or riverine area. A red circle highlights a specific location in the center. Two white arrows point towards the top left and bottom center. The text 'to Petillon' is located near the top left arrow, and 'Site of the Australian Memorial Park' is located near the bottom center arrow.

to Petillon

Site of the Australian
Memorial Park

An aerial photograph of a battlefield, likely during World War I. The terrain is rugged and shows signs of military activity, including trench lines and fortified positions. A white arrow points to a specific location in the upper center of the image, labeled 'AUSTRALIAN FRONT LINE'. Another white arrow points to a location in the lower center, labeled 'to Fromelles'. The date '19 July 1916' is printed in the middle right. In the bottom right corner, there is vertical text: '36 N 9' and '19-7-16'.

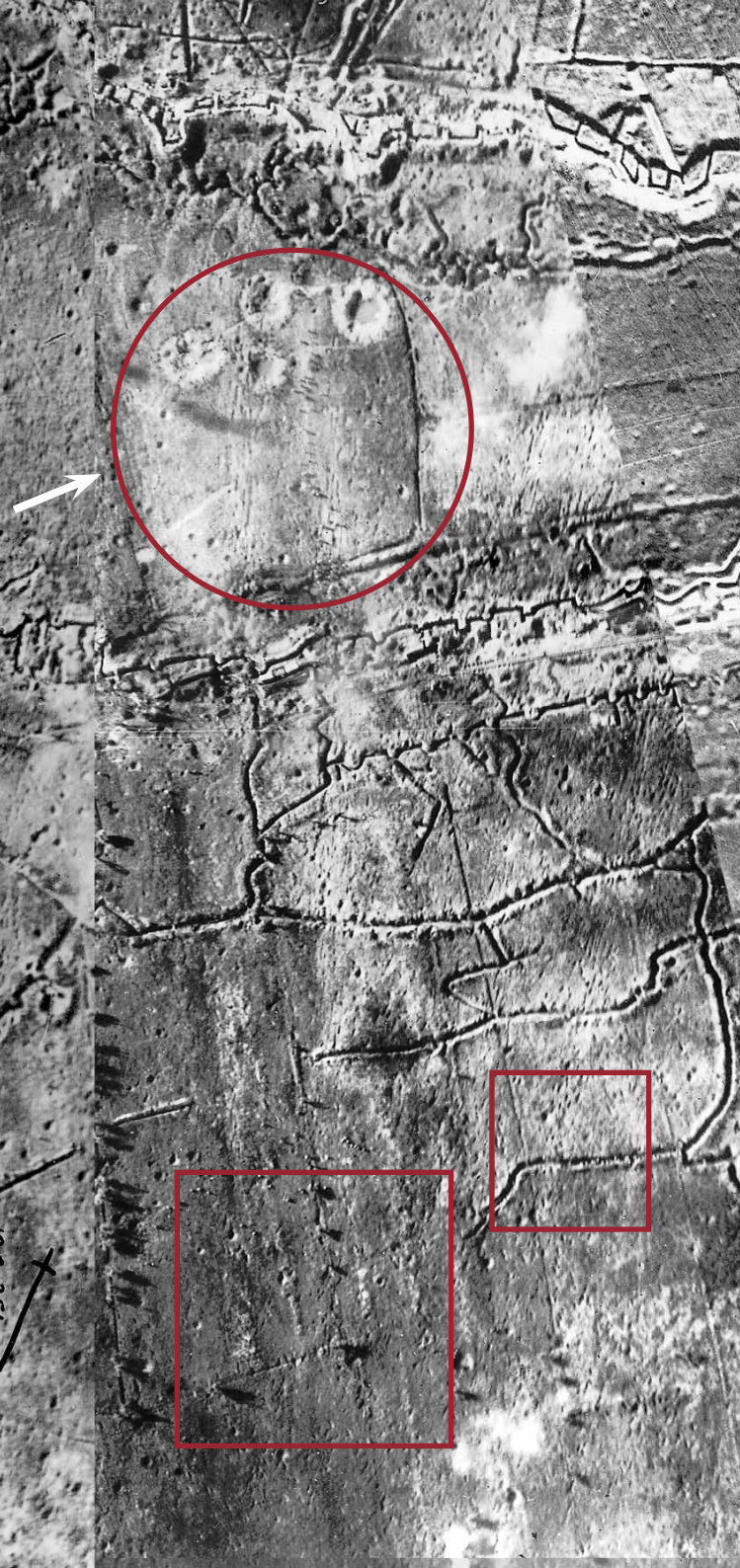
AUSTRALIAN FRONT LINE

**Australian Troops
19 July 1916**

to Fromelles

36 N 9

19-7-16



It was no light work getting in with a heavy weight on your back especially if he had a broken leg or arm...You had to lie down and get him on your back; then rise and duck for your life with a chance of getting a bullet in you before you were safe. One foggy morning...we could hear someone over towards the German entanglements calling for a stretcher bearer; it was an appeal no man could stand against, so some of us rushed out and had a hunt. We found a fine haul of wounded and brought them in; but it was not where I heard this fellow calling, so I had another shot for it, and came across a splendid specimen of humanity trying to wriggle into a trench with a big wound in his thigh...another man about 30 yards out sang out 'Don't forget me, cobber,' I went in and got four volunteers with stretchers and we got both men in safely.

Simon Fraser, son of James and Mary Fraser, was born at Byaduk, Victoria, on 31 December 1876. The above extract is from a letter he wrote on 31 July 1916



THE AUSTRALIAN MEMORIAL PARK is situated around the remains of German fortifications on the part of their line that was captured by the 14th Australian Brigade and held overnight on 19–20 July 1916. The Park and the nearby VC Corner Cemetery, some 3 kms from Fromelles, in northern France, are 8 kms south of Armentières, and 16 kms west of Lille.

THE SCULPTURE ‘COBBERS’, by Peter Corlett of Melbourne is based on 3101 Sergeant Simon Fraser of 57th Battalion, a 40 year old Victorian farmer turned soldier who rescued many men from the battlefield: the man he carries is of 60th Battalion. Later, Fraser, as a Lieutenant in 58th Battalion, was mentioned in Despatches before being killed at Bullecourt on 12 May 1917. He is remembered on the Villers-Bretonneux Memorial as he has no known grave.





Australian Government

Office of Australian War Graves

The Fromelles Memorial is one of a number of memorials, site markers and information plaques erected and maintained by the Office on battlefields of wars in which Australian Forces have been engaged. These are designed to inform present-day Australians of the sacrifices made by earlier generations and to show where and how some of Australia's history was made.

The Office of Australian War Graves has records of the burial places of 67,593 Australians killed during war, together with the location of memorials to the 35,574 missing with no known grave.

Relatives and others in search of such information should contact
the Research Officer,
Office of Australian War Graves,
PO Box 21, Woden, ACT, 2606, Australia
Telephone: (02) 6289 6510
Fax: (02) 6289 4861

