

1918: DEFINING VICTORY

INTRODUCTION

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1998 marks the 80th anniversary of the last year of the First World War. It was called the Great War, the war to end all wars. Australia had been heavily involved, initially in 1914 in German New Guinea where the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force landed at Rabaul, and then in the Middle East and the costly Gallipoli campaign of 1915. In 1916 the Australian Imperial Force, less the bulk of the mounted troops who were to remain in the Middle East, were moved to the Western Front.

By July and August 1916 Australian troops were involved in the first Somme offensive at Pozieres and Mouquet Farm, and in October at Bapaume. The following year, 1917, they were again heavily engaged in May and June at Vimy Ridge, Bullecourt and Messines, and from August to December in the great battles of the Ypres offensive—Menin Road, Polygon Wood, Broodseinde and Passchendaele.

Battle casualties made it difficult keeping the Australian divisions up to strength and one of the divisions, the 4th, was made a depot division to the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 5th Divisions. These were later formed into the Australian Corps, but it was not until May 1918 that the Corps was commanded by an Australian, Lieutenant-General Sir John Monash.

Early in 1918 the Australians were involved in preventing the capture of Amiens, Hazebrouck and Villers-Bretonneux during the major German offensive. During the final battles of the war they were engaged at Mont St Quentin, Peronne and the breaching of the Hindenburg Line. They were still advancing when the Armistice was signed.

The cost of the war in human terms was enormous. In Australia the total enlistments were in excess of 416,000, and this was without conscription. Of these, some 331,000 embarked for service overseas. The total Australian casualties, killed and wounded, came to 215,000. This very high proportion of casualties was probably due in part to the fact that most of the Australians were front line troops engaged throughout the war in heavy fighting.

The human cost was also felt very keenly at home. Families who lost their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons had in many instances lost their means of support. There was also the other cost—the crippled, maimed and damaged men who survived the war. Often whole districts were affected when a battalion raised from that area suffered extensive casualties.

Many of you at this conference, perhaps most of you, can claim a family connection to someone who served in the war. I am sure that most of us here saw some of the coverage of the commemorations which took place in France earlier this year when the memorials at Fromelles and Le Hamel were officially dedicated. You will also be aware of the generous gesture of the French Government in awarding those Australian veterans of the war the Legion of Honour. Survivors of the Great War are few and are fading away. The theme of this conference is, I believe, appropriate while the war is still in living memory.

The reason for this conference is not, however, commemorative. Everybody needs to use history. We need to look at what occurred in the past in order to analyse what happened, to avoid the errors which were made, and to adapt any innovations which might help us now. In this conference we are looking in particular at 1918 and addressing those factors which helped define victory after four long and costly years of war.