



**FRANK MACDONALD MM
MEMORIAL PRIZE**

1917: The Worst Year Of A
Hideous War (For Australia And
Australians) Wrote Max
Blenkin, Defence
Correspondent Australian
Associated Press, December 14,
2016. How Accurate Do You
Think This Statement Is?

Nicole Patrick | Word Count: 1182

World War One (WWI), known at the time as 'The Great War', was a war of frightful proportions. Its origins were complex, its impact on military operations was revolutionary, and the extent of its destruction was horrifying. In December 2016, Defence correspondent Max Blenkin wrote an article titled "*1917: The Worst Year Of A Hideous War [For Australia And Australians]*". But, in a nation that had 416,809 enlistments, of whom more than 61,532 were killed and 156,000 were wounded or taken prisoner¹, is it possible to classify a single year as the worst for such a broad community? As horrifying as WWI was, it is misleading to select a single year of profound tragedy for an entire nation. The statistics of WWI, particularly those for 1917, do not necessarily reflect the degree of disaster that fell upon an individual, town or Australia as a whole.

On 4 August 1914, Britain declared war against Germany, and Australia, being a colony of Britain was instantly also at war. Australia's first major contribution began in April 1915, when the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) troops landed on the formidable shores of Gallipoli. After 8 months of desolation, allied troops retreated but not before losing 8,141 men². 1916 brought even more bloodshed than 1915, with Australia suffering huge losses in battles such as Pozieres, Mouquet Farm and Fromelles. When 1917 finally dawned, the carnage reached astonishing new heights with AIF troops suffering 76,836 casualties by the end of the year³. Men fought valiantly in battles such as Bullecourt, Messines and Passchendaele, and yet gains throughout the year were minimal. The year began with a dreary winter in which Australian troops were involved in minor operations.

¹ *First World War 1914-18 | The Australian War Memorial.* (2017).

² "ANZAC Day - *The Telegraph*". (2017).

³ "Australian Post Collectables - A Look Back At 1917". (2017).

By early April, Australian troops advanced on a German outpost in the small French town of Bullecourt. The first battle of Bullecourt, which began on 11 April 1917, came to a bitter end within 24 hours of it beginning. The result of it was catastrophic, with AIF troops losing many men and the Australian 4th Division being crippled as a fighting force for many months to follow. During that short 24 hour period, around 1,170 soldiers were taken prisoner which came to be the largest number of Australian POWs in WWI. Throughout the remainder of 1917, in spite of growing casualties, Australian troops from Europe to the Middle-East faced their enemies with admirable courage. The successes of 1917, while limited, were not insignificant. Australian troops fighting on the Messines Ridge on 7 June, for instance, found reason to celebrate after a successful ambush. But even such triumphs as these were coloured by horrific casualties. In 1917, Australia suffered their greatest loss, yet this does not prove Blenkins' claim that 1917 was Australia's "worst year". Numbers alone cannot measure the depth of every Australian's suffering. Australia is a nation built on its people and therefore, one cannot classify a time period purely based on figures.

For many, war was presumed to be an adventure from which they would as heroes, but this was not the reality. For thousands, the echo of gunfire was the final noise they heard. The 53rd Battalion of the AIF arrived in France on 27 June 1916, entering the front line for the first time 14 days later and were instantly embroiled in the savage fighting at Fromelles. The 53rd lost all but three of their men, so for the family of the men that died, 1916 would be their worst year and although a miniscule part of Australia, they are Australians and did not find 1917 their worst year. There are many more examples of the suffering in every year of WWI. A diary entry from Corporal Williams of the 55th Battalion

in the 5th Australian Division shows how much every individual suffered. *"The bodies of the dead men lay thickly along its length"*, he wrote of the battlefield at Fromelles. He continued: *"The German shells still searched this sap and blew great craters along its length as we struggled through, trampling underfoot the dead that cluttered it...The smell of the fumes of high explosives, and the unforgettable odour of death made this trench a place of horror."*⁴ This description shows how deep the suffering was for every Australian immersed in the carnage of WWI. Williams' experience echoes those of almost every Australian soldier. His words not only help us visualise the war but also show a soldier's mental turmoil. Many returned home scarred forever and unable to settle back into civilian life.

Tragedy, death and misery, however, fell not only upon those who had experienced the battlefields. Every day, in Australia, some number of women received a telegraph that would usher in a lifetime of mourning. When the message came to say that someone they loved had died, despair would fill their lives forevermore. Families all around Australia suffered unspeakably during WWI and yet statistics show no awareness of this suffering. The statistics one reads and the tallies one is shown omit the suffering of the soldiers and forget the families who also suffered. These statistics dehumanize the men who fought to valiantly in years of WWI and the figures forget the families whose lives were changed dramatically throughout years of a hideous war.

In reflecting upon the carnage of the battlefields, we are often baffled by numbers and statistics. We are sometimes misled by figures that record death, not life. We forget that those statistics were people, individuals who had promising lives ahead of them,

⁴ *"The Battles of Fromelles and Pozieres - Diaries and Interviews"*. (2017)

people who had hopes and dreams for the future. Statistically, 1917 was indeed the worst year for Australia, yet one cannot infer that a single year was emotionally the worst for every Australian. Blenkin suggests that because more Australians died in 1917, it was naturally the worst year for our country, but statistics are a poor measure of experience. In Australia, we revere our war heroes, commemorating those who lost their lives and celebrating those who returned from battle, and yet where are those heroes in Blenkin's account? He forgets that Australia is its people and that no law of 'majority rules' should apply in a calamity like war.

As horrific as 1917 was, one cannot say it was the worst year of WWI. We do not classify Australia by its economic standings or thriving industries, we classify Australia by its individuals – a nation defined by its people. In the same way, we cannot name a year the worst of WWI because each individual, each citizen of Australia will have a different year that was their worst. For the families of the young, brave soldiers who died at Fromelles in 1916, that year will be their worst. No news of further battles or losses will compare to the telegraph they received that year. When looking back upon WWI, perhaps we should not think of the war itself or of a single year. We should look beyond the death tolls and statistics of battle and instead, we should think of the people, the men who so naively stepped into combat. We should think of the women who lost their loved ones, we should think of Australia as a nation of individuals who all suffered throughout years of a hideous war. Maybe then, we will finally see the experience of war as something too brutal to classify and too dark to illuminate by statistics alone. Rather, the story of World War One was one of great comradeship and courage in a time of immense suffering, cruelty and death.

Bibliography

FOOTNOTE FULL REFERENCES: (numbers correspond to footnotes)

1. *First World War 1914–18 | The Australian War Memorial*. (2017). (Author Unknown) Awm.gov.au. Retrieved 31 July 2017, from <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war>
2. Pearlman, J. (2017). *Anzac Day*. *The Telegraph*. Retrieved 12 August 2017, from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/o/anzac-day-important-commemorate/>
3. *The Battles of Fromelles and Pozières - Diaries and Interviews*. (2017). (Author Unknown) *Abc.net.au*. Retrieved 1 August 2017, from <http://www.abc.net.au/fromelles-pozieres/diaries-and-interviews/>
4. Philatelic Team. (2017). *A look back at 1917*. *Australia Post Collectables*. Retrieved 9 August 2017, from <https://australiapostcollectables.com.au/articles/a-look-back-at-1917>
5. *The Battles of Fromelles and Pozières - Diaries and Interviews*. (2017). (Author Unknown) *Abc.net.au*. Retrieved 1 August 2017, from <http://www.abc.net.au/fromelles-pozieres/diaries-and-interviews/>

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION REFERENCES:

These references are not directly linked to the essay but have been extremely useful in gathering information to write the essay.

Army – World War I – National Archives of Australia, Australian Government.

(2017). *Naa.gov.au*. Retrieved 6 August 2017, from

<http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/explore/defence/service-records/army-wwi.aspx>

Blenkin, M. (2017). 1917: the worst year of a hideous war. *News.Com.Au*. Retrieved from <http://www.news.com.au/national/breaking-news/1917-the-worst-year-of-a-hideous-war/news-story/cbe2aba15ed9cd07adcc85d58293543c>

C.E.W. Bean. (1993) *Anzac to Amiens*. New York. Penguin Books Australia. (Text)

First Battle of Bullecourt. (2017). *Awm.gov.au*. Retrieved 11 August 2017, from <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E110>

Fitzsimons, P. (2015). *Fromelles & Pozieres* (1st ed.). 100 Pacific Highway, North Sydney NSW, 2060: Random House Australia Pty Ltd. (Text)

Letters From The Trenches. (2017). *Australian War Memorial*. Retrieved 5 August 2017, from <https://www.awm.gov.au/search/all/?query=letters+from+the+trenches&submit=&op=Search&format=list§ion%5B%5D=collections&filter%5Bt>

War Losses (Australia) | International Encyclopedia of the First World War (WW1). (2017). *Encyclopedia.net*. Retrieved 6 August 2017, from https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/war_losses_australia

World War 1, 1914-1918. (2017). *ANZAC Day*. Retrieved 2 August 2017, from <https://anzacday.org.au/ww1>

FRONT PAGE IMAGE REFERENCE:

Lone Pine - Ngā Tapuwāe Trails. (2017). Retrieved 5 August 2017, from <https://ngatapuwaee.govt.nz/gallipoli/holding-the-line>