

## Introduction

# BRAVE BLOOD



*Never let me hear that brave blood has been shed in vain; it sends  
an imperious challenge down through all the generations.*

SIR WALTER SCOTT

It is a land sown with sadness and suffering and sacrifice. Although 100 years have passed since the horrors, the memories and the spirits linger here.

The day is dull and grey and the cold hangs like a melancholy mantle over the flat, freshly ploughed fields. A bitter wind swirls and spits the rain into my face. But the scene is mesmerising and soon the cold and the rain seem to recede and another picture emerges like a slow dissolve in a movie.

I am standing on the battlefield at Fromelles in French Flanders. It has long been restored to farmlands. The bomb craters and the death and destruction have been ploughed over. The homes and the church and the buildings have been rebuilt. But the memories remain.

The longer I look out over the fields, the clearer the picture becomes. In July 1916 – the European summer – this was part of the line gouged across Europe where two armies faced each other locked in a death struggle. I am standing in the Australian lines. We are hunkered down behind our two-metre high parapet of sandbags in a trench full of young men, brimming with promise and potential. They show no outward fear but their eyes betray them. All around the air is foul with cordite and death and menace. The noise is so pervasive you can feel it in your bones and the concussive force of the massive artillery shells raining down from both sides reinforces the ever-present risk of random death or mutilation. Yet the men wait for their moment of truth with a pent-up kinetic energy, straining like dogs on the lead as they count down the minutes until the order to go over the top. For many this is their first taste of battle. For all, it is the first time they have seen action in France, or have taken part in what has already become known as ‘trench warfare’. They are scared but each is cocooned in the invincibility of youth and is keen to prove his manhood in front of his mates.

Before us no-man’s land stretches as much as 300 metres across the flat Flanders clay. On the other side of this killing field, the enemy waits. He knows we are coming. He holds the high ground and he has seen us prepare for this attack. He has held this position for almost two years now and his defences are intricate and almost impregnable – concrete bunkers and machine-gun nests, protected by thick skeins of barbed wire and massive waves of sandbags. Beyond the ridge behind him, his artillery lurks ready to unleash a hell of lethal metal against the fragile humanity facing it.

The Diggers will have to cross no-man’s land, running the gauntlet of the machine guns and the artillery before they can come to grips with the Germans manning the trenches opposite them. There is no cover there, only the scattered shelter of craters torn from the earth



Australian Sculptor Peter Corlett's wonderful Cobbers statue, at the Australian Memorial Park at Fromelles, depicts the heroic rescues carried out by Sergeant Simon Fraser of the 57th Battalion. The statue looks across from the German front line toward the Australian front line over the deadly open ground of no-man's land. (PATRICK LINDSAY PHOTO)

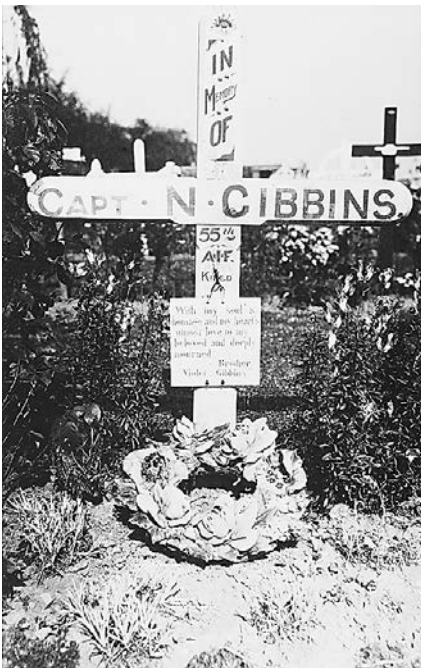
as the projectiles, some as big as car engines, pound into the soil. The Germans have positioned their machine guns with lethal efficiency, especially at the jutting headland known as the Sugar Loaf where they can fire to both sides along the killing field, as well as to the front.

Even before they make their charge, the Australian casualties are mounting. The German artillery gunners have the range of the Australian trenches and here and there men fall, luckless victims of the hail of shrapnel and jagged chunks of high-explosive metal. In places, whole sections of trenches and the men sheltering in them are blown into small pieces and tossed high into the air.

But the Diggers have faith in their leaders. They've been told that their artillery will smash the German defences, tearing open the barbed wire and the bunkers and killing the defenders or sending them fleeing. One of their most trusted chiefs is with them in the front lines and he said: 'Boys, you won't find a German in the trenches when you get there'.

He was wrong. And the Diggers were wrong to place their faith in the men who sent them out on this attack.

As I sit here looking over the killing field, I am struck by an overwhelming feeling of sadness. There can be few more stark examples of the futility of war than the events that took place on this land on one day in the summer of 1916. The tears of sadness soon turn to frustration as I think of the lost potential of the young men destroyed



The cross marking the original grave of Captain Norman Gibbins of the 55th Battalion, killed in action on 20 July 1916 as he returned to the Australian lines after his heroic rearguard action during the Battle of Fromelles. The small plaque hanging from the cross bears a message from his sister Violet: 'With my soul's homage and my heart's utmost love to my beloved and deeply mourned brother. Violet Gibbins.' Captain Gibbins was later reburied in the Anzac Cemetery at Sully-sur-la-Lys.

(AWM PHOTO P03788.003)

here by the stupidity and the cavalier indifference of the High Command.

For the simple fact is that these Diggers had no chance of success. They died needlessly and futilely in their thousands here because of the ineptitude and the callous glory-seeking of their British commander. His guilt is the greater because, unbelievably, a year earlier he had made the same mistake and sent thousands of his own men to their deaths over the same ground.

Many factors predisposed the attack to calamitous failure: poor reconnaissance; inadequate preparation; flawed execution of the preliminary artillery barrage; the size and lack of cover of no-man's land; the depth and quality of the enemy's defences; and the superior experience of its troops. One factor above all others condemned it to certain disaster: the lack of any proper objective or any plan for either holding the ground won or making a tactical withdrawal.

Around 6 pm on Wednesday, 19 July 1916, in full daylight on a clear sunny day, the 5th Australian Division answered the call to attack and was thrown against the German front line as a diversion to help support the massive British offensive then in the balance at the Somme.

The Australians charged into the teeth of German machine guns, which survived the Allied artillery bombardment in their purpose-built concrete bunkers. Our casualties were devastating – 5533 out of around 7000 attackers, with almost 2000 killed – the greatest loss of life in a night in Australian history. Amazingly, despite these losses and against all the odds, hundreds of attackers managed to break through the German front-line trenches and force the defenders to retire. But without support they were trapped by German counter-attacks and eventually either killed or captured.

The fate of many of those who died behind the German lines has been unknown for more than 90 years. Some bodies were recovered



The wall at VC Corner Cemetery Fromelles which contains the names of 1299 Australians missing after the Battle of Fromelles. The bodies of 410 Diggers found but not identified after the Armistice are buried here in groups of ten in 41 mass graves. This is the only all-Australian cemetery on the Western Front and the only one with no headstones, as none of the dead could be identified.

(PATRICK LINDSAY PHOTO)

after the war ended in November 1918 and buried in nearby cemeteries. Many of those who charged that day simply disappeared: 1299 of them are listed as missing on the wall at the VC Corner Cemetery, near the Australian front line on the Fromelles battlefield.

In a war fought by 65 million soldiers over four years, where 37.5 million were killed, wounded, captured or went missing, you might think that thirteen hundred or so missing Diggers are a drop in the ocean.

But that is until you remember that they weren't numbers. They were once sons, brothers, husbands, fathers, mates. They were garbos and teachers, labourers and lawyers, farmers and posties. The dead included 24 sets of brothers and a father and son. They all had hopes of long lives, contented families and quiet retirements.

Many of them had already survived the Gallipoli campaign only to have their lives snuffed out in a single night. As far as their families or the rest of the world knew, on 19 July 1916 they simply disappeared near a small village in north-eastern France called Fromelles.

They remained in the mists of history until a Greek-born Australian art teacher from Melbourne began his quest to find them about eight years ago. Lambis Englezos and his team of supporters now believed they knew the fate and the final resting place of around 170 of those missing Diggers of Fromelles.

