

Simpson Prize 2022

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Year 9

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“To what extent have the Gallipoli campaign and the Western Front overshadowed other significant aspects of Australians’ experience of the First World War?”

Australia’s role in World War 1 (WW1) is remembered today by the legends that materialised from the landings at ANZAC cove and the bloodbath that was the Western Front. These stories from the Gallipoli campaign and the Western Front steal the spotlight from other battles, that also had a huge impact on the war. Every soldier who volunteered to fight in the war should have a voice and never be forgotten.

The overshadowing by the Gallipoli campaign is reasonable, due to how many Australians died compared to other locations in the war. 14% of total deaths occurred at Gallipoli but this campaign is not only known for its statistics.¹ Aside from the massive number of people who died at Gallipoli, it is referred to as a success, for not only Australia but the Allied Forces too. This is because Australia matured, as it increased its independence from Britain and the well-known ANZAC spirit emerged.² Regarding the success brought upon the Allied Forces, this came with how the Gallipoli campaign distracted the Ottoman Empire from the fights raging on deeper into central Europe. This forced the central powers to put their troops on the defensive line, which is what the ANZACs accomplished.³

The Western Front was crucial to both sides of the war during WW1. Australia’s involvement on the Western Front lasted 33 months, where they fought in over 30 battles.⁴ Much more impactful than Gallipoli, 77% of total deaths for WW1 occurred on the Western Front, in its many battles.⁵ Even individual battles on the Western Front can get drowned out in the scale of what happened there; Villers-Bretonneux is one such engagement. This

¹ Simpson Prize Source 8: Table showing “Australian military deaths during the First World War”, 1943, *Australian War Memorial*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1416671>, accessed 12th Oct 2021.

² ‘The Gallipoli Campaign Was a Success for the Allied Forces in World War 1’, *History and Geography Assignment Help*, <https://historygeographyassignmenthelp.weebly.com/was-the-gallipoli-campaign-a-success.html>, accessed 16th Oct 2021.

³ *ibid.*

⁴ ‘Australia on the Western Front’, *ANZAC Centenary Queensland 2014-2018*, Last updated 15th Mar 2021, <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/western-front/index.aspx>, accessed 15th Oct 2021.

⁵ Refer to footnote 1.

village was located in northern France and was an important railway junction.⁶ If the German Army had taken control of Villers-Bretonneux they would have had an open route to Paris, as proceeding onwards to Amiens would open up as an accessible option. The Germans attempted breaking out of their defensive position during March 1918 where they were successful at first, but the Australians successfully counter attacked on the nights of the 24th and 25th of April 1918. Today, just outside the village at the Australian National Memorial, people commemorate the Australians who saved their city every year on the anniversary of the battle.⁷ This is just one of the battles that played a big part in the First World War. The utter magnitude of death on the Western Front completely dwarfs all other battles and their stories.

The amount of people involved beyond Gallipoli and the Western Front and how they honed their skills to provide the Allied Forces with a victory, should not go unnoticed. Countless numbers of men worked together to establish a railway line to transport troops and supplies towards Beersheba.⁸ The battle of Beersheba is known today as the “last great cavalry charge” for its remarkable battle strategy and its massive success for the Australians.⁹ During the night of the 30th of October 1917, 40,000 men travelled 43 kms across the Palestinian desert. This ensured that the Turkish forces would not see them approaching as they had a strong defensive line paired with nine machine guns and two aircraft. Unlike the conventional strategy for the Light Horse, commanding General William Grant decided that instead of dismounting from range, they would charge in together as a cavalry unit. With such a long distance to cover, dismounting too early would leave the Turkish forces with easy targets to pick off. On the next day, at around 5pm, the Australian light horsemen slowly began their charge towards the town of Beersheba. As they swiftly approached, the cavalry began to speed up to tremendous speeds. The Turkish gunners had prepared for a long range battle but by the time the Australians had reached the trenches, the Turkish gunners had limited time to prepare for what would come next. The 4th Regiment dismounted and took on the Turkish troops in the trenches, with bayonet combat while the 12th Regiment jumped over the trenches and continued into the town. Their main objective was to capture Beersheba before the Turkish troops could destroy the precious water wells in retreat. On the night of the 31st of October, roughly 58,000 light horsemen and 100,000 animals had gathered at Beersheba to fulfill their dying thirst. 1,800,000 litres of water were required to hydrate these soldiers and animals. Capturing Beersheba was vital to the survival of over 60,000 allied troops, as it was the last reliable source of water in the vicinity. Despite saving thousands of lives, 31 men died and 36 were wounded during the battle of Beersheba.^{10,11} Stories such as these, make up the missing statistics, overshadowed by the Western Front.

⁶ ‘Villers-Bretonneux’, *ANZAC Centenary Victoria 2014-2018*, 2019, <http://anzaccentenary.archive.vic.gov.au/westernfront/history/key-battles/villers-bretonneux/index.html>, accessed 15th Oct 2021.

⁷ *ibid.*

⁸ Simpson Prize Source 4: A film, “With the forces on the Palestine front”, James Francis Hurley, Palestine, 1917, Australian War Memorial, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C188291>, accessed 17th Oct 2021.

⁹ ‘Beersheba – The charge of the 4th Light Horse, 1917’, *AWM London*, <https://www.awmlondon.gov.au/battles/beersheba>, accessed 17th Oct 2021.

¹⁰ ‘The Battle of Beersheba’, *ANZAC Centenary Queensland 2014-2018*, Last updated 3rd Dec 2018, <https://anzac100.initiatives.qld.gov.au/remember/battle-of-beersheba/index.aspx>, accessed 17th Oct 2021.

¹¹ ‘Two Steps from Hell – Victory Charge of the Australian Light Horse, Beersheba – extended version’, YouTube, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udGcKMhbtC>, accessed 17th Oct 2021.

Even Australia's first military engagement of WW1 is widely unknown, compared to the legends of Gallipoli. As soon as the war was announced, Japan quickly began occupying Pacific islands above the equator. Germany had already colonised islands before the war had begun, some much closer to home. Being so close to Australia, the German Pacific colonies had to be dealt with right away. The Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force (AN&MEF) were called upon to take control of German New Guinea. Australians landed at Rabaul (Now located on the eastern island province of Papua New Guinea, New Britain) on the 11th of September 1914.¹² It took 6 Australians to be killed but the AN&MEF took control of German New Guinea, 6 days later on the 17th of September 1914.¹³ This shows that Australia was committed to their alliance with Britain and was not going to let Germany come any closer to their borders. They had successfully won their first military engagement, but we don't hear much about the navy in WW1, regardless of the outcome. The battles fought on land definitely steal the show from stories at sea.

Stories about what happens behind the guns may not be of much interest but certainly describe the tough conditions young boys had to go through at war. On the HMAS *Sydney* 15 boy sailors were the "unsung heroes" of the battle against the German SMS *Emden*.¹⁴ *Sydney* was able to take down *Emden* losing 4 men in the process but was Australia's first victory at sea. This achievement enabled troop convoys safe passage to the Middle East with no risk of enemy engagement.¹⁵ Similar to the famous "ANZAC spirit", this battle shows the Australian sailor's fighting spirit – sailors are at risk too and their achievements should not be forgotten. The 15 young boy sailors were personally congratulated by Captain Glossop for their brilliant performance. John Ryan was a sixteen-year-old boy whose job was to keep *Sydney*'s forward gun full of ammunition. He could barely carry the 45 kg ammunition; after an hour he would already be tired.¹⁶ Ryan continuously carried shells to the gun and if it wasn't for boys like Ryan, battles at sea would be much more challenging.

The overshadowing by the Gallipoli Campaign and the Western Front ultimately revealed the horrible stories of war and statistics that came with them. However, some stories still lay forgotten, buried in archives. The battle of Beersheba reveals the teamwork and hardship it takes to be successful in war and the victories at sea should be congratulated too. The victory of WW1 for the Allied Forces was a combination of countless engagements, successes or defeats, with their own stories that should never be forgotten.

¹² Simpson Prize Source 9: Map relating to "Australia's first military engagement of the First World War", *Australian War Memorial*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2022>, accessed 17th Oct 2021.

¹³ 'First World War 1914-18', *Australian War Memorial*, Last updated 2nd Jun 2021, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/atwar/first-world-war>, accessed 17th Oct 2021.

¹⁴ Simpson Prize Source 3: Extract from Wes Olson, "The Men Behind the Guns", *Wartime* 89, 2019. p. 48, *Australian War Memorial*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/simpson2022>, accessed 17th Oct 2021.

¹⁵ Stevens D., 'November 1914 – Australia's First Victory at Sea', Royal Australian Navy, <https://www.navy.gov.au/history/feature-histories/november-1914-australia%E2%80%99s-first-victory-sea>, accessed 17th Oct 2021.

¹⁶ Refer to footnote 15.

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