

YOUR VIRTUAL VISIT - 61

TO THE AUSTRALIAN ARMY MUSEUM OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA



Throughout 2021, the Virtual Visit series will be continuing to present interesting features from the collection and their background stories. The Australian Army Museum of Western Australia is now open four days per week, Wednesday through Friday plus Sunday. Current COVID19 protocols including contact tracing will apply.

Battle of the Somme - 1 July 1916

The first day of fighting of the Battle of the Somme on 1 July 1916 was the costliest in British military history. Of 57,470 casualties, there were 19,240 killed. The Battle continued for 141 days resulting in an estimated 420,000 British casualties, 200,000 French and 500,000 German. The Somme, like Verdun for the French, has assumed a prominent place in the popular memory of British military history. For many, it has come to represent the loss and apparent futility of the War and war.



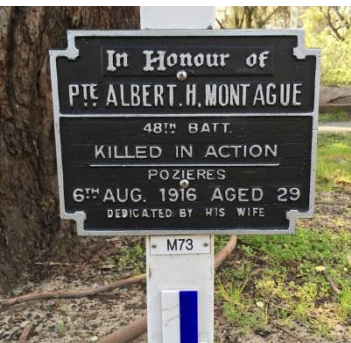
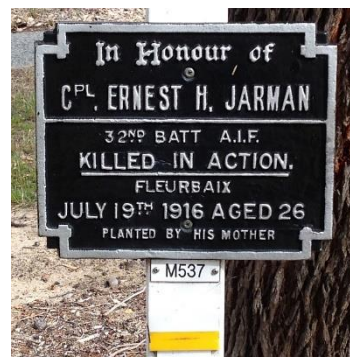
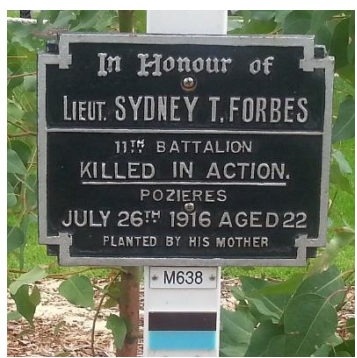
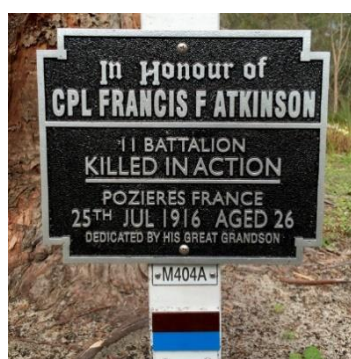
The reality of almost 20,000 deaths on one day, in one coordinated assault is difficult to imagine. If however, 20,000 soldiers were to march in single file from **Blackboy Hill** Camp to the Western Australian **State War Memorial**, the first digger would be arriving at the Memorial before the last stepped off from Blackboy Hill.

The Australian experience of the Battle of the Somme is best encapsulated by the portion designated the **Battle of Pozières** (23 July – 3 September 1916). The costly fighting of that segment ended with British possession of the plateau north and east of Pozieres, in a position to menace the German bastion of Thiepval. Charles Bean's resonant words were that Pozières Ridge "**is more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth.**"



On the night of 23 July, the 1st Division began Australia's involvement in the Somme campaign, with an attack on the German positions at Pozières. They drove the Germans from the village, but the German response was devastating. The men experienced fierce counterattacks and an artillery barrage more powerful and destructive than anything seen on Gallipoli.

Over the weeks that followed, the 1st, 2nd and 4th Australian Divisions rotated through the fighting at Pozières and across the high ground between the village and Mouquet Farm. In just over a month from the end of July, the Australians launched nine separate attacks. All units suffered heavy casualties in every action. By the time they withdrew from the line after 6 weeks of fighting at Pozières and Mouquet Farm, the AIF had suffered some 23,000 casualties. This was almost as many dead and wounded as suffered in the 8 months on Gallipoli.





A sampling of memorial plaques from the Kings Park Honour Avenue can only begin to convey the impact of the Battle of Pozieres on Western Australian families and the generational loss to the Country.

<https://www.bgpa.wa.gov.au/honour-avenues-plaques?start=0>

The Australian Army Museum of Western Australia holds one of the four Victoria Crosses awarded to Australians during the Battle of Pozieres. As you are aware, Martin O'Meara's Victoria Cross remains in Dublin on an extended loan pending lifting of Covid related travel restrictions.

| Name | Date of Action | Unit | Location of medal |
|----------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Arthur Blackburn | 23 July 1916 | 10 Battalion AIF | Australian War Memorial |
| Claud Castleton | 28 - 29 July 1916 | Machine Gun Corps | Australian War Memorial |
| Thomas Cooke | 25 July 1916 | 8 Battalion AIF | National Army Museum, New Zealand |
| John Leak | 23 July 1916 | 9 Battalion AIF | Privately held |
| Martin O'Meara | 9 - 12 August 1916 | 16 Battalion AIF | Army Museum of Western Australia |

Claude Castleton's and Thomas Cooke's Victoria Cross awards were posthumous. The wartime and post war experiences of Blackburn, Leak and O'Meara are varied and compelling. During World War 2, Arthur Blackburn as commanding officer of 2/3 Machine Gun Battalion, personally accepted the surrender of Damascus but later became a POW of the Japanese after the surrender of Java. Subsequent to his award, John Leak, after a series of disciplinary offenses, was sentenced to life imprisonment for desertion from the front. This sentence was later commuted to 2 years hard labour before being suspended and finally remitted, after the Armistice. From 1932 - 35 he and his wife lived in Esperance.

Australia's Tower Keeps Watch and Ward



Although closely associated with actions in 1918, the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux is the place of commemoration of the Australians who died at Pozieres and the other 1916 battles at the Somme who have no known grave. Following the war, the commander of the Australian Corps, Lieutenant General Sir JJ Talbot Hobbs chose the sites of several Australian memorials in Europe. He proposed that a memorial to all of the Australian dead on the Western Front be built in France, in the Villers-Bretonneux area. The proposal was approved by the Australian government in 1923 and a design competition was held in 1925. The competition was open only to Australian veterans and their parents. Australian stone was to be used in its construction. The competition was won by the Melbourne architect William Lucas.

The project was suspended in 1930, due to the Great Depression, the projected cost, and dissatisfaction with aesthetic elements of Lucas's design. A cheaper design was sought, using French stone, from Sir Edwin Lutyens. It was this monument which was opened by King George VI on 22 July 1938. Gunfire damage from World War 2 was made good in 1956. The Sir John Monash Centre, behind the Villers-Bretonneux Australian National Memorial, opened in April 2018.



LINKS FOR FURTHER EXPOLRATION

Visit the Australian Army Museum of Western Australia website

<https://armymuseumwa.com.au/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_World_War_I_memorials_and_cemeteries_in_the_Somme

<https://www.cwgc.org/visit-us/find-cemeteries-memorials/cemetery-details/80800/THIEPVAL%20MEMORIAL/>

<https://www.awm.gov.au/learn/schools/resources/1916/pozieres>

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E84738>

<https://vwma.org.au/research/home-page-archives/poor-devils--the-battle-of-pozieres>

<https://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/conflict/ww1/display/109623-battle-of-the-somme>

<https://architectureau.com/articles/australian-war-memorials-william-lucas-versus-the-government/>

<https://sjmc.gov.au/>

<https://www.dva.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/publications/commemorations-war-graves/westernfront.pdf>



1st Division Australian Imperial Force Memorial, Pozieres

Watch and ward is defined as a continuous unbroken vigilance and guard. The system was developed in 13th century England to preserve the peace in local communities. Guards were appointed and their duties at night (watch) and in daytime (ward) were defined. The phrase ***Australia's tower keeps watch and ward*** was used by King George VI in his speech at the dedication of the Australian National Memorial at Villers Bretonneux.