

Chapter 1

First World War

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

*We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,
Loved and were loved, and now we lie,
In Flanders fields.*

*Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.*

IN FLANDERS FIELDS
John McCrae

The Great War - or the First World War - wreaked carnage, slaughter and destruction on a scale that had never been seen before. It was rooted in the imperial power of Queen Victoria's family. Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany, King George V of Great Britain and Tsar Nicholas II of Russia were first cousins. They called each other by pet names – Willie, Georgie and Nicky and they kept in touch regularly.

Prior to the war, the countries of Europe had created alliances. These alliances promised that each country would support the other if ever war broke out between an ally and another power. There were alliances between Russia and Serbia; France and Russia; Germany, Italy and Austria-Hungary; Britain, France and Belgium; France, Britain and Russia; and Japan and Britain. The alliance between France, Britain and Russia, formed in 1907, called the *Triple Entente*, caused the most friction among nations. Germany felt that this alliance surrounding them was a threat to their power and existence. Conflicts between these alliances eventually led to the formation of the two sides of the First World War.

On 28 June 1914, the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria was assassinated by a young Serbian, Gavrilo Princip. Princip was a revolutionary nationalist seeking Serbia's freedom from Austria and the unification of Yugoslavia. Ferdinand was chosen as the target because he was the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. On the day of his assassination, the Archduke travelled to Sarajevo to inspect imperial armed forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina, former Ottoman territories acquired by Austria-Hungary in 1908. While Ferdinand was travelling in an open car in Sarajevo, Princip fired into the car, shooting Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, killing both of them.

At first the monarchs of Europe did not take the incident too seriously. They expected that Serbia would apologise to the Hapsburg Emperor, Franz Josef of Austria-Hungary, which it did. But, with Serbia's apology not proving abject enough, relations between Serbia and Austria-Hungary were broken off. This finally alerted Europe's family of kings to the danger that threatened them.

As all the alliances of Europe clicked inexorably into place, the crowned heads worked feverishly to avert the inevitable but they proved to be toothless. Their constitutional powers counted for almost as little as their cousinhood. Although, technically, Franz Joseph, Nicholas II and Wilhelm II may have been able to curtail the coming hostilities, they were at the mercy of more powerful forces: the generals, the politicians, and the industrialists – and especially the arms manufacturers. Ultimatums were made but national pride, military glory and delusions of imperial expansion swept

aside the protestations of the crowned heads. The result was that Austria-Hungary declared war against Serbia, with German support. Russia then came to Serbia's defence, therefore initiating the First World War.

This act of violence, by a hitherto unknown Bosnian-Serb nationalist seeking to end the rule of Austria-Hungary in Bosnia and Herzegovina, cascaded through all the alliances of Europe and led to the outbreak of the First World War.

The war was fought mainly in Europe and the Middle East. The Central Powers of Germany, the Austrian-Hungarian Empire and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey) were pitted against the Allies of France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan and later, the USA. The aftermath saw the destruction of the dynasties of Germany, Russia, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria and Turkey and the destabilization of Europe which continued for many years. Some say that it still continues.

Europe has always been a melting pot for warfare. The mixture of ethnicity, religion, language and fragile political and economic alliances is what I remembered from my history lessons at school. Because of Australia's roots, I learnt most of it from a British perspective, but I was also aware of other national protagonists opposed to the British throughout history – including the French (from Joan of Arc to Napoleon Bonaparte), the Indians, the Zulu Kingdom, Ireland, and the Boers in South Africa – to name a few.

At the end of the First World War, the distrust that persisted between nations and the humiliation suffered by some, along with the revenge of the so-called 'victors', laid the groundwork for the Second World War. It is still being felt today. The establishment of the European Union in 1993 was seen as an antidote to the extreme nationalism that arose from both World Wars. It was focused primarily on the values of human rights and democracy where member nations could work together and integrate their resources and skills for harmony and peace. It was not, as many people think, built only on economic or trade principles.

Britain's recent withdrawal from the European Union shows how difficult it is for some nations to give up their past. The UKIP Independence Party, which played a significant role in Britain leaving the European Union, still extols the glory of the old British Empire with an agenda of expelling migrants and rejecting multiculturalism. Its populist, right-wing roots are also seen elsewhere such as in the USA and in other parts of Europe.

During the First World War, Australia's population was about five million of which over four hundred thousand men and women enlisted to serve. Forty per cent of all adult males in the nation joined up. Reading through the files of the servicemen in this narrative, there is a strong sense of loyalty to the British Empire. They were all British subjects - no one was described as Australian. Their flag was the Union Jack and they all pledged their loyalty to His Majesty the King. Their army was even designated the Australian Imperial Force (AIF).

There was no doubt about Australia entering the war. The Australian Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, declared that "*when the Empire is at war, so is Australia at war*". Our participation was a given and Australia offered men and materiel even before Britain's divided government had decided to participate and before it had requested our assistance. When Britain and Germany eventually went to war on 4 August 1914, Australia automatically became involved as a Dominion of the Empire. Australia pledged full support for Britain and greeted the outbreak of war with great enthusiasm. In fact, Australia fired the first shot in the Great War when a cannon was fired across the bow of a German ship trying to leave Port Phillip Bay in Melbourne. This was four hours after war had officially been declared.

The Australian press, initially hesitant, took to the war enthusiastically. All press releases were monitored and censored by the British Government and jingoism was rife. Even the churches supported the cause and the middle and upper classes were especially enthusiastic. However there was reserve among the lower classes, the trade union movement and the strong Communist movement that existed in Australia at that time. Although they could not anticipate what was to come, maybe they had some innate feeling about the concept of 'cannon fodder'. Perhaps they realised that they were the class that would be most affected through the inevitable consequences that war would bring – exposure in the field of battle, disruption of commerce and trade, the scarcity of goods and services, social distress and unemployment. They had the most to lose. Their sacrifices would be harder to recover from than those of their better off cousins.

Another cause bubbling along at the time was the question of Irish Home Rule. It divided Irish Catholics and Ulster Protestants even in Australia and the Easter rebellion in Ireland in 1916 and the two attempts to introduce mandatory conscription in 1916 and 1917 were constant sources of friction within the Australian community.

The war that they volunteered for was the first to adopt the ingenuity of the Industrial Revolution. Technology was used as never before to kill or maim the enemy from great distance and threats loomed on land and sea, and in the air. Aircraft were used for the first time to observe enemy positions, drop bombs and strafe targets on the ground. It was the first war to use chemical warfare which led to the first time gas masks were issued to troops.



Australian soldiers fitted with gas masks.

The first tanks were launched, flamethrowers were introduced and large ships on the sea were designed as landing and take-off platforms for aeroplanes. Submarines were used for the first time on a large scale to attack enemy ships. It was a German submarine that sank the RMS *Lusitania* off the Irish coast in May 1915 killing 1,200 people – the first step in America eventually entering the war in 1917.

Barbed wire was used for the first time as a defensive weapon. Its strands of twisted wire and sharpened spurs snagged soldiers in battle and acted as barriers to attack. It was placed in front of trenches or arranged in such a way that enemy ground assaults were funnelled into areas covered by machine gun and artillery fire. Barbed wire fences were ubiquitous on the Western Front, where snared soldiers made easy targets for small-arms fire.

Trench coats were introduced. They replaced the earlier era's full-length, woollen great coats, which became heavy when wet. British officers serving in the trenches turned to established English clothing firms such as Burberry and Aquascutum for khaki-coloured, waterproof coats with deep pockets large enough to hold maps and a belt at the waist with metal D-rings for attaching gear.

Wristwatches had been around in some form for decades, mostly as jewellery worn by women, but they became standard equipment for soldiers and pilots who didn't want to be fumbling for the traditional pocket watch while launching artillery-supported ground assaults or flying combat missions.

Other innovations new to warfare were wireless communications, steel helmets and the military use of X-rays used by surgeons tending to the wounded. Guide dogs were used to detect land mines and as couriers.



British Mark I tank with anti-bomb roof and "tail," 1916.

There were other innovations not associated with the battlefield which have now become the norm. Women were enlisted for the first time and blood banks, IQ tests, and films for propaganda were introduced.

But the most telling factor was the ability of the protagonists to manufacture their weapons of destruction in such vast quantities. Both sides had the resources to provide their armies continuously with ships, tanks, bombs, aeroplanes, guns and cannons of all description. Machine guns were refined to the point that they became supreme killing machines, decimating frontal attacks by infantry or cavalry by their rapid and sustained firepower.

It will never be known how many people died but it is generally thought that the total number of military and civilian casualties in the First World War, was around 41 million. The European Union has estimated that there were 20 million deaths and 21 million wounded. The total number of deaths includes 9.7 million military personnel and about 10 million civilians. The Allies lost about 5.7 million soldiers while the Central Powers lost about 4 million. This toll was only made possible because of the new technologies and style of warfare.



German infantrymen operate a Maxim machine gun in the First World War.

According to the Australian War Memorial, 62,000 Australian men were killed and 156,000 were wounded, gassed or taken prisoner. The First World War remains Australia's costliest conflict in terms of deaths and casualties.

The German empire in the Pacific came to a sudden end following the outbreak of the war in 1914. In August, New Zealand troops landed on Samoa and the Germans capitulated without resistance. In German New Guinea there was fighting but little bloodshed. The first significant Australian action of the war was the landing on Rabaul (now part of Papua New Guinea) in

September 1914 to take possession of German New Guinea and the neighbouring islands of Bougainville and the Bismarck Archipelago. Australia also annexed Nauru which Germany had occupied since 1877. In October, Japanese forces¹ occupied the Marshalls and Carolines and the remaining German islands north of the equator.

Taking the German colonies in Africa was not so easy. Anglo-French forces swiftly overran German possessions in Togoland in August 1914. In the Cameroons, German forces resisted the Allies until February 1916 – taking the effort of 64,000 British, French and Belgian men opposed to a German force of 1,500 Europeans and 5,500 African soldiers. Unlike the Germans, the British were reluctant to use African soldiers.

German East Africa covers the modern nations of Burundi, Rwanda, the Tanzanian mainland and part of Mozambique. Under the leadership of one of the greatest guerrilla leaders in history, Colonel Paul von Lettow-Vorbeck, who deployed a force of 15,000 men (including 12,000 Africans known as Askaris), the German forces tied down over 370,000 troops of the British Empire. This remarkable campaign came to an end, 12 days after hostilities ended in Europe. The British losses were huge. In East Africa, the British suffered the loss 347,000 men of whom 336,000 were due to sickness rather than bullets or shells.

In German South West Africa (Namibia), German rule ended in 1915 with a defeat by South African forces. Early in the 20th Century, there was an uprising against brutal German colonialism and the punitive action taken by the local rulers has been described as the first genocide of the century.

In hindsight, the campaigns against German possessions in Africa made little contribution to the eventual Allied victory, and absorbed many troops that could have been used more effectively in other theatres. The British campaign against the German colonies was a reflex action of an imperial power. The German colonies were raided simply because they were there and so the British wanted to flex their muscles. In truth, the colonies would have made only a minimal contribution to the German war effort and the British would have done far better if they left them alone.

Coming back to the home front, in November 1914, the Royal Australian Navy made a major contribution when HMAS *Sydney* destroyed the German raider SMS *Emden*. Emden had captured

¹ An ally during the First World War.

or sank 25 civilian vessels in the Indo-Pacific area and shelled Madras in India. The Germans had erected a fake fourth funnel to disguise the ship as a British cruiser.

After *Emden's* defeat, the only other German warship in the Indian Ocean was SMS *Königsberg*, which had been blockaded in the Rufiji River in Tanzania, and remained there until her destruction in July 1915. The destruction of *Emden* meant that Australia was no longer under direct threat from Germany, and many of the RAN ships designated for the nation's defence could be safely deployed to other theatres. Over the next two years, troop convoys from Australia and New Zealand to the Middle East sailed without naval escort, further freeing Allied resources.

The landing on Gallipoli in Turkey by the AIF, together with troops from New Zealand, Britain, India, Canada and France, was Australia's first land campaign. It was ill-conceived and led by incompetent commanders and ended with the evacuation of all allied troops in December 1915. Close to half a million soldiers - nearly 180,000 Allied troops and 253,000 Turks - had been killed or wounded. Australia suffered 28,150 casualties at Gallipoli, including 8,700 dead, nearly one-sixth of the casualties it endured during the Great War.



Anzac Beach, Gallipoli, 1915.

There was another war – especially in the Middle East but also in France – that ravaged the young men of Australia. It was venereal disease (VD). The Australian Army's losses to VD in the First

World War were enormous. An estimated 63,000 VD cases occurred among the 417,000 troops of the AIF. That is, one in seven of the soldiers who joined the AIF contracted VD at some stage of the war. That many soldiers was the equivalent of three infantry divisions. Given that the average VD treatment time was six weeks, the high number of VD infections effectively meant that for six weeks of the war, the AIF commanders had lost three infantry divisions.

When I was researching the stories of the soldiers of the CRB, I found that a number of them contracted VD but, except for a few, I have not mentioned it. There is a school of thought that descendants might be saddened to read about their brave forefathers contracting VD but I have taken the view that the consequences of the scourge and stigma of VD had a very real impact on the lives of those who suffered. I am not scornful or judgemental about this. These were young men exposed to the horrors of Gallipoli and the Western Front who must have thought seriously about their mortality. Going to a brothel in Egypt or France may have been their only chance of a sexual experience with a woman. Many came from remote, rural communities where there was little or no chance of any such experience. Let us not punish them for their human frailty.

For those afflicted, the ghastliness of the treatment of repeated daily injections of heavy metals such as silver, arsenic and mercury and the application of caustic ointments was punishment in another form - but the size of the epidemic had one positive outcome. Because the Army needed to return afflicted men to the battlefield as quickly as possible, the focus shifted from moral indignation to a medical issue. As a result, treatment for sexually transmitted diseases improved exponentially during the war years.

Soldiers with VD were punished by having their pay docked, but this disapproving attitude was soon dropped due to the sheer number of affected men. There were terrible consequences for those infected and they deserve our understanding and sympathy. The impact of VD may have affected their lives just as profoundly as battle wounds, gassing or shell shock, so we shouldn't stigmatise them.

After the evacuation from Gallipoli and a period of retraining in Egypt, the majority of the AIF was redeployed to France and Belgium to serve on the Western Front. The losses on the Western Front were heavy and gains were small.

It is hackneyed to say that the First World War was a war of attrition. The campaign strategy of both sides was to provide their armies with sufficiently vast quantities of soldiers, artillery, shells, planes and other war materiel so that they could outlast their opponent. The use of trenches created a static war. The trenches provided good protection for soldiers, and great quantities of very heavy shells were required to destroy them. This required a large number of heavy artillery units that were difficult to manoeuvre around the war-torn battlefields which, in winter, turned into sludge deep enough to drown in. Thus, attacks took the form of long grinding offensives where the enemy's men, supplies, equipment, and morale were slowly worn down and their ability to replace their losses of men or materiel was eventually used up. The German Spring Offensive of 1918 was an attempt to break the deadlock of trench warfare and, despite the large amount of territory captured, it was the attrition suffered by Germany that led to the collapse of their army.



Troops of 53rd Battalion AIF wait to don equipment for the attack at Fromelles, 19 July 1916.
Only three of these men survived.

In 1918 the Australians reached the peak of their fighting performance in the battle of Hamel on 4 July. Master-minded by Australia's most famous General, Sir John Monash, it was all over in ninety-three minutes. Military historians cite it as first modern battle under a commander of genius

using a combination of infantry, the Tank Corps, the Royal Artillery and the Royal Air Force. The Americans participated, and Monash had to withstand, by extraordinary force of personality, a last-minute attempt by US General Pershing to withdraw them.

During a glorious period of victory in August and September 1918, the AIF was the virtual spearhead of the British army. They had a series of conclusive victories at Chuignes, Mont St Quentin, Péronne and Hargicourt. Monash commanded a force of 200,000 men (including Americans) during the breaking of the Hindenburg line. It was a series of victories unsurpassed in the annals of the British army and, according to military historians, the 5,000 AIF dead was a remarkably light cost. Imagine thinking that 5,000 deaths was little to pay!

By the end of the war, Monash had acquired an outstanding reputation for intellect, personal magnetism, management and ingenuity. He also won the respect and loyalty of his troops. He was regarded with great respect by the British – much more than by his native Australians. Keith Murdoch (war correspondent) and Charles Bean (Australia's official war historian) begrudgingly acknowledged his achievements but were critical of Monash's ambition brought about by his Jewish origins. Historian Roland Perry, author of *Monash: The Outsider Who Won a War*, put it bluntly: '*Bean didn't like Monash because he was Jewish. Murdoch didn't care whether he was Jewish, gypsy or geranium; his motive was that he couldn't manipulate him.*'

Field Marshal Bernard Montgomery had no such doubt. He declared later: "*I would name Sir John Monash as the best general on the Western Front in Europe*". And he was so revered by Australians that 300,000 people attended his funeral in 1931, and 10,000 soldiers led his casket mounted on a gun carriage through the streets to Melbourne's Brighton cemetery.



Lieutenant General Sir John Monash GCMG KCB VD DSM OC Croix de Guerre.

Another war front was the Middle East. This campaign began in 1916 with Australian troops taking part in the defence of the Suez Canal and the Allied re-conquest of the Sinai Desert. In the following year Australian and other Allied troops advanced into Palestine and captured Gaza and Jerusalem; by 1918 they had occupied Lebanon and Syria and on 30 October 1918 Turkey sued for peace.

The 'War to end all Wars' was a farce. It ended imperialism in Germany and Russia and commenced the diminution of the British Empire. The concept of imperial might was a strong motivating factor in the war. But there can be no doubt, that the most significant consequence of the First World War was to sow the seeds for the Second World War where imperialism was reborn, albeit in different forms – in the Third Reich in Germany and the Empire of the Golden Sun in Japan.

During my research for this work I was struck by the patriotism – bordering on fanaticism – of Australians towards Mother England. Early in the war, there were proud rallies for our gallant boys being killed but these wilted as the imperial masters faltered again and again. The newspapers,

initially filled with jingoism and propaganda, degenerated into puzzlement and despair. The glorious deeds of Australia's young men began to look like pointless suffering.

And what was this war like for the Australian men who ventured to the other side of the world? During the war, many of the local newspapers throughout Australia published letters sent home to friends and families. I researched some of them in the Colac Herald. My uncle had written home from France and his letters were published. I also read others but the one written by Driver John Alphonsus Gately of Elliminyt – a 26 year old slaughterman - stuck in my mind. He wrote to a friend in November 1917 as follows:

It is nearly two years now since I left the old town of Colac. A good number of the boys will be missing when 'the ship comes home', but that can't be helped; one has just got to take his chance. It will be a good experience – and a good trip – for those lucky enough to return. I have travelled many miles since I left Colac., having been to Egypt, England, France and Belgium. I went to France from Egypt in March 1916. I have seen much since then. I have had some close calls, but I have been lucky. At Bullecourt a shell burst alongside me and blew me off my horse.

I have seen most of the boys from Colac. I did not meet poor George Power, though I was quite close to him at Pozières when he was killed. Teddie Honan was also killed near there. We lost a lot of men at Pozières, and good fellows they were too. Poor ----- was blown to pieces and his brothers were wounded. V. Bartlett was killed while carrying a wounded man out of the trenches. When we came out of Bullecourt I met a lot of Colac boys, including Bob Dunoon, Johnnie Lee, Alexander, J. McMabon, Geoff Power, Luke Monkivitch², Bell, Box, Bill and Lew Ballagh, and a lot more. Tom Carmody is at present in England, ill, and his uncle, Joe Carmody is in one of our batteries near me. Joe Lee is in Egypt: he has won several war medals. Bert Cox and Charley Sell are with ----. Mat Burns is in France but I have not seen him. Albert McLennan is with me; his brother Charley was killed at Bullecourt. Our battery lost a lot of men there. I was not sorry when the day came to say goodbye to it though I had a lot of mates buried there and it was hard to come away.

One makes real friends here, and it makes it hard when they get knocked, but it is a case of every man for himself. This is not the case though when the battle is on. One does not think of anything then. It is when it is over and they fetch the wounded and dead back that one feels it. When you see the graves with the little wooden crosses over them, and one has time to think, that is the hard part of it. But still it cannot be helped. You just take your chance; if you are lucky well and good and if you get knocked it is bad luck.

² Luke was my grandmother's brother. He was killed at Passchendaele on 5 September 1917 – one of 38,000 casualties.

The winter is terrible, the mud and snow being awful. We were hoping it would finish this spring but we have another winter before us. That is the thing we do not like facing. However we shall just have to put up with it.

We were all sorry to hear of the death of Dean Nelan. He used to shake us up when we were altar boys. I have been thinking of my school days. Remember me to the nuns, who were so good to us. Especially remember me to Sister Patrick, who was so good and kind to me when I used to drive their cab to the Corunnun school. I got my leave last January and had a good time in England. In addition to the fine theatres etc. I went through the Houses of Parliament, Westminster Abbey, and in fact, all the principal buildings. The people treated me well. Remember me to all the old boys and other friends.

Driver Gately was later discharged from the army as medically unfit because of disability due to military service.

And what about the people left at home? They were as far away as it was possible to be. Censorship made communications difficult to the point of impossibility. Mail was heavily redacted and sometimes, not delivered. Many families did not know where their sons or husbands were. When letters did arrive home, they were months out of date. Anything could have happened in the intervening period and, sadly, it was often the case. Even after the end of the war, families were not sure of the fate of their loved ones and they had to rely on organisations like the Red Cross to search lists to try and find names – lists of the dead and wounded, or of those missing, or of those interned.

For those who did return, there was little assistance available in transitioning back into civilian life nor were there many benefits provided by the Government. There was no guidance to families about the implications of the impact of the war on the servicemen – all they knew was that they were ‘different’. The term ‘shell shock’ was first coined by a British psychologist Charles Samuel Myers to describe the type of post-traumatic stress disorder many soldiers were afflicted with during the war. It was sometimes termed ‘psychosis’ and it was never seen to such an extent as in the First World War because of the terror and might of bombardment inflicted on both sides.

For many, the sorrow persisted for life – often a shortened life because of wounds, shell shock, disease and gassing.

Throughout the narrative for the First World War, I have included photograph details of some of the dioramas displayed at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. These dioramas were designed and sculpted by Lieutenant Charles Web Gilbert who was born in Cockatoo near Maryborough in 1867. Late in 1917, Gilbert joined the Australian Imperial Force as a sculptor in the War Records Section, and after the war travelled throughout France gathering information to make accurate models of the battlegrounds now displayed in the dioramas. In 1920 he began work on the memorial to the AIF's 2nd Division for Mont St Quentin, France. His work for the rest of his life was predominantly commemorative.

Gilbert's daughter, Marjorie Addis, had a long career working as a draftsman and administrator in the Bridge Branch of the CRB.



The Battle of Mont St Quentin – Diorama by Charles Web Gilbert.
Australian War Memorial.