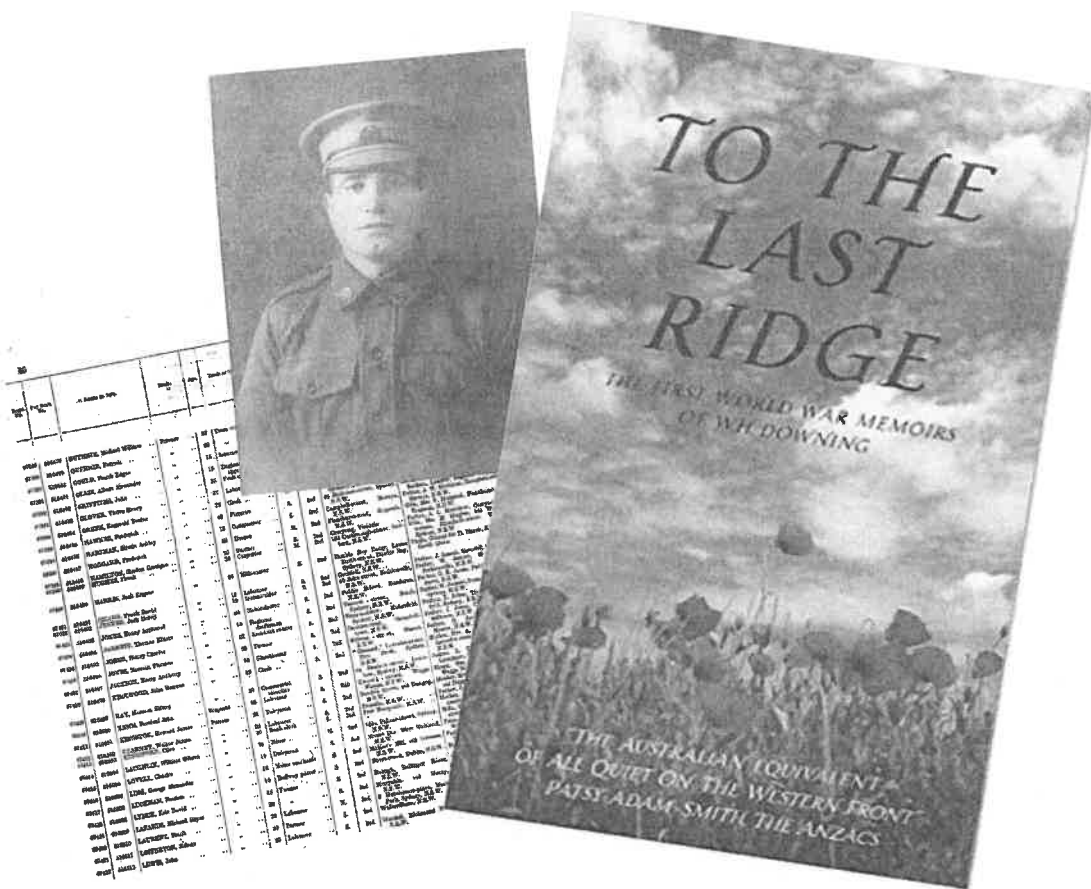


THE FRANK MACDONALD MEMORIAL PRIZE, 2017

Question Two – 1917: The worst year of a hideous war (for Australia and Australians) wrote Max Blenkin, Defense Correspondent Australian Associated Press, December 14, 2016. How accurate do you think this statement is?



FRANCIS MUNRO, TAROONA HIGH SCHOOL

“Day by day the worn and white-faced ghosts of men dragged themselves from under the heaps of burnt clods that were flung by shellbursts [sic] into their trenches, and wiped the shattered flesh of comrades from their faces.”

(Downing, 1998, p. 64).

These are the words of Australian WW1 veteran, Walter Downing, describing the battle of Bullecourt in 1917. Originally published in 1920, his harrowing recount of WW1 has now become a national emblem in remembering the atrocities of the bloodiest war in Australian history. In 2016, Max Blenkin wrote that 1917 was the worst year of a hideous war. This is undoubtedly one of the most accurate statements in history. The First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) had to endure one of the harshest European winters ever and suffered more casualties in 1917 than all the other years of the war combined. Despite this, the year ended with a powerful statement from the Australian people as they voted ‘no’ to implementing conscription for the second time.

Of all the wars that Australian forces have participated in, none have been as appalling as WW1. The AIF has never seen such high casualties in any conflict in the history of Australia. A grand total of 416,809 Australian men enlisted in WW1, including 38.7% of males aged 18-44. **(Scott, 1941)**. Overall, 60,000 were killed in combat, 40,000 of whom were killed in 1917. On top of that, over another 36,000 soldiers became casualties that year. **(Awm.gov.au, 2017)**. The Battle of Bullecourt saw the largest number of Australian soldiers captured at once, with 1,170 troops captured by the Germans. **(Encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net, 2017)**. The loss



Australian soldiers, Bullecourt, 1917.
(Awm.gov.au, 2017).

of so many soldiers led to the Australians feeling as though they were merely being used by the British for useless operations as decoys. The families and friends of those who died in combat, grieved, it was incomprehensible how so many young men and women could be killed in combat in a war, let alone a single year. From the extensive loss of brave Australians, many less capable were forced to take on more difficult

jobs to support their communities. The high casualties also meant many women were left to

look after children who would grow up without a Father. The vast number of casualties proved an immense problem as in August and October, the largest strike in Australian history occurred. The 1917 General Strike saw almost 100,000 workers go on strike to protest pitiful wages, which led to a massive worker shortage in Australia. This meant that now the unfit and unqualified had to take on roles that they were not familiar with to keep Australia's economy steady. This proves that along with 1917 being by far the worst year for casualties on the front, the year also had significant economic problems back on home soil. **(Maritime Union of Australia, 2017).**

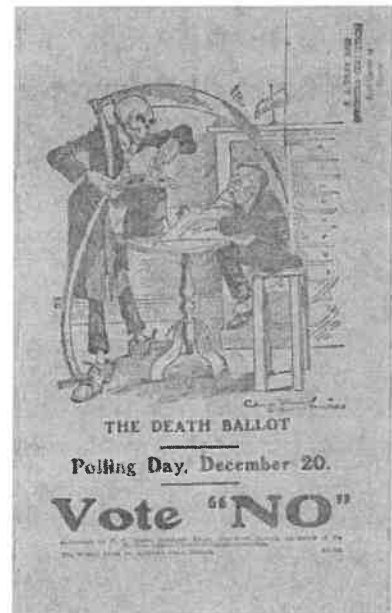
Never have Australian soldiers had to endure such horrific living conditions as that seen during the winter of 1916-1917. It was the coldest winter in Europe in 20 years, the fields froze over, the trenches flooded, and the men were not equipped with proper winter clothing, which led to extreme conditions such as frost bite and 'trench foot.' Life for those poor souls in the trenches was horrendous. In 1920, Walter Downing wrote about his experience in the winter of 1917:

"Frostbite was rare, and trench feet... worse almost than the worst wound."

(Downing, 1998, p. 31).

Trench foot was arguably the most sickening condition developed by soldiers in the trenches. Not only for those in the AIF, but for all fighting during the dreaded winter. Lack of circulation to the feet caused the agonising condition, which sometimes caused soldiers' toes to fall off. The only way to prevent it was with friction by moving or massaging, which Walter Downing describes as almost impossible due to the immense amount of mud. The harsh conditions led to more soldiers dying from the cold rather than combat operations, this caused the Australian morale to decrease drastically making the soldiers unfit for combat. These horrendous months were unbearable for all those fighting, including the all Tasmanian 40th Battalion, who saw some of their bloodiest fighting during this dreaded winter. **(40th-bn.org, 2017).** What we need to remember is that these soldiers were people just like us, as if the shelling and gunfire was not enough to put a man through, the winter made the unimaginable, even worse. The Australian soldiers certainly remembered the winter of 1917 as the worst winter of their lives.

In WW1, everyone who enlisted in the AIF had joined voluntarily, and this proved sufficient for the first half of the war. However, in 1916 when Australian casualties began to increase, voluntary enlisting started to decrease. In 1917, the AIF barely received 45,101 volunteers, only a third of the volunteers they received in 1916. (Butler, 1943). The lower enlistments proved a massive problem as there was constant pressure from the British who wanted Australia to provide an extra 5,500 troops every month. This led to the Prime Minister at the time, William Hughes, to hold a referendum on implementing conscription into the AIF. On the 28th of October 1916, a total of 2,247,590 Australian citizens voted. The vote was lost by a mere 72,476. Over a year later, on the 20th of December 1917, a second referendum was held. Once again, the Australian people voted not to implement conscription, however, this time the vote was decisive by 166,588 votes. This demonstrates that after seeing the atrocities that occurred in 1917, the Australian people had had enough. Prior to 1925, voting in Australia had not been compulsory, the two referenda saw the highest number of voters of all referenda previously held in Australia. In both cases, over 80% of those enrolled, voted. This shows the true passion felt by the Australian people on such a controversial topic. (Ww1.sl.nsw.gov.au, 2017).



An anti-conscription poster, 1917. (Flack, 2017).

I cannot fathom how many family trees, mine included, would have been altered if one of the two referenda had passed as Richard Bryce Lazarus, my Great Grandfather, had no children when he enlisted in 1918. Fortunately, he was lucky enough to not have to see active duty as the Armistice was signed whilst he was on his voyage to the front. If conscription had been introduced prior, it would be a completely different story. Since the Australian people made up their mind so clearly after 1917, this proves that they certainly thought it was the worst year yet.

If there is one thing that military historians agree on, it is that 1917 was the worst year for Australian soldiers on the Western Front, and they have every reason to believe so. With the

British abusing the use of Australian soldiers, we suffered the highest military casualties in the history of Australian conflict, which combined with the 1917 General Strike, created a catastrophic worker shortage back in Australia. If life in the trenches was not already horrible enough, the winter of 1916-1917 made it the worst experience of many soldiers' lives, with feet literally rotting away, it was truly the coldest hell. By the end of 1917, the Australian people had seen enough bloodshed and voted overwhelmingly against implementing conscription, which saved thousands of brave people from losing their lives. 1917 was, without doubt, the worst year of a hideous war.

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Cover Page Images (Top left then clockwise)

- Richard Bryce Lazarus (my Great Grandfather), 1918.
- Downing, W. (1998). *To the Last Ridge*. Sydney: Duffy & Snellgrove
- Embarkation roll featuring Richard Bryce Lazarus (fourth from the bottom).

Memorial, T. (2017). *Private Richard Bryce Lazarus*. [online] Awm.gov.au. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/R1855501> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2017].

Other Images

- Australian soldiers in a trench during The Battle of Bullecourt, 1917.

Memorial, T. (2017). *Australians in the second line of the trenches before Riencourt (near Bullecourt), in May 1917, cleaning their rifles in readiness for an attack..* [online] Awm.gov.au. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C338151> [Accessed 12 Aug. 2017].

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