



St Patrick's College

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Question: *Question 2* – 1917: the worst year of a hideous war (for Australia and Australians) wrote Max Belkin, Defence Correspondent Australian Associated Press, December 14, 2016. How accurate do you think this statement is?

Word Count: 1,154

1917, the worst year for Australia and Australians

“1917: the worst year of a hideous war (for Australian and Australians)” wrote Max Belkin, a Defence Correspondent, in Australian Associated Press. Although, 1917 had not been entirely bad for Australians, only for those on the Western Front. The Australians fighting in the Middle East flourished in their campaign, whereas two major battles on the Western Front turned 1917 into hell for the Australian troops serving in the latter. On the home front, conscription caused division between Australians.

1917 had been a prevailing year for Australian troops in the Middle East. In October, troops of the Australian 4th Light Horse regiment accomplished an historic feat in Israel: they charged the heavily defended town of Beersheba and because of their speed and bravery, took it within 24 hours. Through Beersheba they advanced into Palestine, taking Gaza and Jerusalem before the year ended, with only a small percentage of casualties. In 1917, every major event for these troops had gone well. Henry Gullet, an Australian official war correspondent, wrote: “They rode... with the same easy, casual bearing, and the same self-confidence that are their distinctive characteristics at home.” Gullet sums up the general mood of the Middle Eastern troops in 1917. Australia’s efforts in Middle East, 1917, had paid off. Their amazing charge and capture of Beersheba opened a door to many strategic opportunities that were pursued, and in the following year, the Turks surrendered to the Allies.

Australians of the Western Front had accomplished little. They fought risky battles and lost them, with the First Battle of Bullecourt and Passchendaele being the most notable. Bullecourt was eventually captured on the Australians’ third attempt, but only because they received British support; the Australians could not manage that battle alone. In the end, it was a pointless victory as Bullecourt was of no importance on the Western Front. Australians had fought and died for nothing. After Bullecourt, Australians were completely butchered at Passchendaele and were soon replaced by Canadian support later in the year, meaning they were no longer useful on the Western Front. 1917 had been a successful year for Australians in the Middle East, but it was certainly the worst year for those on the Western Front.

On the 11th of April, near Arras, Australians were to attack the village of Bullecourt on the Hindenburg Line. The 4th and 62nd brigades rushed in on the village. The fighting ensued, and many men were shot down and they were forced to retreat. The reason behind this retreat is that the tanks arrived late to the battle. It was Australia’s first experience with tanks, and they were operated by inexperienced troops. Most tanks were destroyed, and others did not even make the battle. Artillery was withheld because no-one was sure how far Australian infantry had advanced. The Australians called a retreat. The brigades amassed a total of 3,300 casualties. Ultimately, the first and second attempt of the Battle of Bullecourt failed because the tanks were not controlled by experienced operators. Perhaps if the Australians were provided sufficient support by the British, victory would have come more quickly. “Bullecourt, more than any other battle, shook confidence of Australian soldiers in the capacity of

British command,” explained Charles Bean, an official historian. They tried the attack again a month later, hoping for better outcomes. The British learned from their mistake of sending the Australian brigades without support and sent divisions to assist in the final attempt of the offensive. The Germans were defeated, but it was costly victory. The Australian divisions managed another 7,500 casualties. As shown at Beersheba later in the year, Australian morale would have been higher if commanded by someone who was educated on their capabilities and knew what risks to take. The British were not fully aware of the Australians’ training. Sending the novice Australians without sufficient support was a costly mistake by British command. Bullecourt and its failures were the first major event to turn 1917 into the worst year for Australian troops on the Western Front. Bullecourt may have been bad and pointless, but it was nothing compared to the horrors of Passchendaele.

When the Australians began fighting in the Third Battle of Ypres, their first engagements in the battles at Menin Road and Polygon Wood went well, and they advanced to Broodseinde Ridge, where they were less fortunate. Men fell from heavy gun fire and expected enemy counter-attacks. Heavily artillery attacks prevented the Germans from making anymore moves and therefore Australian soldiers had apt space to make appropriate defences and recover. Throughout these battles the divisions suffered 6,500 casualties, but this was little compared to Passchendaele, which had a total of 38,000 casualties. What makes Passchendaele the worst battle of World War 1 is not only its high casualty numbers, but the conditions the soldiers had to fight in. In his book, *The Broken Years*, Bill Gammage describes:

“The mud was so bad that last time we were here one of our officers rode into a shell hole and he disappeared. He had to be pulled out by ropes.”

The battlefield of Passchendaele suffered high amounts of rain, turning the ground into a sloppy bog of shell holes and thick mud. The biggest and worst battle for Australians in 1915, Gallipoli, had 26,111 casualties; 11,889 casualties less than Passchendaele. However, the struggle and toil of Passchendaele’s battlefield proved far worse. The soldiers of Passchendaele endured hard rain, mud and enemy fire. Most soldiers could not retreat since they were stuck in a trap of mud with enemies enclosing. The ex-soldier and poet Siegfried Sassoon wrote: “I died in hell. They called it Passchendaele.” Fighting in those conditions, it must have felt like hell for the soldiers. Men and horse alike drowned in shell holes, tanks sunk in the bog and gun barrels were plugged up with mud and clay. Troops fighting in Passchendaele had no escape and could not be evacuated from the slaughter. “...we found the floor literally covered with a mass of wounded; men being sick, moaning in pain, or crying out for a drink,” explained Sister May Tilton in *The Grey Battalion*; an example of the aftermath of Passchendaele. This battle was the worst battle of the Great War, and is the main reason why 1917 was so bad for Australians on the Western Front.

Back on the home front, things were not too great for Australians either. The idea of conscription was brought up for a second time by Prime Minister William Hughes, as he learned that Australian casualties were getting worse in 1917. The

referendum divided Australians; many people, especially returned soldiers, thought strongly against the idea of conscription. Private Victor Voules Brown, who was against it, wrote in a letter:

“...the [soldiers] in France... they consider it murder (or near enough to it) to compel anymore to come from [Australia]. And then again they consider once conscription is brought in it is the end of a free Australia.”

Private Jack Jensen, who was for conscription, wrote: “You see so many going about who will not enlist and the excuses they give would make your hair turn grey... These sort of men make you feel ashamed.” In the end conscription was defeated for a second time, with 53.8 percent voting against it. The conscription referendum brought unnecessary turmoil and division to home front Australia during a time of need.

Even though 1917 had been a prevailing year for Australian troops serving in Middle East, the terror which Australian troops on the Western Front endured and the unnecessary division of people on the home front caused 1917 to be the worst year of the war for Australians. Casualties were extreme and fighting conditions were appalling compared to any other year, particularly because of the mistakes made by the British command in Bullecourt and the terrible weather at Passchendaele. Max Belkin was correct in saying: “1917: the worst year of a hideous war (for Australia and Australians)” because it certainly was a dreadful mess of a year.

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