



FORMER NAME: The battle was originally called the Battle of Fleurbaix.

PHOTOS: CONTRIBUTED

The true cost of the battle

The Battle of Fromelles resulted in the death of hundreds of Australian soldiers

■ Peter McLady

FLEURBAIX, a siding on the Amiens Branch Railway, commemorates the battle in which the 5th Division of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) was destroyed as a fighting force.

It is now remembered as the Battle of Fromelles.

The attacking troops were not familiar with Fromelles itself because it was in German hands; for them the nearest village was Fleurbaix which stood behind their own lines.

The 5th Division AIF entered the front line near Fromelles on July 10, 1916. This small village 16 kilometres west of the city of Lille in Northern France became the site of the AIF's first major battle on the Western Front.

It could not have been a worse start; the battle plan was described by Brigadier-General Harold "Pompey" Elliott, Australian commander of the 15th Brigade, as "a wretched, hybrid scheme, which might well be termed a tactical abortion" (Elliott 1930, 2).

In a 27-hour period between July 19 and 20, the 5th Division suffered 5533 casualties, including 1917 killed in action – the greatest loss of life in a night in Australian history (Lindsay 2008, 5).

As with so many battles of World War I, the Allied soldiers were to advance against strong and established German defences. The German position at Fromelles consisted of wire entanglements protecting a two metre high and six metre deep sandbag wall

(Pedersen 2012, 15). Among the German troops defending Fromelles was a 27-year-old despatch runner, Lance Corporal Adolf Hitler.

Originally planned for July 17, the attack was postponed until July 19, due to heavy rain and mist. Then, at 11am on July 19, the Allied artillery bombardment opened up and so began the Battle of Fromelles.

“The survivors dug in and fought on.”

— (Laffin 1992, 57).

The Allied bombardment proved to be totally inadequate as "the German fortifications and dug-outs were much deeper, stronger, and less penetrable than their British equivalents" (McMullin 2002, 216).

The bombardment intensified throughout the day and then at 6pm, with some three and a half hours of daylight remaining, the infantry advance began (Bean 1948, 227). The 8th, 14th and 15th Brigades of the 5th Division advanced on a front of 2400 metres across no man's land.

The 61st British Division was on their right and had responsibility for capturing the heavily guarded Sugar Loaf salient – the site of two unsuccessful British attacks in 1915 that had both resulted in heavy British casualties.

Sergeant Walter Downing of the 57th Battalion described the horrific scene.

"And then the 59th rose, vengeful, with a shout – a thousand as one man. The chattering metallic staccato of the tempest of hell burst in nickelled gusts.

"Sheaves and streams of bullets swept like whirling knives.

"There were many corpses hung inert on our wire, but the 59th surged forward, now in silence, more steadily, more precise than on parade.

"A few yards and there were but two hundred marching on. The rest lay in heaps and bloody swathes. Eighty came back that night." (Downing 1920, 25)

"A few Diggers almost reached the enemy wire, the rest were killed or wounded within minutes of the battle's commencement. The survivors dug in and fought on." (Laffin 1992, 57).

The 8th and 14th Brigades had more success and were able to break through the German front line and move forward to capture the second line.

By 7.30pm they held a disjointed position but with



This statue was placed as a memorial of the soldiers who fought in the battle and lost their lives.

both flanks open to counter attack (Pedersen 2012, 18). The German support line they now occupied had long been abandoned and was no more than a muddy ditch.

Standing in knee-deep water, the Australians fought on, at the same time trying to construct sand bag defences.

Reinforcements were sent forward to carry much

needed ammunition and bombs but as the hours passed, the Australians steadily lost men to the German counter attacks.

By 2.30 am the Germans had overrun what remained of the 8th Brigade and as dawn approached the 14th Brigade's situation was described as dire (Pedersen 2012, 19).

The Australian troops were ordered to withdraw. Many died returning across no-man's land and the survivors arrived back in their trenches to face a scene described by Captain Hugh Knyvett of the 59th battalion: "If you had gathered the stock of a thousand butcher shops, cut it into small pieces and strewn it about, it would give you a faint conception of the shambles those trenches were." (Knyvett 1918, 155).

The 5th Division was destroyed as a fighting formation.

Of the 1917 Australians

killed, 1299 have no known grave.

Some 400 Australians were taken prisoner of war. The 60th Battalion from Victoria went into battle with 887 men but came out with only one officer and 106 men. The 32nd Battalion from South Australia and Western Australia lost 17 officers and 701 men (Laffin 1992, 57). The losses suffered by the 61st British Division were 1547 men killed or wounded. The German casualties totalled less than 1500.

The British authorities played down the losses at Fromelles. The official communiqué following the attack massively understated the Allied losses. The British strategy – which continued until after the war – of covering up the appalling losses may be attributed to the disaster that was unfolding further to the south: the Battle of the Somme.



The VC Corner of the Australian Cemetery and Memorial in Fromelles, France. PHOTO: ROD KIRKPATRICK