

Aussie troops' journey into hell on the Western Front

Some of the Granite Belt's best soldiers lost in battle

■ Peter McLady

ONE hundred years ago precisely, the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), with the eight-month Gallipoli campaign behind it, was preparing to enter the fighting on the Western Front of France and Belgium.

The last Australian troops left the Gallipoli peninsula on December 20 1915, with the entire Anzac fighting force withdrawing without the Turkish forces realising they had departed.

The evacuation was achieved with barely a casualty.

However, by then the Gallipoli campaign had resulted in terrible losses on all sides.

The Australians lost 8709 men with another 17,924 wounded.

The New Zealand losses were frightful.

Out of a total fighting force of 8556 men, 2701 New Zealanders were killed in action and another 4752 were wounded (Carlyon 2001, P531).

Five men from Stanthorpe and the Granite Belt died in the Gallipoli campaign and are remembered with honour on the Stanthorpe War Memorial.

These men are Lance Corporal William Burns, Private William Cammack, Private Thomas Marstella, Trooper William Sharpe, and Private William Shelford.

After leaving Gallipoli, the AIF was sent to defend Egypt and the all-important Suez Canal against the threat of attack by the Turkish Army (Bean 1948, P183).

Troop reinforcements from Australia were arriving in Egypt in greater numbers following a surge in recruitments, leading to a major expansion and reorganisation of the AIF.

The experienced soldiers from the 16 oldest battalions were split up and, together with the new recruits, became the basis of the reformed 1st and 2nd and the new 4th and 5th AIF Divisions.

In early 1916, the 3rd Division AIF was formed in Australia and sent directly to England for extensive training.

Since the outbreak of war in August 1914, the British and French troops, holding the Western Front, had suffered severe losses.

The Allies' situation worsened in February 1916 when the Germans began a massive assault upon



Map towns/ Battlefields of the Amiens branch railway siding PETER CHAMBERS

Verdun in France.

The objective was "bleeding France to death", according to the Chief of the German General Staff General Falkenhayn, and he achieved considerable success (Bean 1948, P213).

At the end of the 10-month campaign, French casualties were estimated at 377,000 (Brown 2000, P159).

With the Allies desperately needing reinforcements, it came as no surprise in March 1916 when the order came to move the AIF from Egypt to the Western Front.

On March 19, troop ships carrying the 2nd Division arrived in the French port of Marseilles.

The 1st Division followed just over a week later.

From Marseilles, the Australian troops moved north by train to French Flanders, near Armentieres, which was still in the grip of a wet, cold winter.

There they joined the British Expeditionary Force of some 49 infantry divisions that was holding the line between Ypres in Belgium and 130 kilometres south to the Somme River in France.

The vast majority of the Allied Western Front was held by the French with 111 infantry divisions in the line and in reserve (Bean 1948, P198).

The AIF was brought to French Flanders, a sector known as "the nursery" where new divisions were sent "for a quiet introduction, in training for harsher experiences to come" (Bean 1948, P196).

By mid-April, the 1st and 2nd Australian Divisions were in the frontline south-east of Armentieres.

The 4th and 5th Divisions arrived in France from Egypt in June and were followed in November by the 3rd Division from England.

The five divisions of the AIF went on to fight in many great battles on the Western Front in France and Belgium from mid-1916 until the war ended on November 11, 1918.

From a population of fewer than five million



SIGNS OF REFLECTION: The railway siding signs at the Stanthorpe Heritage Museum.

PHOTO: SAMANTHA WANTLING

people, more than 318,000 men embarked from Australia on active service with more than 62,000 losing their lives (Noonan 2014, P62 and P120).

It was on the Western Front where 46,000 of these young Australians died and more than 150,000 were

wounded.

Proportionate to men in the field, the Australian casualty rate was the highest in the British Empire.

The New Zealand casualty rate was not far behind (Pedersen, 2013, xxiv).

Given the scale of these

losses, we understand the view that "the AIF's spiritual presence in modern Flanders (both Belgian and French) and in Northern France remains significant" (Laffin, 1992, P9).

The sites of some of the most significant battles in which the AIF fought on the

Western Front live on in the names chosen for railway sidings on the Amiens branch line on the Granite Belt.

Thirty of the 39 soldiers whose names appear on the Stanthorpe World War 1 Memorial died on the Western Front.