

Locals lost in last leg of war

■ Peter McLady

ALTHOUGH 1918 was to be the final year of World War I, the Allied forces, including the Australian infantry, began the year in a precarious state.

In mid-November 1917, the five Australian infantry divisions were sent to recover over the European winter months to a quieter sector of the frontline beyond Messines. The great battles of 1917 – Bullecourt, Messines, Passchendaele – had taken a heavy toll on the Australians.

The five divisions had suffered more than 55,000 casualties, 38,000 of which were inflicted at the Battle of Passchendaele.

The Australian contribution, still so passionately remembered by the people of France, is typified by the loss of men from the Granite Belt during 1918.

In the defence of the Western Front, and in the Allied attack launched in August 1918 until the end of World War I, 10 men from the Granite Belt lost their lives.

The Hundred Days Offensive was the final period of World War I when the Allies launched a series of attacks on the Western front, beginning with the Battle of Amiens.

The actual Battle of Amiens was not fought at Amiens, but to the east of Villers-Bretonneux.

The battle began on August 8 when 100,000 Allied troops attacked along a front of 20km. The A.I.F. 2nd and 3rd Divisions joined the attack on a front between Villers-Bretonneux and the Somme River.

The Germans were taken by surprise and the Allies broke through their lines. The 2nd and 3rd Divisions held their gains and the 4th and 5th Divisions moved through their lines to continue the attack.

At the end of August 8 the Allies had captured 13,000 German prisoners and seized some 200 field guns (Bean 1948, 473). General Ludendorff described the day as “the black day of the German army” after which he believed there was no hope of a German victory in World War I.

The following day, the Allied attack continued with the Australians responsible for holding the northern flank. Then followed three days of tough fighting. Without co-ordinated artillery support, between August 9-12, the five Australian divisions suffered nearly 6000 casualties.

Over the next week the Australian forces undertook a series of what became known as “peaceful penetration” attacks.

The next large-scale Allied attack was on August 21 when the British Third Army attacked the German front to the south of Arras. The A.I.F. 3rd Division joined the British attack the

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next day.

The Third Army took most of its objectives with the 3rd Division capturing the area north of Bray. The following day the A.I.F. 1st Division, together with the 32nd British Division, attacked south of the Somme River. Of the 8000 German prisoners taken by the Allies, the A.I.F. 1st Division captured 2000, but suffered nearly 1000 casualties in the fighting (Bean 1948, 477).

There followed another week of “peaceful penetration” fighting by the Australians, forcing the Germans back across the old Somme battlefield.

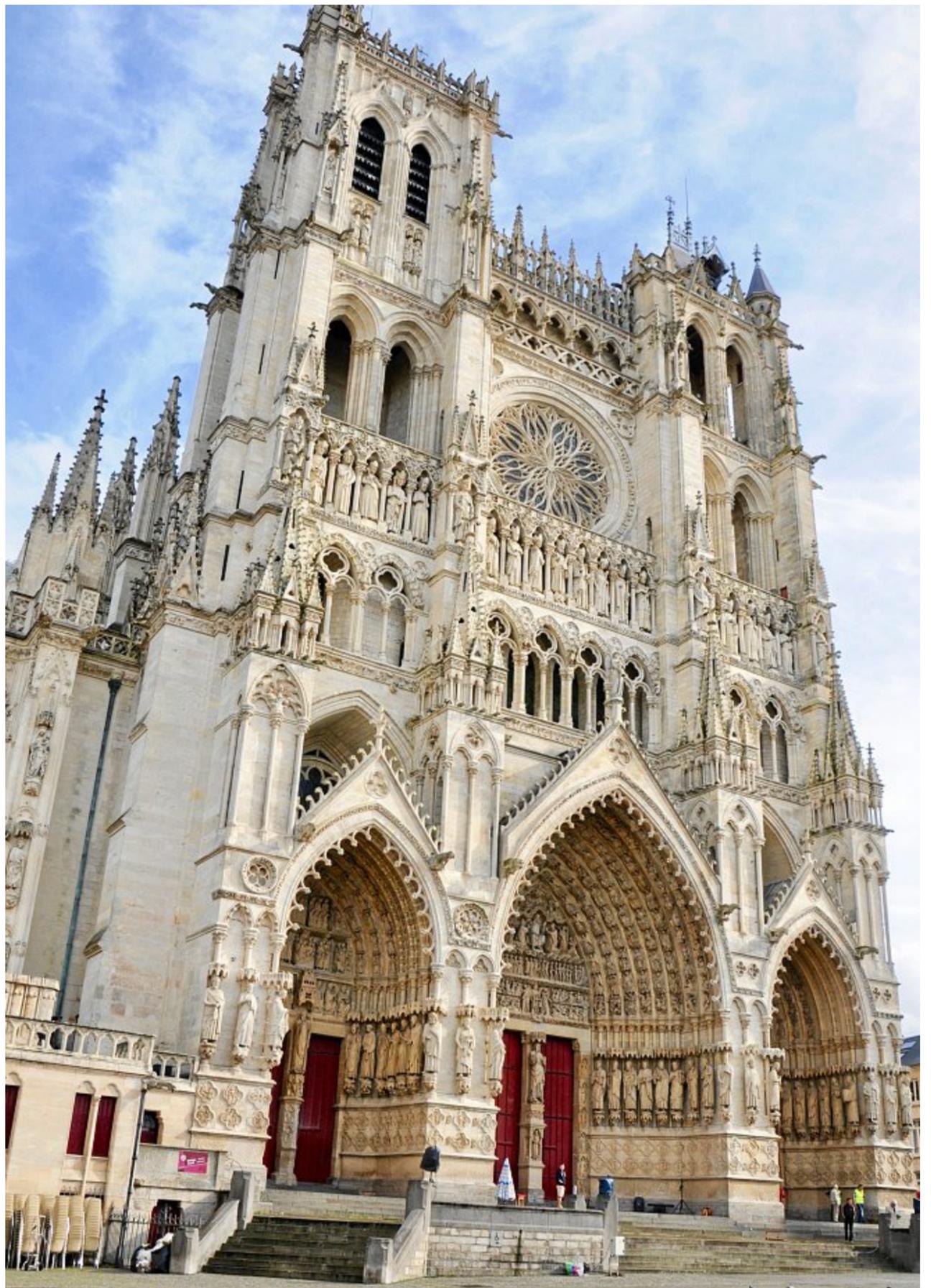
During one such advance on August 30, Private George Alexander, of Wylie Creek, was killed by shellfire in a forward area between Herbecourt and the Somme Canal. George has no known grave and is remembered on the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux.

The 1st Division A.I.F. was relieved by the 2nd and 5th Divisions and with the Germans continuing to fall back, the Australian infantry carried the attack to them. The Australians were nearing exhaustion but pressed on with the attack and engaged the German defences at Peronne and Mont St Quentin. “The capture of Mont St. Quentin and Peronne is held by many Australian soldiers to be the most brilliant achievement of the A.I.F.” (Bean 1942, 873).

Private William Gawith, of Stanthorpe, was killed in action on September 2 when the 25th Battalion was engaged in heavy fighting in the vicinity of Mont St. Quentin. William is buried in the Peronne Communal Cemetery Extension.

The Australians continued to pursue the retreating German forces to the Hindenberg Line. Private James Scott of the 4th Australian Machine Gun Battalion was involved in the attack on the Hindenberg Line east of Peronne.

He and George Alexander were friends and business partners in the Wylie Creek Tin Dredging Syndicate. Just three weeks after the death of his friend and business partner, James was wounded in action on September 20. He was admitted to a Casualty Clearing Station but died on September 22. James is buried in La

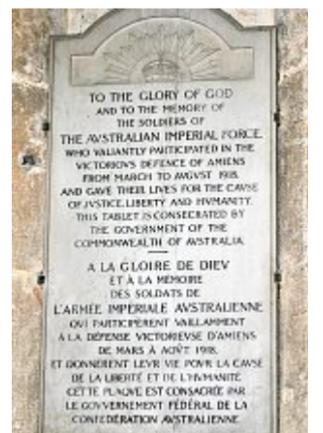


HISTORIC: Amiens Cathedral overlooks the River Somme and was built between 1220 and c.1270.

PHOTOS: PETER MCLADY



The picturesque surroundings of Villers-Bretonneux.



A plaque that sits in Amiens Cathedral.

Chapelette British and Indian Cemetery near Peronne. The Australian infantry went on to fight its last battle on the Western Front at Montbrehain on October 5.

In the final year of World

War I, Australia made a great contribution, as Charles Bean attested:

“Such was the reputation attained after two-and-a-half years of intense warfare on the Western Front by the force whose first trial was in

the equally intense struggle on Gallipoli. There is no question – although their own home folk in Australia at first found this difficult to believe – that the spirit and skill of the Australian Imperial Force, and

particularly of the infantry, in this final year’s fighting in France materially affected the course of the campaign there, as did that of the other Dominion forces.” (Bean 1946, 494.)