



Just Ask: Tracing your family's wartime history

With interest in the Western Front increasing in the final year of the Anzac Centenary 2014-2018, growing numbers of Australians are discovering their military ancestors and retracing their forebears' footsteps through France and Belgium.

In some cases Australians are amazed that an often simple search can produce a treasure trove of information, stories, letters and photos from over 100 years ago.

Asking a simple question of family members, a century after the war, can set off a line of inquiry that leads to online searches, piecing information together, and embarking on a life-altering journey of remembrance to the other side of the world.

It is estimated more than 1.5 million Australians visit the former Western Front battlefields each year which, in cooperation with French and Belgian authorities, are now formalised as the [Australian Remembrance Trail along the Western Front](#).

The 200km trail stretches from Ieper (Ypres) in Belgium to Bellenglise in northern France. It includes battle sites, cemeteries, memorials and monuments.

More than 295,000 Australians served on the Western Front; some 46,000 died and about 131,000 were wounded. As a result, today many Australians have an ancestor who fought and/or died in France or Belgium.

Uncovering the story of military ancestors is a relatively straightforward process that can yield extraordinary results, and the online database of the [Australian War Memorial](#) is a popular starting point.

The Memorial has a Research Centre where staff and volunteers may be available to assist with interpreting service records and other documents.



Other resources are available at the [National Archives of Australia](#), the [National Library of Australia](#) and the [Commonwealth War Graves Commission](#).

The genealogy website [Ancestry](#) also has a tab where people can search for their First World War ancestors.

Detailed records on enlistment, embarkation, battles fought, promotions, injuries, burials, service dossiers and life beyond the frontline are also available to people interested in researching their ancestors.

There can be serendipitous discoveries and moments of intrigue and frustration, but the end result is overwhelmingly rewarding, allowing people to reach into the past and connect with their ancestors, at a time when they were young and confident and undertaking the highest form of public service in defence of their country.