

# Australia and the Western Front 1914-1918

The great international conflict which we now call World War I began with a series of military mobilisations and declarations of war between 28 July and 4 August 1914. On 28 June 1914, a Serbian nationalist, Gavrilo Princip, assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, in Sarajevo, the capital of the Austrian administered province of Bosnia. Serbia was a centre of Slav nationalism, and its government was working to influence the southern parts of Austria-Hungary to join it. The Austro-Hungarian government saw the assassination as a chance to crush this movement, by declaring war on Serbia on 28 July 1914.

Serbia appealed to Russia, seen as the protector of all the Slav peoples, for help. A system of alliances now meant that other nations became involved. If Russia fought Austria-Hungary, France would be bound to support Russia. If Austria-Hungary fought, Germany would support it against Russia and France, so on 1 August Germany declared war on Russia. German military leaders felt that the country could not survive a war on two fronts. To prevent this they planned to invade France through Belgium, sweep into Paris, quickly secure the surrender of France, and then focus all Germany's forces on defeating Russia (which would not be ready to fight for several weeks after a declaration of war). On 3 August 1914, Germany declared war on France and demanded passage for its troops through Belgium. Britain had guaranteed the neutrality of Belgium, so a German invasion of Belgium would lead to Britain's involvement as well. On 4 August, Germany invaded Belgium and Britain declared war against Germany.

In 1914 Australia was still a young nation composed of states that until 1901 had been self-governing colonies of Great Britain. The new Commonwealth Constitution of 1901 gave the new Federal government great powers, including powers over external affairs if it cared to use them. However, Australia, similar to other British Dominions like New Zealand and Canada, felt close to Britain – the great majority of the population in the early decades of the 20th century were either immigrants from Great Britain or Ireland or the descendants of such immigrants. Moreover, Australia was most concerned that the British would continue to assist with Australian defence in the Pacific area against the expansion of other great powers in the region such as the German Empire and Japan. So, when Britain declared war against Germany on 4 August 1914 it would have been unthinkable to Australians at the time that Australia was not also automatically at war, standing shoulder to shoulder with Great Britain and the interests of the British Empire as a whole.



Portrait of Lieutenant J C D Reid  
AWM H06659



Portrait of Sergeant Eric Hall  
AWM H06000



Portrait of Driver Eric Bedford  
AWM H05557



Portrait of Lieutenant Charles  
Teasdale Main AWM H05741



Portrait of Private Frank Pooler  
AWM H05523

Note: all men on pages 11-14  
were killed in action during 1917.

While the war was fought on many fronts — in Russia and eastern Europe, in Turkey and in the Middle East — the centre of the war was in western Europe, in France and Belgium. This ‘Western Front’ stretched from the North Sea on the Belgium coast to the French–German–Swiss border near the Swiss town of Basel (Basle). For either side — the Allies (France, the British Empire, the Russian Empire and, eventually, the United States), and the Central Powers (the German Empire, the Austro–Hungarian Empire, the Ottoman Empire) — to win the war, victory had to be achieved on the Western Front. (See page 16 for a map of the Western Front.)

The early war of mobility in the west, during which Germany tried to deliver a rapid knock-out blow to France, quickly came to an end. The Germans failed to overwhelm the Allies in a series of actions fought in northern France and in Belgium. By late 1914, most of Belgium, except for a narrow strip between the town of Ypres (Ieper) in West Flanders and the coast, was occupied by Germany. Large sections of eastern France also lay in German hands. There now stretched a fortified line between the two sides, from the North Sea to the Swiss border. For the next four years, both sides sought to break through the enemy’s positions with a war-winning campaign that would lead to victory in the west.

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During 1915 and the early months of 1916, a number of attacks were launched seeking this elusive break-through. The British Expeditionary Force (BEF) launched offensives at Neuve Chapelle, Aubers Ridge and Loos, while the French undertook even bigger offensives in Artois and Champagne. None of these attacks gained significant ground, and casualties were heavy. For 1916, Britain and France planned a joint major offensive in the Somme area, but the Germans struck in February with a huge attack on French forts at Verdun. Here, the Germans aimed at nothing less than ‘bleeding France white’ and bringing Britain, a country which depended on imports by sea to wage war, to her knees by instituting unrestricted submarine warfare. As the Verdun battle progressed, the French were obliged to pull many of their forces out of the proposed Somme offensive, but they urged the British to go ahead with the attack, to take the pressure off Verdun. It was at this point in the war that the divisions of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) began arriving in France from Egypt.

After the evacuation of Gallipoli, the AIF had regrouped and retrained in Egypt. The force expanded greatly to four divisions — 1st, 2nd, 4th and 5th Divisions — each with 12 infantry battalions of approximately 1200 men, along with artillery, transport, supply and medical units. Another division, the 3rd, was formed in England but did not enter service until late 1916. In March–April 1916, the AIF moved to northern France and went into the line south of the town of Armentières. Here, the soldiers learned about the art and weaponry of static trench warfare — conducting raids, manning trenches, sniping and directed artillery actions. Then on 1 July 1916, the British opened their great offensive on the Somme to the north-east of the town of Albert. The opening attack, which cost 60,000 British casualties, failed to achieve a breakthrough, but because of the need to keep supporting France at Verdun, the British pressed on. The AIF was soon pulled into this titanic struggle.

On 19 July 1916, the 5th Division AIF, along with the British 61st Division, launched an attack at Fromelles, well to the north of the main Somme battlefield. The aim at Fromelles was to draw German reinforcements away from the Somme area, but the attack was a complete failure. Within twenty-four hours, the Australians were forced to retreat to their start lines and the division suffered more than 5000 casualties. It was a horrendous introduction for the men of the AIF to major action on the Western Front. However, worse was to follow.

By mid-July 1916, the front line on the Somme stood just outside the village of Pozières. Between 23 July and 3 September, the AIF's 1st, 2nd and 4th Divisions mounted a series of major attacks in this area to capture Pozières village, the heights to the east and then positions to the north and west towards Mouquet Farm. In general, all the Australian objectives were taken, but at a frightful cost on both sides. The Germans regarded Pozières and the heights as vital positions, and subjected the AIF to massive artillery bombardment and many desperate counter-attacks. In all, the four Australian divisions suffered

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more than 23,000 casualties in six weeks — a total about equal to the casualties suffered on Gallipoli in eight months. The Somme offensive ground on until November, and the AIF was again involved in some minor actions at locations such as Flers. The looked-for breakthrough never eventuated, but Britain had stood by her alliance with France.

The year 1917 also saw the Allies looking once again for the elusive breakthrough. The French planned what their commander, General Nivelle, saw as a decisive campaign, in April. To assist the French, the BEF would mount attacks to the north and south of Arras aimed at wearing down the Germans and drawing away their reserves from the French area. On 9 April, the Canadians mounted a highly successful attack at Vimy Ridge, driving the Germans off the heights

there. An attack on the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line to the south-east of Arras near Bullecourt was conducted by the AIF's 4th Division and the British 62nd Division. It became a disaster, and the village of Bullecourt remained in German hands. A second attack, in early May, mounted by the AIF's 2nd and 5th Divisions saw the Australians break into the Hindenburg Line. There followed two weeks of intense trench fighting as the AIF held on to their gains. Eventually, the Germans evacuated Bullecourt, but both actions around the village had proved costly in casualties and little was achieved. To the south, the French 'Nivelle' offensive between 16 April and 9 May cost France more than 187,000 casualties and failed to find a way through the German lines.

As early as 1916, the British began to plan a major offensive in Belgium around the town of Ypres (Ieper). For Britain, German possession of much of the coastline of Belgium was a disaster, because German submarines — U-Boats — could range from there more easily out into the Atlantic. In June 1917, U-Boats sank more than half a million tons of Allied shipping heading for Britain. The proposed offensive at Ypres would break through the enemy lines to the east of the town, where the Germans held the high ground, and then



Portrait of Private Donald Smith  
AWM H06776



Portrait of Corporal L N Walton  
AWM H06700



Portrait of 1st Corporal Edward Paten  
AWM H06599



Portrait of Lieutenant Norman Robson Wilkinson AWM H06133



Portrait of Bombadier R E F Hannaker AWM H06780



Portrait of Corporal J Anderson AWM H06549

send cavalry into the enemy rear areas. In this way the Belgian coastline would be cleared and the enemy driven back through Belgium. Before the major battle commenced, a small but significant action was fought at Messines to straighten the British line south of Ypres. At Messines, on 7 June 1917, the 3rd Division AIF went into action for the first time and, despite the usual heavy casualties, gained all their objectives.

After the success at Messines, the great British offensive at Ypres opened on 17 July 1917. For ten days the British artillery, which included Australian units, bombarded German positions with four and a half million shells. Then, on 31 July, the infantry attacked. From that date until 6 November, British Empire and Dominion soldiers struggled across the open landscape to the east and north-east of Ypres, towards the village of Passchendaele. By the standards of these great attrition battles the British had some notable successes. The AIF, for example, gained all their objectives at the Battle of Menin Road (20 September), the Battle of Polygon Wood (26 September) and the Battle of Broodseinde (4 October). By early October, the Germans had been pushed back a considerable distance towards Passchendaele. However, the weather now broke and persistent rainfall turned the battlefield into a sea of mud. The offensive went on, but little progress was made. Actions were fought by the AIF such as the First Battle of Passchendaele (9 October) and the Second Battle of Passchendaele (12 October). The village finally fell to the Canadians on 6 November, but so great had been the casualties suffered in the offensive that it was called off.

Between August and November 1917, all five divisions of the AIF fought at Ypres, suffering 33,699 casualties of whom 11,260 lost their lives.

In April 1917, the United States entered the war on the Allied side. In that year, also, revolution broke out in the Russian Empire, and in March 1918 the new Bolshevik government under Vladimir Lenin took Russia out of the war by signing a separate peace treaty with Germany. This made it possible for the Germans to strengthen their armies on the Western Front, and they planned a great offensive for early 1918 to crush the BEF and the French before the United States could build up a large army in France. On 21 March 1918, the Germans began a series of offensives aimed at pushing a wedge between the BEF in the north and the French armies to the south.

Initially, the Germans had great success and the BEF was forced back many kilometres across the old Somme battlefield. The AIF divisions, which had wintered in the trenches in Belgium, were rushed south to help stem the German advance. At Hébuterne (26 March – early April), Morlancourt (28 – 30 March) and Dernancourt (28 March – 5 April) the Australians held off strong enemy attacks and helped stabilise the British line. Australians also helped to halt another German offensive at Hazebrouck, to the north of Armentières, during April. Further to the south, east of the major centre of Amiens, units of the AIF were instrumental in halting German thrusts at two actions around the town of Villers-Bretonneux on 4 April and 24–25 April. These actions were later interpreted by the local French population as having saved Amiens. By late July 1918, the German attempts to break the Allied line had failed and the enemy was now decidedly on the defensive.

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# Timeline of Major Battles on the Western Front

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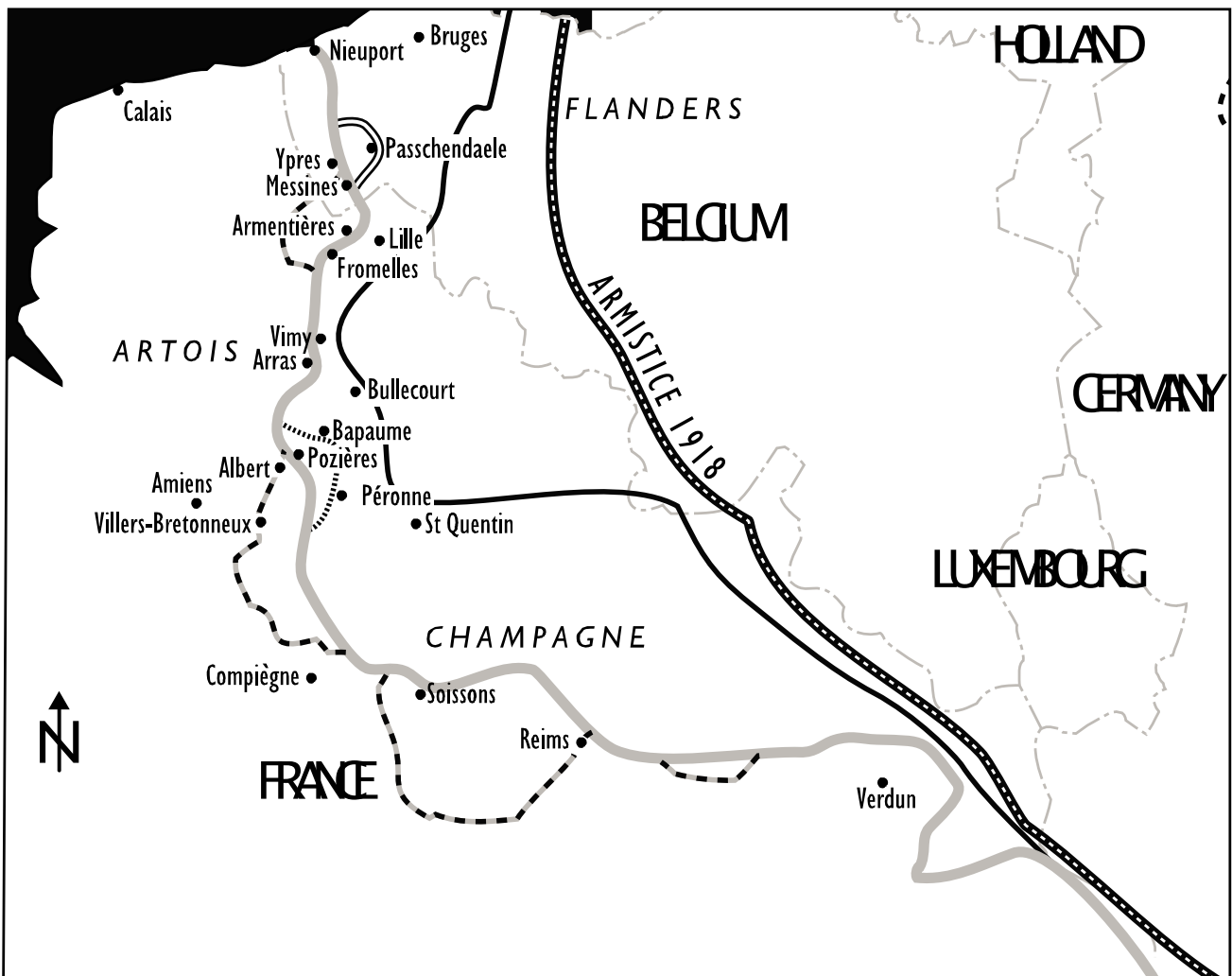
Green indicates Australian involvement.

<b>1914</b>	4 August	Germany invades Belgium
	23 August	Battle of Mons
	6-12 September	Battle of the Marne
	12 October - 11 November	First Battle of Ypres
<b>1915</b>	1 January - 30 March	Allied offensive in Artois and Champagne
	22 April - 25 May	Second Battle of Ypres
	May - June	Second Battle of Artois
	25 September - 6 November	Renewed offensives in Artois and Champagne
<b>1916</b>	21 February - 18 December	Battle of Verdun
	April	First units of the AIF arrive in France
	1 July - 13 November	Battle of the Somme
	19-20 July	Battle of Fromelles
	23 July - 4 September	Battles of Pozières and Mouquet Farm
<b>1917</b>	9-15 April	Battle of Arras
	11 April	First Battle of Bullecourt
	3-17 May	Second Battle of Bullecourt
	16 April - 19 May	French 'Nivelle' Offensive on the Aisne
	June - November	British offensive in Flanders (Belgium)
	7 June	Battle of Messines
	31 July - 10 November	Third Battle of Ypres (often known as 'Passchendaele')
	20 September	Battle of the Menin Road
	26 September	Battle of Polygon Wood
	4 October	Battle of Broodseinde
	9 October	First Battle of Passchendaele
	12 October	Second Battle of Passchendaele
20 November - 3 December	Battle of Cambrai	
<b>1918</b>	21 March - 5 April	German Somme offensive
	9 April - 8 May	German Lys offensive
	24-25 April	Recapture of Villers-Bretonneux
	27-30 May	German Aisne offensive
	30 May - 17 June	Battle of Chateau Thierry and Belleau Wood
	9-13 June	German Noyon-Montdidier offensive
	4 July	Battle of Hamel
	15-19 July	German Champagne-Marne offensive
	8 August - 4 September	Allied Somme offensive

## Timeline of Major Battles on the Western Front *continued*

<b>1918 cont.</b>	8-11 August	Battle of Amiens
	31 August - 3 September	Capture of Mont St Quentin and Péronne
	26 September - 11 November	Allied Meuse-Argonne offensive
	18 September - 17 October	Hindenberg Line offensive
	29 September - 1 October	Battle of St Quentin Canal
	5 October	Battle of Montbrehain – after this battle the AIF was withdrawn from action.
	28 September - 14 October	British-Belgian Flanders offensive
	7 October - 11 November	Allied Sambre-Scheldt offensive
	11 November	Armistice signed at Compiègne brings fighting to an end on the Western Front

## Map of the Western Front



End of 1914  
  Somme Offensive 1916  
  Ypres Offensive 1917  
  German Offensives 1918  
  Allied Offensives 1918



## Resources for Kindergarten – Year 3

The following pages provide some key images to help young children explore some aspects of Australia's World War I heritage.

This activity could be carried out in the lead-up to the school's commemoration of Anzac Day (25 April) or Remembrance Day (11 November).

Students colour in the five images, and cut out and paste on the appropriate caption for each. These can be printed for the students to create their own books.

Teachers will find several coloured artworks in the Image Library on the CD-ROM that they can show to students, to help them choose appropriate colours.

Other excellent resources for students at this level can be found at:

[www.dva.gov.au/commem/commac/studies/studies.htm](http://www.dva.gov.au/commem/commac/studies/studies.htm) and

[www.anzacday.org.au/education/childhood/default.htm](http://www.anzacday.org.au/education/childhood/default.htm)

Students could also be encouraged to create other images and symbols associated with these commemorative days — such as poppies, rosemary, wreaths, medals, etc.

Teachers can show photos or film from the libraries on the CD-ROM to start class discussions about war, who serves in war and what their jobs might be, commemorative symbols, war memorials and family history.



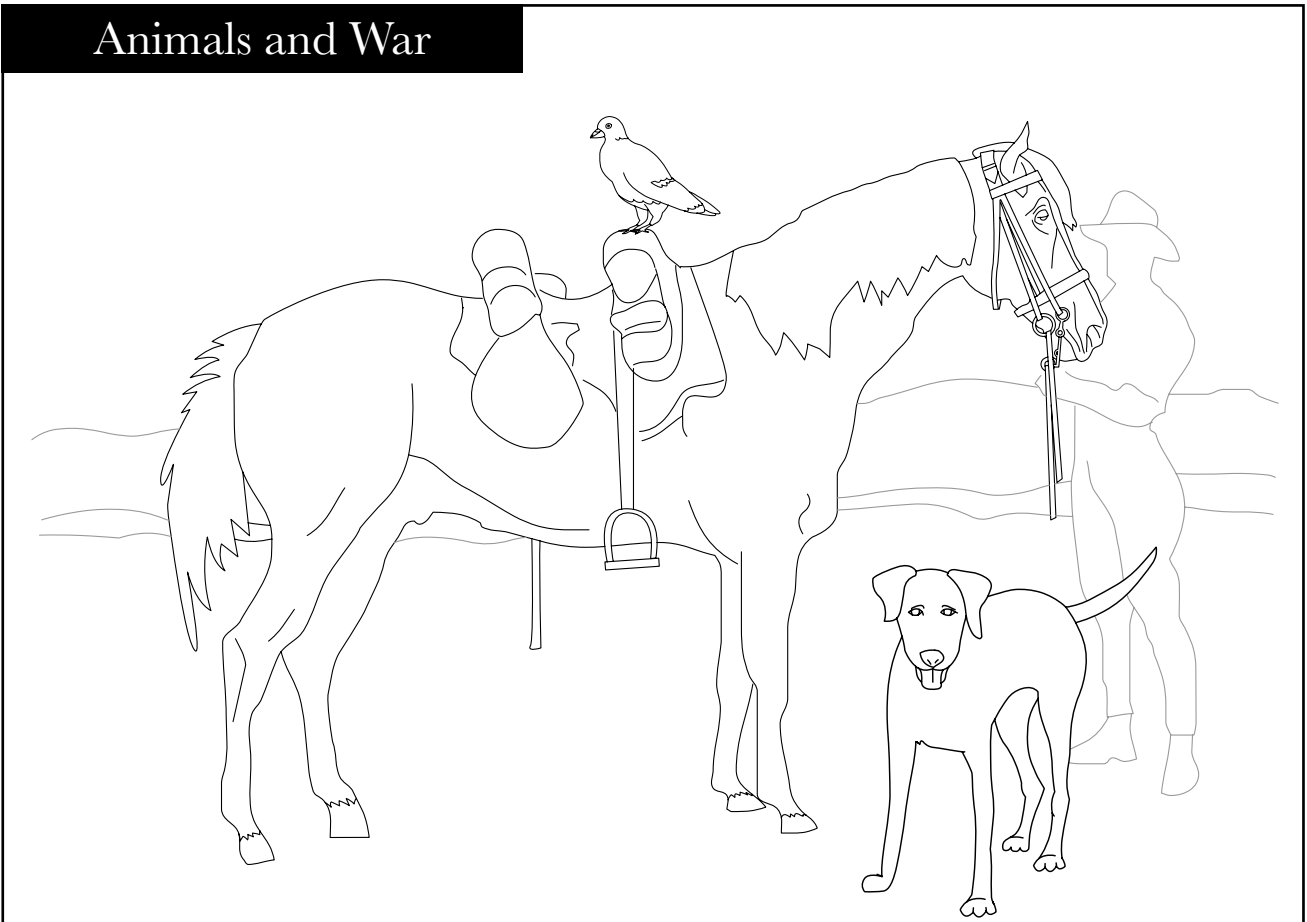
AWM 03183

A machine-gun position established by the 54th Battalion during the morning of the attack through Péronne, France, 2 September 1918.

## An Australian Nurse



## Animals and War





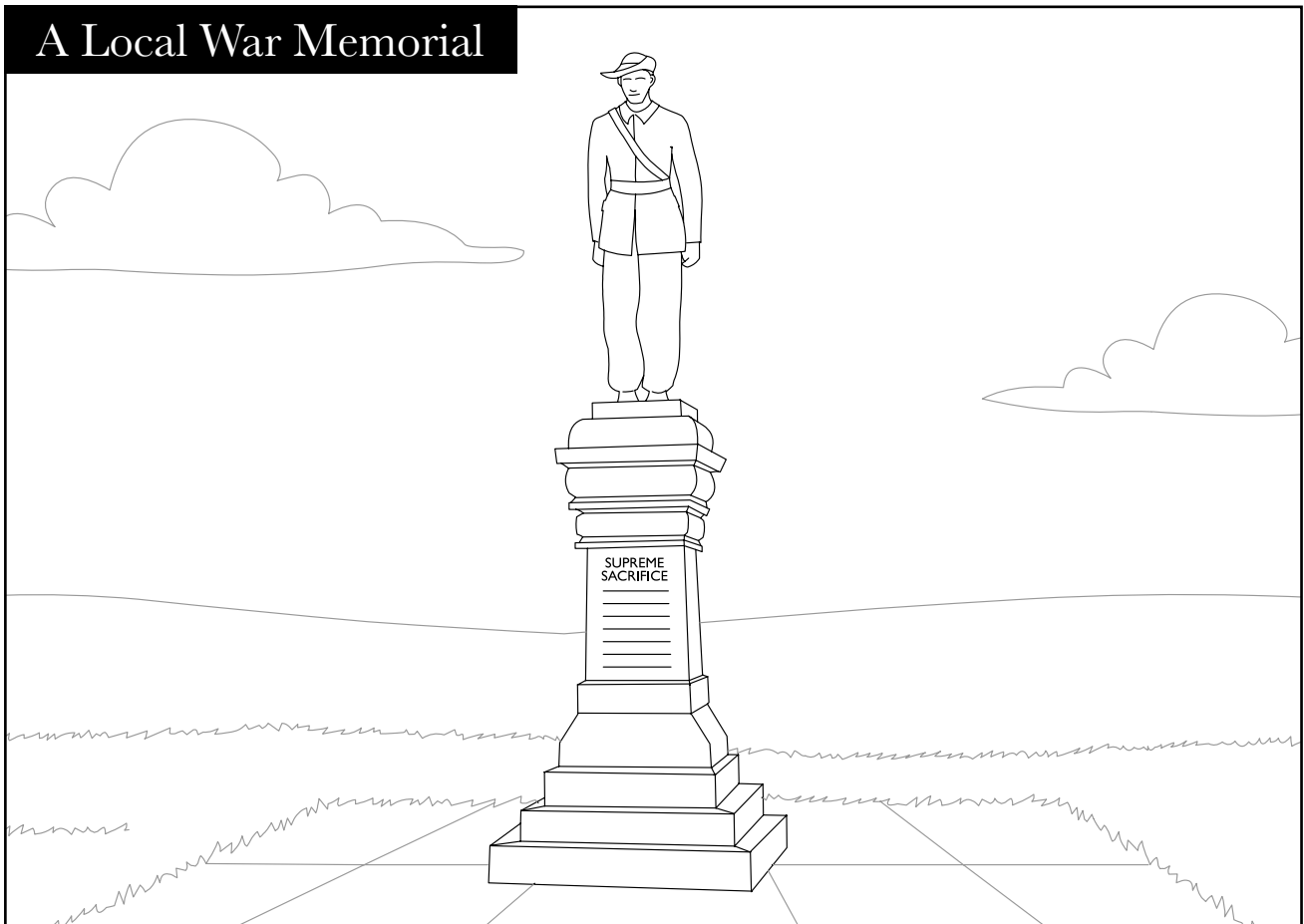
## An Australian Soldier



## An Anzac Day March



## A Local War Memorial



CAPTIONS FOR THE FIVE PICTURES:

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The Australian soldiers were known as 'diggers' during World War I.

Soldiers use some animals to help them in war.  
How are these animals helping the soldiers?

Anzac Day is a special day in Australia. We remember all the people who have been in wars. The banners tell us where the soldiers and nurses were during a war. Young people often wave small flags as they watch.  
Has anyone in your family been a soldier or a nurse in war?

There are many war memorials in Australia. These help us to remember the people who protected our country. Is there a war memorial near your home?

Many Australian nurses took care of the diggers during World War I.