

# TOPIC 2: Why did Soldiers Volunteer to go to War?

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

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During World War I, more than 416,000 Australians enlisted in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) for overseas service. The vast majority were men, but a small number were women who joined the Australian Army Nursing Service. What is important to remember is that the AIF was not the regular Australian army, but a force raised especially for overseas service for the duration of the war, and every man and woman in it was a volunteer. Of these volunteers, more than 331,000 were actually sent overseas, where they served in Egypt, Gallipoli, the Middle East and predominantly on the Western Front in France and Belgium between April 1916 and November 1918. Enlistment for the force began all over Australia soon after the outbreak of war on 4 August 1914 and continued until the end of the conflict.

Why did Australians volunteer? There is no simple answer to this question. In the early days many saw it as a chance to go on an 'adventure' outside Australia, although many undoubtedly also had patriotic motives as well. As the war progressed, however, and the published lists of the dead and wounded grew ever longer, men probably joined for more sober reasons. Some may have been shamed by the earlier departure of relatives and friends; some may simply have reached the age when they could legally join up; and yet others may have regarded the need to win the war as ever more pressing than it was in the heady days of 1914 when everyone thought it would be 'over by Christmas'.

Sadly, the whole issue of voluntary enlistment eventually deeply divided the nation. In 1916, Prime Minister William Morris 'Billy' Hughes, decided that the voluntary scheme would be insufficient for the reinforcement needs of the AIF after the terrible losses the force sustained in France during the Battle of the Somme. He therefore put the question of enlistment twice to a referendum, arguing that conscription was essential to winning the war. Both times, the Australian people, including the soldiers serving overseas, voted narrowly not to allow conscription, but the weeks leading up to each referendum — 28 October 1916 and 20 December 1917 — saw an extremely bitter public debate between the pro- and anti-conscription movements.

In this unit we explore why some men joined the AIF, and others did not.

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## AIMS

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Students at Level 1/2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Know that there was a variety of reasons why men volunteered to join the AIF</li><li>• Appreciate that there were many social pressures encouraging volunteering</li><li>• Are aware that many Australian men chose not to go to the war as volunteers</li></ul>
Students at Level 2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Understand that there were divisions created in society over volunteering</li><li>• Consider why some women might have had a special role in the issue</li><li>• Empathise with the situation facing 'eligibles' at the time</li></ul>
Students at Level 3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflect on the nature and implications of 'patriotism' in wartime</li><li>• Consider how values influence actions</li><li>• Decide if a state can tolerate diversity during crisis</li></ul>

## CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

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Level 1	Which basic concepts do your class need clarified before they can understand why people volunteered? Do they understand the concepts of war, volunteering, persuasion, and difference? Possible brief activities to help clarify the concepts include discussing violence in the recent news, times they have volunteered to raise funds or help somebody else, advertisements that have worked or not worked with them, and situations when they have differed in their reactions to something from somebody else, and why those differences existed (such as taste in clothes or favourite music).
Level 2/3	Have students discuss what would influence their decision to go to war today. Does it depend upon the nature of the cause? Their own values? Their own personal interests? Then look at the material and questions in the worksheets. You might have students create a poster that focuses on one particular value to persuade people, or to create a short statement to justify why they choose not to volunteer.

When war broke out Australia was not an independent country like it is today. It was a part of the British Empire. As Britain was at war against Germany and its allies, Australia was also automatically at war. Each man had to choose whether to enlist and go to the war or not. A very large number of men (and some women) volunteered to go overseas — about 416,000 people enlisted out of a population of about four and a half million, and 331,000 of these served overseas. Many of these joined up straight away. Some did not, and there were many recruiting appeals during the war to encourage those people to enlist.

Here are two posters that were made to try to persuade people to join and fight.

▮ Answer these questions about each one to make sure you understand what it says:

- What does the poster show?
- What is the setting or context of the poster (eg in Australia, at war, etc.)?
- Who are the people in it? Why are these people in it?
- What are they doing or saying?
- What is the main message that the poster is giving about why you should join?
- Who is the poster meant to persuade?
- What has the artist done to get you to accept the message?
- Would this poster be likely to make a person join to fight? Why or why not?



AWM ARTV00141

A recruiting poster, c 1915



AWM ARTV00148

A recruiting poster, c 1916

▮ Match each poster to the main idea that it is trying to get across — either:

- patriotism
- mateship
- duty, or
- protecting others

Poster \_\_\_ is mainly about: \_\_\_\_\_

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▮ Design a poster of your own. Work out what you think would be the best way of getting a man to join the army to fight. Then work out the best way of getting that message across.

Here are some reasons that men gave for deciding to go to war.

1) Match them to the summary given in the right-hand column.

a) I went to war because the school books taught me that it was a romantic thing – drums, uniforms, marching and glory.	1) Loyalty to Britain and the Empire
b) I wanted to stop the enemy – I believed they were cruel and savage.	2) Duty
c) I joined because I could not have looked people in the eye if I hadn't – I would have been a coward.	3) Shame
d) I joined because I thought it would be a chance to get away from the farm and see the world.	4) Mateship
e) I joined because it was every Australian's duty to defend old Mother England where we had originally come from.	5) Adventure
f) I joined because there was a drought and I had no work – and the pay was good.	6) Money
g) I joined because Australia had to do her bit and show the world she was a great young nation.	7) Romance and glory
h) I joined because my mates did. I wanted to stay with them.	8) Patriotism to Australia

Adapted from Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years*, Penguin, Melbourne, 1990, chapter 1

1) Look back at the posters. Select a poster for each person that is closest to the reasons they gave for volunteering:

Person A's reason is closest to Poster \_\_\_\_\_ Person B's reason is closest to Poster \_\_\_\_\_

Person C's reason is closest to Poster \_\_\_\_\_ Person D's reason is closest to Poster \_\_\_\_\_

Person E's reason is closest to Poster \_\_\_\_\_ Person F's reason is closest to Poster \_\_\_\_\_

Person G's reason is closest to Poster \_\_\_\_\_ Person H's reason is closest to Poster \_\_\_\_\_

2) Not every man who could have gone to war volunteered to go. Suggest some reasons why an eligible man might have decided *not* to go to war. For example, they might have been opposed to war, or they had a family to look after, or they did not want to get injured.

3) How do you think other people in Australia who supported the war might have felt about the men who did not volunteer? Explain your reasons.

As the war progressed it generally became harder to raise the numbers of volunteers needed to replace the casualties suffered by the soldiers overseas. Recruiting campaigns and appeals became a significant part of Australian society.

Look at this evidence about recruiting and enlistment and answer the questions that follow.

## BADGES



AWM REL29668

Mothers and Widows  
Badge, c 1919



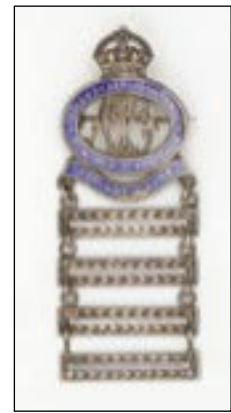
AWM REL31918

Returned from Active Service  
Badge, c 1919



AWM REL30978

Volunteered for Home  
and Empire Cross,  
c 1916-1918



AWM REL29667

Female Relatives  
Badge with four bars

1) Describe the message of each badge.

- Why would people want or need to wear these badges during the war?
- What do these badges tell you about the values of the wearer?
- What do the existence of these badges suggest about the unity of the society at the time?

## RECRUITING MEETINGS AND MARCHES



AWM H02204

A recruiting meeting, Mumbilla, QLD, c 1918



AWM P01587.001

A recruiting march, Queanbeyan, NSW, 1916

- Who would such recruiting meetings be for?
- Who is present at this one?
- What impact might this have on recruiting?
- What impact might it have on a small community?
- Why might some men be tempted to join this march?
- What impact might this have on recruiting?
- What impact might it have on a small community?

## RECRUITING POSTERS

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We have seen some recruiting posters in Worksheet 2.1. Here is one more.



AWM 106713

A recruiting poster, 1918

- ▮ For this poster decide:
  - What does the poster show?
  - Why does it focus on those particular people?
  - What does the artist think about the men who have volunteered?
  - What does the artist think about men who have not volunteered?
  - What does the artist think of the enemy?
  - Do you think this was likely to have been an effective appeal? Why?
- ▮ These posters were sponsored by a government that wanted to persuade citizens to accept a certain duty. Is this an appropriate role for a government in wartime?
- ▮ These posters not only urge men to join — they also make judgements about the men. Do you think these posters were more likely to unite or divide society? Explain your reasons.
- ▮ Were men who did not want to enlist unpatriotic? Explain your ideas.

WOMEN AND RECRUITING

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Here are some cards that were handed out to people.

**Some Girl's Brother  
is fighting for you.  
Are you doing your part?**

**Are you keeping  
a man from  
doing his duty?**

Adapted from AWM RC02285 and RC02287

- ▮ Consider these questions for each card:
  - Who would hand out these cards?
  - Who is the 'target' audience in each case?
  - What are they trying to achieve?
  - What is their method of persuasion?
  - Are they likely to be effective?
- ▮ Would many women be prepared to be involved in this activity? Explain your reasons.
- ▮ Do you think these cards would have united or divided society? Why?
- ▮ Do you think such campaigning is appropriate in wartime? Explain your reasons.

## LETTERS FROM VERA

Here are extracts from two letters printed in 1916 in a small Victorian country newspaper, the *Upper Murray and Mitta Herald*, during a period of recruiting campaigns. We do not know if they are genuine letters from a real person, or ones that were deliberately 'faked' to get a message across at the time. Either way they are an interesting view of some people's attitudes and values at that time.

Dear Bob

I am a lonely country girl, and want a man to fight for me. The recruiting sergeant said your girl won't let you go ... I intend visiting Walwa soon, and I know that, as soon as you see me, you will reckon I am worth fighting for. I will be your dinkum girl and you will get into khaki at once and put-up the fight of your life. If you accept my offer, Bob, you must not speak to that unpatriotic black-eyed cat again ... Bob, I just want to stir your patriotism, because I know that, when you realise that your country and all the nice girls need your help to fight for our freedom, your courage will be there, and that you will prove to be like those thousands who have made Australian bravery a world-wide topic of praise. And when you are gone, dear Bob, I will not be unmindful of you. It will be the joy of my life just to think you are gone to take part in the fight for freedom and our race ... Trusting you will at once take the manly step, I remain your own little woodland dove until the end of the war and for months after.

Vera

Dear Bob

Don't the boys look nice when they come up and say Good-bye to the girls, who are so proud to see the soldier boys in Khaki? Well, Bob, I was at the concert. Can't the Walwa girls sing? What an enthusiastic welcome home they will sing to the boys when the war is over, and they return with their medals hanging on their manly bosoms. The man who stayed at home will not get a look-in! He will then wish he had enlisted, and will feel that he had rather died a hero fighting on the rock-clad slopes of those who have won distinction. What about the two able delinquents who sang 'Keep the Flag Flying'? Didn't they get hen-pecked after the concert by the noble mothers whose brave sons are already keeping the old flag flying ... Bob, dear, I can't believe there is a wilful shirker Australian-born. A man may have substantial reasons why he has not already enlisted. I am more than ready to attribute it to a want of resolution or a want of realization of the awful possibilities hanging over us ... But, oh, the sight of about ten men sitting on a fence! ... as soon as they sighted the [recruiting] sergeant, they one and all dived into their dug-outs in a haystack close by ... I induced [your mother] to sign the consent form to enable you to enlist; this I am forwarding by post. Now, Bob, do the manly act, there's a dear. Any other reason now would be a cloak for cowardice. I am sending two nice little flags to the men who sang 'Keep the Flag Flying', and I hope they will soon realize that it is their duty to go out and *fight* for it, and leave the singing to the girls of Walwa ...

Vera

Quoted in John McQuilton, *Rural Australia and the Great War*, Melbourne University Press, 2001, pages 129-30

- ▮ What is Vera trying to do?
- ▮ What is her expectation of men?
- ▮ Why does she believe that men should enlist?
- ▮ How does she regard anyone who does not share her values?
- ▮ What examples are there in these letters of other pressure being put on men to enlist?
- ▮ What examples are there of pressure applied to other women?
- ▮ What do these letters suggest about the impact of recruiting campaigns on Australian society at the time?



## REASONS FOR NOT ENLISTING – CONSCRIPTION EXEMPTION COURT HEARINGS

In 1916 Prime Minister 'Billy' Hughes could conscript every 'eligible' man into the army, but he could not make them serve overseas without changing the existing law. Hughes believed he could change the law, and while that was happening he called up men to go into camp and start their training. People who thought they should not go into camp had to justify that in a special court. Here is a newspaper report of a court hearing in which men who were seeking to be exempt from the call-up explained their reasons.

**Henry Edge** (33), cartage contractor, on the ground that he was unfit for active service, because of weak eyes and a deformed leg.

*Referred to the principal medical officer.*

**Reginald Emanuel** (27), upholsterer, on the ground that he was the sole support of his home, and that he had a brother already on active service. There were only two sons in the family.

*Granted.*

**Francis W. Cole** (26), manager, on the ground that he was the only son of the family.

*Adjourned to enable applicant to get a copy of his parents' marriage certificate.*

**Clarence Oscar Amott** (22), butcher, on the ground that he was of material service to his parents in business, and that in his spare time he was being educated to design aeroplanes.

*Refused.*

**Leslie Robert Baynton** (32), solicitor, on the ground that the total number of sons called up exceeded half the number of sons in that family.

*Adjourned.*

**Sydney Burton** (23), chemist, on the ground that it was in the national interest that he continue in his present position.

*Refused.*

**James Joseph Guest** (31), carter, on the ground that he was the sole support of his father, who was 75 years of age.

*Refused.*

**Frank George Fehlberg** (33), farmer, on the ground that he was a conscientious objector. As a Christian, he did not believe that he should take up arms against his fellow men. The law of God said 'Thou shalt not kill.'

*Refused.*

*Hobart Mercury, 19 and 21 October 1916*

- ▮ Underline the key words that tell us the person's reason for seeking exemption.
- ▮ One reason that could not be given was 'because I don't want to', or, 'because I do not support the war', or 'because there are other values that I prefer'. Why not?
- ▮ How can we know if such attitudes existed in Australia at that time?
- ▮ These courts are an example of a government trying to force certain behaviour on people who are unwilling to behave in that way. Is this fair and reasonable in a democracy in a time of crisis?
- ▮ Imagine that Australia was at war today. What do you think would influence your decision to volunteer to fight or not?