The whole operation was so incredibly blundered from beginning to end that it is almost incomprehensible how the British staff, who were responsible for it, could have consisted of trained professional soldiers ... and why, in view of the outcome of this extraordinary adventure, any of them were retained in active command.

Lieutenant-Colonel J. W. Clark, CO of the 30th Battalion, wrote: 'We are supposed to have accomplished what the British command was strategically working for, the pinning of German troops to the front, and preventing them from being sent to the Somme. But this could have been achieved by massing troops and making a demonstration.'

Fromelles was the only battle which the AIF fought on the Western Front which failed to produce any positive result, but flesh and blood could have done no more. Nobody has ever suggested that the slaughter was in any way the fault of the 5th Division's commanders.

Directions

Fromelles is most easily approached from Armentières. From the centre of Armentières take the D933 to La Chapelle d'Armentières and cross the A25 motorway. Follow signposts to Bois Grenier and at the crossroads in the centre of the village turn left on the D962, signposted Radinghem-en-Weppes. After 3 kilometres immediately after passing through this village, and through another crossroads, turn right on the D141b to Le Mainsnil and Fromelles. From here, the plain on which the battle was fought is clearly visible. Turn right through Fromelles village. After 1.5 kilometres there is a T-junction at the hamlet of les Rouges Bancs. From here, VC Corner Australian Cemetery is signposted. The cemetery is in the middle of the battlefield. Stand on the cemetery steps and turn half left to place yourself in the direction in which the Australians were advancing. The River Laies (actually little more than a ditch) is only thirty paces to your right and crosses the battlefield diagonally. In the field across the road from the cemetery was the German frontline position which the British called the Sugar Loaf.

Note the line of church spires to your front. In the centre is that of Fromelles, right of it is Aubers and left is Le Mainsnil. They mark the line of Aubers Ridge. Parking at VC Corner Australian Cemetery is difficult. Approach the family in the farm next to the cemetery, explain that you are Australian and they will gladly permit you to park. The Australians' forming up area for the Battle of Fromelles was Rue Tilleloy, near Picarmen. Brigadier-General Elliott had his HQ in an inn named called Rouge Debout at Trou Post.

Hazebruck

This large town with its railway junction was a major base throughout the war. Within an 8-kilometre radius of the town were camped or billeted tens of thousands of soldiers and scores of units and many depots. Close behind the town to the west were transit and reinforcement camps and to the south-west were casualty clearing stations and hospitals. During the German spring offensive of 1918 Hazebruck was in danger of capture but the AIF 1st Division held firm and, with support from some British troops, blocked the German advance and saved the town. It remains much as the Diggers knew it in 1918, especially around the town hall and great square. AIF bands played in the square on several occasions.

Hill 70, Lens

While nothing of the war remains to be seen at this site, it is important in Australian military history on the Western Front for the work, fortitude and courage of the 3rd Australian Tunnelling Company, a West Australian unit with a large proportion of Tasmanians. In November 1916, the unit was ordered into the mines of Hill 70, 2 kilometres north-west of the mining centre of Lens. The Germans were aggressively mining in the white chalk, but the Australians did not then have an accurate idea of the enemy's whereabouts underground. On 27 November the Diggers were almost ready to fire a mine when the Germans beat them to it with a camouflet. Twenty miners were killed and others were gassed. Two more Australians were killed next day. Their mates hit back at the Germans as they learned more about the enemy tunnels and blew their own camouflts. Underground fighting continued and on 26 March 1917 the Australians finally closed the gap in the underground defensive system with a charge of 4990 kilograms of ammonal.

On 26 June 1917 three parties of tunnellers were to raid overland to destroy three enemy shafts within enemy lines. Major L. J. Coulter DSO, the CO of the Company, returned from leave an hour before the patrol was due to start and accompanied the infantry patrol. He was killed during a fight with German infantry.

On 24 July the tunnellers followed up their destruction of enemy shafts by breaking into the German underground system and capturing it. Their struggle for Hill 70 ended in August but 3rd Tunnelling Company was busy well into 1918.
won its first VC in the European war at Bois Grenier. Captain K. Heritage led eight officers and seventy-three other ranks, all volunteers of the 5th Brigade, to harass German positions. After a successful raid, the Australians were returning when they came under shellfire in No Man’s Land. Private William Jackson of the 17th Battalion brought a prisoner into the Australian lines and then ran out into a storm of exploding shells to rescue a wounded mate. Having done this, he went out again and was bringing in another wounded man when a shell practically blew off his own arm. Despite this terrible wound, Jackson persisted in his rescue attempt before allowing his arm to be amputated in the trench.

**Directions**

Jackson actually won his VC 2 kilometres west of Bois Grenier village. From Fleurbaix, take the T176 towards Bois Grenier. After 1 kilometre there is a sharp left elbow where the road becomes the D222. Jackson’s exploit took place in the field to the left of this turn in the road.

**Calonne-sur-la-Lys**

This village, 3 kilometres south-west of Merville, was the scene of great Australian initiative on 12-14 April 1918 during the German Lys offensive. Some AIF Field artillery units — the 12th, 35th, 47th, 46th and 112th Brigades — had been firing from just behind the Clarençe rivulet which flows through the village, and the rapidity of the German infantry advance surprised them. When the Germans were no more than 200 metres away, Sergeant P. H. George, 45th Brigade, brought up the horse teams to get his guns away before the road to Robecq was cut. As the teams galloped down the road other AIF gunners steadied the retiring British infantry. Gunner A. Merck, 47th Brigade, rallied some dispirited British to help soldiers of the Warwickshire Regiment who were making a stand, and stayed with them until night. Gunners W. G. Parkinson and T. W. Kelly, 45th Brigade, and G. T. White, 112th Brigade, also fought with the infantry. Gunner O. E. Cohen, medical orderly of the 47th, formed an aid post on the Calonne road. Here he tended the wounded and retired with his last patient. When the batteries withdrew across the La Bassiere Canal the canal drawbridges were guarded by scratch units formed by Lieutenant R. T. Watt, 112th Battery, and other AIF officers. The canal became the British front line. Calonne has changed little since 1918. Gunner Cohen’s makeshift aid post was at the junction in Calonne of the Robecq and St Venant roads.

**Battle of Fromelles, 19-20 July 1916**

The farm fields of Fromelles were the scene of the AIF’s first great battle on the Western Front. The battle, the brainchild of the British General Sir Richard Haking, was a terrible blunder and the AIF 5th Division (Major-General J. W. McKay) suffered 5553 casualties in twenty-seven hours of incessant fighting, 19-20 July 1916. Haking used the 5th Division, together with the British 61st Division, in a virtually impossible attempt to capture enemy positions protecting Fromelles, which lies on Aubers Ridge. The British High Command also hoped that the attack would hold to that part of the front German divisions which might otherwise be sent to the Somme, where a great battle had been raging since 1 July.

During 1915 the British had twice lost heavily in abortive attacks on Aubers Ridge and Haking himself had already suffered losses in a similar operation in June 1916. The Germans on the higher ground dominated the plain west of the ridge and little British activity there escaped their observation. Their trench lines in front of Fromelles were strong and well defended by many machine-guns. No Man’s Land was from 100 metres to 450 metres wide and without cover for attackers. For the Allies much depended on their artillery barrage being effective and on close co-ordination between the officers and 51st Divisions. The key German trenches were those of the Sugar Loaf, a salient where the German lines jutted forward of their otherwise straight line.

Responsibility for capturing the Sugar Loaf fell on the 61st Division. On the 61st’s left, the 5th Division had a front of about 2400 metres, with the 15th Brigade on the right, the 14th in the centre and the 8th on the left. Despite an inadequate supporting artillery bombardment, the 8th and 14th Brigades made a good start. They crossed No Man’s Land, stormed the enemy front trenches and broke through on the right, however, the British did not capture the Sugar Loaf, enabling the German machine-gunners to entrench the 15th Brigade’s battalions — 57th, 58th, 59th and 60th Battalions — as they strove bravely to cross the widest part of No Man’s Land. A few Diggers almost reached the enemy wire, the rest were killed or wounded within a few minutes of the battle’s commencement. The survivors dug in and fought on.

The 8th and 14th Brigades captured the German second line, hundreds of metres beyond the first line, and worked long into the night to organise a defensive line. As the hours passed they steadily lost officers and men to every type of German fire. That night a supporting attack by the 61st Division was cancelled, leaving the Australians surrounded in the trenches they had captured. Meanwhile, Australian engineers worked frantically to drive communications trenches across No Man’s Land and to their infantry in the enemy trenches. Hand-to-hand fighting and bombing lasted all night and into the next day. Several officers distinguished themselves; they included Captain Norman Gibbitts of the 55th Battalion, Captain C. Airlster, 53rd, Lieutenant C. T. Agassiz, 55th, and Captain F. L. Krinks, 30th. Chaplain S. E. Maxted, 54th Battalion, ignored an order to stay in the rear and became a stretcher bearer. He was killed in No Man’s Land while attempting to rescue wounded men.

As early as dawn on the 20th it was clear that the position was hopeless. None of the positions held by the Australian brigades had any natural advantages and the High Command had not contemplated any reinforcement with fresh troops. As an organised force, the 15th Brigade had ceased to exist. Fighting to the last, the exhausted men of the 8th Brigade and then the 14th were slowly forced back by relentless German pressure.

The appalling losses shocked the senior Australian officers. The 60th Battalion (Victoria) went into the fight with 887 men and came out with one officer and 106 men. The 32nd Battalion (Western Australia, South Australia) had seventeen officers and 701 men hit. Brigadier-General H. E. Elliott, commander of the 15th Brigade, wrote a scathing indictment of the British decision to attack Fromelles and of the battle plan: