



Australia's Bloodiest Day at War **by Carole Wilkinson**

The first shots were fired at 11 a.m. on the 19th of July 1916. The Battle of Fromelles lasted less than 24 hours. When the battle was over, more than 5000 Australian soldiers had been killed, wounded or taken prisoner — more soldiers died at Fromelles than in the Boer, Korean and Vietnam wars combined. What was the point of this bloody loss of life and terrible suffering? What did it achieve? And why, almost a century later, did the attention of the world once again turn to Fromelles?

Themes:

War, mateship, the accuracy of history, the importance of remembrance, power, misuse of power, human error and fallibility, death, the ephemeral nature of truth, youth, patriotism, duty

Pre-reading activities:

- What is your opinion of war before reading this book? Do you believe it is ever justified? Give reasons for your answer.
- Would you enlist in the army under any circumstances? Give reasons for your answer. After reading this book, see if your answer has changed.
- Have you seen any movies, or read any books on war before? How did they affect your opinion of war?
- Do you believe it is important that your generation is aware of the wartime history of Australia? Why or why not?

Topics for Essays, Discussion and Debate:

Page 1: 'The terrible loss of life was all for nothing'. Do you think loss of life is more tragic when the outcome is not ultimately positive? Would this loss of life have been less tragic if the battle had a positive outcome for the Allies? Give reasons for your answers.

Page 5: Walter enlists in the army because he feels pressure from his community. Have you ever done something dangerous due to peer pressure? Do you believe that peer pressure is an acceptable excuse for making certain choices? Give reasons for your answer, based on your own experiences.

Page 7: If there was another World War and Australia was involved, would you feel like a 'traitor' or call others a 'traitor' if they didn't enlist? Do you believe society has changed now and attitudes towards the army have shifted? Give reasons for your answers.

Page 7: Do you think that Walter forging a letter from his mother was a dishonest thing to do, or do you believe he had no choice? Give reasons for your answer.

Page 9: At the time of WW1, England was still considered the 'Mother Country'. Do you believe this attitude still exists? What is your opinion on Australia becoming a republic?

Page 9: Debate topic: Australia should become a republic.

Page 9: Debate topic: Australian teenagers should have compulsory military training.

Page 10: Why do you think there were celebrations in the streets when war was declared?

Page 10: What is your opinion of the gender roles assigned during wartime? Give reasons for your answers.

Page 10: Debate topic: Women should not serve in the military.

Page 19: What are some ANZAC Day traditions that have survived until today? Do you do anything to celebrate ANZAC Day? Why or why not?

Page 20: What are your thoughts on the disrespect for



authority the Australian soldiers displayed? Does it make you admire the Australian soldiers more or less to hear of this disrespect?

Page 38: What do you think of Colonel Haking's plan? Can you see any potential problems with this plan? Write a paragraph about which aspects of the plan you think will succeed and which have potential to fail. Give reasons for your choices.

Page 39: Colonel Haking is very confident in his battle plan. He doesn't seem to have any concerns. Do you think it is a good thing to have such confidence, or do you believe it is important to always exercise caution? Which of these do you tend towards? Give an example of a time when you have been very confident or very cautious. What was the outcome?

Page 42: When Walter's brigade begins marching to the Front, he observes that it is a nice evening, and he can hear the sounds of birds chirping. Has there ever been a time in your life when you have been about to do something very important or scary and your mind became distracted? Write about this memory. Why do you think the mind becomes distracted during trying times?

Page 43: When you read the description of the death of 'Bish', what emotions do you feel? Do you find the description shocking, or does it not affect you at all?

Page 43: Do you think that violence is not as shocking to young people now as it once was? Do you believe this is a good thing or a bad thing? Give reasons for your answers.

Page 60: Imagine you are in a situation where your life is threatened, as Walter's is in the trench. Think of the things that would go through your mind. What aspects of your life would you consider most important if you feared you might be close to death?

Page 67–92: After reading the breakdown of the battle, can you identify one cause for the failure of the Allies, or do you believe there were multiple causes? Do you believe one person was most at fault? Give reasons for your answers.

Page 91: How do the descriptions of the wounds suffered by the soldiers affect your view of wartime? Does it take some of the glory of war away to hear how horrific these injuries were? Do you believe it is important to hear these details? Give reasons for your answers.

Page 103: Debate topic: 'Truces made the enemy more human and were bad for the men's fighting spirit.'

Page 118: Which of the suggested causes for the defeat do you believe was the most crucial? Give reasons for your answer.

Page 124: Do the good things McCay stood for make you think more of him? Do good actions or intentions excuse wrong actions? Give reasons for your answers.

Page 129: Does it make you feel differently about the German soldier knowing they were forced to join the army? Why or why not? Give reasons for your answer.

Page 131: What are your impressions of the German soldier after reading his letter? How does his letter compare with the ones from Crawford and Walter? Does he seem as 'human' to you as the others did? Can you relate to him? Give reasons for your answers.

Page 132: Debate topic: Historical records are always true and completely factual.

Page 132: How do you feel about the soldier's use of nicknames to describe serious issues? Do you believe it is disrespectful? Why or why not? Give reasons for your answer.

Page 136: Hitler was a renowned artist. Many artists, actors and singers lead troubled lives and commit crimes. Why do you believe this is so? Write about one famous artist (in any art form), whose crimes or indiscretions have been made public.

Page 139: Debate topic: If a soldier is 'just following orders' it excuses any crimes or atrocities he might commit.

Page 141: Look at the French WW1 poster. Now, look back at the posters produced by the other countries involved in the conflict. What differences do you notice between the posters of the different countries? Which poster do you think is the most effective?

Page 144: Is it important to you to know your family history? Why or why not?

Page 152: Do you believe it is important that the soldiers received a proper burial? Why or why not? Give reasons for your answer.



162: Debate topic: war is the best and most effective way to solve international disputes.

Art and Drama Activities:

Write and perform a monologue from the point of view of Walter's mother, talking about how she feels about her son going to war.

Page 15: Create your own wartime poster — either an anti-war poster or one for war recruitment.

Page 20: Write and perform a scene between an Australian soldier and a British officer, showing the different attitudes between the two towards authority and respect.

Page 24: Using Walter's description of his travels, draw a picture or make a collage depicting a French town: 'We passed through little villages that looked like they were paintings. The streets were cobbled, the houses were made of pale stone with red-tiled roofs. The roads that twisted through the fields from village to village were white, like they were all leading to Paradise.'

Page 25: Find out what 'bully beef' is, what 'billeting' is, and what 'shells' are. Make a collage using pictures depicting these items or concepts.

Page 37: Write and perform a short play featuring the characters General Birdwood, Brigadier General Elliott, and General Haking showing them arguing over whether the battle should go ahead. Use props and costume to make this scene more entertaining for your audience.

Page 46: Find images of all of the weapons mentioned on this page. Make a poster of the weapons, using pictures and descriptions. You can draw the pictures yourself or print images from the internet.

Page 50: Using the descriptions and pictures found on the internet, make a model of one of the weapons described on these pages. You can use cardboard, paint, papier mache, clay or any materials you have available to make your model.

Page 67–92: Using a voice recorder or a video camera, narrate the events of the battle as if you were a reporter commentating the battle.

Page 85: Write and perform a monologue from the point of view of Brigadier General Elliott as he comes to terms with the fact that he has ordered his men to make a suicidal attack.

Page 86: What are your impressions of Major General McCay? Write some words you would use to describe his personality, then use these words to create a poster about him. Draw a picture of how you imagine him looking and write the descriptive words around it.

Page 134: Draw a picture — or make a collage using images from magazines — of one of the German underground chambers, based on the descriptions the author gives you.

Choose one of the letters in the book to act out as a monologue.

Creative Writing Activities:

Page 18: Look at the headline on this page. Can you imagine a headline like this in today's newspaper? Think of some alternative newspaper headlines that might persuade modern young people to enlist.

Page 21: Do some research into the journalist, Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean, who was the official war correspondent for the Australians in WW1. Now, pretend you are a journalist and write a newspaper report on Bean and his activities during the war.

Page 24: Write a poem featuring the symbol of the red poppy.

Page 26: Write a poem based on the metaphor of the black dress.

Page 27: Have a look at the photo of the old woman serving coffee to the soldiers. Write a poem based on this photograph.

Page 32: Based on the description of the trenches and this photograph, write a 'senses' poem describing the trenches. Use all your senses in making this poem. What do you imagine a trench would smell like? What textures would there be? What sounds would you hear?

Page 57: The noise of the battle of the Somme could



be heard 260 kilometres away. Using maps and internet research, find a place that is 260 kilometres away from where you live. Imagine there is a real war in this place. What would have caused it? Write a short story from the perspective of someone living in this town during the battle.

Pages 67–92: What do you think of the way these pages are written? How do they make you feel? Write a review of the description of the battle describing the emotions you felt at different points in the account.

Page 80: Pretend you are writing a letter to a loved one who was at war. What things would you tell them about what is happening in your life? What news would you give them from home?

Page 82: Walter describes the bullets as being 'like a swarm of hornets'. This is a simile. Find out a definition of what a simile is. Try and think of five more similes that could be used to describe gunfire. For example, it might sound 'like heavy rain on a tin roof'.

Page 84: Despite the fact that their efforts seem hopeless, the diggers behind enemy lines don't give up. Write about a time in your life when you have resisted the urge to give up in the face of adversity.

Page Eighty seven: Find out what a 'haiku' is, then write a haiku based on this image of no-man's land.

Page 92: Seven hundred and fifty men just like McAllister died during the battle. Create the character of another soldier. Give him a name, a family, an age, a hometown, a profession, a favourite colour or song or food, plus any other details you would like to add. Then, write a line or two about how he died during the battle. Was it from blood loss after losing a limb, or concussion from a shell? How does it affect your feelings about the number of dead now you have 'got to know' one of them?

Page 97: Complete the same exercise you completed with the Australian soldier and elaborate on the character of the German soldier who allows Crawford to get away. Give him a name, a family, an age, a hometown, a profession, a favourite colour or song or food, plus any other details you would like to add. How does your opinion of 'the enemy' change once you have made them 'human'?

Page 116: Write your own condolence letter to the family of the soldier you created.

Page 136: Write a short story imagining that Adolf Hitler and Walter met on the battlefield. What happens next?

Page 136: Imagine if Hitler had died at the battle of Fromelles. The entire course of history would have been changed. Think back over your life. Is there one pivotal moment where, if things had taken a different path, your life would be very different today? Write about this moment.

Page 144: Ask your parents or grandparents if they know about a member of your family who fought in a war. Interview them about that person and write a profile of them, as if you were writing for a newspaper or magazine.

Research Activities:

Page 1: Find out how many casualties there were in the Boer War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Make a graph showing the numbers of people killed.

Page 1: Do some research into the Boer War, the Korean War and the Vietnam War and write a short paragraph about each of them detailing information including the sides involved, the causes, the major battles and the outcome.

Page 1: Who were 'The Allies'? How did they come together and what was their role in WW1? Do some research and write a report based on your findings.

Page 1: Why was WW1 called 'The Great War'? Do some research and write a report based on your findings.

Page 2: Do some research into the populations of different countries. Find some countries whose populations approximately match the numbers of casualties and deaths in WW1. Make a poster using this information.

Page 2: Do some research and make a table of all the major battles in WW1, their location and the number of soldiers killed. Make a table displaying the information you find.

Page 6: Talk to your mum, dad or guardian about war. Ask them how they would feel if you were conscripted to go to war. Record their comments and type up a transcript of the conversation.

Page 7: Do some research and then write about the history and symbolism of the white feather.



Page 10: Who were the Australian prime ministers during WW1? Do some research into them and write a short profile about each of them.

Page 10: Do some research into the Gallipoli campaign and write a short report on it. Why do you think Gallipoli is the most famous battle for Australians?

Page 12: Do some research into conscription. What wars in the last century was conscription in place for? Look into the concept of the 'draft dodger'. Write a report based on your discoveries.

Page 13: Do some research into and write a short report on the federation of Australia.

Page 14: Do some research into and write a short report on the Battle of Marne.

Page 14: Do some research into and write a short report on trench warfare.

Page 15: The conscription poster on this page is by Norman Lindsay. Who was he? Do some research into him and write a short biography. Based on what you find out, do you think he would have supported the war?

Page 16: Do some research into the Western Front. Why was this area of land so important in WW1?

Page 19: The Australian soldiers did not agree with the British style of military discipline, and believed that people should get respect only if they deserved it. What does this tell you about the different class systems in Britain and Australia. Do some research into the class system in Britain and see if this gives you any clues. Do you think we have a class system in Australia? If so, how does it differ from the British system?

Page 21: Research the effects of exhaustion, heat distress and dehydration on the human body. Write a report on your findings.

Page 22: The Australian soldiers who fought at Fromelles had only three months to prepare to go to war. Do some research into current military training in Australia and write a detailed report on the training a soldier would undergo now before being sent into conflict. Write a report on your findings.

Page 23: Who was the Count of Monte Cristo? Find out as much as you can about him and write a report on your

findings. Why do you think he would be a person that would fascinate Walter?

Page 24: Walter talks about the fields in France being full of poppies. Is there a significance to poppies in WW1? Write a report on your findings.

Page 24: What is the Palace of Versailles? Who lived there? What is its significance in French history? Write a report about what you find out about the palace.

Page 28: In the text box on this page, we learn that a casualty can include soldiers who suffer mental illness due to their war experiences. Do some research into the effects of war on returning soldiers. Look into the concept of 'post traumatic stress'. Write a report on your findings.

Page 30: Find pictures of helmets used by soldiers from different cultures throughout history. Make a 'helmet timeline' using pictures of these helmets and information about the soldiers who wore them.

Page 31: Do some more detailed research into the Battle of the Somme. Write a report based on your findings.

Page 43: Do some research about the concept of 'desensitisation'. Write a report on your findings. Do you believe that you are desensitised to violence?

Page 46: Do some research into the use of horses in war in history. Write a report based on your findings.

Page 47: Do some research into the weapons currently used by today's Australian army. What are the weapons most commonly used? Are any of the weapons used in WW1 still in use? Write a report on your findings.

Page 70: The Australian soldiers began to suspect that there might be spies informing the Germans of their plans. Do some research into spying during war time. See if you can find out about a particular spy. Do a report about them. What were their motivations? How were they punished?

Page 84: Do some research into the use of pigeons in war. Write a report based on your findings.

Page 89: Do some research into the treatment of prisoners of war captured by the Germans in WW1. Write a report based on your findings.



Page 93: Do some research into 'survivor guilt'. Write a report based on your findings.

Page 101: Do some research into the contribution of Australian medical staff to the war effort in WW1. Write a report based on your findings.

Page 105: Do some research into censorship. What is it? What are the censorship laws in Australia? Is the army or the government still able to censor the information that goes into newspaper reports?

Page 106: The words used by the journalist Bean and the official army report used different words to describe the same event. The words 'skirmish' and 'battle' may have very similar 'denotations', but their 'connotations' are vastly different. What is a denotation and a connotation and how do they operate in this instance? Why did Bean choose different words from the ones the army used?

Page 114: What is 'Going AWOL'? What was the punishment for it in WW1? Is it still a crime in today's army? Write a report based on your findings.

Page One hundred and thirty three: Do some research into the creation of the German Empire. Write a report based on your findings.

Page 156: What is DNA? How was DNA testing developed? Do some research and write a report based on your findings.

Page 161: Who was General John Monash? Do some research about his life and write a report based on your findings.

What are the wars currently being fought in the world today? Write a report based on your findings.

could ever do, so I suppose I didn't think of it back then. Once I'd decided to try and become a writer, I went to university. I wrote lots of things at university including my first novel. I didn't think it was very good. I showed it to a friend who worked in publishing. I don't think she thought it was very good either, but she must have seen some potential because she asked me if I could write a teenage novel. 'Yes,' I said, when actually I was thinking 'Are you serious? Of course I can't!'

I'd never thought about writing for young people. I tried to think of a story. My daughter was at high school, and something she was doing at the time gave me an idea. My friend liked my idea. So I went ahead and wrote the whole novel. That was my first published book. It was published in 1996 and was called Stagefright.

I sometimes wish I'd started writing when I was younger, but then I think things have worked out okay. I find that I have lots of ideas and so far I've never had 'writers' block' (touch wood). I might have got a late start, but I've been trying to make up for lost time. I've written 30-odd books, some short stories, a telemovie and some TV and planetarium scripts.



About the author

Carole: I didn't start writing until I was quite old — nearly 40. Before that, I worked as a laboratory assistant. My jobs involved working with a lot of blood and brains. You might think this sounds a bit gory, but I quite enjoyed working in a laboratory. The trouble was I always had this niggling feeling that it wasn't what I was meant to be doing.

One day I realised what I've always wanted to be—a writer! I don't know why it took me so long to work that out. When I was at school in the 1960s (a very long time ago) it didn't sound like the sort of thing a girl from Port Adelaide