



Australian soldiers during World War 1 faced many challenges. How did the experiences of foot soldiers on the Western Front differ from those of the Light Horse in Palestine?

Australian War Memorial, 2021

FRANK MACDONALD MEMORIAL ESSAY

By Esther Mbabazi

Word Count: 1446 words (excluding quotes and references)

The Western Front and Palestine were both significant battlefronts in World War 1 (WW1). Although the conditions on these fronts varied due to the vastly different terrain and differing reasons for fighting in this area, in both locations the ANZAC soldiers showed tremendous bravery, endured challenging conditions, and left a legacy that endures to this day. In this essay, I will uncover the challenges the ANZAC soldiers faced on the Western Front and in Palestine, and later compare them and see the difference between the challenges each faced.

WW1 was fought on various battlefields, but France and Belgium was where the war started and ended. The battlefields and trenches reached 700 kilometres from the Belgian coast through France to the Swiss borders. The Allies on the Western Front quickly espoused the German description of this area as 'the Western Front.' By the time the Australian soldiers came to the Western Front, the Germans had taken over a vast amount of Belgium and a proportion of France. The goal for the Australian soldiers was to stop the advance of the Germans and drive them away from France and Belgium. The soldiers of the brigade were systemised in an exceedingly effective way that allowed them to do their duty and accomplish their goals. Colonel Ewan Sinclair-MacLagon, a British officer serving Australia (Major General Ewen George Sinclair-Maclagan, 2023) encouraged his soldiers, "'Forward' is the word, until on our position, when 'Hang on' is what we have to do" (Sinclair-MacLagon & Bert, 1936). Stopping the Germans was going to be a terrifying task and leaders like Colonel Ewan were needed because they showed leadership and gave the soldiers the courage to be brave in the face of adversity.

The conditions on the Western Front were wretched and hazardous, and to make this more challenging, the soldiers had to contend with machine guns, artillery, enemy infantry, and gas. The British trenches were often flooded, so diseases were easily caught. Trench foot was one of the many diseases the soldiers suffered due to continual immersion in water. Vermin found homes in the trenches, lice and biting insects filled the environment. Corporal A.G. Thomas, an Australian

Private assigned to the 6th Infantry Battalion (Corporal Arthur G Thomas, 2023) recounted in his diary:

God, I cannot describe the horrors of last night. We just fell down and slept, rain and all, and shells falling all about us but we were too exhausted to bother, we didn't mind if we were killed, it was terrible. (Thomas, n.d.)

Through Corporal Thomas's quote, we understand that the war was tiring, and soldiers got to such a point of exhaustion that they did not care if the falling shells hit them. Lieutenant Ronald McInnis, a private soldier in the 53rd Australian Infantry Battalion (Lieutenant Ronald Alison McInnis, 2023), was close to resting when bomb shells struck near where he lay and caused the trench wall to fall on him. He described his torment in his diary:

The brim of the hat kept the earth out of my nose but the weight gradually forced it further down my head, the head band gradually travelling down my nose and taking the skin with it ... I soon found the end would not come for want of fresh air – I could breathe. Then the realisation came of what was gradually but surely ending things. The soft earth ... slowly settling down and compressing ... It was as though an iron band were tightening round my chest and preventing any movement. (McInnis, n.d.)

His account shows that even though the trench walls were built to protect the soldiers, they could not withstand the shells' force and gives us an idea of what being buried alive can feel like and the terrors one may feel.

A year after the war started, on April 22, 1915, the German specialist troop launched a wave of asphyxiating gas released from buried cylinders. This caused panic in the Allied line on the northern end of Ypres land, and many struggled to survive the newly formed weapon. Later, Cluny Macpherson, Principal Medical Officer, 1st Newfoundland Regiment, invented gas masks, but being fragile and uncomfortable they cost many soldiers their lives. One British soldier once witnessed the gas effect on the French colonial soldiers and described it as:

A panic-stricken rabble of Turcos and Zouaves with gray faces and protruding eyeballs, clutching their throats and choking as they ran, many of them dropping in

their tracks and lying on the sodden earth with limbs convulsed and features distorted in death. (Unknown, 1915)

The unknown British soldier's description of the effect is very detailed and clarifies that the Germans had the upper hand because of the gas bombs.

Winters on the Western Front meant the soldiers experienced devastating conditions. After spending a night on a shelf cut into the side of the trench wall, Lieutenant R.A. McInnes describes the icy conditions of the Western Front: "When I woke I was terribly cold. My feet protruded from my overcoat and the caked mud on my big legging-boots were covered with white frost." (McInnes, n.d.) This description of what the nights were like for the foot soldiers, waking up each morning freezing and having white sheets of frost covering them, shows us how much they endured.

Not all was bad on the Western Front. On the 8th of September, 1916, the 13th Brigade moved into the billets in the locality of Steenwoode, where they enjoyed a few weeks of rest. Lieutenant Colonel T.S. Louch, Captain of the 51st Australian Infantry Battalion and part of the 13th Brigade (Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Steane Louch, 2023), mentions:

Parades were reduced to a minimum and the men had an easy time. The part of the country we were in was undisturbed by the war and the hop fields were in bloom ready for picking. The local girls quickly shewed our men how to do the picking, and then sat back and watched them doing it. Altogether it was a pleasant interlude, and nearly everyone brightened up and returned to normal. (Louch, 1916, p. 13)

The Western Front was known to be an unpleasant place, but Louch proved through this quote that they got a chance to enjoy the dangerous place. Despite the hardship the Allies faced on the Western Front, their bravery won them the war against the Germans.

Another group of soldiers that proved their courage was the Australian Light Horse in Palestine. When the British Empire asked Australia to enlist in the war, around 416,000 were sent to the Western Front in 1916, but some of Australia's mounted forces were sent to Egypt to fight against

the Turks, who were threatening the Suez Canal. After 1916, the Light Horse advanced into Turkish territory after conquering them in the Canal and at Romani [August 1916]. In 1917 the ANZAC entered Palestine and captured Gaza and Jerusalem, then a year later, progressed into Syria and Jordan. The light horsemen were already professional horse-riders or rifle handlers, so their training was drills and mastery of the mounted infantry fighting technique. The goal was to reduce the Ottoman/Turkish forces' hold on the Middle East and eliminate the Turkish from the War. Private James Tait, 58th Australian Infantry Battalion (Private James Tait, 2023), wrote in his diary describing the Middle East scenery:

5 February 1916 - Laying cable through the desert to trenches. The light railway is well on its way towards completion... The desert is covered with dried shrubs and lizards and large rats abound. The only people we see are Indian lancers, whose duty is to patrol. Our food and water are brought up by camels, which we captured from the Turks in their last raid. (Tait, 1915)

Private James gives us an image of how the land would have looked and gives us new knowledge that the soldiers used the camels they had captured from the Turks as food transport. The section where Private James informs us that the only people being seen are the Indian Lancers shows us how deserted the environment around them is.

The challenges the light horsemen had to face in the desert were many. With the extreme heat of the day and coldness of the nights, travelling long distances did not make things any better and often, water was scarce. Many nights they slept in tents, blanket shelters or under the stars. Trooper Ion Idriess, once a private and part of the 5th Australian Light Horse Regiment, comments:

A squadron of our fellows went out last night, with one water bottle each, and will be away all day. Poor devils ... Not a drop of water to drink in camp. We are going away and drinking from the horses' well. The water is forbidden and brackish but a man must drink something. (Idriess I. 1917)

Another diary entry by Trooper Albany Varney shows what the soldiers had to deal with in the deserts of the Middle East:

The flies are in millions they fly flop onto your food whether you like it or not, and as I am writing this note I have to keep them off with one hand and write with the other. Our horses suffer worse than we do. They have to stand in the sun and hot sand, for there is no shelter. We have to scrape the top sand away before we can sit down during a short stop but nothing troubles us now we take things as they come whether it is bully and biscuits, or a drop of tea and no sugar or a nice stew full of sand and flies...

(Varney, 1916)

Through Trooper Ion and Albany's quotes, their resilience is clear. While water was hard to get, they found a way.

Another critical challenge the soldiers in the Middle East faced was the lack of communication. For example, in October 1917, Trooper Albany Varney, 12th Light Horse regiment received two letters that informed him of his mother's death. They had taken roughly three months to get to him, and due to the war, further months had passed before he could reply and more months before it reached his family. In his reply, he wrote:

I am sorry I could not write to you sooner, but when I received the sad news about Mother, we were working hard and expecting to be hard at it at any moment. (Varney, 1917)

This shows us that communicating was hard for the light horsemen in the Middle East and how this may have overwhelmed the soldiers because they couldn't reply when they received letters from their loved ones. On the 31 of October 1918, the Middle East campaign ended a few weeks after the ANZAC and Allies captured Damascus. The fierceness of the light horsemen shook the Turkish and made them surrender, marking the end of the Middle East Campaign.

The foot soldiers and light horsemen were courageous fighters, they didn't back down and laid their lives down for the country they served. The soldiers on the Western Front had to endure the cold weather and muddy trenches. On the other hand, the light horsemen in Palestine had to endure the scorching climates and arid landscapes with limited access to water. Regarding tactics and protection, the Western Front relied on the trenches as protection during offence and defence. In comparison, the light horsemen charged directly into the enemy line without the cover of trenches. When it came to mobility and rest, the light horsemen had a good advantage of camping away from the front line, while the foot soldiers on the Western Front often lacked sleep and rest due to their constant presence on the front lines. Considering casualties and significance, the Western Front had a significantly high death toll, with approximately 46,000 deaths, while the Middle Eastern campaign had a lower death toll of around 1,300 deaths. It is essential to compare the two battlefronts as they provide insights into different ANZAC soldiers' experiences, and how they faced each circumstance, to help us appreciate and acknowledge their contributions.

While Australian Soldiers faced immense challenges on both the Western Front and in Palestine, their experiences were significantly different. The light horsemen battled the heat elements and launched attacks on horseback, while the foot soldiers endured the harsh conditions of the Western Front. Despite these variations, the ANZAC soldiers undoubtedly earned their prestigious title and will forever be commemorated by Australia.

References

Corporal Arthur G Thomas. (2023). Australian War Memorial.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P11013422>

Edger, P. (2009). *To Villers-Bretonneux, Brigaders-General William Glasgow, DSO and 13th Australian Infantry Brigade.*

Egypt and Palestine campaign. (n.d.). National Army Museum. Retrieved August 17, 2023, from <https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/egypt-and-palestine-campaign>

Fisher, A. (1914, July 31). <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/anzac-voices/1914>

Idriess, I. (1917). *Idriess, Ion Llewellyn (Trooper, b.1889 - d.1979).*

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/1DRL%3A0373>

Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Steane Louch. (2023). Australian War Memorial.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P11035399>

Lieutenant Ronald Alison McInnis. (2023). Australian War Memorial.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P11013294>

LIFE IN THE TRENCHES. (2017, July 18). <https://sjmc.gov.au/life-in-the-trenches/#:~:text=Conditions%20in%20the%20trenches%20on,guns%2C%20enemy%20infantry%20and%20gas>

Life in the trenches. (2019, October 17).

<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/anzac-voices/life-trenches>

Louch, T. S. (1916). *In the Ranks* (Vol. 11, p. 13). McBride R.E.

Major General Ewen George Sinclair-Maclagan. (2023). Australian War Memorial.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P11025503>

McInnes, R. (n.d.). *Snow Bound.* ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee. Retrieved August 15, 2023, from <https://anzacday.org.au/snow-bound>

McInnis, R. (n.d.). *Life in trenches*. Australian War Memorial. Retrieved August 15, 2023, from <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/anzac-voices/life-trenches>

Middle East Campaign. (n.d.). WORLD WAR I and AUSTRALIA. Retrieved August 17, 2023, from https://guides.sl.nsw.gov.au/wwi-and-australia/middle_east_campaign#:~:text=The%20rest%20of%20the%20troops,Palestine%20capturing%20Gaza%20and%20Jerusalem.

Overview of Australia's involvement in the First World War. (2023a, March 14).

<https://www.dva.gov.au/newsroom/media-centre/media-backgrounders/overview-australias-involvement-first-world-war#:~:text=Some%201%2C300%20Australians%20were%20killed%20in%20the%20campaigns%20in%20the%20Middle%20East.>

Overview of Australia's involvement in the First World War. (2023b, March 14).

<https://www.dva.gov.au/newsroom/media-centre/media-backgrounders/overview-australias-involvement-first-world-war>

Private James Tait. (2023). Australian War Memorial.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P10077694>

Service men and women from Australia. (n.d.). Where Australians Served during World War I. Retrieved August 18, 2023, from

<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served#:~:text=Soldiers%20and%20medical%20staff%20served,in%20Australian%20and%20British%20squadrons>

Sinai and Palestine Campaign 28 January 1915 to 31 October 1918. (2022, July 28).

ANZAC PORTAL . <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/sinai-and-palestine>

Sinai Palestine, 1916-17. (2023). ANZAC VOICES.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/anzac-voices/sinai-palestine>

Sinclair-MacLagon, E., & Bert, C. (1936). *The Fighting 10th. A South Australian Centenary. Souvenir of the 10th Battalion, A. I. F., 1914-19. By Cecil Bert Lovell Lock, Etc.*

Soldier, unknown. (1915, April 22). *First Usage of Poison Gas.* The National WW1 Museum and Memorial. <https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/about-wwi/spotlight-first-usage-poison-gas#:~:text=On%20April%2022%2C%201915%20at,a%20new%20form%20of%20weapon.>

Tait, J. (1915). *Dairy of Private James Tait, The East Yorkshire Regiment.*

The Aftermath Of World War I. (n.d.). The Great War Ends. Retrieved August 18, 2023, from <https://history.delaware.gov/world-war-i/conclusion-ww1/#:~:text=Finally%2C%20the%20fighting%20was%20over,celebrated%20Armistice%20Day%20on%20Nov.>

The Campaign in the Middle East. (n.d.). ANZAC Day Commemoration Committee. Retrieved August 17, 2023, from <https://anzacday.org.au/ww1-the-campaign-in-the-middle-east>

The Mounted Soldiers of Australia. (2023). The Australian Light Horse Association. <https://www.lighthorse.org.au/the-mounted-soldiers-of-australia-2/#:~:text=At%20the%20start%20of%20each,the%20mounted%20infantry%20fighting%20technique.>

Thomas, A. (n.d.). *Snow Bound.* <https://Anzacday.org.au/Snow-Bound>. Retrieved August 15, 2023, from <https://anzacday.org.au/snow-bound>

Varney, A. (1916, May 22). *Papers relating to Albany Thomas Fredrick Varney, 1915-2011*. <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG0000895?image=114#display-image>

Varney, A. (1917, November 23). *Papers relating to Albany Thomas Fredrick Varney, 1915-2011*.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/RCDIG0000895?image=213#display-image>

Voices of the First World War: Winter 1916. (n.d.). Retrieved August 15, 2023, from <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-winter-1916>

World War I Gas Mask. (n.d.). Memorial University Libraries | Health Sciences Library. Retrieved August 15, 2023, from <https://www.library.mun.ca/hsl/archives/about/gasmask/#:~:text=Cluny%20Macpherson%2C%20Principal%20Medical%20Officer,was%20eventually%20transferred%20to%20Gallipoli>

World War I: The Western Front. (n.d.). National Archives of Australia. Retrieved August 15, 2023, from <https://www.naa.gov.au/students-and-teachers/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/war/world-war-i/world-war-i-western-front#:~:text=Between%20March%201916%20and%20November,to%20help%20repel%20the%20Germans>.