

# Frank McDonald Memorial Prize Essay

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## Question 1

Evaluate Tasmania's contribution to the Great War (1914–18) on both the home and battle front. Consider incorporating the stories of local soldiers and/or home front activities in your analysis.

Word Count: 1435 (Excluding quotes and references)



*Waiting to board the HMAT Orsova. Members of the 6th Reinforcements, the only all-Tasmanian 40th Infantry Battalion. (Australian War Memorial 2023)*

*“A thousand strong they march along,  
With loyal hearts and light;  
They heard the call, they gave their all  
For Freedom's cause to fight.*

*Tasmania's own, her flesh, her bone-  
A stalwart, steady band,  
They sail away to join the fray  
And honour Tasma's land.”*

(Extract from ‘Tasmania’s Own’ Albert J. Wood. *The North Western Advocate and the Emu Bay Times* 1916)

Wood’s poem resonates with the belief of the time that the most significant contribution Tasmania could make to The Great War of 1914 -1918 was to send ‘its own’ to the warfront. It was an honourable and noble sacrifice Tasmania was prepared to make to defend its allies. In addition to the actions on the battlefield, including the contributions of the 12th and 40th Battalions, the support and strength on the home front demonstrated the state’s commitment to the war effort. Numerous families were impacted as loyalty to the Empire was strong. As Henney (2006) states, “More than half the 13,000 who served overseas were casualties, 2432 losing their lives, and many more returning broken in health, physically and mentally.” While these contributions and sacrifices are honoured on ANZAC Day, the many war memorials in towns and cities across Tasmania serve as a daily reminder of those who died defending freedom. From the battles at Gallipoli and the Western Front to the vital role of Tasmanian nurses and the support of those on the home front, Tasmania played a crucial role in Australia’s war effort.

Tasmania was noted for the bravery and resilience demonstrated by soldiers through battlefield contributions. Tasmanian troops, such as the 40th Battalion, gained recognition for serving in significant battles on the Western Front. Monash (1922) describes the 40th battalion’s uniqueness as entirely made up of men from Tasmania: “In no other unit were the pride of origin, and the sense of responsibility to the people whom it represented, stronger than in the Fortieth.” The 40th Battalion was involved in a successful enemy raid at Warneton, near Ypres, during trench operations on the Western Front. The following is a firsthand account by Green (1922) of the raid after months of fighting.

“The plan was for the 39th Battalion to raid at 5.15 p.m. on the 30th November, and that 7 hours later the 40th Battalion party would raid the same place, hoping to find the enemy somewhat disorganised and repairing his trenches... The right storming party met with no resistance before getting into the trench, but on jumping in, they found the line full of bewildered Germans. Bombs were thrown among these... The entire plan was well thought out and executed. The idea of sending two raiding parties over in the same place on the same night was a new one, and emanated from the Commanding Officer of the 40th Battalion (Lieut. Col. J. E. C. Lord, D.8.0.)”

The double raid of Warneton was, according to Hamlin and Jones (2023), “the most well-planned and successful Australian trench raids of the First World War.” The men of the 40th Battalion contributed to the success of the raid under the leadership of Tasmanian Lieutenant Colonel Lord. Monash describes Lord as an “officer of ripe experience, with a full knowledge of men, and one having a broad and sympathetic outlook” (Monash 1922)

Another portrayal of Tasmanian strength and contribution to the Great War can be seen through the 40th Battalion's courage during the Battle of Messines, Belgium. The campaign to seize Messines Ridge by British, New Zealand and Australian troops was brutal. On the 6th of June as the 40th Battalion marched from their camps to the frontline, they were hit with gas shells and Bean (1941) describes the difficulty of marching with masks in the dark, “For troops in masks the mere effort of marching under the load of rifle, ammunition, tools, and rations, and the excitement of the occasion, caused heavy breathing and consequent distress.” Private L. Lawes (1917) of Lietinna, in a letter he wrote to his mother from the hospital, describes how the gas shells fell, yet they marched onwards single file to the trenches. Lawes also represents a defining moment in the battle of the detonation of nineteen land mines planted underneath the German frontline trenches, and the immediate actions taken by the 40th Battalion.

“At that time, the mines in the hills were fired. The hills in the German lines seemed to burst open like an earthquake; the flames and smoke looked just the thing. At that time, all of our heavy guns opened out with a deadly barrage, on a ten-mile front, pounding all his trenches and strongholds. At that time, our Battalion of the Third Division...hopped over the top, line after line...clearing the huns out of their trenches and dugouts...(Overall) There were 7,000 prisoners taken, and dead huns strewn everywhere.” (Lawes 1917)

During this particular campaign, approximately 12,600 German troops were killed or missing, severely weakening their frontline defences. Despite suffering 47 losses and 343 casualties, the 40th Battalion contributed to strengthening the frontline. It supported the advance toward St. Ypres and the engagement in the Battle of Passchendaele, also known as the Third Battle of Ypres.

There are many accounts of Tasmanian contributions and bravery during the battles at St Ypres. Lewis McGee is a compelling example of this courage due to his actions during the major Allied offensive during the Third Battle of Ypres and the attack on Broodseinde Ridge (4 October 1917). McGee proved himself a skilled soldier from the start. He was employed as a railway engine driver in Avoca when he enrolled in the Australian Imperial Force on 1st March 1916. After gaining a reputation as a hardworking soldier, he was named lance corporal a mere twenty-two days after enlisting. Later, he was promoted to sergeant on 12 January 1917. During the attack on the Ridge, beneath heavy artillery and gunfire, the 40th Battalion advanced with ferocious determination to seize the German positions. McGee's Platoon was engulfed in heavy gunfire from a German pillbox. It was quick thinking and courage that led McGee to take action, which would impact the course of the attack.

“A pill-box party of Huns was holding up the advance of his platoon, and this little impediment to his progress had to be removed. McGhee, with nothing but a revolver, charged the pill-box single-handed, shot some of the occupants, and captured the rest. Then he reorganised his platoon and proceeded in the lead of it.” (Sunday Times 1917)

Despite significant casualties, the Battalion contributed to securing the ridge. The efforts of the Battalion were instrumental in driving the frontline forward and lessening the German hold on the Ypres Salient. McGee was granted the Victoria Cross for his bravery; however, it was made posthumously as he was killed in action at Passchendaele. Buried at Tyne Cot Cemetery, visitors can pay respects to the man who single-handedly saved his whole platoon. McGee’s actions reflect the key contributions and sacrifices Tasmanians made during the Great War.

Similar to the 40th Battalion, the 12th was primarily composed of Tasmanians, with the remainder of the men coming from South and Western Australia. The 12th Battalion became one of the earliest representations of Tasmania’s contribution to the war, fighting in crucial campaigns, from the shores of Gallipoli to the gruelling fields of the Western Front. Assembled in August 1914 as a part of the First Australian Imperial Force, the 12th Battalion was one of the first infantry units.

The 12th Battalion took part in one of the many major operations; however, the Gallipoli landing is seen as a crucial part of Tasmania’s contributions to the Allied Powers. Led by Lieutenant Colonel L. Clark, on April 25, 1915, the 12th Battalion was one of the first units ashore at Anzac Cove (Australian War Memorial 2016). Their objective was to hold the ridges above the landing point, to protect the remainder of the landing force. Lt. Col Hilmer Smith of the 12th Battalion, writing to Col. Martin, mentions the conditions the ANZACs endured upon their arrival at Anzac Cove:

“We landed at Anzac Cove at 4 a.m. on Sunday, April 25, and received a warm welcome. There was no time or opportunity for organising, we just had to climb up hills-something like those around the Cataract Gorge, only much steeper, and covered with prickly scrub, which tore our clothes and hands.” (Examiner 1915)

While scrambling up cliffs, the troops were under heavy Turkish gunfire, but managed to secure key positions, like Plugge’s Plateau. The valiant actions of the 12th Battalion enabled the remainder of the ANZACs to establish a beachhead, allowing more troops to land safely. Following the Gallipoli Campaign, the majority of the Tasmanian troops were redeployed to the Western Front, where they further participated in significant battles, including the Battles of Somme and Fromelles.

Tasmanian women also responded to the necessity of their role on the warfront, with 89 nurses enlisting to serve. Six were awarded the Royal Red Cross Medal. The Military Medal was granted to Clare Deacon for continuing to care for her patients through an artillery attack. (Norris 2006) “During an enemy air raid, she declined to leave her patients, but stayed at her

post, covering them over to protect them, and utilising enamel hospital bowls as a protection for their heads.” (The Mercury, 1918) This illustrates the bravery of Tasmanian nurses during their time at the warfront. Tasmanian nurses of the home front also contributed to the war effort as they supported returned soldiers at the hospital at the Claremont Camp and within other facilities. (Wadsley 2023)

Tasmanians on the home front were supportive of the national war effort and voted in favour of conscription in a national referendum in 1916, although that support for conscription in the 1917 referendum dwindled as the true horror of war set in with increasing casualties. (Henning 2006 and Ramin 2006) While support for conscription did lessen, the communities' support for their soldiers never did.

The support from the home front was one of the greatest contributions the Tasmanian community could make towards the Great War, as this assisted the soldiers before they left and once they were on the battlefield. While this support varied from the enormous amount of food supplied by the government and transported to the Claremont Training Camp, it also included charitable Christmas dinners freely supplied to soldiers, writing desks given to the camp, and comfort funds (Wadsley 2023). Many fundraising events were organised throughout Tasmania to boost morale amongst the troops, even including the purchase of musical instruments, as shown in the following extract about a fundraising event;

“The efforts which are being made to raise funds to provide instruments and accessories for the band of the 40th Battalion should forcibly appeal to the patriotic sympathies of the residents of Northern Tasmania. The inspiring effect of band music upon weary troops when marching long distances, as well as at other times, is well known, and it is to be hoped that our Tasmanian soldiers will not be deprived of this through lack of funds wherewith to equip the recently formed band.” (The Daily Telegraph, 1916)

Essential items such as warm clothing, newspapers, letters and food were included in comfort packages for the soldiers. These were organised by the On Active Service (OAS) Fund in Tasmania, and “rabbit-skin waistcoats were made locally and were much sought after, particularly during the extremely cold winter of 1916-17 on the Western Front.” (Wadsley, p 144). Upon receiving a set of comfort packages for the 40th Battalion that also included sport equipment Col. Lord showed his gratitude to the Tasmanian community, “The gifts were of the very greatest value to the troops, and I shall be glad if you will kindly convey to donors, through the medium of the press, the very hearty thanks and appreciation of all ranks.” (Examiner 1916)

From the courageous actions of ‘Tasmania’s own’ on the Western Front and Gallipoli, to the tireless dedication at home, Tasmania’s contributions were integral to the Great War. The state’s profound commitment to the Great War is illustrated by the bravery of the 12th and 40th Battalions and their leadership, especially that of Col. Leit. Lord, the determination of the Tasmanian nurses and the heroism of soldiers like Lewis McGee. Communities displayed their loyalty to the cause and united by volunteering, fundraising and supporting returned

soldiers. Despite the high cost, duty and pride brought Tasmanians together. Their contributions and memory live on, not only in memorials and events like Anzac Day, but in the lasting testimonies of valour, perseverance and sacrifice that defined not only the war, but Tasmania's legacy with it.

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