



# FROMELLES

by Major Ian R Gumm



## In the footsteps of the British and Australian Forces on 19th – 20th July 1916

*“As a professional battlefield tour guide and member of the Guild of Battlefield Guides I regularly visit the countryside, towns and villages of Northwest Europe to discuss the battles that raged across the canvas that is the battlefield. One such battlefield is in the vicinity of a small town in the Nord Pas de Calais region of Northern France – FROMELLES.”*

In May 2009 work began to recover the remains 250 British and Australian soldiers who had been buried in mass graves behind what had been the German lines in July 1916. These remains had been discovered after years of persistent research by a retired Australian teacher Lambis Englezos who had pin-pointed the site at Pheasant Wood, Fromelles.

To re-bury these men in a fitting manner a new CWGC cemetery, Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery, is being built and on Monday 19th July 2010, the anniversary of the battle, a special commemorative ceremony will take place there to mark the completion of the cemetery and laying to rest of the exhumed remains of the soldiers found.

What follows is the story of their battle, the battle in which they fought and gave the ultimate sacrifice, the Battle of Fromelles.

On the 9th October 1914 Fromelles effectively became part of the frontline, which in this sector ran north–north–east from La Bassée to Frelinghien located to the east of Armentières. The frontline effectively cut the commune of Fromelles in two, with the south-eastern section including the

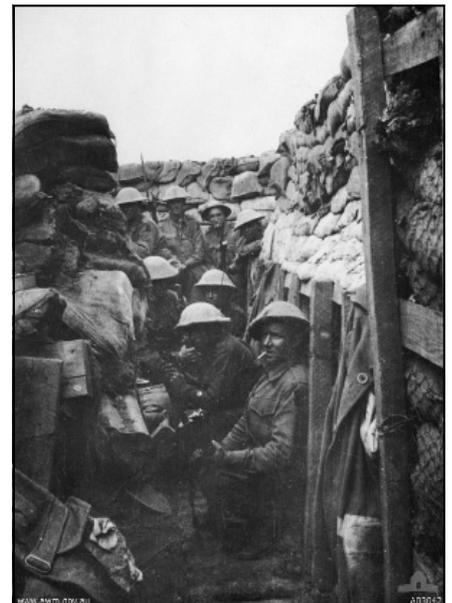
centre of the village occupied by the Kaiser’s Imperial German Army and the north-western part occupied by the British and Dominion troops.

On 9th May 1915 the British launched an assault in this area in order to support the large French attack against the hill of Notre Dame de Lorette. This was the Battle of Aubers Ridge. It was as a result of this battle that the German Chief of Staff General Ludendorff made his famous statement: *“These soldiers are fighting like lions, but are led by donkeys.”*

The Battle of Aubers Ridge is not however our story, as it was during the attack launched by a mixed British and Australian Force just over a year later that the dead buried at Pheasant Wood were killed.

### **The Battle of Fromelles, 19th to 20th July 1916**

At 18:00 hrs on Wednesday 19th July 1916 the British 61st Division and 5th Australian Division attacked the German positions in the vicinity of Fromelles. Both of the Divisions involved were recent arrivals to the Western Front. At the outbreak of war the units of



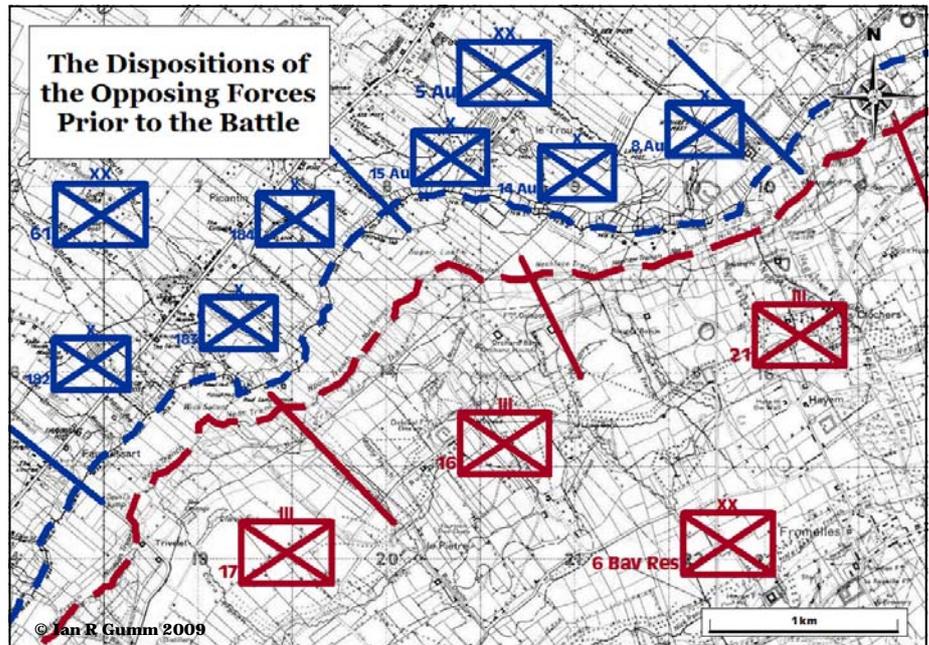
Men of the 53rd Battalion waiting to don their equipment for the attack at Fromelles. Only three of the men shown here came out of the action alive, and those three were all wounded.

the Territorial Force formed ‘second line’ or reserve units. The 48th (South Midland) Division raised ‘second line’ units based upon the men of the Territorial Force who had not volunteered for overseas duty and were as such ‘home service only’. From September 1914 onwards new recruits were assigned to them and by early January 1915 drafts were being posted to the ‘first line’

Division. In April 1915 the 'second line' units of the South Midland Battalions were formed into the 61st (2nd South Midland) Division. In May 1916 the 61st Division was warned that it would be sent overseas and by the end of the month it was in France. In July 1916 it was in the frontline opposite the German trenches in the vicinity of Fromelles.

The 5th Australian Division was formed in Egypt in February 1916 with the intention of replicating the original Australian Imperial Force which had been fighting in Gallipoli. A delay in assembling the Artillery component of the Division meant that it did not arrive in France until June 1916. In July 1916 it was also in the frontline opposite the German trenches in the vicinity of Fromelles.

Whilst the objective of the attack at Fromelles was to capture the 'Sugar Loaf' salient to the north of the village by a combined British/Australian assault, the aim was to divert German reserve away from the great Somme offensive that was taking place some 50 miles further south. It was to be the first time that Australian troops were to see action on the Western Front.



The British 61st Division was on the right (west), between the Fauquissart-Trivelet road and Bond Street, and the 5th Australian Division was on the left (east) between Bond Street and Cordonniere Farm. In the trenches facing them were elements of the 17th, 16th and 21st Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiments, which were part of the 6th Bavarian Reserve Division. The British and Australian positions were overlooked by the German observers on the nearby Aubers Ridge.

The heavily waterlogged nature of the ground in the Aubers sector made the construction of deep trenches near impossible and consequently vast barricades of earth, sandbags and timber were constructed behind which the infantry sheltered. These 'breastwork defences' were in effect thick defensive walls that offered far more visible targets to the enemy's artillery than the well-dug trenches used elsewhere and the defenders suffered accordingly from enemy shellfire. The breastworks did however offer a good level of protection from enemy small arms and machinegun fire. One of the main disadvantages of this type of defence was the way in which the infantry had to deploy into no man's land. Rather than climbing over the relatively high 'parapet' of the breastworks the British infantry used access holes or 'sally-ports' through the protective earthen walls.

The preliminary bombardment of the German defences began on 14th July 1916 with the intention of destroying the enemy wire. This clearly signalled to the Germans that an attack was pending as they huddled in the comparative safety of their bunkers. On the 16th the heavier artillery began engaging the German strongpoints and machine gun positions, but the wet weather disrupted the artillery programme and the attack was



An oblique view across the frontlines showing the 'Sugar Loaf' Salient.



Australian Infantry preparing to leave their trench.

postponed from its scheduled start on 17th to 19th July 1916.

At 11:00 hrs on 19th July 1916 an intense artillery bombardment of the German defences took place, which in turn led to counter fire from the German Artillery. Waiting in their trenches the British and Australian troops were shelled and sustained a number of casualties.

At 17:30 hrs, still under cover of the artillery, the attacking Battalions began to move out into no man's land. The British soldiers of the 61st Division moved through the sally-ports in their breastwork defences and became instant targets for the waiting German machineguns. Their Australian counterparts, however, decided not exit via the sally-ports but go over the top instead.

At 18:00 hrs the general assault began and the British and Australians advanced in waves to be met by an inferno of high explosives and lead. The German artillery and trench mortars rained down their deadly loads upon the advancing allied infantrymen and their machineguns poured their hail of lead towards them. To this the German Infantrymen added the weight of their rifle fire creating a storm into which the British and Australians headed.

On the extreme right of the attack the British 61st Division managed to force an entry in the German lines. Part of the British 182nd Brigade, the 2/7th Warwicks deployed successfully and rushed across the 150 yards of no man's land to break into the German lines. To their left the 2/6th Warwicks lost heavily deploying for the advance, but pressed on to the 'Wick Salient' to be checked in front of German wire losing many men to the murderous German machineguns.

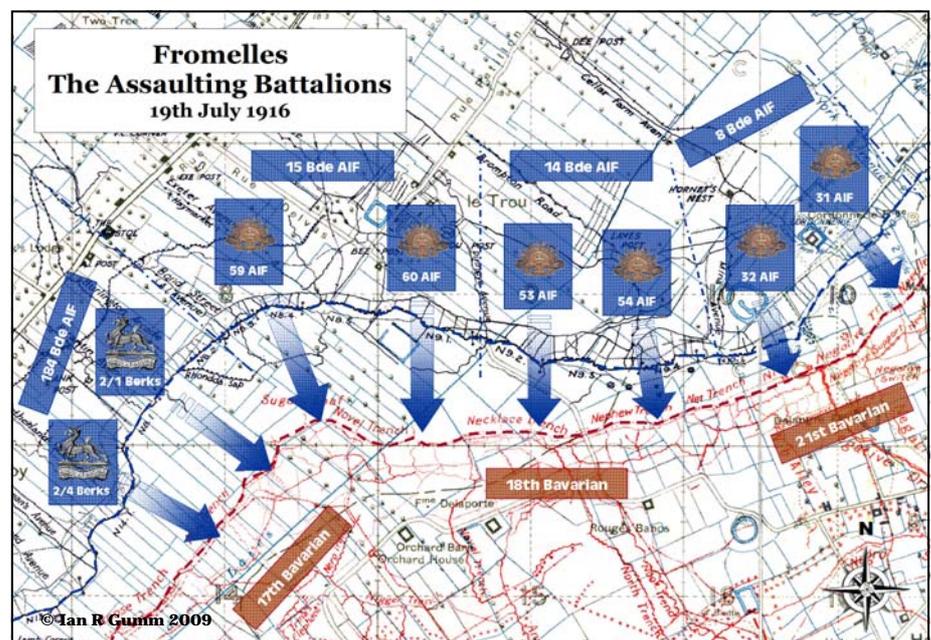
The 2/4th and 2/6th Gloucesters of the British 183rd Brigade in the

centre of the 61st Division's front were heavily shelled whilst waiting for the assault and as they exited from their sally-ports. They advanced in the face of such intense machinegun and artillery fire that few of their men made it anywhere near the enemy wire.

In the centre, where the opposing lines were the closest, the German defences were the strongest. Here the advancing British and Australian infantrymen were cut down in their swathes and the British 184th and Australian 15th Brigades sustained very heavy casualties.

On the far left of the British attack, closest to the Australian 15th Brigade, the British 184th Brigade's assaulting companies had been in the front line since 09:00 hrs. As they waited they sustained many casualties as a result of the German shellfire. The 2/4th Royal Berkshires were hit hard by machinegun fire as they came out of their sally-ports, few made it to the wire and those that did found it uncut. The 2/1st Royal Berkshires advanced towards the Sugar Loaf amidst heavy shrapnel and machinegun fire. The British Official History of the Great War recalls:

*"The right company was practically destroyed in its efforts to advance; but on the left a party of the battalion reached the north-east face of the salient, and there*



*was sharp fighting on the parapet till all were killed or wounded."*

On the extreme right of the Australian line, the 15th (Victoria) Brigade's 59th and 60th Battalions attacked across the shallow narrow water course of Laves Brook. The British Official History of the Great War records that:

*"The 59th started well, but soon came under deadly machine-gun fire from the Sugarloaf [sic] and was checked after covering 300 yards. Next on the left, the 60th Battalion struggled on as far as the German wire, but could do no more. Losses were very heavy, especially in officers, Major C G McCrae commanding the 60th being killed, and Lieutenant Colonel E A Harris of the 59th, disabled by a shell burst. The survivors had no thought of retreat and endeavoured to dig in where they lay."*

The Australians on the left were more successful and their attack rapidly gained their objectives. The 31st and 32nd Battalions of the Australian 8th Brigade, on the far left, though meeting strong enemy machinegun fire from front and flank, stormed the German breastworks and pressed on. In the left centre, the 14th (New South Wales) Brigade's 53rd and 54th Battalions raced across no man's land and fought their way into the German trenches. They pressed on in search of the non-existent German support line before gallantly attempting to consolidate their gains in the shallow water-filled ditches. Desperate efforts were made to construct a communication trench across the fire-swept zone, to supply the most forward of these attackers, but the line that the Australians held was far from continuous and anything but defensible.

The lodgements gained in the German lines were short lived and the German defenders drove the British and Australians back in a series of short and painful retirements. A further abortive effort was made later that night, but by the morning of the 20th



Captured British and Australian soldiers marching through the streets of Lille on their way to captivity shortly after the battle.

July 1916 the attackers had been forced back to the points from which they had assaulted the previous evening.

The attackers subsequently licked their wounds and began to count the cost. The British 61st Division sustained a 1,547 casualties 503 of which were the dead and the 5th Australian Division suffered 5,533 casualties of which 1,780 were killed. No tactical advantage was achieved in the Fromelles area and none of the German reserves destined for the Somme were diverted to the vicinity of Fromelles. The British Official History of the Great War sums up the futility of the action at Fromelles, stating:

*"The pity of it was that the action need not have been fought, since First Army had perfect liberty to cancel it. To have delivered battle at all, after hurried preparation, with troops of all arms handicapped by their lack of experience and training in offensive trench warfare, betrayed a grave underestimate of the enemy's powers of resistance. The utmost endeavours of the artillery were unable either to subdue the German batteries or to reduce the*

*defenders to state of collapse before the assault', so the infantry, advancing in broad daylight, paid the price... Even if the German defences had been completely shattered by the British bombardment, and the infantry assault had succeeded, it would probably have proved impossible to hold the objective under the concentrated fire of the enemy's artillery directed by excellent observation."*

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