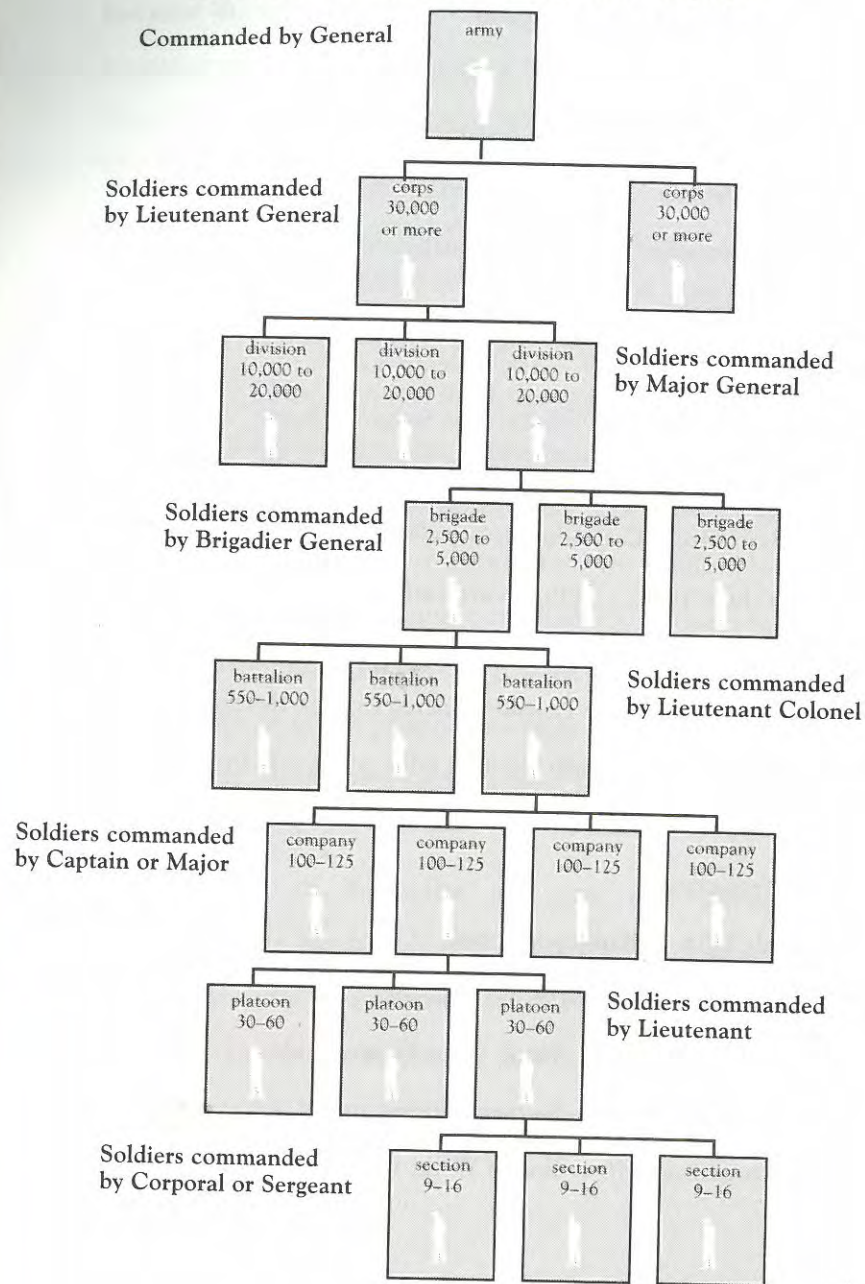


Basic Australian Army Structure



CHAPTER I NEW RECRUITS

22 May 1915, Melbourne, Australia
Walter McAlister,
carpenter's apprentice

I'm going to volunteer. I always intended to, the minute I turned 18, but I've had enough, so I'm not waiting any longer. It's not my fault I'm over six foot and I look older than my age, but every day someone, somewhere, has a go at me. Yesterday some boys from the school up the road were chanting, 'Cowardy, cowardy custard, your arms are made of mustard'. It hurts. One of them spat on the footpath in front of me.

Last week I tried to join the Albert Park Football Club, but they wouldn't have me.

'We don't take chickens,' the coach said.

I tried to explain that I'm under-age, but he wouldn't listen.

Mum says I shouldn't take any notice. 'You send 'em round to me,' she says, 'I'll sort 'em out.'

It seems like she's the only person in Melbourne who doesn't want me to join the army.

She's hoping the war will be over before I turn 18 next year.

'You should lie about your age. Tell 'em you're only 16,' she says. 'I want you to stay here with me. Always.'

I gave her a hug. She only comes up to my shoulder. It'll be hard for her when I go, and Billy won't like it either.

As it happens, I've already lied about my age to someone — Sally Tucker. Except I told her that I'm older than I am, not younger.

The first time I walked into the Palais with her on my arm, I felt so proud I thought I'd burst. I wanted to act like it was the most normal thing in the world, but I couldn't wipe the smile off my face.

I shouldn't have told her I was 18 and a half, but she'd just had her 18th birthday when I first asked her out. She wouldn't have said yes if she'd known I was only 17. We've been stepping out together for three months now and I know for sure that Sally's the only girl for me.

We were walking in the Botanical Gardens last Sunday afternoon. She looked a picture in a pink floral dress and a hat that she made herself. Every second bloke was in uniform. They couldn't take their eyes off my Sally. They tipped their hats to her and she smiled at every one of them. She thinks there's nothing smarter than an army uniform.

I left her at a table and went to order two teas and some scones at the kiosk, but the girl behind the counter ignored me, serving everybody else. Then a lady with a poodle and a parasol pushed in front.

'Why aren't you over in Turkey?' she says, prodding me in the stomach with her parasol. 'You should be defending the Empire. If you were a man you would be!'

Her silly-looking dog was barking at me and other people in the queue were nodding and muttering 'traitor'.

I went back to the table where Sally was sitting. Her face was bright red. She picked up her handbag, got up and walked away. I ran after her, pleading with her like a three-year-old. Near the oak lawn, she turned towards me. She didn't speak. She reached up to her hat and pulled out a feather. A white one. She handed it to me, and stupidly, I took it.

I'd heard of women giving white feathers to men who hadn't volunteered, because they thought they were cowards. I never thought it would happen to me. Sally strode off and I stood there on the path with the feather in my hand. It was more grey than white, just a stupid chook feather.

You need your parents' permission to join up if you're under 21. I knew Mum would never agree to it, so I went home and I wrote a letter.

'I am proud that my son, Walter McAlister, has decided to go to war,' I wrote. 'Under the present circumstances,

I reckon it is the duty of every young man to do so. I am willing to let him go.'

I forged Mum's signature, signing it with my left hand.

I'll earn more as a soldier than as a carpenter's apprentice. I can send half my pay home to Mum and still have some savings. I won't waste my money on beer. I'm going to save up for an engagement ring. When I get back Sally'll know I'm not a coward and I'll ask her to marry me.

I'm at the recruitment office. There's a queue of young men, and some not so young, all keen to join up.

The recruitment officer looks at my letter with the wonky signature.

'How old are you, sonny?' he says.

'Eighteen and a half,' I say.

He looks at me. Then he winks and hands me an enlistment form.

WORLD WAR I began with the assassination of the heir to the throne of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Political tensions in Europe were high, and war was inevitable. When it was revealed that Serbia was responsible for the assassination, Austria declared war on Serbia. Because Russia had an agreement that it would assist Serbia if it were ever attacked, Russia joined the war. The German Empire sided with the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and when the German Army set out to invade France, it first captured the small, neutral country of Belgium. That was the signal for Great Britain to join the war in defence of Belgium and France. Once Britain was involved, then members of the British Empire followed — including Australia.

The war lasted from mid-1914 to the end of 1918.

Enthusiasm

Most of the Australian public were strongly behind the war. They thought it was Australia's duty to fight alongside the 'Mother Country'. At school, children were taught to be proud of Australia's place in the British Empire. Boys and young men between the ages of 12 and 26 took part in compulsory military training — boys in cadets, young men in the home militia. Schoolboys had to participate for a number of hours each year in physical education, marching and rifle training. Young men took part in drills and camps.

how to shoot a rifle, but the new divisions also needed **artillery** to support them. Men were needed to operate the heavy guns. There were a few men with experience but the artillery units were mostly made up of infantry and light-horse soldiers who volunteered to do artillery training. These new recruits had to be turned into skilled artillery operators in the shortest possible time.

There weren't enough trained officers to teach the 3,000 men that the divisions would need to operate the heavy guns, so the first job was to train the instructors. Training was conducted from 4.30 a.m. to 6.30 a.m. each morning. Then for the rest of the day, the instructors, with their new knowledge, would train the recruits.

To France

After three months training in Egypt, I ANZAC and II ANZAC were ordered to go to France. They boarded ships at Alexandria and in six days they were disembarking at Marseilles, a port in southern France. Finally they were on their way to the battlefield where they would fight for their country — where they would face the enemy.

This is what the men had been waiting for.

CHAPTER 2 GREEN FIELDS AND BARBED WIRE

28 June 1916, Steenbecque, France
Private Walter McAlister,
60th Battalion, 15th Brigade

I can't believe it. I'm in France! Sally would be green with envy. She's always dreamt of going to Europe, but instead, it's me who's here. Everything's so hush-hush they don't tell us exactly where we're going, but here we are in a village called Steenbecque.

You never heard such cheering as when we first caught sight of France on the horizon. As we sailed into the harbour at Marseilles, there was a lovely castle on the cliffs. Someone said it was where the Count of Monte Cristo was imprisoned. Imagine that! On the train from Marseilles I felt like I was in a storybook myself. The countryside was so beautiful, like a fairyland. The trees are a different sort of green to the trees at home, a

brilliant green. And the fields are full of waving wheat and barley, sprinkled with the red of poppies and the blue of cornflowers. It's such a relief after the glaring light and blast-furnace heat of Egypt with its endless sand and flies. No flies in France, no mozzies either!

We spent three days and nights on the train — 15 men squashed into one compartment. They were all new recruits like me, except for one sergeant who was at Gallipoli. He's a bit of a sourpuss. The chaps are always having a joke and a laugh, but he never raises so much as a smile.

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. You can just feel the history in the air here. I saw beautiful old churches, cathedrals and a palace, which that Gallipoli sergeant told us was Versailles. The train stopped for a while just then, so we had a chance to really take it in. I've never seen such a big place!

And the people! They're so friendly, so welcoming. Every time the train stopped, there'd be a crowd of people waving and cheering us like we were the team that had just won the Grand Final. 'Vive l'Australie!' they shouted. Old women gave us flowers, and crucifixes to protect us. Young women gave us kisses! All we had to give them in

return were tins of **bully beef**. I thought I'd be able to write and tell Sally all about the French fashions, but the women don't worry much about fashion, not in this part of France anyway. Most of them just wear plain black dresses.

We arrived last night and we're **billeted** in a barn. A woman sold us eggs and butter and fresh bread and we all ignored our rations and cooked up a load of fried eggs on toast. What a treat! A young girl brought us coffee. It's like we're at the Ritz. Except that during the night the guns started up. They're miles away, but you can hear the roar of the artillery and feel the ground shake.

This morning the sound of children laughing woke me and I got a look at our new digs. It's a pretty little farm, but there are a few dings in the buildings where they've been hit by **shells**. The farm is busy. The whole family is out in the fields trying to carry on as if the war isn't a few miles from their door. Something isn't quite right. I can't put my finger on it.

'There's no men.' It's that Gallipoli veteran — Sergeant Crawford. He's leaning on the barn wall having a smoke. It's like he's read my thoughts.

He's right. The whole time I've been in France all I've seen are women, children and old men. All the younger men are at war, every last one of them.

I go to the farmhouse to buy a few more eggs. Farmhouses are strange here — a big square of buildings with a gateway that leads into a courtyard. Sergeant

Crawford follows me. The old granny is the only one not out in the fields. She can't speak a word of English, but she understands my meaning. She invites me into the house. She's sewing, making dresses, black dresses, lots of them.

'That's all she does, day and night,' the sergeant says.

I don't grasp his meaning at first. I look at the pile of black dresses and the yards of black material waiting to be made into more. Then it hits me. The women are wearing black for a reason. There isn't one of them who hasn't lost someone in the war — husband, father, brother or son. They are all in mourning.

FRANCE COULDN'T HAVE been more different to Egypt. It was summer, the fields were green, and the French people gave the Australian soldiers a warm welcome. Europe seemed civilised, and it was familiar to the Australians from their lessons at school. This was more like the experience the young men had been imagining.

'They pelted us with flowers and sweets and, while no one objected to the embraces of the girls, we thought it a bit too much when the men as well threw their arms around us and kissed us on both cheeks.'
Lieutenant Hugh Knyvett, 59th Battalion, 15th Brigade

An old French woman serves coffee to Australian and Scottish soldiers at an *estaminet* (small café) in her village, within 800 metres of the trenches.



AWM EZ0032

the Allied soldiers were then to take the second trench behind it, finally making their own new front line in the third trench about 150 metres behind the German front line.

While this was all happening, each brigade had to dig two trenches across no-man's-land so that

'None of these divisions would have been ordered fit for present use in the Somme offensive, the Fifth Australian being too new, the Sixty-first a numerically weak Territorial division recently arrived from England...'

Captain C E W Bean, Official Australian War Historian

there could be safe movement into the German trenches once they had been captured. Trenches at each end of the captured line would be dug across no-man's-land to join the new section to the original front line on either side. On paper it all looked simple.

The men of the Fifth Division were finally going to do what they had joined the army to do. The coming battle would be the first battle on the Western Front for Australian soldiers. As it turned out, the least experienced Australian troops were going to take part in it.

CHAPTER 3 LETHAL WEAPONS

18 July 1916, Fleurbaix Sector, Western Front, France
Private Walter McAlister,
60th Battalion, 15th Brigade

We're in the front line. Our first time. I've never been so exhausted in my life, but now we've finally got a chance to rest. We scraped shallow recesses in the side of the trench, wrapped ourselves in our greatcoats, used our packs as pillows. The others all went out like a light, but I can't get to sleep. It's the guns. The sound of the heavy guns.

They make a particular noise when they're fired. Crump, crump. It's like no other sound you've ever heard. It's distant, but the ground shakes. There's a whizzing sound and you hold your breath to see if the shell's going to land on you. Then there's another and another.

Sometimes it's our big guns, sometimes it's theirs. Then there'll be a silence. That's why I can't sleep. I'm just lying here waiting for the next one. It doesn't seem to bother the other blokes. I know Fritz is aiming at our guns, which are miles away. It's unlikely we'll get hit, but you never know.

We started off at dusk, marching in our companies 200 yards apart. It was a beautiful French summer evening. I could hear the last calls of birds as they noisily settled down for the night. It's been a while since we made a long march, and the cobblestones were hard on the feet. No one dared fall out though, no matter how sore their feet were.

After a couple of miles, we stopped for a break, and everyone was quiet, sensing that the enemy was close. Then we were divided into our platoons. They were worried that Fritz might notice a big group of blokes from their observation posts.

We left the road and the hedges behind and walked across a wheat field. I felt exposed, which was stupid because the hedges wouldn't have protected us from gunfire. We divided into our sections, just ten men.

Then suddenly the path sloped and we were in a trench, with the sandbag parapets towering over our heads. I should have been relieved that we had some protection, but the sudden darkness and the narrowness was suffocating. The trench smelt of mud and explosives and urine and decay. It was a communication trench

leading to the front line trenches, but not in a straight line. Communication trenches zig-zag back and forth, so that if a shell hits, it lessens the damage.

Then the heavy guns started up. Not ours, theirs. The earth shook and the shells were landing close.

'Keep moving,' said the section leader. 'They're not aiming at us.'

You could have fooled me.

Then there was a whiz and an ear-splitting bang and I was lifted clean off my feet, thrown back about five yards. Earth rained down on me. I sat up. My ears were ringing and I couldn't believe I was still in one piece.

*In front of us, instead of the trench, there was a huge shell hole. A man was lying up on what was left of the parapet. It was Bish. His eyes were wide open like he was surprised to see us. His arms and legs were intact, but flung about like he was a discarded rag doll. I couldn't see any wounds. There was no blood, but I knew for sure he was dead. He was just a slab of meat. That was the first time I'd seen a dead person, and I'd been sharing a **dixie** of tea with him not 20 minutes before. I got to my feet. There were lots of dead men, their bodies mutilated, and others who weren't dead, but bleeding, screaming, wishing they were.*

It hit me that I could be dead by tomorrow. I didn't even think about it. My feet were scrambling up the other side of the ruined trench.

'Latrine,' I heard myself saying.

I just wanted to get away to somewhere safe. I crawled back through the wheat field on my hands and knees, so no one could see me. It was dark by then. I didn't have a plan. I didn't know where I was going, but I knew I wasn't going to the front. I didn't care how many white feathers I got. I didn't care if I ended up in jail. I am a coward. And that's why, when I came to another trench, I dived into it. I tried to look like I had an urgent message to deliver.

Then a hand grabbed my shoulder.

'Where do you think you're going, private?'

It was Sergeant Crawford. I'd lost my way in the field and looped back to the communication trench.

'I can't...' That's all I managed to say.

*'You can.' He was still gripping my shoulder. He leaned in close to me. 'You must,' he whispered. 'Otherwise I'll have to hand you over to the **Provosts**. I should do that anyway, but you'll be **court-martialled**. You wouldn't want to disgrace your family would you?'*

I thought of Mum working in a clothing factory, Billy going home to an empty house after school. I thought of Sally. She'd never speak to me again.

'Come on, son.'

*I followed him back to my **company**.*

There are rats. I can see them trying to get into our tucker bags, scraping away at tins to get the last scraps of bully beef. They're big buggers. Someone said that's

because they eat the dead. There are bodies out in no-man's-land and the rats eat their flesh and gnaw on their bones. I don't know whether that's true or not. The guns are quiet at last, but I still can't sleep.

CHAPTER 4

ATTACK

19 July 1916, Fleurbaix Sector, Western Front, France
 Private Walter McAlister,
 60th Battalion, 15th Brigade

The guns have been going all day long. It's enough to drive you crazy — the constant deafening roar, the shriek of a shell as it heads our way, the waiting to see if this is going to be the shell that blows you to pieces. Only seconds, but it seems like ages. Then there's a thud and an ear-splitting bang as it hits. Further down the line the 8th got hit pretty bad. We've been lucky.

*'We're charmed,' Thommo says. 'Nothing will touch us today. With a bit of luck, I'll get a little smack in the arm or the leg. Just enough to get me a **Blighty**.'*

*It's only an hour till **zero hour**. I'm terrified. None of the other men seem scared at all. Some of them are joking, lounging back against the sandbags and smoking like*

they're in the pub. One man is reading his New Testament. A couple of them are re-reading letters from home.

Sarge handed out letters this morning, while we were having breakfast. It was the best breakfast I'd had since I'd been in the army — eggs, bacon, a big hunk of fresh bread.

'The condemned man's last meal,' one of the men said. Everyone laughed. I didn't think it was funny.

I think Sarge saved the letters till this morning, so we had something to cheer us up. Make us remember why we're here. I got one from Mum. I didn't want to open it in front of the others. Mum's gone all religious since I've been in the army. She sends me these Bible verses that she's written out and decorated with pressed flowers from our garden. The other chaps would laugh if they saw them, so I put the letter in my pocket unopened.

*One of the other blokes stands up on the **fire step** and looks over the parapet. He could get his head blown off, but he doesn't.*

'The artillery's doing its job,' he says. 'Fritz's trenches are getting blown to pieces.'

Everyone cheers.

I'm just about to open my letter, when next thing I know, word is passed along that the first wave is going over in five minutes. I stuff the letter back in my pocket. I put on my slouch hat. There were only enough tin helmets for the first two waves and I'm in the fourth wave. There's no joking now. This is it.

'Over you go,' says our battalion commander, Major McCrae, and the first wave jumps up on the fire step and leaps over the sandbags as one man. Over goes the next wave. No one hesitates. They could be kids playing a game. I can see the major at the end of the line. He's going over with the last wave, with us. His promotion to lieutenant colonel hasn't gone through yet, so he's still a major. He's a good bloke. He'll see us right.

Then I'm jumping over the sandbags. I feel like someone else is making my body work. I can see the gap cut in our wire and I run through it. I'm in no-man's-land. It looks like a place where children should be playing — long grass waving in the breeze, wild flowers, the remains of an orchard. I can see green apples on the branches.

We run through the grass in the evening sunlight. I have to wade through a ditch full of water. It'll be all right, I think. It's not as bad as I thought it would be. The smoke clears a bit, but I can't see the first waves of men in front of us, just the swaying grass. Major McCrae is on my right. He's still striding on, so I do too.

I can just hear another sound under the roar of the heavy guns. It's the rat-a-tat of machine guns. Machine gun bullets are suddenly thick in the air. Major McCrae stops in his tracks, like he's just remembered something important. Then he crumples to the ground and disappears beneath the grass. I trip over something. It's a body. One of my battalion. I crawl along and amid the grass there are

bodies everywhere. Lots of them. Men I know. I flatten myself against the earth, wriggling like a snake. Machine-gun bullets skim above me or smack into the earth. One goes through the sleeve of my jacket, but somehow misses my arm.

The machine-gun fire gets heavier. I see a shell hole and I tumble into it. I can hear rasping breathing and low moans. I'm not the only one who's taken refuge here. There are five others. Three of ours and two from the 59th. Their uniforms are dark with blood. They have terrible wounds. I see a hand hanging by a thread of skin, a head with only half a face, fingers holding a stomach with a mangled length of intestine visible through them. At least three of the men are dead.

I should be shocked, I should feel sick, but instead I want to sing.

I'm alive.

where the others are. It does however provide a useful screen as Allied soldiers carry machine guns across no-man's-land to the new front line.

Brigadier General Elliott receives a request from the commander of the British 184th Brigade asking for support in a new attack on the Sugar Loaf that is due to take place at 9 p.m.

Meanwhile, General Haking has finally realised that the initial attack has failed. He cancels the 9 p.m. attack and orders the British troops to withdraw from the battlefield so that they can regroup.

Though the message about the cancelled attack reaches Fifth Division headquarters by 8.35 p.m., no word of it reaches Brigadier General Elliott. He organises his reserves to make the attack.

9 p.m.

Darkness is falling. On the dot of 9 p.m., the reserve battalion of the 15th Brigade leaps over the parapet and dashes across no-man's-land. A few survivors of the original attacking battalions rise up from the shell holes of no-man's-land and join them. They charge the left flank of the Sugar Loaf. All their commanders are dead, so they are led by 22-year-old Major Hutchinson.

What they don't know is that they are the only battalion to make the assault.

CHAPTER 5 THE DEAD AND THE DYING

19 July 1916, Fleurbaix Sector, Western Front, France
Private Walter McAlister,
60th Battalion, 15th Brigade

*I am lying in this shell hole with three dead men to keep me company. I do what I can for the two who are still alive — drip iodine on their wounds, give them a sip of water, mutter useless words of comfort. It's getting dark. All I have to do is lie here till it's all over. I can pretend I got **shell shock**. Then I can carry back these two wounded men. I might be a coward, but I can do that at least.*

I take out the photo of Sally that I keep in my breast pocket. There she is looking lovely in a pale dress with her hair loose. Mum's unopened letter is there, too. I pull the single sheet of paper from the envelope and three paper angels fall out. They are wearing long white dresses and have golden wings. She's cut them out of religious pictures,

but hasn't used enough glue to make them stick to the page properly. I open the letter. I can just read it in the fading light. The writing is big, the lines aren't straight and Mum's spelling isn't good either. She had to leave school early to help support her family. It's just the usual stuff — Auntie Val's rheumatism is worse, Mr Dingley next door has had a stroke, Fred Knights has come back from the war with three fingers missing and a nasty scar on his face. I'm sorry to hear that Billy has left school and is working in a tinned fruit factory. Then at the end there's one sentence;

'Oh, I nearly forgot, Fred just got engaged to Sally Tucker and their wedding will be in September.'

I feel like I've been hit by one of the shells, knocked sideways, concussed. I stare at the letter, watching the words fade into the darkness. It's quieter. The shells have died down a bit. Either that or I'm getting used to them.

I turn over the page and I can just read the Bible verse Mum's written on the back.

Behold, I give unto you power to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall by any means hurt you.

Luke 10:19

When I left home, Mum just wanted me to keep my head down, but since she joined the Lady Mayoress's

Patriotic League, she's gradually changed her tune. Now she thinks we must be victorious and defeat the evil Huns at all costs.

I can see the shapes of men running. At first I think it's Germans. They're attacking. But then I realise it's our blokes. One of them dives down into the grass next to my shell hole. He's with the 58th, the battalion that was in reserve.

'New attack,' he says, out of breath. 'Us and the Tommies on the Sugar Loaf.'

He gets up and runs off.

The one soldier in the shell hole who is still conscious looks at me. He doesn't speak but I can tell from his eyes that he thinks I am scum. I look at Mum's paper angels. I fold up the letter and put it back in my pocket.

I don't have to be a coward. I can join this new push. I can show Sally that I am as brave as Fred Knights.

I get up and reach for my rifle, fix my bayonet. I climb out of the shell hole and run forward with the men of the 58th. I can't make out the Sugar Loaf in the dark, but I can see the red dots of the machine-gun fire. It's close. I aim my rifle, but it won't fire. It must have gotten wet in the shell hole. I keep running anyway. The enemy machine-gun fire is ferocious, like a horizontal hailstorm. Men are falling all around me. Then I can see it — a dark mound spitting out red from its black eyes like a crouching monster. The Sugar Loaf. The bullets are like a swarm of

hornets flying fast and arrow-straight. One stings me in the leg, but I keep running. Another hornet stings me in the arm. I'm past the Sugar Loaf. I will make it to the German trenches where I can kill enemy soldiers with my bayonet. I will be a hero. I'll go home with medals.

I feel a sting in my back. My legs stop moving and I find myself face down in the dirt. It's cold. I'm cold. I slowly roll over and warm my hands in the blood that is coming through my jacket. I can see the first stars through the smoke. I can hear someone shouting orders in German. I'm close to the enemy trenches. I'll catch my breath and then I'll get up again and I'll kill the serpents and scorpions with my bayonet. I'll be a hero.

THE SURVIVING BRITISH are now all back in their own trenches. Only the Australian 15th Brigade takes part in the attack on the Sugar Loaf — half a battalion against the entire line of Germans. The German machine gunners at the Sugar Loaf turn all their firepower on the Australians. They are annihilated. None of them reaches the German lines. Major Hutchinson and most of the 15th Brigade soldiers now lie in no-man's-land, dead or wounded.

'Few more gallant episodes than this dashing, hopeless assault exist in the annals of any army in the war... The attack melted into nothingness — passed in a few quivering moments from the realm of man's high endeavour to the record of his deathless failures.'

Captain A D Ellis, 29th Battalion, 8th Brigade

At 9.25 p.m., Brigadier General Elliott receives notification from General Haking that the 9 p.m. attack has been cancelled.

9.30 p.m.

In growing darkness, the remains of four Australian battalions are furiously digging in behind enemy lines under constant artillery fire, but they have few officers to organise them. A new front line in enemy territory has only been established on the left and centre of the battlefield, and that is disconnected, the soldiers spread thinly. Somehow men have

Some defy the order to retreat, and shoot until they run out of ammunition and are forced to surrender. Men die within sight of their original trenches in the last minutes of the battle. The communications trench is so full of the dead and wounded, that some men climb out to make their retreat, but German snipers are waiting to pick them off.

'No English came into the trenches of the Regiment that day except as prisoners.'
 Captain Friedrich
 Wiedermann, 16th Bavarian
 Reserve Infantry Regiment

9 a.m.

The last few men of the 14th Brigade stagger back and find the Australian front line trenches packed with wounded men. The battle is over. Nothing has been gained.

CHAPTER 6 DEFEAT

20 July 1916, Fleurbaix Sector, Western Front, France
 Sergeant Frank Crawford,
 60th Battalion, 15th Brigade

What a sad sight. Yesterday my battalion was a thousand strong. A thousand living, breathing, joking, smiling soldiers. Now there is just this handful of grim, grey-faced men, looking years older than they did yesterday. These are the survivors. The 60th Battalion has been almost wiped out in its very first engagement.

As there are so few officers left, I'm in charge of the roll call. I can't bring myself to call out all the names and listen to the silence, so I get the survivors to call out their names and I tick them off. Just 60 men and four officers. I can't believe it. We've lost more than 750 men. God help us if

the Germans decide to attack today. There's only half a battalion of exhausted men in the front line.

McAlister wasn't at roll call.

I go over to a corporal from my company.

'Did you see McAlister out there?'

He shakes his head.

He's not at the dressing station either.

I just want to lie down and sleep, but the sun's burnt off the mist and you can see the dead and wounded lying out in no-man's-land. And now that the guns have finally stopped, you can hear wounded men calling out. It's awful. Orders are to wait until it's dark to attempt to rescue them, but it's going to get hot out there. Those that aren't already dead soon will be. And young McAlister might be one of them.

The 60th Battalion survivors are dead on their feet, but I say, 'I need some volunteers.'

They look at me in disbelief, wondering what on earth I want them to do. Dig out the ruined trenches? Rebuild the parapets?

'Officially, we're not supposed to go out and bring in any wounded, not until nightfall,' I say. 'But nobody said we couldn't go out and give 'em water.'

Six men volunteer. They look like they've suddenly found a store of energy. Perhaps they feel the same as me. Guilty. Did I do everything I could? Did I try hard enough? How come I'm still alive when so many are dead?

We fill up as many water canteens as we can. Some of the boys take off their jackets and won't even put on helmets. They think there's less likelihood of the Germans shooting at them if they see them in their shirts with no weapons. It's a risk. I don't want any more of these lads to die, but I can't stand here listening to those cries for help.

We go out, keeping to a low crouching run like monkeys. No one shoots at us, but we distribute the water canteens on our hands and knees, not taking any chances. The wounded are in a terrible state. It's warm and the flies are troubling them something shocking. I was at Gallipoli, but I've never seen wounds like these, and so many.

I hand a water canteen to one man. He lifts his hand an inch or two and dies before my eyes. There's another bloke in the same shell hole. His legs are both broken, bones shattered by machine-gun fire.

'I'll come back for you when it's dark,' I tell him.

'Don't think I'll still be here then.'

I look at him. He's probably right. 'It's dangerous in the daylight,' I say. 'But I'm game if you are.'

He nods. He's not a heavy bloke, but it's hard for me to lift him onto my back. I have to lie flat in the mud and blood. He rolls over and it's agony for him but he hangs on to my neck and I manage to get him onto my back. I crawl back to our trenches. A couple of the other boys are helping the wounded too. It has done them in though. They can't do it again. No one found McAlister.

A rumour has come down the line that someone up in the 8th Brigade is organising a truce to collect wounded. I have to go out again. I've got to find McAlister. I have this vague hope he might still be alive out there. It's stupid, I know, but I've kept an eye on him since Marseilles. He's obviously under-age; hasn't even started shaving yet.

I get a Red Cross armband from one of the stretcher bearers. I go out into no-man's-land again, though it's the last place on earth I want to be. I distribute more water. I bind up some wounds.

I must have a death wish. I'm almost at the German trench. The dreaded Sugar Loaf is over to my right.

Then I see him. McAlister. Lying in the churned up earth.

I crawl over to him. His uniform is soaked with blood. He's got something clutched in his hand. A photo I think. His eyes have the glazed look of the dead.

I'm just about to get his identification tag when I hear someone cock a rifle. I freeze. Close my eyes. Hold my breath. Wonder if I should pray. Nothing happens. I open my eyes. There's a German standing over me, pointing his rifle at me, his finger on the trigger. He looks as tired as I feel. He glances at McAlister.

Junge,' he says.

I think that's German for 'young'. I nod.

The German points his rifle at my heart. 'Ein, zwei...'

He's counting. He's giving me time to get away.

'Drei, vier...'

I start running. I don't know whether he's counting to a hundred or to ten. The back of my neck is prickling. A couple of minutes ago I could hardly put one foot in front of the other, now I'm running faster than I ever have in my life.

He was still writing articles about Fromelles in 1930. In 1933, he committed suicide.

Men who were afflicted with shell shock were thought to be weak and 'nervous'. They are not listed among the heroes. Losing your life in war is honourable; losing your sanity is not.

*In World War I, shell shock was considered to be something that happened to a person if a shell exploded very close to them, like a serious **concussion**. Nowadays it is known to be a nervous disorder brought about by the stress of experiencing the horrors of warfare.*

CHAPTER 7 WHAT WENT WRONG?

20 July 1916, Steenbecque, France
Sergeant Frank Crawford,
A Company, 60th Battalion, 15th Brigade

Of all the things I thought I might be doing in the army when I joined up, this isn't one of them. Typing. Some of the officers know how to type properly, but I can only do it with two fingers. I have to write condolence letters to the families of the battalion's dead.

This typewriter has seen better days, and the ribbon is nearly worn out. The purple letters on the page are faint, and all the Os type out of line like they're trying to jump off the page. The paper's got mud splatters on it too. There are so many letters to write, it's going to take me a long time. Brigadier General Elliott's doing all the officers and Lieutenant Ellwood's taken on a heap, even though he's wounded. The rest fall to me.

*I'm back in the barn where we're billeted. It's very quiet. Before the battle we hardly had room to move. Now we've got more room than we want. I've had a bath, put on a clean shirt and socks, and had a hot meal. I've slept for a few hours, but something has been playing on my mind. I kept dreaming of McAlister lying out there. Him in particular I feel responsible for. If only I'd let him go **AWOL**. He'd be in prison, but he'd be breathing still. I had this idea that he'd be marked for life if he deserted. I didn't want his mother to be ashamed of him. So he did the honourable thing, and what good did it do him?*

I should have let him go.

I can't go back and get his body, I've got all these letters to type. Some of the lads have gone out, but they won't go that close to the German line. I was lucky. That German was still in shock, I reckon, seeing all those bodies lying out in no-man's-land. Now they'll have had time to gather their own dead, and they won't be so merciful.

McAlister never spoke about his father. There's a brother, I think, and his mum had to go out to work to support them. I can't send MacAlister's identity tag, but I've been through his haversack. There's not much there, but it'll be something to remember him by — a scarf, his wallet, a camel carved out of wood that he bought in Egypt. I've put them in a sandbag and sent them to Brigade Headquarters. Eventually they'll find their way to his mother.

I wish I could tell her that her son had a proper, respectful funeral and there's a nice headstone to commemorate him, but the truth is he's lying out in no-man's-land and he'll probably just rot there. I feel bad, but there's nothing I can do. Except type this letter.

Dear Mrs McAlister,

This is a very difficult letter for me to write, and it will cause you a great deal of pain and sorrow, for I regret to tell you that your son Private Walter McAlister was killed in action. It occurred last night about fifteen minutes past nine, in an operation against the enemy. For reasons of security, I am not able to give you any details, but I can tell you that he was most brave and died from a bullet wound in the chest, so close did he engage with the enemy. I saw his body myself. He still bore his pleasing features, and I shall always remember him as I knew him — cheerful, helpful and hopeful, a fine Australian soldier.

I write to offer you my deepest sympathy in your sorrow, which will be very great I know. I have lost many a good friend since 1914, and I know the bitter loss

when one who is very dear is taken away. His personal belongings will be sent to you through the proper channels. As commander of A Company, I am in a position to know your son's worth. I got to know him on the journey from Egypt to France. He always did his duty well. If ever he was asked to do a job he did it thoroughly. He was a young man I had my eye on to recommend for promotion. His loss will be felt throughout the whole company. What your son has done for his country was the duty God wished him to do. I again express my deepest sympathy with you in your loss.

Yours in sorrow, Sgt F G Crawford,
A Company, 60th Battalion, 15th Brigade

THE ALLIES HAD more men and more artillery than the Germans, but they lost the Battle of Fromelles. The purpose of the battle was to make the Germans keep troops in the area. They were supposed to believe that there was a big Allied troop build-up opposite them. If the Germans had ever believed that there was a large contingent of Allies, after the battle they knew for certain there wasn't, as they found a copy of the order issued by General Haking on a prisoner of war. It spelt out that the attack had only ever been a feint.

Why the battle went so tragically wrong is a topic that is still debated almost a hundred years after the event.

Inexperienced

The artillery had been rushed into action and many of the gunners had no battle experience. The Allied artillery failed to destroy key enemy positions and to disable the enemies' artillery.

One of the main reasons for the defeat was the fact that the inexperienced artillery had not destroyed the Sugar Loaf in the pre-battle bombardment. This gun emplacement, with thick concrete walls, was a crucial target. Because of the way the Sugar Loaf projected out into no-man's-land, the German gunners could shoot at the Allied soldiers from the front as they first attacked, from the side as they passed by the Sugar Loaf, and then from behind, if they made it past. The result was that no