

## **RICHARD REID**

### **Title**

Probably you have read of the fight for Bullycourt ... Ancestors on the Western Front, 1916-1918

### **Summary**

Little remains of the battlefields of the Western Front but cemeteries and memorials that follow the old trench lines as they snake across the landscape. Millions of Australians have an ancestor who fought in epic battles in France and Belgium between 1916 and 1918, and the survival of rich archival sources allow family historians to walk closely in the footsteps of the men of the Australian Imperial Force, catching glimpses of their personal tragedies and achievements.

### **Abstract**

Some 325,000 Australian soldiers went overseas to fight in the First World War. More than 66 per cent were killed, wounded or became prisoners of war. The majority of the deaths - 45,000 - resulted from action along the so-called 'Western Front' in France and Belgium. Neither before nor since has Australia suffered such a catastrophe in war. Not surprisingly, when, in 1993, the Australian War Memorial brought home an Unknown Australian Soldier for burial in the Memorial's Hall of Memory there was little hesitation in deciding he should come from the Western Front.

Today increasing numbers of Australians make the journey to northern France and Belgian Flanders. There they listen to the nightly sounding of the Last Post at the Menin Gate at Ieper (Ypres) and attend the Anzac Day ceremony at the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux. These battlefield visitors seldom see themselves as 'tourists' but rather as latter day 'pilgrims' paying their respects at cemeteries and memorials to lost family members or seeking out the battle locations where soldier ancestors fought and sometimes died.

Today's battlefield visitors have access to a comprehensive array of original archival material – unit war diaries, personal letters, maps, official photographs – which add deeper levels of understanding to what happened at places such as Pozières and Passchendaele. To assist them a new web based 'remembrance' trail has been developed which opens up stories of Tasmanians at the Battle of Broodseinde, South Australians at Bellenglise and Australia's most famous war photographer, Frank Hurley, at Ieper (Ypres). Using the trail family historians can appreciate the sorts of archival material that could reveal their own soldier ancestor's war experience and, if they travel the old Western Front, can make that visit memorable and moving.

### **Audience**

All levels