Fromelles. VC Corner, Aus Mem, Abbiette Bunker, Pheasant Wood.

**The Battle of Fromelles** was a part of the 1916 Somme campaign although the battlefield is about 100km from the main Somme battlefields. The battle was fought 19-20 July 1916, involving 5 Aus Div and 61st BR Div uc XI Corps. The purpose was to relieve pressure at battle of Some to the south by keeping Germans tps in this area. It was a hastily planned operation and resulted in the loss to the 5 Aus Div of over 5550 casualties, 2000 killed or died of wounds from a division of about 10,000. Still the highest battle casualties for any Australian force in a single day and thought to be the deadliest day for any division in the War.

**Ground Orientation**.

Stand at entrance to VC Corner Cemetery. The Australian front lines were about 00 m to our rear behind the memorial wall. To the front about 600m away is a large group of trees and farm buildings. This is a horse-riding school today but on the trench maps is Delaporte Farm, Orchard House and Deleval Farm. Halfway between here and those buildings the German Trench system was known as the Sugarloaf which marks the forward position of the German trenches. Continuing left there is a tree line on the horizon, it doesn’t look much but this is the start of the ridgeline that is Aubers Ridge. Along this ridgeline was the main German position. We will visit the Abbiette Bunker there. Further left there is a house. It is on the intersection of a road leading off to the right. This house is in the approximate position of what was known as Rouges Bancs. This was behind the German front line and in front of the German main position. Looking down the road you can see Australian and French flags. This is the Australian memorial park and formed No-man’s land, between the Australian and German lines.

Aubers Ridge south (BR) sector and Sugarloaf are the vital gnd in the area. Front line roughly SW to NE 4km from Aubers north of Fromelles village. The Australian 5 Div consisted of the 8th, 14th and 15th Brigades. It formed up in front of the British front line from a position south of Petillon to Cordonniere Farm north of Fromelles. The troops were attacking in a southerly direction. The Germans had extensive trench system connected by communication trenches going all the way back to Fromelles. There were effectively three defensive lines that needed to be breached. The objectives of interest to the Australians were from the Sugar Loaf east to Delangre Farm. To reach their objectives the soldiers had to cross between 80 and 400m of open ground in daylight. The enemy was fortified in concrete blockhouses, the remains of which can be seen still.

The Sugarloaf feature itself presented a tactical problem as it formed a salient out from the German line. The advantage was that machine guns on the Sugarloaf could fire right across the front of the German lines engaging the attackers in what soldiers call ‘enfilade fire’ until the very last moment. This was a very dangerous situation for the attackers. This situation was compounded by the fact that the Corps Commander (Gen Haking) put the inter-divisional boundary on the Sugarloaf, meaning that the capture of the Sugarloaf was the responsibility of 2 Divisions, and this brought command and control problems to that task. It would have been better that such an important objective to the responsibility of a single division, who in turn, gave the responsibility to a single brigade. This would have been a much less complex arrangement.

At 1800 h on 19 July the Australians attacked and were completely out-matched. The 7 hour preliminary artillery fire had failed to destroy German positions due to the advanced nature of their defences. The Germans used their salient of the Sugarloaf well and were able to fire MG in enfilade at the advancing troops and the troops received frontal fire as well.

Despite the terrific losses, some units did reach their objectives and occupied German trenches. However, the gains were not sufficiently widespread to be held and throughout the night the Germans staged a number of counter-attacks. With the impending dawn, young leaders were faced with the terrible dilemma of having to prepare their soldiers to fight their way back out of the German trenches to the British line and put their soldiers lives at risk once more in giving up the ground that they had fought so hard and suffered so many casualties to capture. Many managed to withdraw under the cover of darkness but still more were cut off, killed or wounded trying to escape as dawn broke. For 3 days and nights men risked their lives to go out and rescue the wounded. Many died in no-man’s land.

No-one accepted responsibility for the fiasco, and no-one was ever held to account. Official histories and communiques essentially covered up the scale of the failure. The Australians were untrained for such a complex battle, the combat power employed was not sufficient to guarantee victory, companies and battalions captured German trenches but then kept going rather than consolidate positions allowing for German counter-attacks. The artillery batteries used were not well trained or experienced and misdirected artillery caused many friendly fire casualties. Additionally, their inexperience meant that they couldn’t put together the fire support needed to protect the infantry whose own inexperience had put them in vulnerable positions during the consolidation. The divisional and corps staff were not experienced enough to overcome difficulties during the battle, however, the key failure was one of planning. The piece-meal planning and disregard for actual and potential problems were the cause of the disaster.