

# Australia at War

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Author: R. Hilman  
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## Why Australia went to war

When World War I (1914-1918) broke out, the nation of Australia was just 13 years old. It was only in 1901 that the Australian states federated and the Commonwealth of Australia was created.

### Part of the British Empire

Most Australians still thought of Britain as the 'Mother Country', more than 20 000 kilometres across the seas. In 1914, Australian and New Zealand troops crossed those seas and fought as if the enemy had invaded Australia or New Zealand. They travelled further to fight in World War I than any soldiers had in history. In the early decades of the 20th century, Australia was more British than it is today. As one of the dominions of the vast British Empire, Australians felt that the interests of Britain and those of Australia were one and the same.

Pride in being a British citizen (as all Australians were in those days) was as great as the pride in being Australian.

Australia was also obliged to support Britain, as the Australian Constitution left it up to Britain to make the major decisions on defence. All the same, and everywhere in Australia, arguments were going to war. Bitter arguments raged for the whole four years of the war. Two referendums on the conscription of young Australians into the armed services were held during the war years. Both were defeated.

### The terrible cost

The very high cost of Australia's involvement in the Great War (World War I) was disputed at the time of fighting. It was considered

'cowardly' and 'treacherous' to suggest that the war was a waste of lives. Legends about the bravery of Australian soldiers hid the horror of injury and death on the battlefields.

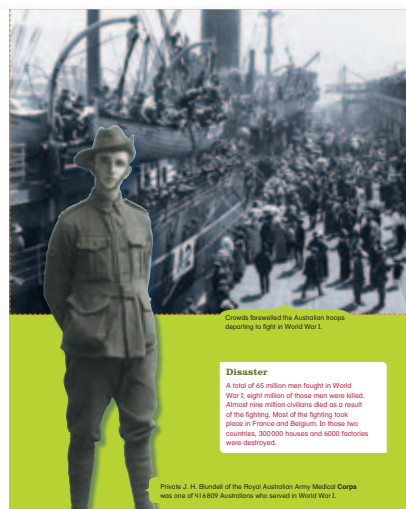
The casualty figures were shocking. Of the 416 000 Australian servicemen who served in the war, 215 585 were either killed or wounded.

Half of Australia's fit young men (aged 18-25) fought in the war and, of those, 60 per cent were killed or wounded.

It was said that the war 'almost destroyed a generation'. At the end of the war, Australia had great cause for pride in its soldiers, but also great cause for sorrow at the loss of so many.

### It's 'it going, digger!'

Australian soldiers became known as 'diggers' during World War I. The long hours spent digging with a pick and shovel in the trenches led to the name. 'Digger' referred to any ordinary Aussie soldier, but the term came to mean 'mate' or 'pal'. It became the source of terrible danger, but they were in places where great friendships were made. Many soldiers remembered the years in the trenches with affection and humour. Phrases in the trenches like 'digger' entered the speech in the home, for their connection was so strong.



Crowds farewell the Australian troops departing to fight in World War I.

### Disaster

A total of 65 million men fought in World War I, eight million of those men were killed. Almost nine million civilians died as a result of the fighting. Most of the fighting took place in France and Belgium. In those two countries, 300 000 houses and 6000 factories were destroyed.

Private J. H. Blundell of the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps was one of 11 689 Australians who served in World War I.

## Actual text size:

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