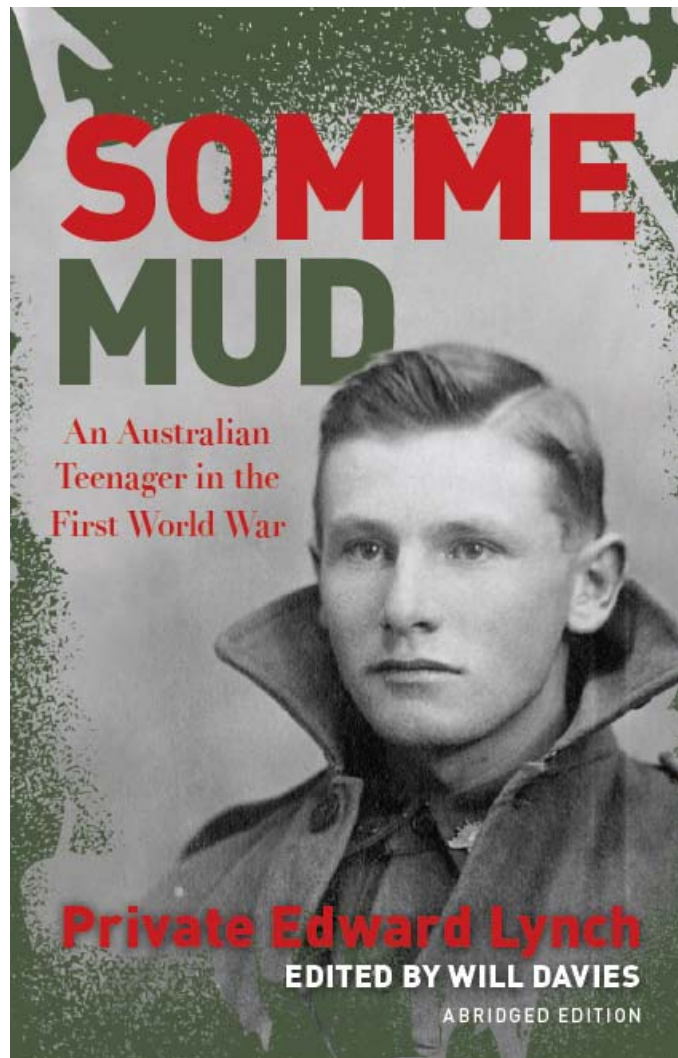


SOMME MUD: Young Readers' Edition

by Private Edward Lynch

Edited by Will Davies



HISTORY & ENGLISH TEACHING SUPPORT KITS

Prepared by Geoff Lewis, Will Davies and Random House Australia

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SOMME MUD: Young Readers' Edition

History Teaching Support Kit

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1. BACKGROUND

'We live in a world of Somme mud. We sleep in it, work in it, fight in it, wade in it and many of us die in it. We see it, feel it, eat it and curse it, but we can't escape it, not even by dying.'

This semi-autobiographical novel was written by Ted Lynch in pencil in twenty school exercise books in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It's most likely that he completed the manuscript in the hope of exorcising the horrors that he and his mates saw on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918. His family remembers him reading each chapter to them as it was completed. When he was CO of the Jungle Training School at Lowanna (1942–43), Lynch typed up the manuscript, probably believing that he could sell it to a publisher.

His efforts were in vain as people were trying to rid themselves of memories of the First World War and the manuscript lay in the possession of his family until 2002. By chance, historian and documentary film producer Will Davies was shown the copy by Lynch's grandson, Mike Lynch. As a friend, Will took on the task of editing Lynch's work, seeing that it was an important historical record: a time capsule of Australians on the Western Front. The original text was 240,000 words, and this was halved in the first edition published in 2006 as *Somme Mud: the war experiences of an Australian infantryman in France 1916–1919*.

Since then, Will has edited the text to approximately 80,000 words, and added explanatory chapter introductions, to form the edition you now have. In addition, he wrote *In the Footsteps of Private Lynch*, which traces Lynch's (Nulla's) movements across the Somme in northern France and into Flanders in southern Belgium. These are the places that thousands of Australians visit each year to pay their respects to the diggers of the 1st AIF and the sacrifice they made in the 'war to end war'.

Students may find it useful to read the original published edition of *Somme Mud* as well as *In the Footsteps of Private Lynch*. Those studying the war from the point of view of its participants could also read Erich Maria Remarque's classic *All Quiet on the Western Front*. It deals with similar themes to *Somme Mud* but from a German perspective. You may find that Lynch's text is at least the equal of the German classic.

Study of *Somme Mud* can occur at several places in History in secondary schools:

- as part of an examination of Australia and the First World War in Stage 5 of a year 7–10 History Syllabus (as occurs in NSW)
- a specialised or extension study of conflict
- as part of the (NSW) Higher School Certificate Modern History Syllabus: the Western Front.

The forthcoming National Curriculum, which includes a compulsory study of History, should not significantly change these situations. Thus, we have created a range of exercises in this Study Guide that can be incorporated or adapted to a range of History curricula.

2. SOMME MUD AS AN HISTORICAL SOURCE

Edward Lynch came from the village of Perthville near Bathurst and served in the 45th Division of the 1st AIF on the Western Front from 1916 until the end of the war in November 1918. He was a signaller and regimental runner. He was wounded twice and fought in memorable battles such as Messines, saw the horrors and futility of Bullecourt, victory at Villers-Bretonneux and the 'moving war' of the German retreat of 1918. At Messines, regarded as a 'success' by the generals and historians, the 45th Battalion survived a four-day battle with just 61 men at the end. Many of these men were wounded. But it was the Somme winter of 1916–17 – believed to be the worst in a century – that destroyed the souls of Lynch and his mates.

The question of what is an historical source should be discussed at many levels of History in schools. Up to about Year 10 (Stage 5), most students will be concerned chiefly with identifying a source as '**primary**' or '**secondary**'. Broadly, a primary source was written or produced at or very close to the time an event or events occurred. Thus, a diary, newspaper article or photograph would fall into this category. A secondary source is one which was produced some time after the event, but is about the event. Textbooks or a popular or scholarly work which would be the product of extensive and careful wide research, would be the most common examples of this type of source.

For students, a study of historical sources, especially firsthand accounts written by soldiers who experienced the horrors of war, add interest to a study of the war. It can come as a surprise that these writings are by men who were not much older than the students studying the First World War and the role played by Australians. In addition to popular interest, these sources are useful to historians and students but they have limitations and their reliability should not be taken at face value.

The official Australian war correspondent CEW Bean requested that a caveat about these limitations be added to the official holdings of his notes: *'These writings represent only what at the moment of making them I believed to be true . . . not infrequently, what [I] believed to be true was not so. . . [I] did try to ensure such accuracy by consulting with others who had seen or otherwise taken part in the events.'*

The full text of the caveat and further information about CEW Bean are available from: http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/war_diaries/cew_bean/description.asp

Keep these comments in mind as you study the history of any event.

The firsthand accounts of the Western Front include:

- *diaries* kept by individuals (although against military regulations)
- *letters* home to family and friends (these were subject to military censorship)
- *photographs* taken by soldiers (again forbidden) as well as those taken by official photographers.

These show the day-to-day life on the Western Front and focus on the man and the group around him – generally his section or company. Usually, they don't show the 'big' picture of the war, except to criticise the 'brass hats' (the generals who plan the offensives). We can learn of men's feelings and thoughts before, during and after fighting from these sources.

Other primary sources include:

- *Regimental War Diaries*, which were the official records of daily happenings. They do not include the minute detail that can be seen in the soldiers' writings and photographs but are nevertheless very useful.
- *newspaper accounts*, which were generally written a little after a battle by accredited journalists or war correspondents. Because of the technology of the time they would be considered 'yesterday's news' by modern standards. The main problem is that they usually followed the official government line and were used for as propaganda. Their reliability must be questioned.

Texts such as *Somme Mud* can be difficult to categorise. You will notice that it fits many of the first criteria above. It raises several problems:

- Most of it is based on Lynch's firsthand experiences of the war, even though it is believed that he did not keep a diary.
- Some parts the text (such as his account of the attack along the Menin Road and on Zonnebeke) were not part of Lynch's direct experience but based on the memories and stories of other soldiers, or official records.
- It was initially written some years after the events portrayed, then edited twice before its initial publication in 2006.

Activities

1. After reading *Somme Mud*, decide what type of historical source it is. You will need to discuss the problem in class.
2. How reliable do you think *Somme Mud* is as an historical source on Australians on the Western Front?

3. THE 1ST AIF AND THE 45TH BATTALION

When first encountering the 1st AIF, you may be confused about its organisation. The Australian Imperial Force was part of the British Army and was organised along similar lines so that they (and the New Zealanders, Canadians, South Africans and Indians) could mesh together. *In theory*, the AIF was organised in the following manner, but in fact, it was always short of the necessary numbers.

Section	8–10 men commanded by a Corporal. Nulla's closest mates were in his section.
Platoon	composed of four sections and commanded by a Lieutenant.
Company	made up of four platoons, and commanded by a Captain.
Battalion	four companies, up to 1000 men, commanded by a Colonel or Lieutenant Colonel. This is the level of Nulla's C.O. (commanding officer). There were sixty Battalions in the AIF.

Brigade	composed of four battalions, around 4000 men, commanded by a Brigadier or Brigadier General. There were fifteen Brigades.
Division	three brigades plus artillery and commanded by a Major General. The AIF had five divisions.
Corps	made up of three or four divisions commanded by a Lieutenant General.
Army	three or four corps commanded by a General.

In addition there was a 'staff' of high-ranking officers who planned battles. A range of other 'services', such as medical, signals, transport, supply, pioneers, machine-guns and engineers usually existed at division or battalion level.

The 4th Division which was made up of the 4th Brigade (13–16th Battalions); 12th Brigade (45–48th Battalions); and the 13th Brigade (49th–52nd Battalions). Thus, Nulla was in the 12th Brigade, 45th Battalion, 14 Platoon, D Company, 6 Section.

45th Battalion AIF Battle Honours

Lynch's 45th Battalion AIF was in the line in the following Western Front Battles.

Somme	1 July – 18 November 1916
Pozières and Mouquet Farm	23 July – 3 September 1916
2nd Bullecourt	3–17 May 1916
Messines Ridge and Wytschaete	7–14 June 1916
3rd Ypres (Passchendaele)	31 July – 10 November 1917
Menin Road	20–25 September 1917
Polygon Wood	26 July – 3 October 1917
Zonnebeke & Westhoek	12 October 1917
River Ancre	5 April 1918
Amiens	8–11 August 1918
Albert	21–23 August 1918
Epehy	18 September 1918
Le Verguier	18 September 1918

Activities

1. Historians still debate why Australians enlisted in the First World War. What reasons does Nulla give for enlisting in 1915? (For example, on pp 324–325, Nulla briefly explains why men enlisted, but there is more to this problem.)
2. What attitudes did the Australians of the time have towards Britain and Australia?
3. What attitudes did they show towards people of other races?
4. Why were they so proud of the fact that the AIF was the only volunteer army in the war?
5. Read the 45th Battalion's Battle Honours above and pinpoint the places mentioned on a map of Europe. Notice how close together these places are, and by implication, how small the Front in Europe was. It is only 133 km by road from Ypres to Peronne.
6. Australian Historian Dr Peter Stanley* has identified the 'average' digger as about 25 years of age, single, urban working class with only a basic education (many boys from the country were scarcely literate). How well do you think Nulla and the men of his section meet this description?

*Peter Stanley (2009): *Men of Mont St Quentin; between victory and death* Scribe

4. THE SOLDIER'S EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE

Nulla's descriptions of battles present the reader with the narrow perspective of a private soldier. His view is limited to what he sees, hears and feels in his immediate vicinity. At the same time, the text is also a way to trace the progress of the war on the Western Front. However, his account does not cover all the major battles in which the Australians were involved. This would be impossible, as divisions were moved around the Front, to 'share the burden'. Thus, the first battle in which diggers fought in Europe, Fromelles in 1916, is not included – it was a 5th Division operation. Likewise, Polygon Wood in 1917 only gets a passing mention and the last 'Australian' battle at Montbrehain in October 1918 is not mentioned.

Some key sections where Nulla describes and comments on battle include:

- From p. 22, his description of the fighting at Guedecourt and Bernafay Wood shows the disorganisation and chaos of the earlier stages of the War.
- Pages 37–38 describe the urgency of a German attack
- On p. 102 we see the death and destruction of war at Delville Wood.
- The tragedy of Bullecourt, Dernancourt (from p. 185) and Passchendaele (from p. 163) leave the reader contemplating the waste of war.
- The changes in warfare – the new 'mobile' tactics from Hamel (from p. 220) and Mont St Quentin (from p. 264) – speed up the end of the war in the last months of 1918.
- The end of the war, however, creeps up on them, almost catching them by surprise. On p. 300 Nulla comments: *Surely wars don't end like this.* It is an anticlimax.

Activities

1. Find a description of the following stages of battle as experienced by Nulla and his mates. Choose one battle or find evidence from the several battles Nulla describes.
 - a. Waiting for dawn (when attacks were commonly made)
 - b. The final minutes before the attack commenced
 - c. Going over the top – climbing out of the trench and being exposed to enemy fire
 - d. Going into no-man's-land, the space between the opposing linesFor each, briefly explained what is happening in your own words. Provide a quote from Nulla's descriptions to support your interpretation.
2. As you work through the phases of battle, also find and note down evidence of:
 - a. the brutality of war
 - b. men discovering that 'life is cheap' in war
 - c. dangers specific to trench warfare
 - d. an example of good luck
 - e. the noise of battle
 - f. the smell of battle
 - g. some of the weapons used on the Somme.
3. Refer to Chapter Seven: Straightening the Line. What was Nulla's job? Why was he given this job? What were his responsibilities?
4. Pages 85–94 describe an Australian trench raid. The Australians were renowned for their success with this tactic.
 - a. What was the aim of this particular raid?
 - b. What dangers did they face?
 - c. How did they signal to each other as they crawled across no-man's-land?
 - d. Describe how they put the machine-gun out of action.
 - f. What is 'ratting'?
 - g. Why do you think the Australians were so successful in this form of warfare?
5. On p. 273, the men experience a German gas attack – not for the first time. Read the first paragraph and describe the soldiers' experience in your own words. (You may also use information from other gas attacks that are described in the text).
6. Compared to the uniforms and equipment that today's soldiers wear and use in combat, the men of 1914–1918 looked almost primitive. As a runner, Nulla carried messages either in his memory or on scraps of paper known as 'flimsies'. Using information in the text on pp 29–30 and in some of the photographs (such as pp 11, 18–19, 52–53, 99, 188, 284, 291, 302–303 and 316.), list or describe what soldiers in the 1st AIF wore and carried into battle and what some of the items were used for. (For example, why did they wrap their legs in sand bags?)

5. TRENCH WARFARE: INTERPRETING DIAGRAMS IN HISTORY

Trench warfare or 'war of attrition' was the defining feature of the Western Front until August 1918 when the 'breakthrough' brought an end to the stalemate that Lynch describes so vividly.

Diagram A (next page) is based on trench maps and shows:

- how complex the systems of trenches were
- the narrowness (and hence deadliness) of no-man's-land
- the names given to trenches so that men would have less chance of being lost and also 'to make them feel more at home'

What the diagram does not show is the noise, the smell, the maze of shell craters and the destruction of life and landscape. Try to keep the diagram in mind as you work through the activities.

Diagram B (below, p. 12) shows a stylised representation of the Western Front

Diagram C (below, p. 13) is a stylised cross section of a British or Australian trench. Not all trenches are as perfect as this one.

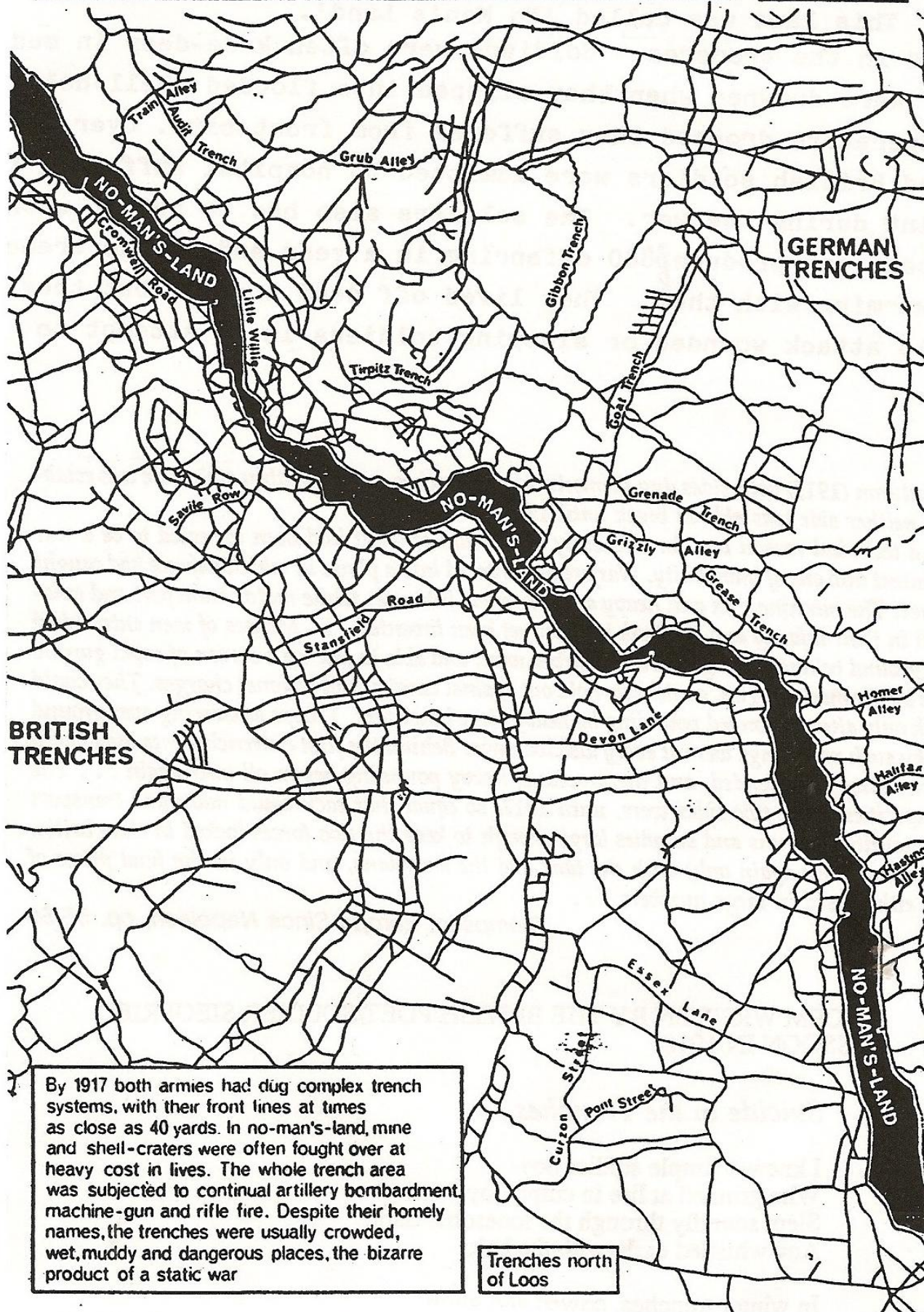
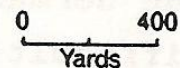
Please note: all diagrams and their captions are taken from previously circulated teaching notes, however the original sources could not be identified. Any copyright holders should contact the publisher and omissions will be rectified.

Activities

1. a. In diagram A, what have the trenches on the British side been named after? Why do you think the army used these names?
b. Work out how wide no-man's-land is at each of these places: Savile Row, above Devon Lane and Halifax Alley. (Scale: 400 yards = about 350 metres)
c. Which would be the most dangerous to cross if you were a British soldier?
2. The labels in diagram B also appear in *Somme Mud*. Explain or define the meaning of each. (e.g., 'village billets' was where the soldiers stayed when they were not fighting at the front; the barbed wire was to stop soldiers attacking a trench on foot.)
3. Refer to diagram C
 - a. From what direction would the enemy attack this trench: left or right?
 - b. What is the purpose of the following: barbed wire, parapet, revetment, fire step, duckboards, dug-out, sandbags and paradoss? All words are used in *Somme Mud*.

Diagram A

TRENCHES ON THE WESTERN FRONT 1917



By 1917 both armies had dug complex trench systems, with their front lines at times as close as 40 yards. In no-man's-land, mine and shell-craters were often fought over at heavy cost in lives. The whole trench area was subjected to continual artillery bombardment, machine-gun and rifle fire. Despite their homely names, the trenches were usually crowded, wet, muddy and dangerous places, the bizarre product of a static war

Trenches north of Loos

Diagram B: stylised representation of the Western Front

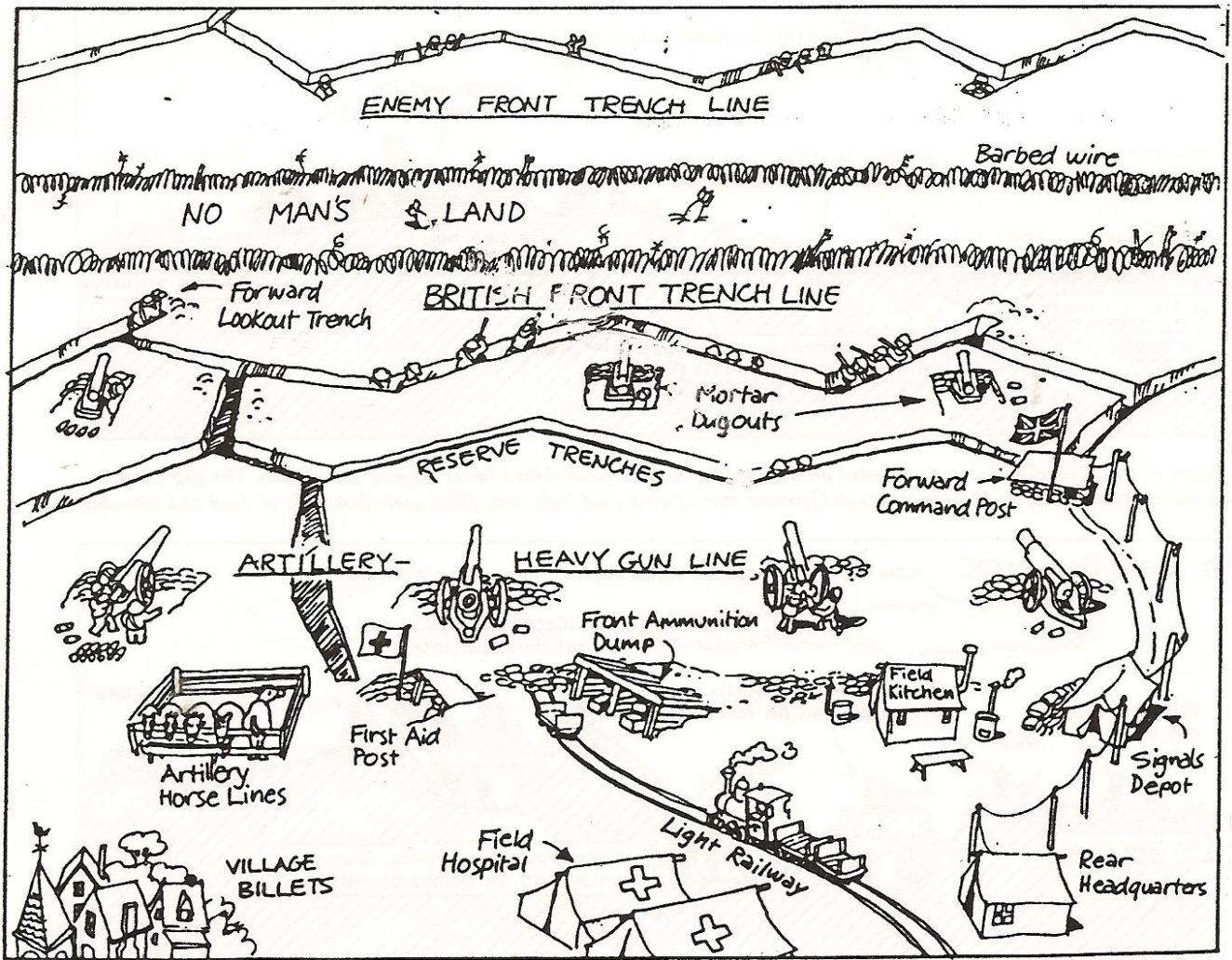
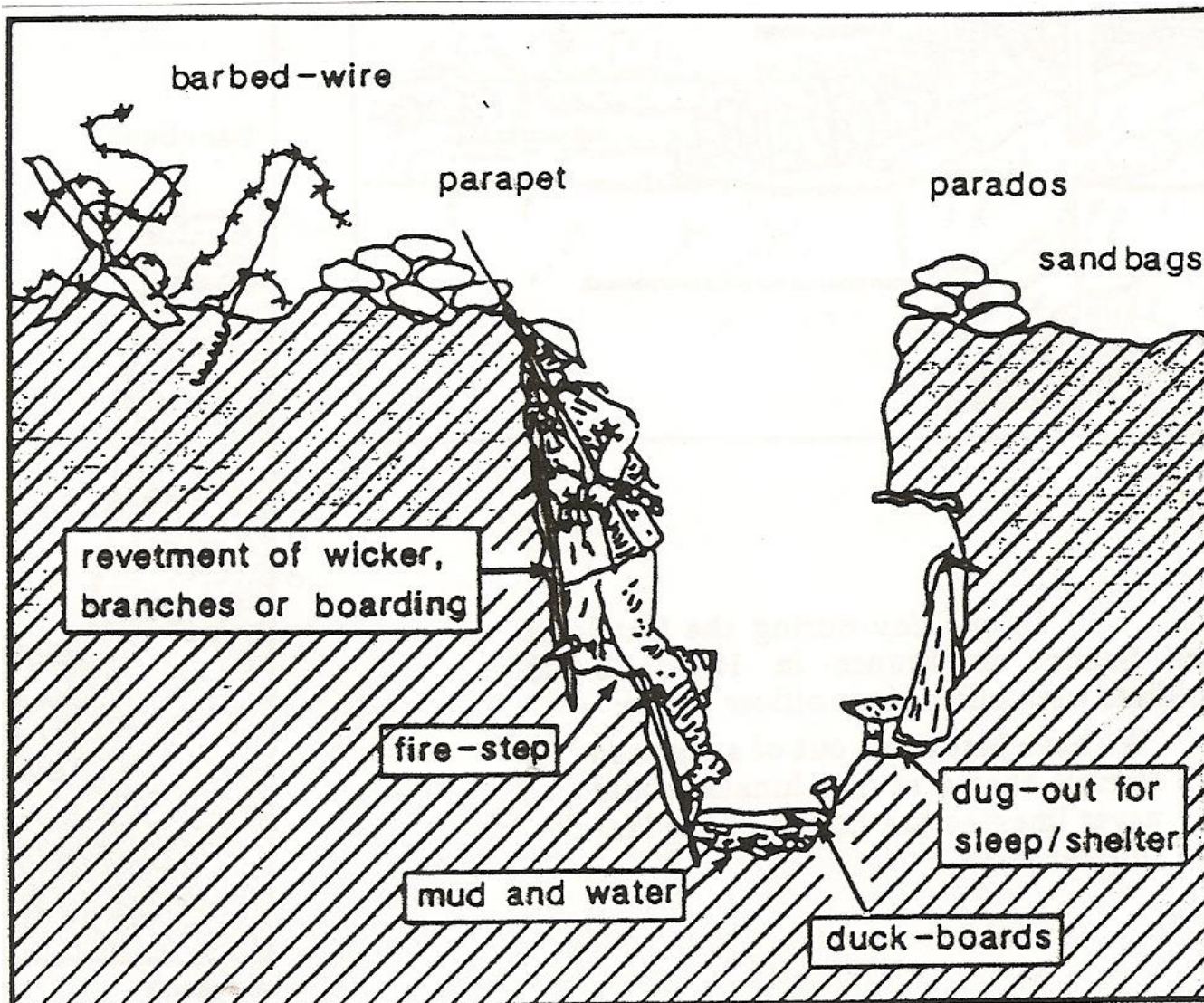


Diagram C: Cross section of a British or Australian Trench



With a complex maze of trenches dug along and behind the 800-kilometre Western Front, one possible origin for the Australian soldier's nickname of 'digger' could have come from his ceaseless task of shovelling Flanders mud. The typical front-line trench was deep enough for a man to stand with his head below the firing line; interconnecting slit and communication trenches were usually shallower and narrower. Digging a cubby-hole in the side of a trench was officially discouraged after several fatal cave-ins, but the practice continued.

6. WEAPONS AND INNOVATION

A. Artillery Bombardment

One of the features of the war on the Western Front was the use of heavy artillery. The aims were to cut the barbed wire in front of the trenches; force the enemy to shelter in their trenches and dugouts and so prevent them setting up their machine-guns; and to shatter the nerves of the enemy. The Front saw three significant changes in the utilisation of heavy guns. Until this war, gunners generally had to be able to see their targets as the range of guns was relatively short. Changes in the design and manufacture of guns meant that they had a much longer range and could now target hidden or distant objects. As a result, gunnery became a science. At first the use of artillery did not keep up with the advances in guns and the inevitable result was that shells 'dropped short' or were firing inaccurately, as at Fromelles where heavy casualties were caused to men on the same side. By 1917, changes in sighting, factors such as weather and wear on gun barrels, meant that artillery was much more accurate. Nulla saw this at Polygon Wood.

Finally, artillery was also used to cause fear and alarm among opposing soldiers. A week of continuous shelling in the trenches and dugouts caused 'shell shock' among the men being bombarded. All these are brilliantly described by Lynch in *Somme Mud*, for example, on pp 65–67.

The shells were of four types:

- high explosive (HE) which simply blew buildings, the landscape and men to pieces. In addition, small and large pieces of red-hot steel shards and casings caused horrendous injuries or death.
- shrapnel which burst overhead and showered the men below with lead balls and pieces of steel casing. The use of this weapon caused the introduction of 'tin hats' among the men in the trenches.
- shells using the 109 fuse which could cut enemy barbed wire, making it easier for the infantry to get into enemy trenches.
- gas shells landed with a distinctive 'plop' and spread gas across the landscape, causing horrible respiratory injuries. Men feared a gas attack and Nulla makes several references to the problem in the text.

Activities

Read one of the descriptions of an artillery attack in the text. Take the point of view of one of Nulla's mates and describe the attack, noting the physical and well as the psychological effects on the men and the environment.

B. Counter Attack

The nature of trench warfare on the Western Front – at least until March 1918 – was of attack and counter-attack over no-man's-land. The reading and activities above focus on the former. However, soldiers on both sides always expected and feared a counter-attack after they had occupied the enemy's trenches. Read pp 200–203 for an account of an Australian counter-attack on the German lines.

Activities

From p. 130, Nulla describes the Australian attack on Owl Trench and the German counter-attack. Read the account carefully, as you should be able to get a clear picture of what trench warfare was like.

1. What was the biggest problem the Australians faced in their initial capture of Owl Trench?
2. On p. 133, they find themselves stranded in no-man's-land as the Germans counter-attack. Why did they find themselves in this position?
3. What caused most of the Australian casualties?
4. What does the description tell you about the soldiers of both sides?
5. Why were they given the order to retreat?
6. What are your lasting images of this description of the offensive at Owl Trench?

C. Gas Warfare

Like the men on both sides, Nulla feared a gas attack. Initially, the gas used was chlorine which caused extreme discomfort in breathing. Later, more deadly gases such as phosgene and mustard gas were used. The only defence against a gas attack was for the men to wear 'gas respirators' which are described on p. 261 and p. 273. On pp 226–227 and 273, Nulla recounts a gas attack and its aftermath at Polygon Wood and Villers-Bretonneux.

Activities

1. In your own words, describe the effects of gas on the men.
2. What prompts Nulla to remark that *'I now know what put that abject terror into his voice when we two were back in that little cellar when to gas alarm went.'*?

D. Military Innovations

1. How does Lynch show the technical and military innovations that occurred on the Western Front between 1915 and 1918? How did these affect the lives of the men?
2. The text also follows the changing tactics of the war. By 1918 and particularly after the Battle of Hamel in July, static trench warfare changed to the much speedier 'open warfare' as the British and Australians chased the Germans across the flat country east of Amiens towards Peronne. Read Chapter Sixteen: Leap-frogging to Victory which presents an exciting account of this new style of warfare, and note down some of the differences between this tactic and tactics described in previous chapters.

7. BLOODY STATISTICS

Battle casualty admissions to field ambulances from the AIF in France from April 1916 to March 1919.

Cause	Number	Per cent of total
Shell fragments and shrapnel	72,513	50.93%
High velocity bullets (rifle and M-G fire)	48,309	33.93%
Gassing	16,822	11.82%
Bombs and grenades	2,714	1.90%
Shell concussion (i.e. shell shock)	1,624	1.14%
Bayonets	396	0.28%
Total	142,378	

These statistics can be found in Adam-Smith, Patsy, The Anzacs, 1978, Nelson, p. 360.

Activities

1. From your reading of *Somme Mud*, why do you think so many men became casualties of the first two causes.
2. Using the text where Nulla describes being wounded (e.g. from p.146 and from p. 175) draw up a flow chart to show how he was treated from the time he received his wounds until he was back at the Front after treatment. You will find the photographs on pp 35, 178 and 209 useful.

8. CIVILIANS

Too often we ignore the involvement of civilians in the conflict on the Western Front. The front was fought over a relatively small area, which included farms, fields of crops, woods, roads and railway lines. It involved towns and villages where ordinary people had worked and lived before 1914. On pp 224–227, Lynch describes the effects of artillery on a village. Later, in Picardy, they encounter a village *'that has been shelled clean off the map – absolutely obliterated.'* (p. 274)

Activities

1. Page 188 features a photograph of French refugees making their way back home, probably after the war has ended. What are some of the everyday items these people are carrying on their wagon?
2. What do these items and the photograph tell you about the social position of these refugees?
3. On the next page, Nulla meets a long line of French refugees. Why do you think they are *'relieved when they see hundreds of our men'*?
4. His description of the plight of the refugees adds to our images from the photograph. What other information is given in Nulla's description?

5. What does he mean by '*The war has drained the country [France] of its manhood*'?
6. What are Nulla's feelings towards the plight of children in this situation? What are yours?

9. COMPARING HISTORICAL SOURCES

In this exercise, you will work as an historian and examine some sources and come to a conclusion of your own. The Australian 4th Division played an important role in the Battle of Messines (7–14 June 1917). The battle took place in Flanders, about ten kilometres south of the city of Ypres. The significance of the battle has been the subject of considerable historical debate ever since. You will need to know something of the battle and then consider some conclusions that have been drawn.

Activities

1. Use the internet to research the basic facts of the Battle of Messines. It was famous for one spectacular event on the first day. It will help you to complete the activities if you make a summary of the information you find. You will also find excellent summaries of the battle in texts such as:

AJP Taylor, *The First World War: an illustrated history* (1963)

CEW Bean, *Anzac to Amiens* (1993, originally published 1946)

Les Carlyon, *The Great War* (2006)

2. Now read Nulla's account of the same battle in chapter ten, *Mixing It At Messines*. Much of this is an account of the action at Messines. However, Lynch did not actually see the nineteen mines explode, so he must have relied on other accounts to tell Nulla's narrative. Lynch, like Nulla, was quite seriously wounded at Messines. What information does Nulla give that is not in the accounts you have found online, or in other print texts?
3. In what ways do the conclusions agree and/or disagree with each other?
4. Which one would give an historian studying Messines the most information?
5. Do the sources reveal whether the battle was a success? Would Ted/Nulla agree? Give reasons for your answer.
6. Which of the accounts is the most reliable or credible? Why?

10. THE ANZAC LEGEND

As you work through your study of *Somme Mud* and of Australia's role in the First World War, you will discover references to the 'spirit of Anzac' or 'the Anzac legend'. These ideas have affected the way Australians have viewed themselves and how they see their role in the world ever since 1915.

The *Macquarie Dictionary* defines a *legend* as: *a non-historical or unverifiable story handed down by tradition from earlier times and popularly accepted as historical*. Other historians have observed that there is an element of truth in a legend which, for example, may have its origins in fact.

The Anzac legend was created by Australia's First World War correspondent Charles Bean (CEW Bean) and was based on his experiences and writing about Australians – and New Zealanders to a lesser extent. It was based on the distinctive wartime culture of the digger, first at Gallipoli and later on the Western Front and in Palestine. It was a male culture and had its origins in the bush of the nineteenth century, the 'larrikin' and the aggressive Australian nationalism of the time. Added to this was the legend of the 'baptism of fire' at Gallipoli: a place where Australia made its presence known in the world by the character and nature of the 'boys' who fought there and continued to fight elsewhere.

Mostly, the Anzac legend is seen in Australian language – both 'ordinary Australian English' and the language of the digger. It was nationalistic and frequently racist, focusing on Australia's perceived superiority and an antagonism to 'foreigners'. Most Australians liked to view themselves as equals, regardless of rank or social class. Thus, they were generally contemptuous of officers, but the sources reveal that they respected and often felt some affection for company officers: captains and lieutenants, for example, who fought alongside the men under their command. Bean portrayed the Australians as cool and nonchalant under fire, resourceful and feared as opponents on the Front. Their humour was dry and laconic, often understated. They complained about everything but, in the end, accepted their lot and excelled at war.

Activities

1. Do you consider that some of the characteristics of the Anzac legend are still in evidence in today's Australia?
2. According to Bean and later generations, the diggers possessed the following qualities:
 - determination to win
 - dedication to duty
 - honour
 - integrity
 - mateship and teamwork
 - courage in battle
 - initiative
 - loyalty and patriotism to Australia.

Write these words down and next to them, write their meaning.

3. As you read the text, find evidence of these qualities among Nulla and his mates. You may use some direct quotes and references to support your findings.
4. At the conclusion of the text, Nulla takes time to consider all that has happened to him:

Behind memories, memories of mates of war, old mates of the happy-go-lucky, never -say-dies philosophy. Memories of real men we've known. Men who were mates. Men we've helped and men who have so often helped us.

Where are our old mates now? Our mates who slogged along with us through the black, clinging Somme mud, that awful Somme mud that so clung to tired legs.

Men who faced and broke the unbreakable Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt, who climbed with us side by side through the shell-fed smoke and dust of Messines Ridge, who somehow did their job through all but impassable shell-ploughed mud that was Passchendaele. Our mates of Peronne, of Hollebeke, of Dernancourt and Villers-Bretonneux, of Hamel, Proyart and Lihons.

The brightest memory of the lot is that I have known real men. Men with the cover off. Men with their wonderful nobility of character, of mateship revealed. It's a glorious memory to have. To have known men as men. That is something that does not come to everyone.

The war is over. The trial was long and severe. The prize was worth it, though, when measured in the mateship of men. My mates! Memories of men! Men who were mates and mates who were men.

C'est la guerre!

As he leaves France for the last time on 15 April 1919, Nulla muses:

'All morning we sit in the huts watching the rain and thinking. Somehow there's a sadness behind our apparent gladness at leaving France, for not only are we leaving France, but leaving dozens of fine mates who fell whilst we lived through it all.'

Activities

1. What does Nulla (Lynch) see as the main factor that sustained the Anzacs through the Western Front? Can you link this with the Anzac legend?
2. List the physical and mental changes that came over the men as a result of their experiences on the Western Front. (You will need to do this as an ongoing activity).
3. To what extent does this extract explain the ongoing tradition of Anzac Day?

11. PHOTOGRAPHS AS EVIDENCE

Photographs of the First World War have long been primary sources for historians and students to interpret. Australia is especially fortunate to have the huge photographic collection held at the Australian War Memorial. There are, however, a couple of problems that you, as a young historian, should be aware of. Photographs can be limited in what they reveal, for example by:

- what the photographer wants you to see
- what he sees through his lens [all the official wartime photographers were men]
- technology – cameras were not as sophisticated nor as portable as today's
- manipulation – images can be changed in a range of ways, changes such as cropping or combining several photographs to create a single image.

Activities

Look up the following photographs in *Somme Mud* and answer the questions.

Photograph 1 (p. 47, AWM E0455)

Throughout the narrative, Nulla complains about exhaustion and lack of sleep. This photograph shows an exhausted digger near Bullecourt in April or May 1917.

1. Describe the scene in your own words.
2. What information does the photo show about the equipment the Australians carried into battle?
3. What do you think the soldier passing by might have been thinking?

Photograph 2 (pp 52–3, AWM E00139)

This photograph was taken at Delville Wood, a place that Nulla knew well.

1. What are 'duckboard tracks'?
2. Why were they necessary?
3. What measures are the diggers taking against the cold?
4. Are the men walking to or from battle? What evidence is there which shows this?

Photograph 3 (p. 75, AWM E00502)

1. Identify evidence that shows that a battle has taken place recently.
2. What does the photograph tell you about trench warfare?
3. Assuming the second photograph gives an impression of what the sunken road was like before the war, what advantages are there for soldiers wanting to occupy it?
4. What changes have occurred in the area since the war ended in 1918?

Photograph 4a and 4b (pp 99, AWM E01330 and 105, AWM E01512)

These photographs give glimpses of everyday life on the front, away from the fighting.

1. What tells you that photograph 4a was taken at a 'quiet time'?

2. What do you believe the men may be thinking about?
3. What evidence tells you that the men are newly arrived in this particular trench?
4. What humorous incident in the text does photograph 4b help explain?

Photograph 5 (p. 108, *AWM E00575*)

1. What are the differences between this photo and the one taken of the sunken road at 'Fritz's Folly' (p. 86)?
2. How have conditions at the front deteriorated (assuming this one was taken some time after earlier ones in the text)?

Photographs 6a and 6b (p. 132, *AWM E01366* and p. 142, *H09212*)

1. These photos show two aspects of the German defences which Nulla and his mates had to face.
2. What was the purpose of the pill box? Why were they given this name?
3. Why was it so difficult to capture one and put it out of action?
4. From the damage to the pill box in the photo, what means may have been used to capture it?

The photo on p. 142 was taken after British forces – including Australians and New Zealanders – were successful in taking Messines Ridge, albeit at enormous cost. What differences are there between this German trench and the Australian ones in other photos in the text?

Photograph 7 (p. 284, *AWM E03260*)

Note the caption: this may be one of the last photographs taken featuring Australians in action on the Western Front.

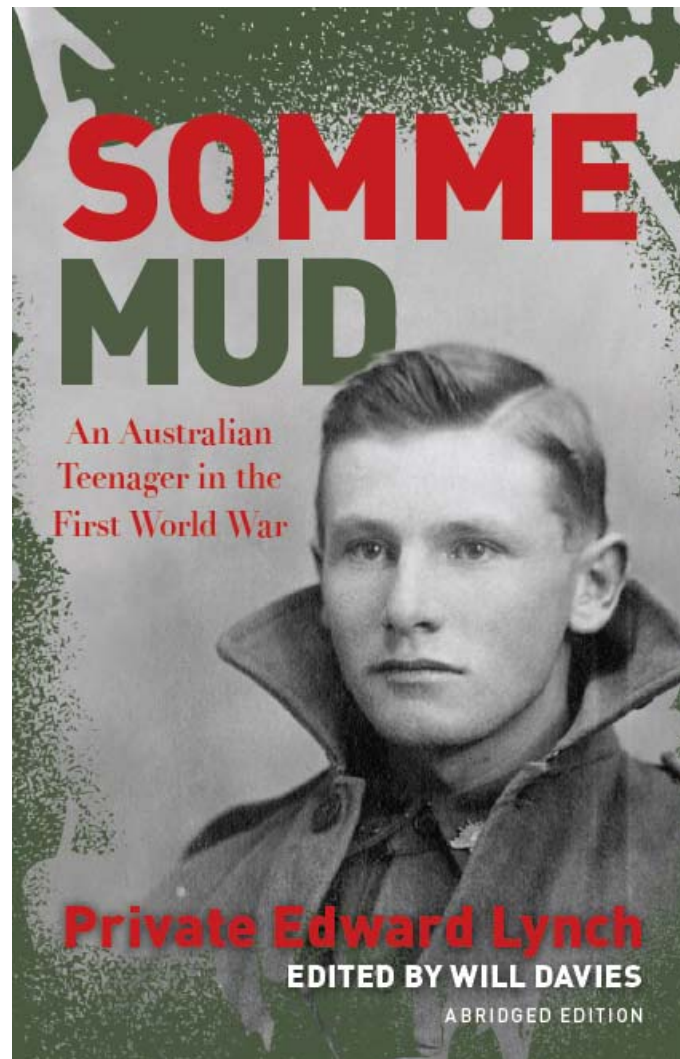
1. By this time, late September 1918, the war was nearly over. Describe how the fighting and conditions had changed since Nulla first came to the front in 1916.

SOMME MUD:

Young Readers' Edition

by Private Edward Lynch

Edited by Will Davies



ENGLISH TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

Prepared by Geoff Lewis, Will Davies and Random House Australia

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SOMME MUD:

Young Readers' Edition

English Teaching Support Kit

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1. BACKGROUND

'We live in a world of Somme mud. We sleep in it, work in it, fight in it, wade in it and many of us die in it. We see it, feel it, eat it and curse it, but we can't escape it, not even by dying.'

This semi-autobiographical novel was written in pencil by Edward Lynch in twenty school exercise books, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. It's most likely that he completed the manuscript in the hope of exorcising the horrors that he and his mates saw on the Western Front between 1916 and 1918. His family remembers him reading each chapter to them as it was completed. When he was CO of the Jungle training School at Lowanna (1942–43), he typed the manuscript in the hope of having it published.

His efforts were in vain and the manuscript lay in the family's possession until 2002 when, by chance, historian and documentary film producer Will Davies was shown the manuscript by Lynch's grandson, Mike Lynch. As a friend, Will took on the task of editing Lynch's work, perceiving that it was an important historical record: a time capsule of the First World War. The original text was 240,000 words and this was halved in the first edition published in 2006 as *Somme Mud: the war experiences of an Australian infantryman in France 1916–1919*.

Since then, Will has edited the text to approximately 80,000 words, and added explanatory chapter introductions, to form the edition you now have. In addition, he has produced *In the Footsteps of Private Lynch* which traces Lynch's (Nulla's) movements across the Somme in northern France and into Flanders in southern Belgium. These are the places that Australians visit in large numbers each year to pay their respects to the diggers of the 1st AIF and the sacrifice they made in 'the war to end war'.

Students may find it useful to read the original published edition of *Somme Mud*, as well as *In the Footsteps of Private Lynch*. Those studying the literature of the First World War could also read Erich Maria Remarque's masterpiece of the German war experience, *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Study of *Somme Mud* can be undertaken within several areas of the English curriculum. We have based this study guide on the NSW English Syllabus, Stages 5 and 6 but it can be adapted to suit the needs of students and teachers across Australia, especially as the National Curriculum is in the offing. To allow students a context in which to study the novel, it is suggested that students have studied Australia's participation in the First World War (1914–1918) in History classes.

A number of themes can be studied in *Somme Mud*:

- changes in language, especially Australian English
- journeys
- the experience and effects of war
- a study of Australian and other Literature

2. GENRE

Lynch's 'novel' presents problems when determining its genre. Like Remarque, he based his work on his own experiences at the Front. In all probability, the character 'Nulla' is Lynch. The members of his section are either real characters or composites. Indeed, Will Davies has tried to identify them through a study of war records, but has been only partially successful. You can, however, find Edward Francis Lynch's war record through the National Archives of Australia's website (www.naa.gov.au and follow the prompts).

Lynch also recounted several experiences and placed Nulla in locations at which he (Lynch) was not present, such as the Battle of Mont St Quentin in 1918. He probably gleaned details of these events by talking with other diggers who had been present, by visiting the battle sites a few days after, or simply through common knowledge. These do not detract from the power of his text.

Thus, we can identify *Somme Mud* as a semi-autobiographical novel. It is important to note that although the story is that of the Australian 4th Division, the men more closely identified with their battalion – in this case the 45th. Their closest mates, the ones they depended on, were in their section of about ten men.

3. THE LANGUAGE OF *SOMME MUD*

A. *Changes in language*

Lynch originally wrote the novel almost ninety years ago. Under Will Davies' editing, much of Lynch's language has been preserved – a bit like a time capsule of Australian English of the First World War and of the interwar period. Like all languages, Australian English undergoes change. Much of the language – the words, phrases and expressions that you and your family and friends use – will either change, gain new meaning or disappear altogether.

Activities

1. Why do you think language changes?

2a. Below is a list of some colloquial or slang words that appear in *Somme Mud*. (a) Write down the meaning of each from the context in which they appear in the text. (Note: these are all words that were in everyday use at the time. They are not specific to the language of the AIF. There is a glossary of specific AIF words in the back of the text.)

- | | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| a. furphies (p. 10/ p. 188) | h. tucker (p. 45) |
| b. cove (p. 13/192) | i. spell (p. 113/ p. 165) |
| c. clink (p. 13) | j. whopper (p. 123) |
| d. pelt (p. 14) | k. flash joker (p. 141) |
| e. gutser (p. 15) | l. old dial (p. 156) |
| f. mongrel (p. 36) | m. codger (p. 177) |
| g. poor beggar (p. 37/ p. 51) | n. stonker (p. 42/ p. 283) |

b. Write down the equivalent colloquial words and expressions you and your friends would use today.

B. Racism in language

Nulla and his mates use colloquial language and the language of the Australian Army at the time. Indeed, most other firsthand accounts, such as diaries, contain similar language. In today's society, some of the language would be considered racist and unacceptable. Remember that at the time the events took place and later when Lynch wrote the novel, much of this was not considered racist, at least as we understand the meaning today.

We can construct a hierarchy of racist language in the text and need to consider three examples.

1. Throughout the text, Nulla and his mates call their British comrades 'Poms'. Just like today, this is the noun that many Australians use when they refer to anyone from the British Isles, but especially from England. Generally, it is not intended to be offensive or construed that way, but it can have some 'bite' when used in the context of sporting contests between Australia and Britain. The word is used in two distinct contexts: one for British officers and the other for the ordinary soldier or 'Tommy'.

2. The next level is the use of 'Fritz' to describe the Germans. 'Fritz' is the short form for the German name 'Friedrich'. Note that Nulla almost always refers to individual Germans as 'a big Fritz'. Some have suggested that this is because Nulla, like Lynch was only a small man. Like 'Pom', 'Fritz' was a generic term used by the diggers. It is a stronger word than 'Pom', but it is not as strong as the noun 'Hun' that the Tommies and the British media and propaganda used during the war. By the end of the war, 'Fritz' almost became a term of respect for the enemy.

3. The final level is Nulla's use of the words 'nigger' and 'coon' to describe the labourers who worked on the wharves in South Africa (pp 10–12). Quite obviously, these words are totally unacceptable today. In fact, the use of such words is an offence in law. But note, that no swear words are included in the text; instead, Lynch uses 'floppin'.

Activities

1. Why would Australians call Germans 'Fritz'?
2. What is the difference between the Australian name (Fritz) and the English one (Hun)?
3. Why do you think that the English used the word 'Hun'? (Hint: think about who 'the Hun' was and the use of the word in propaganda)
4. Why are the third group of words unacceptable today, yet Nulla and the other diggers appear to have used them without a second thought?
5. Were he and his mates intentionally being racist?
6. Discuss some of the changes that have occurred in Australian society that may have contributed to how these words are now perceived.

C. Language Devices

Lynch frequently uses onomatopoeia: words or phrases that resemble the object of action being named (e.g. crash, bang, thud).

Activities

1. Why do authors use this device?
2. What is the effect on the reader?
3. What words does Lynch use for the sound of:
 - a. a flare being fired (p. 25)
 - b. machine-gun bullets (p. 26)
 - c. a bullet ricochet
 - d. a cannon being fired close by (p. 22)
 - e. a rifle shot (p. 36)
 - f. a low trajectory German shell (p. 42)
 - g. shrapnel shell bursting overhead (p. 45)
 - h. a Lewis gun being fired (p. 89)
 - i. ejecting and reloading a rifle (p. 91)
 - j. a bullet hitting the ground (p. 54)
 - k. a machine gun being fired (p. 63)
 - l. boots in mud (p. 107)
 - m. Mills bombs exploding (p. 108)
4. Is the onomatopoeia effectively used? Does it give meaning to the text? Give reasons for your answers.

4. THEMES AND DESCRIPTIVE LANGUAGE ACTIVITIES

In his foreword to the 2006 edition of *Somme Mud*, Australian historian Bill Gammage said it:

is written in the present tense and in moments of high drama (it) uses short sentences and small words to make the action fast and close. (It) uses detail brilliantly – sharp, vivid, not overloaded, just enough to let readers see the scene, sense being there, feel anxious about what will happen. Somme Mud puts you in the trenches, enduring the mud and the cold, smelling the stink of whale oil, following the dogfight overhead, suffering death's randomness. You watch Snow snipe at a German half a mile away, then next day risk his life to save another German and be reprimanded for it. You are brought close up into the war's world, wondering how much such men could ever be civilians again, if they got the chance.

Dr Peter Stanley, in his review (in *Defender* Spring 2006) noted '*Lynch's gift for graphic description*'.

Activities

A. Coping with death

At the end of Chapter Nine: The Carrying Party, (pp 211–7) Nulla unsuccessfully tried to save Joe Benns.

1. Describe how Joe was wounded and then died.
2. How does Lynch use language to show the following:
 - desperation
 - the tragedy of Joe's death
 - the sounds of battle
 - why the 'boys' mourn the death of Joe
 - use of irony (see the last few lines on p. 217).

B. The effects of battle on the environment and on the participants

3. On pages 60–62, the men of the 45th Battalion are salvaging material in Delville Wood after the South Africans and British suffered an enormous number of casualties. Read the description in the text on these pages.
 - a. What is the first sight they encounter?
 - b. What is unusual about the way the men are lying?
 - c. How have the men died?
 - d. Lynch describes the horror, futility and tragedy of the scene. How is he able to create the image of the type of fighting that occurred there just a few hours earlier?
 - e. Outline the reaction the Australians have to the scene Nulla describes? What is your reaction?

C. A night in the trenches

Much of the fighting and activity on the Western Front took place at night. Read pages 73–77, which describe a 'typical' night for Nulla.

4. How does Lynch set the atmosphere of a cold, dark night?
5. What words and phrases does he use to suggest time passing slowly and/or quickly?
6. Nulla almost gets his 'mob' lost in no-man's-land. What would have been the consequences of this?

D. After an assault

Several times in the text, Nulla contemplates what has just occurred and what the future may hold. Read pages 81 and 82.

7. What is the tone of the three paragraphs beginning '*He questions me . . . ?*'
8. What images does Lynch use to create this tone?
9. What impact do these images have on the reader?
10. Who does Nulla think will suffer the most from war?

E. The war moves towards its conclusion

The success of the Australian capture of Mont St Quentin (31 August to 2 September 1918), a high point just north of the town of Peronne, marked the beginning of the end of the war on the Western Front. However, the capture of this important strategic point was at an enormous cost in Australian lives. Lynch was not at the battle, so his description is based on what was common knowledge or else from accounts of the men who survived. Read Chapter Seventeen: Following Fritz.

11. On p. 281, Nulla expresses a different attitude to the Germans. What is this change in attitude? What caused this change?
12. How does Lynch show that the morale of the men has improved since the battle of Hamel?
13. What indications are given that the journey is moving towards its conclusion?

5. AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR

'Wonderful laconic Australian humour, that deadpan style that Aussies have, the old digger generation . . .'

Michael Parkinson talking about Australian Cricket Captain Jack Fingleton

Lynch produced an unvarnished and at times humorous account of the Western Front. The humour ranges from Longun's forthright opinion on the officers: *'It takes more than one clown to make a circus!'* to Nulla's own dark observation: *'Cripes mate, you'll sleep cold tonight,'* a man remarks as he tenderly straightens a broken body in its grave of mud.

Activities

1. What is meant by the description of Australian humour as 'dry and laconic'?
2. Why is humour so vital to the mental survival of the diggers?
3. (p. 33) *'Biscuits are handy. We spend half the day carving photo frames out of them.'* To what degree is this example evidence of 'dry and laconic humour'?
4. (p. 35) *'Half way along I prop still . . . And the poor upturned hand is full of cigarette bumpers.'* This is an example of black humour. Why do we find it funny? Would Nulla have had the same reaction?
5. (p. 118) Retell the incident of stealing the coal as it might appear in a movie script. Include directions to the actors. What attitudes towards the 'Poms' would you wish to show?
6. (pp 140–141) Why did Longun find prodding the German officer with his bayonet funny?
7. Read pages 306–8, where they are 'visited' by King George V. This shows typical larrikin humour. What are the features of this humour that make the incident so amusing, especially to an Australian reader?
8. On page 321, a two-up game is being played. Comment on the humour in this incident, especially Longun's reply to the officer.
9. On pages 273–274, Logun (again!) and Dark play a practical joke on some Tommies. Describe the joke and explain why it is successful as a humorous prank.

10. Could you claim that the examples of humour above as well as other examples scattered through the text are 'typically Australian' and would only appeal to Australian readers? What kind of humour appeals to you and your friends?

6. THE CHARACTERS

In Chapter Twelve: Passing it on at Passchendaele, Nulla is in hospital wounded and his thoughts turn to his friends and the mateship that held them together. Lynch has used the opportunity to bring all his characters together (in much the same way that Remarque does at the start of *All Quiet...*)

Activity

1. The main characters in the text are: Nulla, Longun, Snow, Darky (Dark), the Farmer (Farm), the Professor (Prof), Young Jacko and Jacob. Note down their physical characteristics, their personalities, backgrounds and other details you have discovered from your reading.
2. Select two of the characters and compare the ways experience on the Western Front changed each.
3. What becomes of each of the main characters (you may include this with the first question)? E.g., on p. 156, we are given an 'update' on their condition.
4. Historian Peter Stanley has identified the 'typical' digger as being: 25 years of age; coming from an urban background; a semi-skilled or unskilled worker; with a basic level of education; and many may have been semi-literate.

(Stanley, Peter, 2009: *Men of Mont St Quentin: between victory and death*, Scribe)

- a. To what extent do the characters in *Somme Mud* confirm Stanley's view?
- b. Critics have noted that the characters in *Somme Mud* are not mere stereotypes or caricatures but have reality and depth. Do you think that they are 'real' or stereotypical? Give reasons for your response.

7. AREA OF STUDY: JOURNEYS

You have probably been reminded that 'life is a journey' to the point that it has become a cliché. One Area of Study for the NSW Preliminary HSC Course – Advanced and Standard English is 'Journeys'.

This Area of Study is the exploration of a concept that affects our perceptions of ourselves and our world. You will be asked to explore, question and articulate the ways in which your concept of a journey is shaped in and through the interrelationships between a range of texts.

In your written and oral responses you will examine, question and reflect upon:

- the texts' observation and understanding of the portrayed events, people, ideas and societies
- the assumptions underlying the representations of journeys
- the ways in which the texts portray the world and speculate about it
- the ways in which you may consider your own journey through life.

Generally, teachers may approach the text through:

- cultural heritage
- personal growth
- cultural analysis
- literary approach

Thanks to Gareth Scott of Kinross Wolaroi School for his assistance in this section of the study guide

Nulla's Journey 1915–1918

A. At the beginning of their journey, Nulla and most of his mates are naive, carefree country boys on the verge of manhood; their enthusiasm and larrikinism is obvious. Notable is their loyalty to anything British (or English). At first, their second loyalty is to Australia but this changes.

Activity

1. Nulla does not dwell on his enlistment and basic training. Why?

B. Travel to Europe by troopship: Nulla describes this as 'Life is one long monotony now.' There is some relief from the boredom at port in South Africa (the incidents with the wharf labourers and the enlistees throwing oranges at officers). For most of the young soldiers, this voyage was their first time away from family and home, the first time at sea and the furthest they had ever travelled. Note the comments on the start of their journey on page 6.

Activity

2. What attitudes held by young Australian men at the time are shown by these incidents?

C. Arrival in Britain for training and preparation to go to war. The new soldiers find the training monotonous and seemingly pointless. Cynical attitudes soon emerge, along with a deeply held belief in egalitarianism. Later in the war, this attitude is made clear: '*Gone is the parade-ground 'Sir'. Men and officer are no longer separated by parade-ground discipline or the gulf of rank. That chasm has been bridged by the bond of mateship.*' (p. 276). These lead to confrontations with 'Pom' training officers. They are still unaware of the reality of war on the Western Front.

D. At Bernafay Wood: Nulla was on the Front just a little while after the Australians' first action in Europe at Fromelles (Fleurbaix) which took place on 19 July 1916. This was his first encounter with the reality of war. Their training and expectations did not prepare them for the '*unbelievable conditions . . . a solid sea of slimy mud*'. This must have been etched on Lynch's mind; hence the title of the book. Another ongoing theme, the noise of artillery assaulting their '*nervous ears*' is described for the first time. A fragment from an exploding shell kills a man in front of them – '*our first man killed*'. Their corporal takes all this in his stride, just as Nulla will do by the end of his narrative.

E. Nulla and his mates encounter the horrors of war for the first time and react to it through apparent callousness (Chapter Three: *Holding the Line*). They have learned the practical skills of war that should enable them to survive: to sleep standing up; the noise/sounds made by different shells and bullets.

F. The first turning point in the text comes in the very moving incident of Snow and the sniper in Chapter Three. They are beginning to accept the reality of their situation: death and killing.

Activities

3. The incident with Snow and the German sniper is one of the most moving and tragic episodes in their journey. Outline what happened in your own words and indicate the mental effects that it had on the men of the section.

4. What does the incident reveal about:

- a. the tragedy of war
- b. the basic decency of people?
- c. Why is this a major turning point in their journey?

G. A second turning point on their journey occurs in Chapter Six: *Fallen Comrades*. The futility of war is apparent and the soldiers' first deep feelings against the war appear:

Our job is done. We've made a good collection that may be turned to some further use in the scientific destruction of our fellow man . . .

Like Paul Baumer in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Nulla has also grasped the meaning of comradeship: that all soldiers, no matter what side they are on, suffer the same.

The poor shattered bodies of British and Fritz are intermingled in their last long sleep that knows no waking.

H. While in the vicinity of Pozieres, in the feared Delville Wood, Nulla and the men are scavenging material that can be re-used, cleaning up the battlefield and decently burying bodies and remains. Nulla overhears a comment and his thoughts on it indicate that another turning point has been reached: **the acceptance of death**:

'Cripes, mate, you'll sleep cold tonight,' a man remarks as he tenderly straightens a broken body in its grave of mud. There's nothing irreverent or callous or frivolous in that remark. It's just familiarity, the sorrowful, friendly familiarity of the sad side of soldiering. (Chapter Six)

I. By Chapter Nine: *The Carrying Party*, their journey has taken them to **the pit of physical discomfort**. They are now living in conditions that no human being should have to tolerate:

We're living, or rather existing . . . in Dernancourt. And how we have this hole, its dirty dilapidated dwellings, remains of sheds and damp, foul-smelling cellars which house our battalions.

The spirit of the men has reached rock bottom. Of the youngest member of their section, involved in deadly hand-to-hand fighting, Nulla says:

Jacko is no longer an Australian schoolboy. He's gone back fifty thousand years. No joy, aim or ambition in life but to smash that face to a gory pulp . . . Civilisation regains control: the caveman's paroxysm of blood-lust gives way to the sportsman's code that won't kick a man when he's out to it.

Activities

5. Identify the morality or principles that appear to control their actions even in the depths of war.
6. What earlier incident do Jacko's actions reflect?

J. Their journey takes them through a landscape smashed by war to Bullecourt, where the diggers suffered staggering casualties in a poorly planned and performed attack. Nulla comments on the blundering and incompetence and tragedy of the British-led assault that cost thousands of Australian lives, but was still regarded as a success. The **comradeship with the enemy** is again noted: *'Some of the bravest men we've ever bumped have been Fritz gunners; we know that to our sorrow.'*

Activity

7. Why would Nulla have this attitude to the enemy?

K. The spring of 1917 thaws the harshness of the winter. The men of the 45th are involved in the attack on Messines where tunnellers had dug under the ridge and laid mines under the German lines. The nineteen explosions was one of the most spectacular sights and events of the war. Nulla is suitably impressed. Despite the success of this offensive, the war finally gets to Nulla, still a young man as he arrives at the **lowest point in his personal journey**:

No, I didn't hear him scream. We don't any longer notice screams. We're used to them... The news of relief (that the Division is being taken out of the line) awakes no enthusiasm and very little hope. We're past caring and almost past hope.

Activity

8. Has the war completely stripped away their humanity?

L. Chapter Twelve: Passing it on at Passchendaele: Just when Nulla feels that his emotions and physical discomfort could not get any worse on his journey, **the men move onto the 3rd Battle of Ypres** – commonly known as the Battle of Passchendaele. They are given a forewarning of what lies ahead as reports of the fighting along the Menin Road and at Polygon Wood, in the same area, begin to filter back: *'Quietly we move on into mud and slush of a black night over freshly shelled ground.'* Their journey takes them through mud that was deep enough to drown a man or a horse, and rain fell incessantly. Nulla describes the wounded *'walking, staggering, lurching, limping back'*. Little does he know that he will soon join them:

I realise that a shell has burst under me and tossed me into the trench. I know my leg is smashed, it's numb, and now a shooting mass of jumping pain. I

must examine it, must bandage it, must stop the bleeding, but somehow all I can do is to roll and roll on the leg, pressing it harder and harder into the boards.

Thus begins his '*first ride on a stretcher*' as he is taken out of the line as a casualty.

M. Little do Nulla and his mates realise that **their journey is nearing its end**. Following the tragedy of Passchendaele, a winter almost as severe as the previous one set in. In March, the Germans – in their last throw of the dice – launched a massive attack all along the Western Front, pushing the Allies back to their 1916 positions. However, the tide turned on 8 August 1918 – 'the black day for the German Army' – as the Australians and Canadians in the south of the Somme broke through at Amiens and pushed the enemy back through Villers-Bretonneux, Hamel, Peronne and Mont St Quentin towards the heavily fortified Hindenburg Line, the Germans' last line of defence. Although the fighting caused many casualties on both sides, the war became one of relatively rapid movement. The men became exhausted. But the spirits of Nulla and of the soldiers who were fighting immediately rose. They even had time to freely pilfer food, wine and clothing.

On 11 November an armistice or cease fire came into effect and to all intents and purposes, the First World War had ended. For Nulla and the men of D Company of the 45th Battalion, their war had also ended. He makes a terse and surprising comment: '*Surely, wars don't end like this*'.

Activity

9. How is the impression that the end of the war is an anticlimax revealed to the reader?
10. List the changes that occur to Nulla and his mates on their journey through the Western Front. Note physical and mental or inner changes. What caused these changes? Support your responses with evidence from the text.
11. What physical and emotional obstacles did the men face on their journey?
12. What might the men have found out about themselves that they might not have known at the start of their journey?
13. Despite all that they have gone through, humanity sometimes shines through. On pages 188 and 189, they encounter French refugees escaping the war. What is the tone of Nulla's description? How do the French feel towards the soldiers and how do they, in turn, feel towards the civilians?

N. At the conclusion all journeys, there is a period of reflection – even more so after such a bitter experience as the men of 1914-18 had gone through. Lynch calls Chapter Eighteen '*Fini la Guerre*': (Thus) ends the war.

At the conclusion, Nulla contemplates their journey in poetic prose:

Where are our old mates now? Our mates who slogged along with us through the black, clinging Somme mud, that awful Somme mud that so clung to tired legs. Men who faced and broke the unbreakable Hindenburg Line at Bullecourt, who climbed with us side by side through the shell-fed smoke and dust of Messines Ridge, who somehow did their job through the all but impassable shell-ploughed mud that was Passchendaele. Our mates of Peronne, of Hollebeke, of Dernancourt and Villers-Bretonneux, of Hamel, Proyart and Lihons.

The brightest memory of the lot is that I have known real men. Men with the cover off. Men with their wonderful nobility of character, of mateship, revealed. It's a glorious memory to have. To have known men as men. That is something that does not come to everyone.

The war is over. The trial was long and severe. The prize was worth it, though, when measured in the mateship of men. My mates! Memories of men! Memories of mates! Men who were mates and mates who were men.

C'est la guerre!

For Nulla and his mates, their journey ends where it began: back home in Sydney with his family. But note that a psychological distance has emerged between those who experienced the journey and those who did not.

Activities

14. Even today, Australians tend to go on and on about mateship. Why do you think that this is so?
15. How does Nulla feel at the end of his journey – the end of the war? How does it contrast with his feelings at the start of his journey?
16. Do the men fear the end of the war as much as they fear the war itself?
17. What are your memories of Nulla's and his mates' journey?
18. What kept Nulla going through the war?
19. Whom do they now see as their enemy? (Note the sympathy towards the Germans on pp 247, 252, 259 and 281)

8. THE LITERARY JOURNEY

Another way to consider Nulla's journey is to examine *Somme Mud* as a text and compare it with other texts. Just as Nulla and his mates journeyed across the Western Front and their lives changed as a result, so too, the poetry written by men at the Front went on a journey as content, themes and perspectives changed. Your task here is to compare the extracts from Lynch's novel with wartime poetry.

A. The early months: texts that celebrated the outbreak of war

The early texts put forward the view that Britain and the Empire (of which Australia was a part) could not have avoided war in 1914 because of the aggressive 'bullying' of Germany. Thus, these texts can be seen as mere propaganda, but there is more to it than this. They reflect attitudes of the time, including the unrealistic, over-optimistic and sentimental attitude of the British people to war in 1914. The war was seen as a Christian crusade against a barbarian enemy. It was moral uprightness and decency against immorality and lack of culture. Many men enlisted with a feeling of optimism, assuming that the war would be chivalrous and heroic and would be over by Christmas. Many believed that war would make better men of those who enlisted.

On pages 324 and 325, on the way back home in 1919, Nulla reflects:

No one ever seems to admit that he enlisted out of love of country, or because he thought his loved ones were in danger. Somehow it seems that

most of us enlisted because our mates did and by that urging spirit of pulling together that is really mateship undefined. A man enlists because his mates do, not because he wants to bayonet and bomb other men.

Darky tells us he enlisted because he was impelled by love of country and pride and race to do so, and gets called a hero and is howled down.

Longun says, 'I enlisted because I was a bloomin' coward and to flamin' frightened to face the things they were saying about coves who didn't enlist.' And he too is disbelieved. Many of us realise that our own enlistments were brought about by a blending of the reasons given by Dark and Longun.

Activities

Rupert Brooke (1887–1915) was an English wartime poet. Find a copy of his 1914 poem **'The Soldier'** and compare it to the above section of *Somme Mud*. This poem was considered one of the great expressions of patriotism at the start of the war and was extensively used in propaganda.

1. To whom is the poem addressed?
2. What patriotic feelings does Brooke stir up?
3. Ironically, the poem has a peaceful tone. How does Brooke create this?
4. What reasons does Nulla give for Australians enlisting?
5. In what ways are these reasons different from those of Brooke?
6. Why do Darky and Longun get 'howled down'?

B. Texts that show an awareness of the horrors of war

By the middle of 1915, the war was being fought with a new and terrible ruthlessness. Trench warfare developed into a deadly stalemate in Western Europe, where it seemed that the only hope of a breakthrough was by a massive frontal assault, such as at Loos. People recognised that a new type of warfare had developed which could go on for years. Soldiers, especially in the British armies, began to lose faith in the class system and in the officers that were drawn from the upper classes. Many soldiers they now saw themselves as a 'group apart' from the civilians back at home.

Nulla experiences the horror of war in several places. On ' 269, the men are 'stumbling along a deep grassy trench' when:

My foot treads on something soft and springy in the entrench floor. I stumble as if walking on a half-inflated football, peer down and see I have trodden on a man's stomach. A torch flashes and its fleeting beam shows a headless and legless Australian body lying amongst the lank grass underfoot.

A few more steps and an officer gives a breathless sigh as he sidesteps something else in the grass, something round, something gruesome even to a war-hardened officer- the mangled head of the men whose body lies a few yards back.

Activities

Wilfred Owen (1893–1918) was a highly regarded poet and a soldier in the British army. Find and read his poem *'Dolce et Decorum est'* and compare it to the above section of *Somme Mud*. Owen's poem is one of the most bitter condemnations of the war.

1. What are the two horrors described in these two texts?
2. Show how does the poet and novelist react? How do they inform their readers of their feelings?
3. There is irony in both texts. Sassoon's poem is more ironic than the extract from *Somme Mud*. Quote examples from each which show this use of irony. What gives the poem a greater sense of irony?
4. Explain why *'Dulce et Decorum est'* is considered one of the 'great' war poems.

C. Texts that show the reality of war

The massive Somme Offensive (July – November 1916) was a turning point in the war and in the literature it spawned. The men began to write down their honest accounts, often writing while under attack. They did this to find some relief from their feelings, the death all around them and, at some stage, inform the civilians what war was really about: death, mutilation, mud, lice, cold, hunger, sleeplessness, fear, misery, noise and stench, which were all inherent in this new type of warfare. They felt that they owed it to their dead comrades and mates.

'They're killing men! Oh my God! They're killing men!' A new reinforcement man moans in horror at the killing he is powerless to stop.

Soon the man will probably be accustomed to this game as the rest of us. He isn't to be blamed, for it's just the reaction of a sensitive soul face to face with the awful reality of hand-to-hand fighting.' (p. 283)

One thing that especially appalled them was the massive scale of modern warfare, which decreed that individual survival was a matter of experience and good luck. The chances of surviving an artillery barrage now depended not only on bravery or skill, but on luck.

Somme Mud contains vivid descriptions of the artillery bombardments that preceded and continued throughout infantry attacks. Often these bombardments would last for over a week, intended to destroy defences or send the men mad in their trenches and dugouts. The same event can be compared through the concentrated language of poetry with the longer prose of *Somme Mud*.

On p. 129 Nulla writes:

We hug the ground and wait. Shells are falling all around and the air above our heads is thick with the swish of enemy bullets. Thirsty, worn out, utterly exhausted, our men are falling asleep in the blazing sun as we await for the launching of our attack.

Jacko and I are together in a shell hole watching Fritz 9.2 inch shells bursting close by. There about ten yards above the ground, we see something like a little black pill fall from the sky and down we crouch as with a deafening roar and a trembling of the ground, a huge funnel of black earth and smoke flies skywards.

Suddenly an enemy barrage is down upon us. Crash! Bang! Thud! and shells are bursting all about us. Dirt showers upon us. Fumes burn our throats and bring tears to our eyes. Orr-up! Rr-up! Rr-up! And shrapnel is bursting overhead. The pellets patter upon the ground ten yards behind us.

A man jumps into our shell hole. 'Prepare to advance!' he roars as he drops down on top of us. I crawl out above the hole and wriggle on a few yards to where three men are lying behind a dead fritz and roar the message.

Activities

1. Find and read the poem '**Bombardment**' by **Richard Aldington** (1892–1962), and compare it to the quotes from *Somme Mud* above.
 - a. Both describe an artillery bombardment in the first person. Why does Aldington choose to do this?
 - b. Identify those features of the bombardment that both texts have in common as well as those that offer a different perspective.
 - c. As a reader, which text appeals to you more as a depiction of 'reality'? Give reasons for your response.

D. Texts that show the tragedy of war

The English poet **Siegfried Sassoon** (1886–1967) stressed the tragic waste of war and he wrote with compassion rather than bitterness or anger. The waste of life on the Somme and in Flanders in late 1917 tested the moral values of the men at the front. The poets of this time wanted to make their readers aware of all the good these young men could have achieved, if only they had survived the war. Other writers wrote in a mood of pity or protest.

In August 1918, as the Allies are turning the Germans back on the Somme, Nulla says:

We are walking across the ground fought over on the 8th, just twelve days ago. Men fought and fell are here still. In khaki and in grey waiting for the spade of the burying parties.

Still on the old battle ground we make our way. We are crossing some old enemy trenches as fast as we can, for dead men are on every side. Poor falling wretches rotting under a fierce August sun. They are sickening to behold. They cannot be escaped whilst ever a man is in possession of his sense of sight and smell.

On every side are up-turned faces greeny-black in putrefaction and great, swollen, distorted bodies. Sightless, dull, dust-filled eyes. If only they would close! But no, they remain open- and move! Open, gaping mouths are surely moving too! We're sick in every fibre as we hurry on past open eyes and open mouths . . . We're in the land of rotting men in the year of Our Lord, 1918. (p. 271)

Nulla was probably only about twenty-two at the time he saw this.

Activities

Find and read Sassoon's poem '**Suicide in the Trenches**', and compare it to the quotes from *Somme Mud* above.

1. What is the effect on the reader of Sassoon focusing on an individual, compared to Nulla's broader focus?
2. In Sassoon's poem, why do you think the 'simple soldier boy' committed suicide?
3. Why does 'no one speak of him again'?
4. The extract of Nulla's has an immediate impact on the reader. Why? Show how he creates this impact. On the other hand, the impact of Sassoon's poem is not necessarily immediate. What is the 'delayed' impact of *Suicide in the Trenches*?
5. In what ways does each text reflect the tragedy of war?

E. Texts that show the stupidity and blunders of war

These texts bring the literary journey to a conclusion. Following the fearsome winter of 1916–17 and the enormous loss of life at Passchendaele in late 1917, no side appeared to have a hope of winning. Some at home thought that a negotiated peace might be possible. Work written at the Front now had a mood of bitter satire or dark humour. The men at the Front were now certain that they belonged to a 'different race' following all that they, as young men, had experienced. Some were embittered with the profits that many at home were making out of the war. The nationalism and jingoism that featured in the early months had now dissolved into indignation and a feeling that somehow they had been 'conned' to enlist by the upper classes and even the church. Very often, these texts attacked the hypocrisy, self-righteousness and insincerity of capitalists, the old officer class and organised religion.

Just after the successful Battle of Hamel in July 1918, Nulla observes dozens of German prisoners being marched back behind the Australian lines (pp 232):

Dozens of Fritz prisoners are coming back, shepherded along by our mopping-up party. The strained unnatural faces of Fritz plainly tell what they have been through. We've seen that scared, nervously apprehensive look before, on Fritz faces and on our own. Men unstrung to the point of mental collapse.

Somehow we can't keep our eyes off these poor devils for they aren't men but mere boys of no more than fifteen. Tear stains are on many of their boyish faces. Tears of fear. Boys thrown into what hardened men can barely stand. We've often been inclined to laugh at prisoners, sometimes, we've abused the poor down-hearted wretches, but now we're full of pity for these poor little lads called upon to do the job that men should not be asked to do . . .

An old runner is speaking: 'I've got three boys at home as old as those fellows. It should be absolutely illegal to put boys like that in the line. Enough to sicken anyone of the war'.

Activities

Find and read Siegfried Sassoon's '**Does it Matter**' and compare it to the quotes from *Somme Mud* above. Both these texts focus on foolishness and errors of the war; but through differing perspectives.

1. What is the perspective of each text?
2. The poem shows the physical effects on those who survived. What is Nulla's perspective?
3. How does each reveal the stupidity and blunders of war?
4. What has made Nulla understand that war is senseless in this extract?
5. Again, Sassoon's poem is rich in irony. Find quotes that show this.
6. How has the attitude of the Australian soldiers towards the Germans changed since the start of their journey?
7. Who do you feel more pity for: the survivors in the poem or the boys and men in the extract?

LISTENING AND READING WIDELY

As an extra activity, students could listen to Australian folk singer and songwriter **Eric Bogle**'s anthem to the Western Front '**No Man's Land (The Green Fields of France)**'. The song was composed as Bogle was exploring Tyne Cot War Cemetery in Flanders – the largest Commonwealth War Cemetery in the world – when he came across the grave of a nineteen-year old Scots soldier William McBride.

Think about or discuss the question: *Was it all worthwhile?*