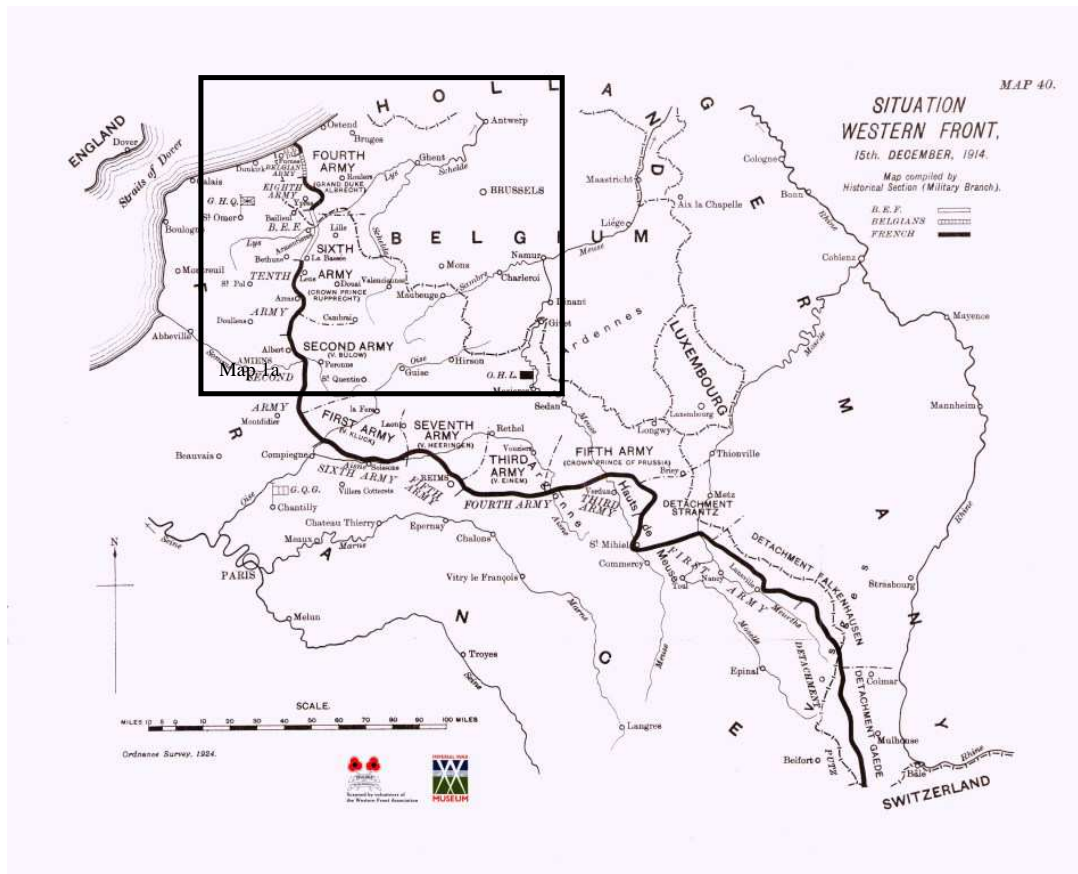


## Background to the Battle of Fromelles Part 1: 1915 and the Battle of Aubers Ridge

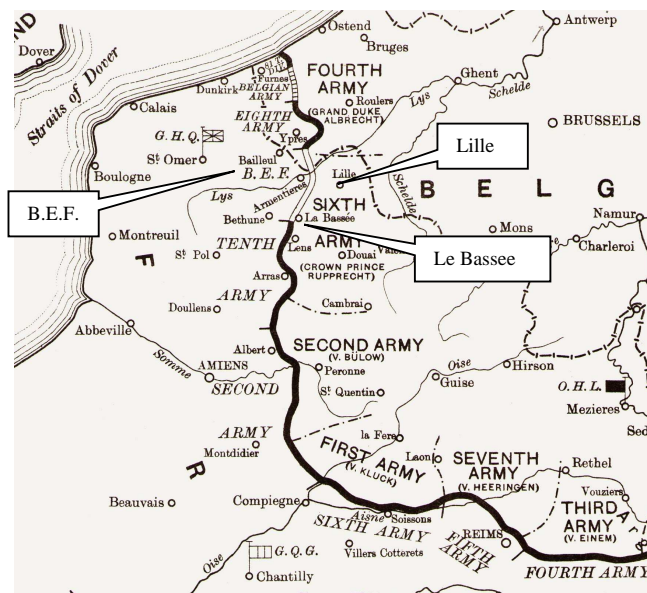
The meeting of the British War Council of 13 January 1915 made 2 decisions that would have profound impacts upon the Australian Imperial Force and families in Australia. The War Council established a sub-Committee, chaired by Lord Kitchener, to consider the employment of a military force in a new theatre of war, which focussed initially on the Balkans, but in response to an appeal from the Russian Tsar, Grand Duke Nicholas, eventually settled on a naval attack on the Dardanelles. The War Council also considered the Western Front campaign strategy for 1915.



Map 1: Location of the Western Front 15 December 1914

Sources: *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations: France and Belgium 1914, Volume 2 Map 40* [extract from *The Western Front Association: Mapping the Front in association with the Imperial War Museum*]

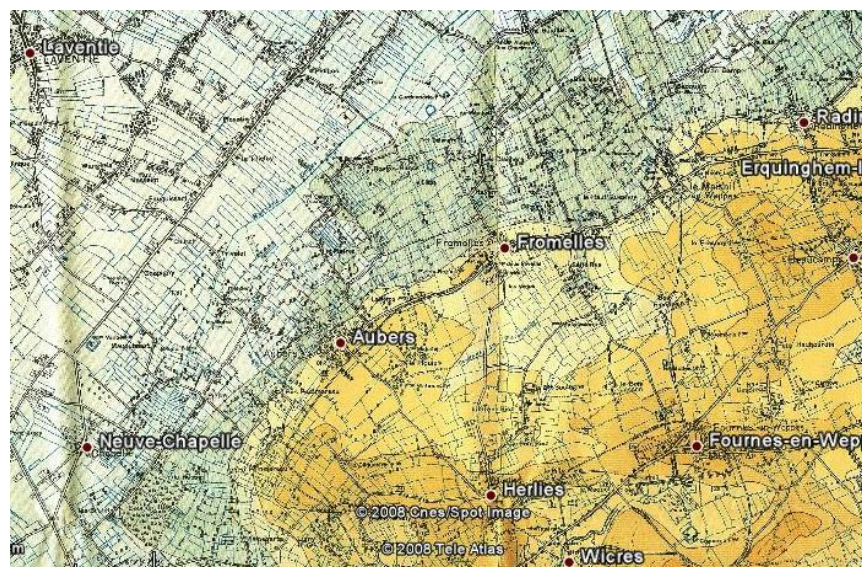
One of the lessons of the fighting on the Western Front in 1914 was that while infantry positions could be improved by means of trenches and defensive positions, nothing could replace or compensate for the tactical advantage of high ground for steady and continuous artillery observation of the enemy's position. Strategically, in the campaign planning for 1915, the capture of Lille, the fourth largest town in France (and identified on the map below), was regarded as a necessary prelude to any significant advance by the British Expeditionary Force (BEF).



Map 1a: Location of the Western Front 15 December 1914

Sources: *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations: France and Belgium 1914, Volume 2 Map 40* [extract from *The Western Front Association: Mapping the Front in association with the Imperial War Museum*]

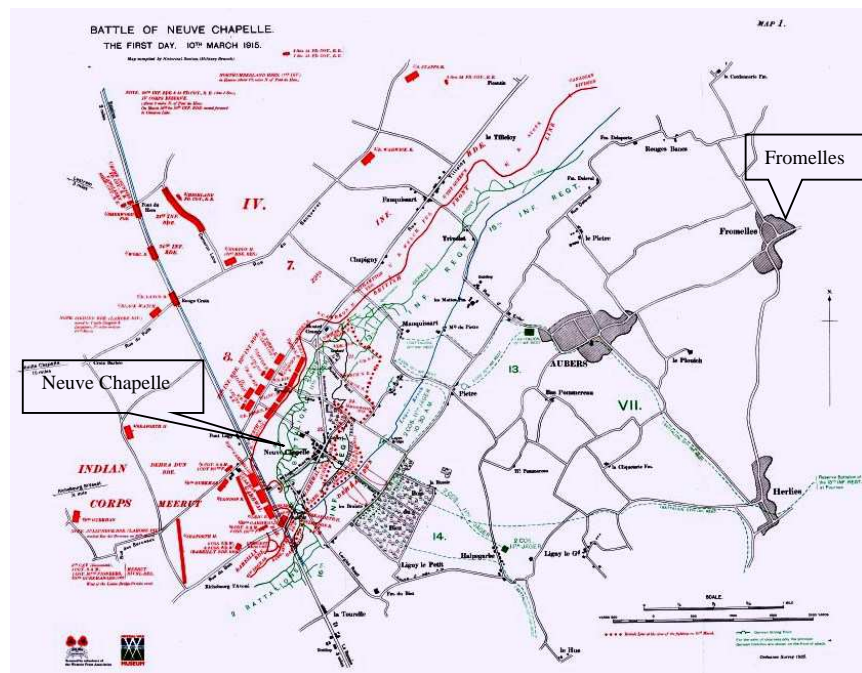
As Aubers Ridge provided direct observation of the railway lines leading from the east and southeast of Lille and on the town itself, the capture of Aubers Ridge was of great strategic importance. In addition, an offensive against Aubers Ridge could be co-ordinated with and receive support from the prospective French 10<sup>th</sup> Army offensive on the Artois plateau further south (Vimy Ridge) and together the two attacks would threaten the rail, road and canal junction of La Bassee from north and south. On 15 February 1915, Sir John French, Commander-in-Chief asked General Haig to draft schemes for an offensive by the First Army with Le Bassee and Aubers Ridge as its objectives.



Map 2: The Battle of Aubers Ridge – Location map showing topography with River Lays lowlands overlooked by Aubers Ridge.

Sources: Google Earth & *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915*

The battle of Neuve Chapelle commenced on 10 March 1915 with a short bombardment by 350 artillery pieces in support of 4 British and Indian divisions, along a 4,000 yard front. This was the first time that an artillery “barrage” was ordered and the first time a timetable was issued giving each battery a purpose and target for each phase of the bombardment. It was also the first time “objective maps” were prepared with a “red line objective” and “blue line objective” etc. These became standard practice for all subsequent battles of the war. Further to the north, opposite Fromelles, the line was held by the Canadian Division. Neuve Chapelle was captured and the British line advanced more than half a mile (1,000 yards) before German counter attacks stabilised the front. Despite British casualties totalling 11,500 men by the end of the offensive on 13 March, the British Command concluded that success in trench warfare was dependent upon artillery fire.

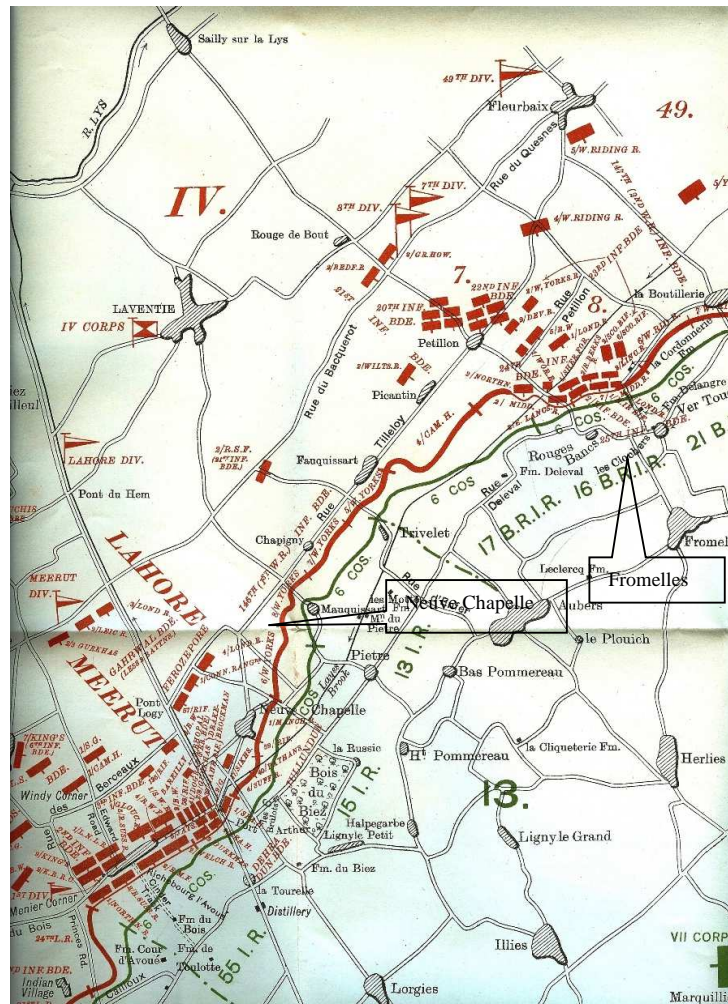


Map 3: Battle of Neuve Chapelle, 10 March 1915

Sources: *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915, Volume 1 Map 1* [extract from *The Western Front Association: Mapping the Front in association with the Imperial War Museum*]

A second attack on Aubers Ridge on either side of Neuve Chapelle was made from 9 May 1915. At Fromelles in the north, the British 8<sup>th</sup> Division attacked the 6<sup>th</sup> Bavarian Reserve Infantry Division that had taken over part of the front line in March. This Division included the 21<sup>st</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiments (BRIR) that opposed the Australian 5<sup>th</sup> Division and British 61<sup>st</sup> Division 14 months later. To the south of Neuve Chapelle, the 1<sup>st</sup> Division Commanded by Lt. General Sir Richard Haking attacked the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Divisions. The British I Corps, IV Corps and Indian Corps (Lahore and Meerut Divisions) attack was timed to coincide with a major French attack in the second battle of Artois, attacking Vimy Ridge. The attack was preceded by a significant artillery bombardment on defences that were then described as “well-developed”. The barrage did little to undermine the German defences and there was concern over the quality and quantity of shells provided for the artillery (which contributed to the fall of the Asquith Government and Lloyd George becoming Prime Minister). The attack made little progress

and ground to a halt the next day with British casualties amounting to 11,600 men. The French campaign, further to the south, also proved costly with high casualties.



Map 4: The Battle of Aubers Ridge, 9 May 1915.

Sources: *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations: France and Belgium 1915, Volume 2 Map 2*

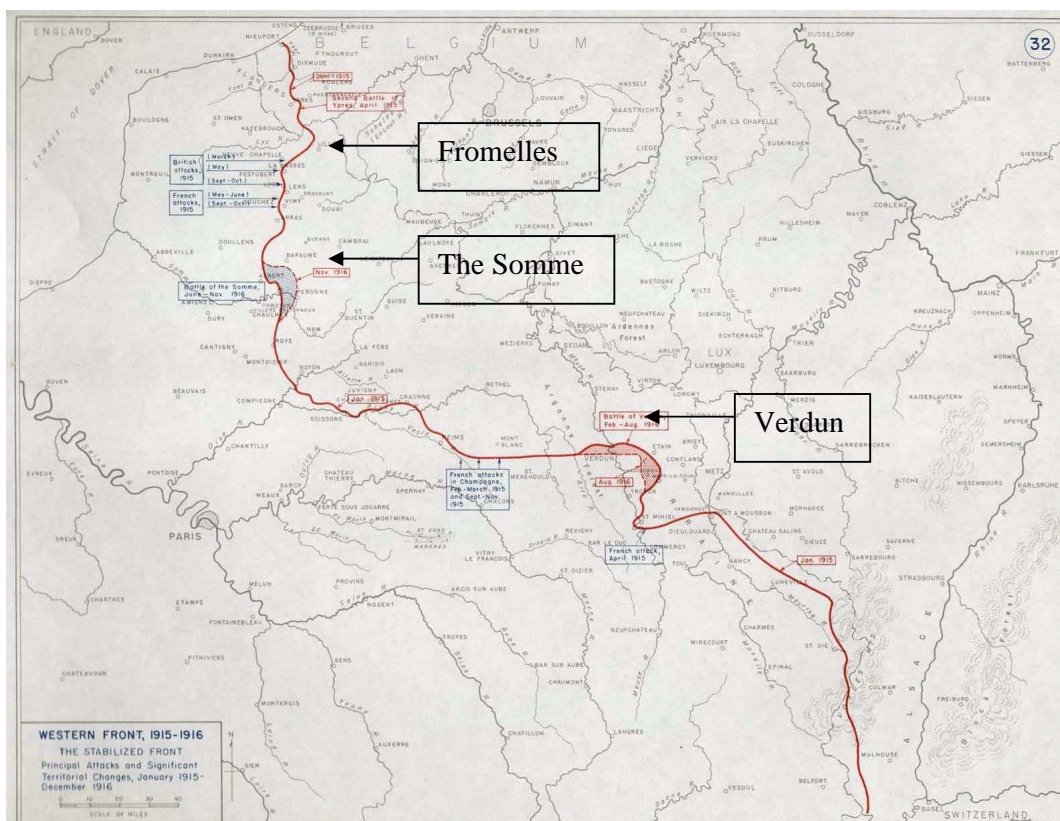
A few days later the Battle of Festubert commenced on 15 May about 3 miles to the south of Neuve Chapelle in the first night attack of the war and continued for 10 days with 16,000 casualties. The attack was again carried out by the British First Army commanded by Sir Douglas Haig and included the British 2<sup>nd</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Divisions and Indian Meerut Division.

Later, in September, the Battle of Loos commenced with 6 Divisions of the British First Army (2<sup>nd</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 1<sup>st</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 47<sup>th</sup> Divisions between 5 and 10 miles to the south of Neuve Chapelle. Commanded by Sir Douglas Haig, the offensive commenced on 25 September and after counter attacks and renewed attacks, finished on 18 October with 50,000 casualties.

Lille and the Aubers Ridge remained in German hands at the end of 1915.

## Background to the Battle of Fromelles Part 2: 1916 and the Battle of the Somme

The Allied war strategy for 1916 was for simultaneous offensives mounted by the Russians on the Eastern Front, the Italians in the Alps and an Anglo-French attack on the Western Front in the Somme Valley. However, a major German offensive at Verdun commenced in February and the French Government pressured the British Government for the attack in the Somme Valley to become largely a British attack to draw German forces away from Verdun.

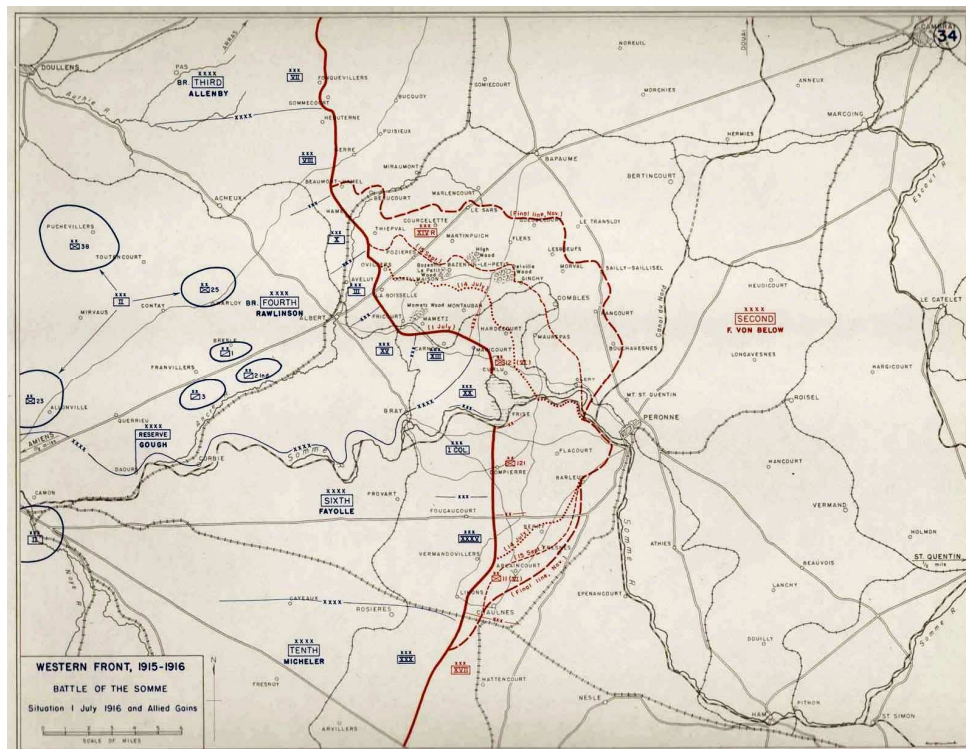


Map 5: The Western Front 1915-1916

Source: Department of Art and Military Engineering at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, 1950, published as *A Short Military History of World War I – Atlas*, edited by T. Dodson Stamps and Vincent J. Esposito, available online at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm>

The following analysis of the Battle of Fromelles is largely extracted from the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918 Volume 3, The AIF in France 1916* Chapters 12 & 13 The Battle of Fromelles. Compiled by C.E.W. Bean, the history devotes almost 120 pages to the Battle of Fromelles (pp 328-447). This is available on line through the Australian War Memorial website [www.awm.gov.au](http://www.awm.gov.au).

The Battle of the Somme commenced on 1 July 1916 with the Fourth Army (commanded by Sir Henry Rawlinson) and the Reserve Army (later renamed the Fifth Army and commanded by Sir Hubert Gough) attacking on a front of 15 miles. British casualties were 57,500 casualties on the first day, while German casualties were approximately 8,000, including 2,200 taken prisoner.



Map 6: British gains in the Battle of the Somme July to September 1916.

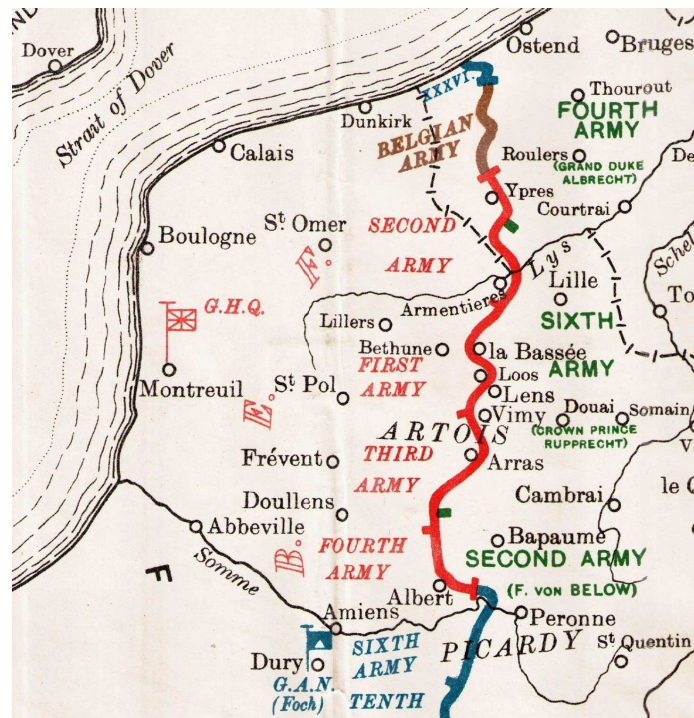
Source: Department of Art and Military Engineering at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, 1950, published as *A Short Military History of World War I – Atlas*, edited by T. Dodson Stamps and Vincent J. Esposito, available online at <http://www.firstworldwar.com/maps/westernfront.htm>

The British High Command sought actions to prevent the German Army reinforcing their forces on the Somme. On 5 July prospects of a break-through on the Somme appeared so promising to General Haig, now Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, that he ordered the other armies to prepare attacks in case the enemy was thoroughly beaten there. In that event the Third Army, Commanded by General Allenby, on the northern flank of the battle, would launch an offensive; but Haig on 5 July also ordered:

*The First and Second Armies should each select a front on which to attempt to make a break in the enemy's lines, and to widen it subsequently.*

He pointed out that the German armies on the Somme might contemplate withdrawal, and in that case the First and Second British Armies, by attacking, might “*turn the retreat on the Somme into a general retreat.*”

General Plumer of the Second Army that held the line from north of Ypres to south of Armentieres, noted that where the Second Army joined the First Army opposite the Sugar Loaf Salient, the Germans held their front more lightly and he proposed a joint operation to General Monro, the commander of the First Army. General Monro on 8 July requested General Haking, an experienced and distinguished officer, formerly commanding the British 1<sup>st</sup> Division and now commanding the XI Corps of the First Army, to draw up plans for an offensive, and to assume that his Corps would be reinforced by a division from the Second Army, together with some of that division's artillery.



Map 7: Location of Armies on the Western Front 30 June 1916

Sources: *Official History of the Great War: Military Operations: France and Belgium 1916, Volume 1 Map 3* [extract from *The Western Front Association Mapping the Front in association with the Imperial War Museum*]

General Haking's scheme, aiming at the capture of the Fromelles-Aubers Ridge, a mile behind the enemy's front, was rejected by General Monro, being of opinion that the capture of the Aubers-Fromelles Ridge, though of great advantage if the rest of the front was to remain stationary, would be of little assistance in the case of the advance on the Somme, for which he had been asked to prepare.

By then, however, the situation on the Somme had changed and Sir Douglas Haig's general staff were now looking into several operations recently suggested and concluded that the attack on Aubers-Fromelles, undertaken as "an artillery demonstration," would "form a useful diversion and help the southern operations."

Australian troops commenced moving to the Western Front from training camps in Egypt and England from March 1916 with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions of the AIF taking over part of the line in the "nursery" sector south of Armentieres. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division Unit Diary for 2 July noted that the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Divisions were to relieve the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Divisions so that they could be moved to a reserve area ready for a move to the south (Somme) or north (Ypres) if required. The 4<sup>th</sup> Division relieved the 1<sup>st</sup> Division in the Fleubaix / Fromelles area on 3 July while the 5<sup>th</sup> Division was still arriving in France (from 26 June to 8 July), but on 6 July the 4<sup>th</sup> Division was also added to the reserve force to move to the south and was relieved by the 5<sup>th</sup> Division, which took charge of part of the line on 12 July as part of the First Army under the command of General Monro.

On 14 July, it was decided that an infantry attack should form part of the demonstration, the First Army probably providing two divisions, and the Second Army one. This

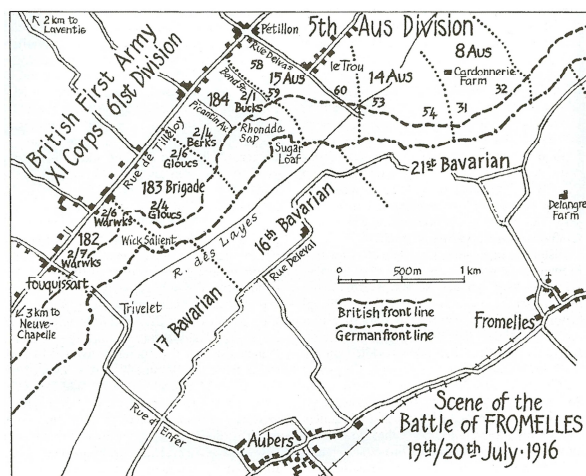
coincided with the 5<sup>th</sup> Division receiving its final 5,000 trench helmets. The bombardment was to begin on 14 July with all the artillery then available, and was to last about three days. General Haking's scheme of attack was therefore approved, its object (according to the First Army order issued on 15 July) being:

*“to prevent the enemy from moving troops southwards to take part in the main battle. For this purpose (it was added) the preliminary operations, so far as is possible, will give the impression of an impending offensive operation on a large scale, and the bombardment which commenced on the morning of the 14<sup>th</sup> inst. will be continued with increasing intensity up till the moment of the assault.*

C. E. W. Bean reports that General Haking, in a letter read to all troops on 16 July, the eve of the day appointed for the assault (it was later deferred 3 days), explained, firstly, the reason for the operation, and then the methods. In describing the latter he said that the feint bombardments in the south would be continued on the morning of the offensive ...

*“whilst our guns along the front of our real attack will be getting the exact range of the enemy's trenches without attracting undue notice. When everything is ready, our guns, consisting of some 350 pieces of all descriptions, and our trench mortars, will commence an intense bombardment of the enemy's front system of trenches. After about half-an-hour's bombardment the guns will suddenly lengthen range, our infantry will show their bayonets over the parapet, and the enemy, thinking we are about to assault, will come out of his shelters and man his parapets. The guns will then shorten their range, and drive the enemy back into his shelters again. This will be repeated several times. Finally, when we have cut all the wire, destroyed all the enemy's machine-gun emplacements, knocked down most of his parapets, killed a large proportion of the enemy, and thoroughly frightened the remainder, our infantry will assault, capture, and hold the enemy's support line along the whole front. The objective will be strictly limited to the enemy's support trenches and no more.”*

General Haking believed that the rear-most trench of the enemy's front system would probably be found at from 100 to 150 yards beyond the German front line and that the two allotted battalions of each brigade would suffice for an advance so limited.



Map 8: The Battle of Fromelles – Order of Battle for British and German forces.

Source: Mike Senior, Fromelles, 19/20 July 1916 – A Success After All?, pp 33-36, Stand To: The Journal of the Western Front Association, Number 83, August / September 2008,

The units involved in the attack were to be (from north-east to south-west):

5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division:

8<sup>th</sup> Brigade

Assaulting battalions 32<sup>nd</sup> (WA) and 31<sup>st</sup> (Qld, Vic)

Reserve battalions: 29<sup>th</sup> (Vic) and 30<sup>th</sup> (NSW)

14<sup>th</sup> Brigade (NSW)

Assaulting battalions 53<sup>rd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup>

Reserve battalions: 56<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup>

15<sup>th</sup> Brigade (Vic)

Assaulting battalions 59<sup>th</sup> and 60<sup>th</sup>

Reserve battalions: 57<sup>th</sup> and 58<sup>th</sup>

61<sup>st</sup> Division:

184<sup>th</sup> Brigade

Assaulting battalions 2/1<sup>st</sup> Buckinghamshire and 2/4<sup>th</sup> Royal Berkshire

Reserve battalions: 2/4<sup>th</sup> Oxfordshire and 2/5<sup>th</sup> Gloucestershire

183<sup>rd</sup> Brigade

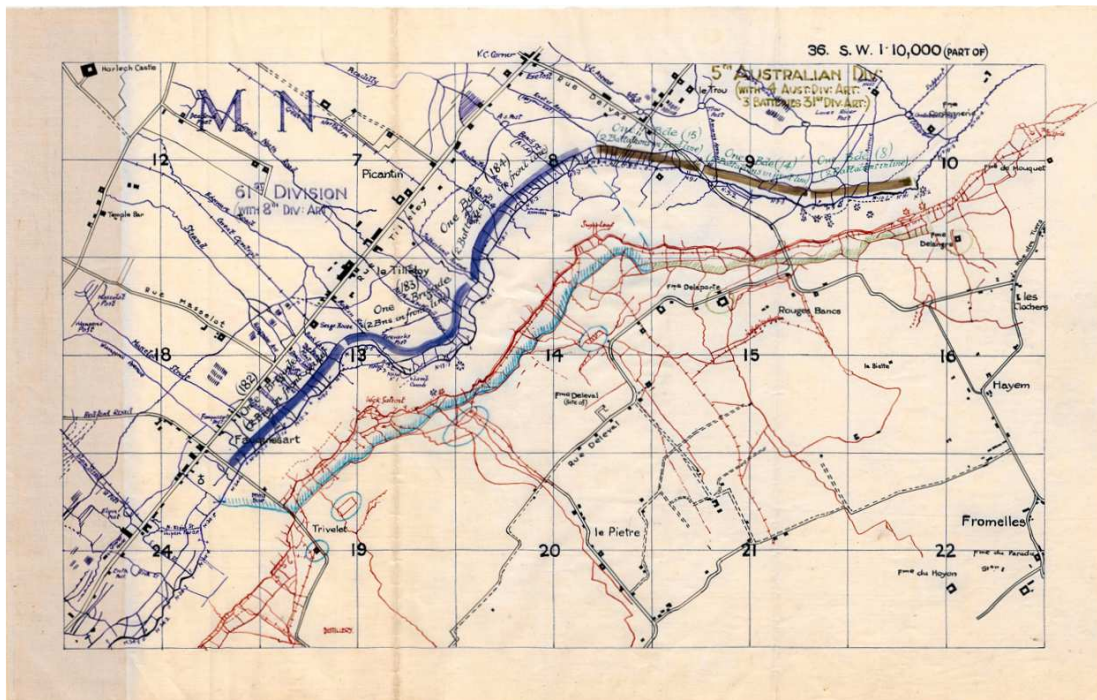
Assaulting battalions 2/4<sup>th</sup> Gloucestershire and 2/6<sup>th</sup> Gloucestershire

Reserve battalions: 2/5<sup>th</sup> Worcestershire and 2/7<sup>th</sup> Worcestershire

182<sup>nd</sup> Brigade

Assaulting battalions 2/6<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwickshire and 2/7<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwickshire

Reserve battalions: 2/5<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwickshire and 2/8<sup>th</sup> Royal Warwickshire



Fromelles Battle Map Original of July 1916

Of the Australian assaulting battalions, the 60<sup>th</sup> had not yet been in the front line on the Western Front; the 32<sup>nd</sup> and 54<sup>th</sup> had been there for part of a day, and the 59<sup>th</sup> somewhat longer; the 31<sup>st</sup> and 53<sup>rd</sup> for two days. Thus, the 5<sup>th</sup> Division of the AIF that had recently arrived in the Fromelles area was committed, with short notice, to attack a defensive

system that was described as “well developed” 14 months earlier against the troops of the 6<sup>th</sup> Bavarian Reserve Infantry Division that had been holding these defences for all of this time.

Due to wet weather and other limitations, the artillery bombardment, originally scheduled for 3 days was reduced to seven hours, and while intended to commence at 4 a.m., it finally began when the mist cleared at 11 o'clock in the morning of Wednesday, 19 July, with the infantry attack rescheduled to 6 p.m. instead of as originally planned for 11 a.m.

According to Bean, the Battle of Fromelles had its origins as:

*Suggested first by Haking as a feint-attack; then by Plumer as part of a victorious advance; rejected by Monro in favour of attack elsewhere; put forward again by G.H.Q. as a "purely artillery" demonstration; ordered as a demonstration but with an infantry operation added, according to Haking's plan and through his emphatic advocacy; almost cancelled-through weather and the doubts of G.H.Q. – and finally reinstated by Haig, apparently as an urgent demonstration- such were the changes of form through which the plans of this ill-fated operation had successively passed. It was now definitely ordered. Haking arranged that the seven hours' bombardment should be begun at 11 o'clock in the morning of Wednesday, July 19th, and the infantry attack at 6 p.m. Thus the assault, originally planned to be delivered before noon, was now to be made three hours before dusk.*

In response to the bombardment that commenced at 11 o'clock, by 2 o'clock the enemy's artillery began to answer the increasing British bombardment by shelling the communication trenches and reserve and support lines of both the attacking divisions. In the Australian area the ammunition and bomb-dump of the 31<sup>st</sup> Battalion was blown up and the battalion commander, Lieutenant-Colonel Toll, and most of his signallers, messengers, and the medical staff of the battalion were wounded. By 3 o'clock, the enemy's fire upon the trench-lines sharply increased, probably in answer to the bombardment.

The Australian 14<sup>th</sup> Brigade, having inadequate communication trenches, sent its third and fourth waves over the open fields between the “300 yards” and front lines at 5:25 and 5:31 p.m. At the same time the infantry of the 61<sup>st</sup> Division began to file out from its front line through sally-ports leading into No-Man's-Land. It was with this manoeuvre that the infantry operation really began.

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*1st Australian Division, General Staff, Headquarters War Diary July 1916*, AWM4-1/42/18

*1st Australian Division, Administrative Staff, Headquarters War Diary July 1916, AWM4-1/43/18*

*1<sup>st</sup> Infantry Brigade War Diary July 1916, AWM4-23/1/12*

*4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, General Staff, Headquarters War Diary July 1916, AWM4-1/48/4*

*4<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, Administrative Staff, Headquarters War Diary July 1916, AWM4-1/49/4*

*5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, General Staff, Headquarters War Diary July 1916, AWM4-1/50/5*

*5<sup>th</sup> Australian Division, Administrative Staff, Headquarters War Diary July 1916, AWM4-1/51/2*

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