

# A.I.F. ABROAD - Western Front Tour 2016

*James Downey*

I left Australia on Wednesday July 13th this year with eight other people from Sydney as part of a tour known as A.I.F. ABROAD. It was put together by a fellow from Melbourne who usually runs Kokoda tours, it was mainly made up of WWI re-enactors from all over Australia.

All members of the tour met up while at our stop over in Singapore before heading on to London. We had two days in London before catching a train to Lille in France where we were met by a fellow WWI French re-enactor. He became our first guide while in France and took us to his cafe in Armentieres.



**The group outside of the Mademoiselle from Armentieres Cafe.  
James is standing behind the flag and Dennis Channels is third from the right in the front row.  
Photo: James Downey**

We then made our way to our accommodation in Belgium before heading to the city of Ypres to attend the nightly last post ceremony at the Menin Gate. The local fire brigade have sounded the last post every night since 1928, the year after the gate house was officially opened. The Menin Gate contains the names of 56,000 allied soldiers who fought in that sector and died. Approximately 6,000 of those names are Australians.

The group attended the official ceremonies to commemorate the centenary of the battle of Fromelles and Pozieres. I also had the pleasure to be at the burial of an Australian soldier whose remains were discovered on April 25th 2013. He was buried in the Commonwealth cemetery in the shadow of the Australian 5th Division memorial, Polygon Wood.

We visited other Australian memorials, museums and battle fields including Villers-Bretonneux/Hamel and Bullecourt.



**Burial of an Australian Soldier at the Commonwealth Cemetery at Polygon Wood.  
Photo: James Downey**

Several members of our tour found graves and names of family members etched on walls at some of the memorials we visited. I found my mother's great uncle, Joseph Young, who survived Gallipoli only to be killed in France in 1918. His body was never found. Dennis Channels, also from Riverstone, found his uncle's name at the VC Corner memorial in Fromelles. His uncle was part of the massive loss of Australian life on our very first night of battle on the Western Front.

The tour ended with my arrival back in Sydney on Tuesday the 26th of July. I brought home several items that I subsequently donated to the Riverstone Museum to try and help tell the story of our service men and women during the Great War 1914-1918. I look forward to seeing them on display.



**Shrapnel from Australian Lines at Bullecourt. Photo: Rosemary Phillis**