On the evening of 19 July 1916, Australian troops became involved in their first major battle on the Western Front.

Stationed in northern France, close to the town of Fromelles, between the Somme Valley and the Belgian border, the 5th Australian and 61st British divisions had yet to engage in any combat. Several weeks prior, just south of Fromelles, the British Army and German Second Army began what would become a five month long battle known as the Somme Offensive. The intense fighting over a period of several weeks required the British to request reinforcements. Knowing the Germans would be needing similar support, careful attention was paid to the movement of troops within the region. When intelligence reports arrived indicating movement, it was decided an attack would be planned against the German line at Fromelles.

This battle was intended to distract the Germans from moving south to join the larger offensive. The artillery bombardment of the German lines began on the morning of 19th July and by 6 p.m. the full assault had...
The Battle of Fromelles
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commenced. With periods of rain in the previous days, the fields were wet and muddy. Aged 22 when he enlisted in 1915, W.J.A. (‘Allan’) Allsop was present that night and he documented in his journal a vivid account of the events which unfolded. As a stretcher bearer, Allsop was responsible for ferrying the wounded from the trenches to the ambulances posted behind the lines: ‘Backwards & forwards we travelled between the firing line and the R.A.P. [Regimental Aid Post] with knuckles torn and bleeding due to the narrow passage ways. "Cold sweat", not perspiration, dripped from our faces and our breath came only in gasps. The communication trench was about 1½ miles long. By the time we had completed 2 trips (six miles) with the numerous zig-zag turns in the trench and the stoppages caused by the traffic up and down, we were weak and completely exhausted.’ (Allan Allsop, MLMSS 1606/Item 2)

As the battle wore on, the number of wounded grew exponentially. Teams worked non-stop, carrying one man at a time to safety. The trip, however, proved to be just as dangerous for Allsop and the other stretcher bearers, as it was for the soldiers stationed in the trenches. He recounted:

‘No sooner had I entered this sap "Piney Avenue" than a bullet struck my steel helmet and nearly knocked it off my head. The sound caused my mates in front of me to look round. Happily the bullet came at an angle so that the roundness of the helmet caused it to glance off.’ – (Allan Allsop, MLMSS 1606/Item 2) (transcript; page 15)

When the battle ended on the morning of 20th July, the Australian and British divisions had been devastated. What seemed like a decent plan in theory, turned out to be ineffective. The massive size of ‘no-man’s land’ separating the two trenches, the relative inexperience of the men involved, and the inability to effectively notify all troops that the engagement was called off all contributed to the failure. Additionally, because the Germans had been on the high ground, they had seen all of the movements of the British and Australian troops in the period leading up to the battle. Unfavourable weather conditions had forced the postponement of the offensive for several days, and therefore it would not have been hard for the Germans to deduce something was about to happen. Allsop documented in his journal the preparations of battle:

16th July (Sunday)
Two of us were given a job of making the Operating Theatre Gas Proof. Later in the afternoon we were asked to make two operating tables as fast as we could. Evidently something is expected. The arrival of troops and guns seem to suggest it.

17th July (Monday)
Orders this morning stated that an offensive movement had been planned for today but it has been postponed till Wednesday. It is rather strange that such orders should be circulated when they are generally kept secret. Aeroplanes were very busy today.

(Allan Allsop, MLMSS 1606/Item 2)
With 5,533 Australian casualties, the Battle of Fromelles is recognized as the deadliest twenty-four hours in Australian military history. In 2008, a project was undertaken to discover the location of mass graves nearby the battlefield which was believed to hold the remains of soldiers who perished during the battle. Through the hard work and dedication of the project team, the remains of 250 individuals were recovered. In 2010, the soldiers were properly buried with full military honours at the Fromelles (Pheasant Wood) Military Cemetery, and as of mid-2015, 144 of the 250 soldiers had been identified.

During the war, Allsop served in both Egypt and France, assigned to the 8th Field Ambulance, 15th Field Ambulance, and later the Australian Corps Signal company. He returned to Australia in April 1919 on the troopship, Sardinia. A collection of five journals Allsop kept which cover his experiences between July 1915 and December 1917 were purchased in 1920 by the State Library as a part of their European War Collecting Project.[2]

In commemoration of the centennial anniversary of the Battle of Fromelles, the diary of Allan Allsop is now on display in the State Library’s Amaze Gallery.

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