Near a picturesque village called Pozières, in northern France, is a patch of land that is owned by you, and by me, and by every Australian. This slice of French countryside was earned 100 years ago this year – and the price that Australia paid for it, was a generation of its sons.

The Windmill site was attained by the Australian War Memorial because it marks a ridge more densely sown with Australian blood than any other place on earth. Over a seven-week period in 1916, close to 7,000 Australians died in this countryside – including 5,000 casualties in a single day during the attack on Fromelle. This battle is described by the Australian War Memorial as the “worst 24 hours in Australia’s entire history.”

Archie Barwick, a farmer from Richmond, was among the tens of thousands of Anzac troops who took part in this 1916 Somme offensive. Like many Diggers, Archie had served at Gallipoli before being transferred to Europe’s Western Front. Writing in his diary after the Battle of Pozières, Archie described the “engines of destruction” that characterised this new age of technological warfare. He said that …

“All day long the ground rocked & swayed backwards & forwards from the concussion of this frightful bombardment. It put me in mind of being on top of a well-built haystack & swaying it about, that’s how the ground behaved. Men were driven stark staring mad & more than one of them rushed out of the trench, over towards the Germans. Any amount of them could be seen crying and sobbing like children, their nerves completely gone … But still the Australians refused to give ground …”

Archie Barwick’s words remind us that the First World War – and 1916 in particular – is a heart-breaking story of slaughter: 17 million people died worldwide in this conflict, including 7 million civilians. Australia itself lost
60,000 soldiers and 25 nurses, with a further 60,000 dying in the following decade of war-related injuries. And in Tasmania – where the population was less than half of what it is today – an average of two families, every single day of the conflict, received the news that their son, or husband, or father, or daughter would never be coming home.

Here in Lindisfarne, 14 households received the news – out of a population of only 632 people. These were the families of

- brothers Frederick and Bernard Lane, two of five Lane boys who served in World War One;
- Frank King, the sole Lindisfarne soldier to be killed at Gallipoli;
- next-door neighbours Frank Chapman and Francis Brammall, who lived at 6 and 8 Lincoln Street;
- Donald Anderson, George Atkins and Frederick Atwell, who all died in the fighting at Pozières;
- Eric Stewart, George Rossington and Douglas Scott, who are among the millions with no known graves;
- Robert Pinkerton and Frank Sellers, who died on the same day at Villers-Bretonneux;
- Charles Stewart, who was in the all-Tasmanian 40th Battalion; and
- Arthur Fleming, a Lindisfarne carter who died in the Third Battle of Ypres. Another man who was killed in this battle was Gunner Arthur Sampson, a miner from New South Wales. He was my great, great uncle.

No family was spared the grief. Everyone knew someone who had been killed or wounded. With this in mind, it raises the question as to why we should commemorate the centenary of our participation in this disaster – or, for that matter, any war.
Last year, while researching this question, I had the honour of talking to Hobart resident Joshua Weir, who spent 15 years in the military and served in Iraq and Bougainville. I asked Mr Weir about the importance of commemorating World War I, and he said that this conflict marked the birth of the Anzac legend. The Australian colonies had federated only 14 years before and these original Diggers helped define our national identity – a character that was described by Charles Bean, the official war historian, as resourceful, adventurous, independent and committed to mateship.

But what I found especially moving was when Mr Weir added that the First World War had claimed more Australian lives than all conflicts since. He said it is not only important to remember those who have fallen, but also powerful.

“On Remembrance Day,” he said, “or even on the anniversary of a certain battle, a lot of my friends and I say a prayer for the ghosts – and by this I mean we reflect upon, and even talk to our mates who have fallen… I’m not really spiritual but I feel that by remembering them, we keep their spirits and memory alive.

“It also reminds us”, Mr Weir added, “that life is good and that the rest of us are still here and we can get on with it: that being the duty we owe them for their sacrifice.”

With Mr Weir’s words in mind, I know that today, a century since Australian troops had their first taste of fighting on the Western Front, many of you will also be commemorating your own events. Perhaps it will be the 75th anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk, during which the tenacious Diggers in the north-African desert earned themselves the nickname of ‘Rats’. Maybe your thoughts will turn to the 50th anniversary
of the Battle of Long Tan, in which the action of 108 Anzacs audaciously repelled a Viet Cong force of up to 2,500 men.

Whatever or whoever you reflect on today, our nation stands beside you to welcome home the memory of those who have fallen. Their spirit continues to define the best that we, as Australians, hope to be. And to those of you who are among the 13,000 current and former Defence personnel living in Tasmania, we say “thank you” for your service.

Lest We Forget.