Between 1914 and 1918 millions of soldiers of many nations fought and died along the Western Front between Belgium and Northern France. Death and injuries occurred on an unprecedented scale as 20th century weapons met with 19th century military techniques.

On 1st July 1916 20,000 British Soldiers died in one 24 hour period on the Somme. The first Western Front battle involving Australian troops was at Fromelles a few weeks later. Here, on the 19th July 5,533 Australians were killed or injured. This remains the worst day in Australian military history.

In order to deal with the thousands of wounded men, a system of battlefield evacuation and treatment was in place. Stretcher bearers took the wounded from trenches to a dressing station and then to a casualty clearing station sited some kilometres from the front. Here the men received treatment including surgery and anaesthesia. From the casualty clearing station the wounded were transported, often by rail, to a general hospital. They were then evacuated to specialist hospitals in Britain, repatriated home to Australia, or returned to their units.

Anaesthesia had changed little in the previous 60 years and was mostly ether or chloroform administered by open techniques and not always by doctors. Nitrous oxide and spinal anaesthesia were also used. Anaesthesia and resuscitation improved considerably throughout the war.

A tour of the Western Front today reveals cemeteries and memorials scattered around sites of battles, advanced dressing stations and casualty clearing stations. Museums also contain many relevant items of interest.