

Address to the National Press Club: We're all Australians now: 1918 and the War that changed us

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The Hon. Dr Brendan Nelson AO
Anzac Hall

The vision for the Australian War Memorial was articulated by its founder, Charles Bean in 1948:

Here is their spirit, in the heart of the land they loved; and here we guard the record which they themselves made.

From the Gallipoli landing to Montbehrein and the Armistice, from the front he had been witness to it all.

In July and August 1916 at Pozieres, he saw 23,000 Australian casualties in six weeks - 6,800 dead; five Victoria Crosses.

Almost killed twice on 31 July returning from the very front, he simply wrote:

Blackened men everywhere, torn and whole – dead for days.

A mortally wounded Australian asked of him,

“Will they remember me in Australia?”

Bean subsequently conceived and resolved that at its end he would build this, the finest museum and memorial to these men of the Australian Imperial Force and the nurses.

Over almost a quarter of a century, he would write and edit the twelve volumes of the official history. Finally, to summarise it all, he wrote this:

What these men did, nothing can alter now. The good and the bad; the greatness and the smallness of their story; it rises, it always rises, above the mists of ages.....a monument to great hearted men and for their nation a possession forever.

Immersed in their spirit, we now pause here in the Australian War Memorial conceived in blood they shed for one another, for us and the ideals of mankind.

We are Australians.

Whether conferred by birth or by choice, we are defined less by our constitution and the machinery of a democracy given us by the British, than we are by our values and our beliefs; the way relate to one another and see our place in the world.

We are shaped by our triumphs and our failures; our heroes and villains; the way as a people we have endured adversity and how we face the inevitable adversities that are coming and respond to emerging, unseen horizons.

No events so deeply wounded, divided, changed and ultimately defined us than those that bring us here today.

Every nation has its story. This is our story.

At no time in history has Australia had as great an impact on international affairs as we did in 1918.

It was the year of victory.

But as with defeat, it brought tragedy – 65,000 Australian casualties, 14,664 dead.

In the blood soaked quagmire of Passchendaele in October 1917, Australia had sustained 38,000 casualties in eight weeks. Thirty five Australians were killed for every metre of ground taken.

In March 1918, the Germans took it all back in just three days.

General Erich Ludendorff, Chief of the Staff of the German armies launched **Operation 'Michael'** with his amassed troops on 21 March on a front south of Arras. A stunning success, the Germans were now dangerously close to the gates of Amiens and its vital rail infrastructure.

A week later, fighting at **Dernancourt** was desperate.

Stanley McDougall charged a second wave of Germans, single handedly killing seven men, capturing a machine gun which he turned on the attackers. Firing until out of ammunition, he charged again, bayoneting three men and an officer. Grabbing a Lewis machine gun, he attacked yet again, halting the enemy advance.

McDougall was awarded the Victoria Cross.

Days later the Australians faced the strongest attack of the entire war. Outflanked and penetrated, only a ferocious counter-attack saved the day.

But the Germans were losing momentum - stretched communication lines, tired troops and unable to bring up their formidable artillery.

The Australians saw boyish British troops falling back in disorder while others, tired and depleted, bravely held on.

The Germans had to be stopped at Villers-Bretonneux.

The Australian National Memorial in France rises above a hill north of the village of **Villers-Bretonneux**.

From its tower, pilgrims survey the key Australian battlefields.

The town's school is named in honour of the Australian state of Victoria. The playground bears a sign exhorting children to, *N'oublions j'amaïs l'Australie* (Never Forget Australia).

This is why.

On 24 April 1918, at 4.45 on a dull and misty morning, heavy German artillery fire descended onto the British held line in front of Villers-Bretonneux.

British soldiers falling back warned Germans were advancing with flame-throwers and tanks.

Amiens, now a deserted and shell-damaged city, was under direct and serious threat.

The Australians resolved the enemy would not pass.

The Germans broke through to the Amiens side of the town pounded by artillery fire.

There had to be a quick and powerful counter attack.

When two German soldiers appeared bearing a white flag demanding Australian surrender, Brigadier William Glasgow barked, "Tell 'em to go to hell!"

In a pincer movement, the Australian 15th Brigade would attack on the town's north and the 13th on the south. British troops would follow through in the gap created.

Grenades and extra ammunition were issued.

At 10pm supporting artillery opened fire prematurely.

German flares lit the sky in stark, multi-coloured clusters. Heavy German artillery fire rained on the town, smashing roofs and walls as buildings erupted in fire.

Sergeant Walter Downing of the 57th battalion wrote:

....houses burning in the town threw a sinister light....it was past midnight. Men muttered, "It's Anzac Day".....there was nothing to do but go straight forward and die hard.

And die hard they did.

Captain Robert Forsyth of the 52nd Battalion, recalled:

... An officer shouted -'Still'.....I could see a long single line of men standing motionless in either direction as far as I could see.....

....as the light faded, the darkness in front started to tap, tap, tap, and bullets whistled....the line shuffled forward....rifles ready like men strolling into fern after rabbits.

The whistle of bullets became a swish and patter.....boys fell all round me....without a sound.

They went forward, many straight into the face of machine guns.

Some in the 57th Battalion began yelling, their screams heard across town above the deafening noise

Downing wrote:

The yelling rose high and passed to the 58th and 60th Battalions. Baying like hell-hounds, they charged.

Oblivious to their losses, they attacked with bayonets and grenades backed by machine guns,

Their blood was up.

Lieutenant Clifford Sadlier of the 51st Battalion won the Victoria Cross that night and Sergeant Charlie Stokes a Distinguished Conduct Medal. Carrying bags of grenades ('bombs'), they boldly led their platoons against at least six enemy machine gun posts.

Sadlier attacked a machine-gun position alone with his revolver, shooting a German who shot him in the leg whilst surrendering.

Their grenades wreaked bloody havoc.

Stokes later confided to his youngest daughter that the morning after Villers-Bretonneux, when he saw what he had done to other human beings, he wept like a child

Days later, Downing wrote to a friend:

.....the killing went on, I was mad....I had blood all over my rifle, bayonet and hands.....we had avenged Fromelles....

Years later he wrote:

The Australians killed and killed..... The evil pyre in the town flickered and showed to their killers the white faces of Germans lurking in shell holes, or flinging away their arms and trying to escape, only to be stabbed or shot down....

The Germans had been driven off. One German officer wrote:

The Australians were magnificent. Nothing seemed to stop them. When our fire was heaviest, they just disappeared in shell holes and came up as soon as it slackened.

With 1,500 Australians dead, an officer surveyed the carnage:

All about us lay the dead, pitifully boyish-looking Tommies.....among them was the equipment of....our men who had died in the recapture ... and had been buried.

On 1 June, John Monash was promoted to Lieutenant General and command of the Australian Corps.

An Anzac of Prussian descent, Jewish, brilliant, meticulous, engineer, consummate administrator, Monash would lead our nation's five divisions to a series of stunning victories.

Yet war sickened him. He had written to his wife from the mire of Passchendaele:

I am heartily sick of the whole war business. Its horror, ghastly inefficiency, impossible cruelty and misery have always appalled me....

In their March offensive, the Germans had captured the village of **Hamel**.

Allied command wanted it back.

Monash was given the job - straighten the front line south of the Somme River.

Unaware of this, Prime Minister Billy Hughes turned up two days before the battle to address the troops, stirring their emotions.

Private Walter Adcock said:

The very word 'Australian' tingled in the men's veins...

For the first time in history, Australia would fight with the Americans and under the command of an Australian general.

Monash chose the 4th of July – American Independence Day.

Embracing combined arms tactics of coordinated infantry, aircraft, artillery and tanks, Monash chaired a four hour pre-battle briefing with his officers.

Twelve battle-depleted Australian battalions and 1,000 Americans from the 33rd division supported by 60 tanks, dozens of aircraft and 600 artillery guns, attacked at 3.10 am across a 6.5 kilometre front to a depth of 2.5 kilometres.

Monash planned victory in 90 minutes. It was done in 93 minutes.

A war winning combination had finally been found – a corps commander of genius, Australian infantry, tanks, artillery and aircraft.

One of two Victoria Crosses awarded at Hamel was to Private Harry Dalzeil.

At Pear Trench, a revolver in each hand, Dalzeil rushed a machine gun, capturing it and the entire crew. Severely wounded, he twice ran over open ground under heavy fire to secure ammunition:

...I dashed at seven Germans with my revolvers. One German bloodhound wounded me in the hand, but I soon had him on the ground.

I lunged at him with my German dagger, catching him right over the heart. His dying cry upset me and I shivered.

Ignoring orders for medical treatment, Dalzeil kept lobbing grenades under heavy machine gun fire until he collapsed. His skull shattered and brain exposed by a sniper bullet, he was laid with the dead. A mate later noticed he was breathing.

But Dalzeil's strongest, proudest recollection was this:

.....in No Man's Land a little German boy in tin hat and grey uniform - about 14 years old, came to me cryingtwo Yanks came at him with fixed bayonets.

Stop! I cried, raising my two empty revolvers...don't move or I'll blow your bloody heads off!

I told them to take him back to the Captain. On passing the dressing station, I saw a German soldier with his foot blown away, the two Yanks and little Fritz conversing together.

One of the Yanks came over and said, "This German soldier wants to talk to you".

"Comrade", he said, "you have saved my son".....and he shook my hand.

With 800 Australians and Americans laying together in death, one Australian officer bestowed the highest praise:

United States troops are now classified as diggers.

Days after Hamel, French Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau arrived to address Monash's men:

When the Australians came to France the French people expected a great deal of you. We knew you would fight a real fight. But we did not know from the very beginning you would astonish the whole continent....I shall say to my countrymen: "I have seen the Australians. I have looked in their faces. I know these men....will fight alongside of us again, until the cause for which we are all fighting is safe for us and our children.

French General, Charles Mangin launched a stunning attack on the Germans on 18 July in the **second battle of Marne**.

With 23 French and American divisions under his command, supported by 500 tanks, he struck a savage blow 9 kilometres into German lines.

Nicknamed 'the butcher' for his sociopathic indifference to casualties, Mangin's actions that day were described by Bean as "the turning point of the Great War.....one of the most formidable spearheads ever struck".

Mangin shocked German high command. Hindenburg and Ludendorff wavered.

But the greatest blow against the Germans would be struck on the 8th of

August. Claimed as a 'British' victory, it was delivered by the Australians and the Canadians.

Amiens lent its name to the decisive German defeat by the British Fourth Army and the French First Army on 8 August 1918.

General Erich Ludendorff described it as:

...the black day of the German army....the worst experience I had.

The twin objectives were to break the German lines and to protect Amiens.

Guns silently registered their targets.

Into the attack were brought 430 British tanks concealed by masking aircraft noise.

Monash addressed his troops on the evening of 7 August:

For the first time in the history of this corps, all five Australian Divisions will tomorrow engage in the largest and most important battle operation ever undertaken by the Corps.....supported by exceptionally powerful artillery, tanks and aeroplanes on a scale never previously attempted.

Thick fog blanketed the battlefield when massed British guns brought down the creeping barrage at 4.20 a.m.

Sergeant Walter ('Jimmy') Downing of the 57th Battalion wrote:

.....the whole world flared behind us.....a titanic pandemonium of ten thousand guns. We shouted to each other, but we couldn't hear our own voices, buried beneath colossal ranges of sound....

... Then a rattling of machine-guns told us that the lads in front were at grips with the enemy...

... We hurried forward.....as bullets zipped among us. ...

Three hours later, German trenches were overrun and by mid-afternoon, the Australians had taken their objectives.

Gunner Helmore reported from deep into enemy territory:

Entering Fritz's land with mixed feelings....abandoned gun positions, corpses littered about, blankets strewn everywhere....we could not repress a shudder at the gruesome sights we saw.

German trenches ploughed up by shells and a few still shapes in grey uniforms told the tale of our big barrage..... no barbed wire; no support or

reserve trenches, just a small shallow front line...very different from German defences at Passchendaele.

Aircraft co-ordinated with ground forces and engaged multiple dogfights. The Roye road was strewn with hundreds of downed aircraft and derelict tanks.

George Maxwell found a group of dead Canadian machine gunners unwounded, killed by concussion from a high explosive shell:

Some were in a crouching posture, as if tending their guns. They looked as if they were still alive, some resembled wax figures.

One...was caught in the act of lighting his pipe, his hands still cupped...and there he knelt, stone dead

The Australians pushed on – catching hundreds of Germans in the Morcourt Valley, with enemy still firing into their flank and rear.

Private Edward Lynch, 45th Battalion wrote:

....passing the old enemy trench behind us....we see a broken machine gun emplacement with five 3rd Division men lying dead.... bullet riddled, as they gamely rushed the enemy gun.

In shell holes are rifles left by the wounded men, so we know the Fritz gun reaped a heavy toll before it was silenced.

At the gun position we notice broad tracks of a tank....two enemy gunners lie dead just yards from the gun which is squashed flat, driven into the dust by....a tank.....

Flattened alongside the gun is a grey clothed heap of gory pulp.....a few hours ago the living body of a Fritz gunner.

On the ridge overlooking **Morcourt**, A Company with its left flank exposed saw Germans preparing to escape the Australian advance.

Reduced to half strength, they boldly attacked the village.

With flanking support, Captain Norman Wilson led his men into the village from the south headed by one tank, machine guns and a six pounder in rapid action.

The vigorous German defence was quickly defeated in ferocious fighting. Wilson was awarded the Military Cross.

The German Army suffered 27,000 casualties at Amiens, the Australians captured 8,000 prisoners.

Among the 450 guns captured was the 11-inch German gun mounted on a railway platform, which had been shelling Amiens from Harbonnières.

Its barrel is displayed here at the Australian War Memorial, a powerful reminder of brutal, industrialised killing.

Three days after the Amiens offensive launched, Field Marshal Douglas Haig met the Australian divisional commanders at Villers-Bretonneux.

According to Colonel Thomas Blamey, Monash's chief of staff, Haig thanked them. Then, tears rolling down his cheeks:

You do not know what the Australians and Canadians have done for the British Empire in these days

Blamey described a long, "dramatic" pause, and they left.

King George V arrived at Amiens the next day and Knighted Monash - the first battlefield knighthood in 100 years.

Monash pushed the Australian Corps on, either side of the Somme River to **Péronne**.

Overlooked by the fortified hill of **Mont St Quentin**, the enemy stood strong.

Anxious to strike before the oncoming winter, Monash hardly paused.

With well learned infantry tactics, the 2nd Division boldly attacked Mont St Quentin. The 5th Division set against Péronne.

Close frantic fighting with bombs, bayonets and machine-guns ensued.

Badly wounded, Lieutenant Harold Williams was evacuated to a casualty clearing station at Daours and paid tribute to unsung heroes:

That these nurses worked their long hours among such surroundings without collapsing, spoke volumes for their will-power and sense of duty.

The place reeked with the odours of blood, antiseptic dressings, and unwashed bodies.

They saw soldiers in their most pitiful state – wounded, blood-stained, dirty.....reeking of blood and filth.....incredible that a woman could....retain her sanity.

Mont St Quentin was taken on 1 September, regarded by some as the most brilliant achievement of the AIF.

Eight Victoria Crosses were awarded to Australians in the capture of Péronne and Mont St Quentin; the greatest number for any single Australian operation.

Monash's battle-weary Australians pushed on from Péronne, fighting their way beyond **Hargicourt** to where they stood overlooking the Hindenburg Line.

It was a race against the approaching winter to break through the Hindenburg Line, a wide fortified zone of machine-guns, artillery, barbed wire, trenches, and tunnels.

Monash kept attacking but his men were reaching an exhausted breaking point when an American corps was offered.

In his climactic attack on 29 September against the Hindenburg Line, Monash commanded more Americans than Australians.

Supported by a British division, the Germans were forced to withdraw. Over the next week the Australians fought their last battles around a string of defended villages.

The Australian capture of **Montbrehain** on 5 October was their last battle, these exhausted diggers ending their war victorious.

The Victoria Cross was awarded to Lieutenant Joe Maxwell who wrote:

...We began to reflect that it was merely a matter of time when we would all be killed...of the three hundred who left Australia in B Company not half a dozen remained.....I was utterly sick of the war...

Captain Ellis, the 5th Division historian watched them leave the battlefield for the last time:

Troops more fatigued had rarely been seen....and yet, by sheer determination, they overcame the weakness of the body and marched back in excellent order.....

...their strained, pallid faces revealed what they had passed through.....

.....numerous transport units along the road respectfully, in silence pulled their vehicles to one side so that the war-worn men might not have an extra step to march.

It was the mute and eloquent testimony of brave men to heroes.

A world away in **Palestine**, victory finally came on 31 October when the Turks signed an armistice.

On 25 September at Semakh on the Sea of Galilee, the 4th Light Horse Brigade had fought a Turkish garrison fortified by German machine gunners. Capturing 365 prisoners, the 11th Light Horse Regiment included 30 Aboriginal light horsemen, from the Queensland mission stations.

The Australian Light Horse rode into the ancient city of Damascus on 1 October.

The official historian, Henry Gullet wrote of them:

They rode, very dusty and unshaved, their big hats battered and drooping, through....the oldest city in the world, with the same easy, casual bearing, and the same self-confidence that are the distinctive characteristics of their country tracks at home.

On the western front, the Guns finally fell silent with the Armistice on 11 November.

Charles Bean chose not to celebrate.

Instead, he drove to Fromelles where he witnessed Australia's worst day ever in July 1916 - 5,533 Australian casualties and 1,917 dead.

In silence he walked the battlefield, to reflect and be with the men who had dreamt of this day they would never see, but for which they had given their lives:

We found the old no man's land simply full of our dead. The skulls and bones and torn uniforms were lying about everywhere.

Bean later wrote:

It is over. The enormous effort of the men – yes, and women and children....is finished....Australia will settle down to carve out her new and splendid future....we are free to be happy again.

Sixty thousand Australians bought us this happiness with their lives.

Reaction to the Armistice in Australia was joyous and prolonged.

We emerged victorious, but inconsolably mourning 62,000 dead.

The nation would live with another 60,000 who would die over the following decade.

Private Richard Williams had fought on the Somme and Passchendaele. The end of his war was a taste of things to come.

Just hours from Freemantle on the morning of the Armistice, he killed himself by jumping off the ship. He had told Chaplain Wilson Smith that “he would rather do anything than go back to Australia”.

For many of the 160,000 returning veterans, another war was about to begin.

One soldier said:

The war will never let you go, you know.

It will come back at all sorts of times.

You finish up enlisting twice – once for the war, and once for the nightmares.

Of Australia's 272,000 veterans, 170,000 suffered wounds or illnesses.

As marble, stone and bronze memorials were erected as ‘substitute graves’ of ennobled memory, the nation was deeply divided, more so than at any time in our history.

Ongoing bitter divisions frequently manifest in violence.

Conscription, religion and politics polarised us.

Enlisted men were politically endorsed, regarded as superior Australians to the ‘shirkers’.

Carrying a crippling war debt, repatriation costs approached a fifth of all government outlays.

Divorce rates had doubled and many men returned broken, embittered and violent. Families found themselves as carers for damaged, traumatised sons and husbands aged well beyond their years.

A single word, “Pozières” or “Passchendaele” uttered in a hushed tone denoted inconsolable grief or an unspeakable domestic environment.

Yet in the decade that followed, culminating in the Great Depression, we remained true to our young, brittle democracy.

It was possibly our greatest achievement.

John Monash's leadership of the Australian Corps to its stunning victories in 1918 laid the foundation for a no less significant post war legacy.

Monash was the most widely respected Australian.

Veterans regarded him as their natural spokesman, an outsider, unpretentious not of the establishment - honest, decent and intelligent.

In his leadership of everything from the Melbourne Anzac Day parade to Rotary and the Australian Association for the advancement of Science, he was a pillar of the democracy for which so much had been given.

His repudiation of the right wing movement exhorting him to lead an insurrection against the government during the Great Depression spoke truth to his beliefs and vision for a modern Australia:

The only hope for Australia is in the ballot box and an educated electorate.

He believed in the liberating, egalitarian principles in democracy.

He knew that what would most protect us from ideas deeply rooted in ignorance and forged on an anvil of prejudice, is – education.

At the heart of the Australian War Memorial is the Hall of Memory within which since 1993 has been interred the Tomb of the Unknown Australian Soldier.

Above him stand silent sentinels, fifteen stained glass windows depicting a serviceman and nurse from the First World War.

At the base of each is a single word.

Charles Bean and John Treloar, a veteran of Gallipoli and France and the Memorial's longest serving director, asked themselves a very important question.

“What are the essential personal, social and battle qualities we saw in these men and women?”

They probed the basis of character.

‘Character’ derives from the Greek word meaning the impression left in wax by a stone seal ring. The Greeks called it ‘the stamp of personality’.

Informed by worthwhile intrinsic virtues, character transcends everything else in life – rank, power, money, influence, looks and intellect.

RESOURCE CANDOUR DEVOTION CURIOSITY INDEPENDENCE
COMRADESHIP ANCESTRY PATRIOTISM CHIVALRY LOYALTY COOLNESS
CONTROL AUDACITY ENDURANCE DECISION

Young Australians seeking values for the world they want need look no further than these.

Years after he had made his diary entry for 24 August 1916 at Mouquet Farm, Charles Bean reflected on the events that had inspired his words that evening.

His much loved cousin, 2nd Lt Lionel 'Leo' Butler had been buried that day. Bean had written:

As we placed his coffin in the ground, six more or less close friends standing nearby, a labourer leaning on his scythe and a French woman dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief, I could not help but feel if it was all worthwhile.

Was there anything in this war to justify such sacrifices?

Pondering back, Bean asked himself:

What was so special about the Australians?

He answered it thus:

The answer lay in the mettle of the men themselves. To be the kind of man that would give way when his mates were trusting to his firmness....to live the rest of his life haunted by the knowledge that he lacked the grit to carry it through, this was the prospect with which these men could not live..

...life was very dear, but life was not worth living unless they could be true to their ideal of Australian manhood.

Bean realised he had observed, absorbed and recorded the first revelation of an emerging Australian character. Henry Lawson had called it *mateship*.

Wherever they fought, they were sustained by belief in their worth and in one another, whether, as Bean observed, "their own death or the destruction of the world would come".

It is a spirit that binds us, irrespective of the adversities we face.

We emerged with a greater belief in ourselves and a deeper understanding of what it means to be, an Australian.

This place reminds us of the truths by which we live. Not the building, artefacts or relics displayed, but the stories of the men and women who stand behind them.

It challenges every Australian every day to ask if we continue to be people worthy of such sacrifices.

Just two lives described by Bean that 'bought our freedom to be happy again'.

Harry Thorpe was a Brabawoolong man from the Tyers Lake Mission, Lakes Entrance, Victoria.

In February 1916 he left his wife Julia and son Reginald and travelled to Sale.

Denying his Aboriginality, he enlisted into the 7th Battalion. Wounded at Pozieres and again at Bullecourt, in the hellhole of Broodseinde in 1917, he was awarded the Military Medal for bravery, "inspiring his men while clearing German dugouts and pillboxes".

In Monash's August offensive he was found in open ground with a gunshot wound to the abdomen on 9 August, dying the same day.

On 10 September 1918, this was published in the *Melbourne Argus*:

*They laid our hero down to rest
in the flag with a southern cross.
And we mourn him as one of the best.
For his death was Australia's loss.*

Your loving wife Julia and son Reginald

In 1924, Mrs Elizabeth Hart sat in her kitchen at the back of her home in 4 Park Street, Middle Park Melbourne.

Her task was to pen the words for her son's grave that she would never see at the Guards cemetery, Lesboeuufs France.

Ian Donald Hart had been a draper at Myer, Melbourne in late June 1915 when the Gallipoli casualty lists were published. Enlisted into the 60th Battalion, he survived Fromelles but was killed on 27 November 1916. He was thirty years old.

She wrote:

I GAVE MY SON
HE GAVE HIS ALL, HIS LIFE

FOR AUSTRALIA
AND EMPIRE

The individual sacrifice of these men and of those who loved them; their devotion to duty and to our country is but two of thousands that gave us what we have and made us who we are.

62,000 hand knitted poppies, woven as repositories of love for every one of them will soon sweep across the grounds of this place, the Australian War Memorial.

They remind us that we *are* Australians.

We are young, and we are *free*.