

2017

ANZAC Spirit Study Tour

WHAT DOES THE ENDURING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
AUSTRALIANS AND THE PEOPLE OF VILLERS-BRETONNEUX TEACH
US ABOUT THE ANZAC SPIRIT?

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What does the enduring relationship between Australians and the people of Villers-Bretonneux teach us about the Anzac Spirit?

One century ago, when the pernicious advance of World War I diminished vulnerable villages to sites of rubble, Australian soldier's chivalrous defence at Villers-Bretonneux became an honoured moment in national history for France and Australia. Even today, the town remembers Australian soldiers with ANZAC Day services that commemorate the ANZAC values of innovation and initiative. Core ANZAC principles of bravery and mateship are revealed through the establishment of the National Military Cemetery, while the sturdy building of the Victoria School reflects the Australian sense of egalitarianism. Seeing such national recognition fourteen thousand kilometres away signifies that despite the land or century, one cannot cease to remember the ANZACs.

Prime Minister Joseph Cook's statement "If the empire is at war, so also is Australia," on 1 August 1914 declared Australia's involvement in the First World War.¹ However, the supposedly 'quick' war stagnated into a tedious stalemate and the damage eventually reached the civilian population. By the end of 1916, food shortages and unemployment in Russia led to the Bolshevik Revolution, after which, the Treaty of Brest Litovsk granted Russia a peaceful withdrawal from the war.³ With the fall of the Eastern Theatre, Germany invested all its power into the Western Front which marked the launch of Operation Michael, and the beginning of the enduring relationship between Australians and the people of Villers-Bretonneux.⁴

The establishment of an Australian Military Cemetery in Villers-Bretonneux to honour Australian soldiers reveals that the ANZAC Spirit is a spirit of mateship and courage. The first battle of Villers-Bretonneux commenced on April 4 1918 to halt fifteen German divisions advancing towards Amiens, and a counter attack by the Australian 36th Battalion ended German progress beyond the town.⁵ Despite the successful defence, there were more than 660 casualties, and in the second battle of Villers-Bretonneux 1200 Australians died saving the village.⁶ During the hours the French were waiting to be "condemned by men" with artillery that "eviscerates and terrifies," the Australian forthright approach to battle showed the relentless essence of mateship and courage present in the ANZAC soldiers.⁸ In memory of the fallen, the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery located within the Australian National Memorial displays 10,982 names of courageous Australian servicemen.⁹ Although Australia was one of the many contingents fighting under the British flag, the existence of a

¹ 'Statement by Mr. Cook', The Argus, 1 August 1914, p. 20, available at:

<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/10800045/376537>

² ABC News, *World War I: How Australia reacted to the outbreak of conflict*, 2014,

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-08-04/world-war-i-australian-reaction-to-outbreak-of-conflict/5603588> (accessed 19 July 2017)

³ History, *Treaties of Brest-Litovsk*, 2017, <http://www.history.com/topics/world-war-i/treaties-of-brest-litovsk> (accessed 26 July 2017)

⁴ Australian Battlefields of WW1, *France 1918*, 2017, <http://www.anzacsinfrance.com/1918/> (accessed 19 July 2017)

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ ABC News, *Villers-Bretonneux remembers decisive battle 90 years on*, 2008,

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-04-25/villers-bretonneux-remembers-decisive-battle-90/2415632> (accessed 21 July 2017)

⁸ Chevallier, G, 1930, *"Fear (Le Peur)"*, Editions Stock, Paris, p.218

⁹ Commonwealth War Graves Commission, *VILLERS-BRETONNEUX MEMORIAL*, <http://www.cwgc.org/find-a-cemetery/cemetery/93000/VILLERS-BRETONNEUX%20MEMORIAL> (accessed 20 July 2017)

national cemetery thousands of kilometres away reveals that each Australian had a sense of mateship that extended to others beyond the slouched hats and the Rising Sun badge; a sense of mateship and courage that urged them to manoeuvre through the terrors of No Man's Land and towards the hills of victory, all for the freedom of a foreign ally. Despite Australians being unable to speak French, a deeper level of communication and understanding was accomplished through the essence of mateship and courage, a relationship the town continues to uphold by commemorating the fallen Australians among its land in the Military Cemetery.

Every year when the clock strikes 5:30 am on the 25th of April, and as thousands gather at the Villers Bretonnouex Memorial, the ANZAC values of initiative and innovation are honoured. On 23rd April 1918, when Germany captured Villers-Bretonneux, commanders Elliot and Glasgow of the Australian 15th and 13th Brigade immediately developed plans for a surprise night attack where the two brigades would enclose the village from the east.¹⁰ The infantry attack without a preliminary bombardment had not been envisaged by the Germans, and the sense of initiative and innovation that allowed the Australians to develop such a brilliantly planned and executed attack is still honoured with annual ANZAC Day ceremonies where Villers-Bretonneux salutes to the Australian flag and places wreaths at the Great Australian Cemetery.¹¹ During the attack, when the 13th Australian Brigade experienced heavy German gunfire, Lieutenant C.W Sadlier disobeyed his commander's orders and led his West Australians into the woods where he captured six-machine gun posts, enabling the brigade to push on, and allowing the 15th Australian Brigade to proceed with a bayonet charge that eliminated all resistance.¹² Lieutenant Sadlier's sense of initiative and creative thinking not only earned him a VC, but also exemplified that Australians did not fight with simple audacity, but also with a sense of sagacity. By dawn on the 25th April, the Australians ended the German offensive on the Somme and the French and Australian flags were raised over Villers-Bretonneux.¹³ A century later, the annual ANZAC Day ceremonies at Villers-Bretonneux reveal the essence of innovation and initiative inherent in the ANZAC Spirit; the tenacity that stopped the imminent German capture of Amiens, and the tenacity that failed on 25 April 1915, but endured to succeed on the dawn of 25 April 1918.

The ANZAC Spirit was not limited to the duration of WWI, and the development of the Victoria School in Villers-Bretonnouex verifies the ANZAC value of egalitarianism. When the detrimental effects of the war had left the town in a state of crisis, the Victoria School, a gift from the children of Victoria, was established in 1927, declaring Australians believed that French children in a small town fourteen thousand kilometres away, should have equal access to proper education facilities.¹⁴ Today, the green and yellow inscription over the porch reading "Never Forget Australia," the Franco-Australian Museum on the first floor, and the current development of the educational Sir John

¹⁰ Macdougall, AK, 2014, "Australians at War", Melbourne, VIC: Five Mile Press. P. 161

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² *ibid*

¹³ ABC News, *Villers-Bretonneux remembers decisive battle 90 years on*, 2008, <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2008-04-25/villers-bretonneux-remembers-decisive-battle-90/2415632> (accessed 21 July 2017)

¹⁴ Musée Franco-Australien de Villers-Bretonneux, *Victoria School*, 2009, http://www.museeaustralien.com/en/?Victoria_school (accessed 21 July 2017)

Monash Centre, reflects the ANZAC values of equality, as the small village grows and remembers the Australians who “gave their lives on a heroic recapture of the town.”¹⁵¹⁶

The influence of the ANZACs on Villers-Bretonnouex reveals values of the ANZAC Spirit. Villers Bretonnouex’s Australian National Cemetery embodies the spirits of the Australian soldiers who died with the essence of courage and mateship for the liberty of a foreign ally. Annual ANZAC Day commemorations at the Villers-Bretonnouex Memorial honours the soldiers who on that day fought with initiative and innovation to recapture Villers-Bretonnouex. Development of the Victoria School, in an effort to provide equal education to all children, demonstrates the core ANZAC value of egalitarianism. Today, the enduring relationship between the Australians and the people of Villers-Bretonnouex is expressed through the town’s continuous efforts to remember the ANZACs, proving that the distance of thousands of miles and a century will always be closed with the undying and abiding ANZAC Spirit. To young Australians, values of the ANZAC Spirit revealed through this lasting relationship inspires them to understand that the ANZAC Spirit is not merely a symbol of national pride, but with egalitarianism, mateship, bravery, innovation and initiative, Australians can continue to leave their mark on the world.

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ Australian Government Department of Veteran Affairs, *Unveiling the Design for the Sir John Monash Centre*, <https://www.dva.gov.au/commemorations-memorials-and-war-graves/memorials/war-memorials/france/sir-john-monash-centre-4> (Accessed 21 July 2017)

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