

# Anzac Spirit Study Tour

The Bond of the ANZAC Spirit Between Australia and Villers-Bretonneux

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## What does the enduring relationship between Australians and the people of Villers-Bretonneux teach us about the ANZAC spirit?

*"This school building is the gift of the school children of Victoria, Australia, to the children of Villers-Bretonneux, as a proof of their love and good-will towards France... May the memory of great sacrifices in a common cause keep France and Australia together forever in bonds of friend-ship and mutual esteem."*<sup>1</sup>

The landing on the shores of Gallipoli, on the 25 April 1915 was where the ANZAC Spirit was born,<sup>2</sup> and the remembrance of ANZAC Day we partake in over 100 years later, harks back to those first steps. Arthur Bourke describes the ANZAC Spirit as *"a powerful driving sensation that can only be felt...it burns in the heart of every Australian...a warm, tender, fiery, even melancholy ideal that nurtures intense patriotism in the innermost soul of every body."*<sup>3</sup> ANZAC stands for "Australian and New Zealand Army Corps,"<sup>4</sup> and the ANZAC spirit is still within the heart of Australia and each Australian. Charles Bean stated that the *"...Anzac stood, and still stands, for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship, and endurance that will never own defeat."*<sup>5</sup> This spirit was forged in the battles of the Western Front in WWI, between the Allied Powers and the Central Powers.<sup>6</sup> Within those battlefields is a village named Villers-Bretonneux, a small town that is significant in Australian military history. It was here Australia and Britain fought to reclaim Villers-Bretonneux from the Germans. The impression of how the battle was fought, the courage, bravery and later the generosity shown by Australians forged a lasting bond with the town of Villers-Bretonneux. The friendship is a testament of the ANZAC Spirit, but how did this relationship form?

The First Battle of Villers-Bretonneux was within the widespread battle of the Somme. Villers-Bretonneux was a strategic place for the Germans to capture, as it was within range for the Germans to barrage Amiens with its artillery. On the 31<sup>st</sup> Of March 1918, the Germans pushed the British frontline towards Villers-Bretonneux. Although the village was captured in the morning of April 4<sup>th</sup>, 1918, a successful counter attack at night from the 36<sup>th</sup> Australian Battalion allowed the Allied Powers to recapture Villers-Bretonneux and push the German line back.<sup>7</sup> Villers-Bretonneux was however threatened again in the Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux.

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<sup>1</sup> Ricki Sharpe, April 22, 2013 *Villers- Bretonneux and Australia*, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> of August 2017

<<https://twainfrance.com.au/places/villers-bretonneux-and-australia/#foobox-1/0/Villers-17.jpg>>

<sup>2</sup> History Net, n.d. *World War I*, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> August 2017 < <http://www.historynet.com/world-war-i> >

<sup>3</sup> Australian War Memorial, *Anzac Spirit*, n.d. Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> August 2017

<<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/anzac/spirit>>

<sup>4</sup> Australian War Memorial, n.d. *The Anzac Day Tradition*, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> August 2017

<<https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac-day/traditions>>

<sup>5</sup> Australian War Memorial, n.d. *Anzac Spirit*, Accessed 5<sup>th</sup> August 2017

<<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/anzac/spirit>>

<sup>6</sup> The Anzac Portal, n.d. *Visiting Villers-Bretonneux*, Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2017

<<http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/conflicts/australians-western-front-19141918/australian-remembrance-trail/australian-1>>

<sup>7</sup> John Rickard, 27 August 2007, *First Battle of Villers-Bretonneux I, 30 March-5<sup>th</sup> of April*, Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> August 2017 <[http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles\\_villers\\_bretonneuxI.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_villers_bretonneuxI.html)>

The Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux occurred during the battle of Lys after the first offensive Battle of the Somme from the 24<sup>th</sup> to the 27<sup>th</sup> of April 1918. Thirteen German tanks reinforced the attack, making it the largest offensive from German tanks during WW1. The Germans were enforced by heavy artillery and mustard gas, which proved effective, with the Germans capturing the town and leaving Amiens susceptible to bombardment. However, a counter attack was planned and executed by the 13<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> Australian Battalions, which proved successful. This attack marked the end of the Battle of the Somme, with both offensives regarded as successes.<sup>8</sup> An unnamed German soldier's reaction to the Australian's counter attack stated that they "*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.*"<sup>9</sup> This demonstrates the remarkable bravery of our soldiers and reinforces the notion of the ANZAC spirit despite the devastating impact of a total of 1,455 Australian casualties.<sup>10</sup>

Both the First Battle and Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux marked a remarkable success for the Australian Forces. After the battles, the Australians helped to restore Villers-Bretonneux, and doing so forged a lasting bond that would stand the test of time. Australian school children each donated a penny towards rebuilding the village's school, called the Penny Drive. The school was reopened on ANZAC day and renamed 'L'Ecole Victoria', or "Victoria School."<sup>11</sup> An Australian memorial is situated within Villers-Bretonneux, the last memorial from the Great War to be made. This memorial includes all 11,000 names of Australian Soldiers that died within France. The central tower within the memorial has a view of the plains in which the Battle of the Somme was once fought.<sup>12</sup> The actions of Australia during the war and the years after created a lasting relationship between Australia and France.

The bond between Australia and France is still strong 100 years on. The Australian flag today is flown over Villers-Bretonneux, and the town hall entrance features kangaroos, a native animal to Australia and plaques that retell the story of the battles. Numerous streets are named after Australian towns and cities. The school has signs which say "N'oublions jamais l'Australie" (Never forget Australia) above the playground and the chalkboards of each classroom. The pillars of the classroom contain wooden carvings of flora and fauna native to Australia.<sup>13</sup> This exemplifies the gratefulness of Villers-Bretonneux.

The children in the school still learn about Australia through the ANZAC Dawn Service. Australia Week is commemorated as well, which features commemorative activities and sports.<sup>14</sup> These actions of Villers-Bretonneux is not just an act of kindness; it's a sign of the

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<sup>8</sup> John Rickard, 27 August 2007, *Second Battle of Villers Bretonneux, 24-27 April 1918* Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 <[http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles\\_villers\\_bretonneuxII.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_villers_bretonneuxII.html)>

<sup>9</sup> The Anzac Portal, n.d. *Second battle of Villers-Bretonneux*, Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 <<http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/history/conflicts/australians-western-front-19141918/australian-remembrance-trail/australian-5>>

<sup>10</sup> John Rickard, 27 August 2007, *Second Battle of Villers Bretonneux, 24-27 April 1918* Accessed 6<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 <[http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles\\_villers\\_bretonneuxII.html](http://www.historyofwar.org/articles/battles_villers_bretonneuxII.html)>

<sup>11</sup> Culture Victoria, *Villers- Bretonneux*, n.d. Accessed 7<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 <<https://cv.vic.gov.au/stories/a-diverse-state/villers-bretonneux/>>

<sup>12</sup> Somme Battlefields, n.d. *Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux*, Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 <<http://www.somme-battlefields.com/memory-place/australian-national-memorial-villers-bretonneux>>

<sup>13</sup> Ricki Sharpe, April 22 2013, *Villers- Bretonneux and Australia*, Accessed 8<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 <<https://twainfrance.com.au/places/villers-bretonneux-and-australia/#foobox-1/0/Villers-17.jpg>>

<sup>14</sup> Somme Battlefields, n.d. *Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux*, Accessed 9<sup>th</sup> of August 2017 <<http://www.somme-battlefields.com/memory-place/australian-national-memorial-villers-bretonneux>>

gratitude and a testament to the ANZAC spirit which still lives today. Australians travel the lengthy journey to France every year to attend commemorations, ensuring the ANZAC spirit is alive and well.

The ANZAC Spirit started in Villers-Bretonneux in WW1. The victory of the battles showed the ANZAC spirit of courage and bravery to both the town of Villers- Bretonneux and Australia. It also demonstrated the mateship and sacrifice of our soldiers. This enduring relationship teaches us how powerful the ANZAC Spirit really is. Lasting for many years, and many more to come, the spirit of the soldiers passed down through the generations. Although the relationship was forged on the battlefield, the bonds between Australia and Villers-Bretonneux continues to enrich and invigorate the enduring relationship built from Villers-Bretonneux's gratitude. From the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, to the sacrifices of Australians that are still commemorated through ANZAC day, Remembrance Day, and every day we stop to remember. This is the ANZAC Spirit, from the heart of Australia, embedded deep into the heart of every Australian... flowing through our veins. Lest we forget.

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