

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



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL ART03028
Night attack by 13th Brigade on Villers-Bretonneux, Will Longstaff. [Oil on canvas AWM ART03028]

"The moon sunk behind clouds. There were houses burning in the town throwing a sinister light on the scene. It was past midnight. Men muttered, 'It's Anzac Day.' It seemed there was nothing to do but go straight forward and die hard."

-Sergeant W.H. Downing
(Burness, 2008)

Chief Minister's ANZAC SPIRIT Study Tour 2018

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Villers-Bretonneux and the ANZAC Spirit

The ANZAC spirit was spoken of very early in World War 1 after the landing at Gallipoli. People saw that Australian and New Zealand soldiers possessed characteristics, specifically the qualities those soldiers showed on the battlefields. These qualities include endurance, mateship, humour, ingenuity and larrikinism. According to this concept, the soldiers were also perceived to have been innocent, fit, stoic and laconic. They were also naturally egalitarian and disdainful of British class differences (Wikipedia, N.A).

General John Monash talked about this spirit when he said:

"not lip service, nor obsequious homage to superiors, nor servile observance of forms and customs...the Australian army is proof that individualism is the best and not the worst foundation upon which to build up collective discipline" (Australian Inspiration, N.A)

This spirit was also present when Australian troops defended the village of Villers-Bretonneux from advancing German troops in 1918.

The first and second battle of Villers-Bretonneux

On the 29th of March 1918 the 9th Australian Brigade, consisting of four Infantry Battalions was sent south from Belgium to prevent a breach in the line between the British 5th Army and the French 1st Army as the Germans were trying to reach the rail head at Amiens and pushed the British back towards Villers-Bretonneux.

The line west of Le Hamel was reinforced by the arrival of the 15th Australian Brigade. In the afternoon the German troops pushed south and Villers-Bretonneux appeared ready to fall, the Germans coming within 400 metres of the town. The Australian troops launched a surprise counter-attack, pushing the Germans back and forcing two German Divisions to retreat from Villers-Bretonneux. (Wikipedia, N.A)

The second battle of Villers-Bretonneux took place between the 24th and the 27th of April when the central powers made a push against the triple entente to the east of the Amiens. A few days prior the Germans bombarded the area behind Villers-Bretonneux with mustard gas causing 1,000 Australian casualties. On the 24th

of April four German Divisions attacked the village breaking the 8th Division and making a 4.8km wide gap in the allied line. This caused Villers-Bretonneux to fall to the Germans and the railway junctions of Amiens becoming vulnerable to capture. (anzacportal, N.A)

The retaking of the town took place on the 24th and 25th of April with the Australian 13th Brigade and the 15th Brigade. When zero hour struck at 10:00pm on the start of the operation German machine guns caused heavy casualties, as a number of charges against machine gun posts occurred to help the Australian advance. The two brigades swept around Villers-Bretonneux and the Germans retreated, overwhelmed by the ferocious fighting of the Australian troops.



(Anzacs in France 2001-2017)

The work of the Australian troops during that time is widely regarded as a turning point of the War and involved extraordinary fighting skill.

“In my opinion, this counterattack, at night, without artillery support, is the finest thing yet done in the war, by Australians or any other troops.” – Monash (McMullin, 2008)

Fighting continued in the area, with Australian troops for some months. The Northern Territory’s own Albert Borella won a Victoria Cross for his bravery in July 1918 at Villers-Bretonneux. His citation read:

For most conspicuous bravery in attack. Whilst leading his platoon with the first wave, Lieutenant Borella marked an enemy machine gun firing through our barrage. He ran out ahead of his men into the barrage, shot two German machine gunners with his revolver, and captured the gun. He then led his party, now reduced to ten men and two Lewis guns, against a very strongly held trench, using his revolver, and later a rifle, with great effect, causing many enemy casualties. His leading and splendid example resulted in the garrison being quickly shot and captured. Two large dug outs were also bombed, and thirty prisoners taken. Subsequently the enemy twice counter attacked in strong force, on the second occasion outnumbering Lieutenant Borella’s platoon by ten to one, but his cool determination inspired his men to resist heroically, and the enemy were repulsed, with very heavy losses.’ Commonwealth Gazette No. 23, 12 February 1919

(The Borella Ride, N.A.)

The enduring relationship since 1918

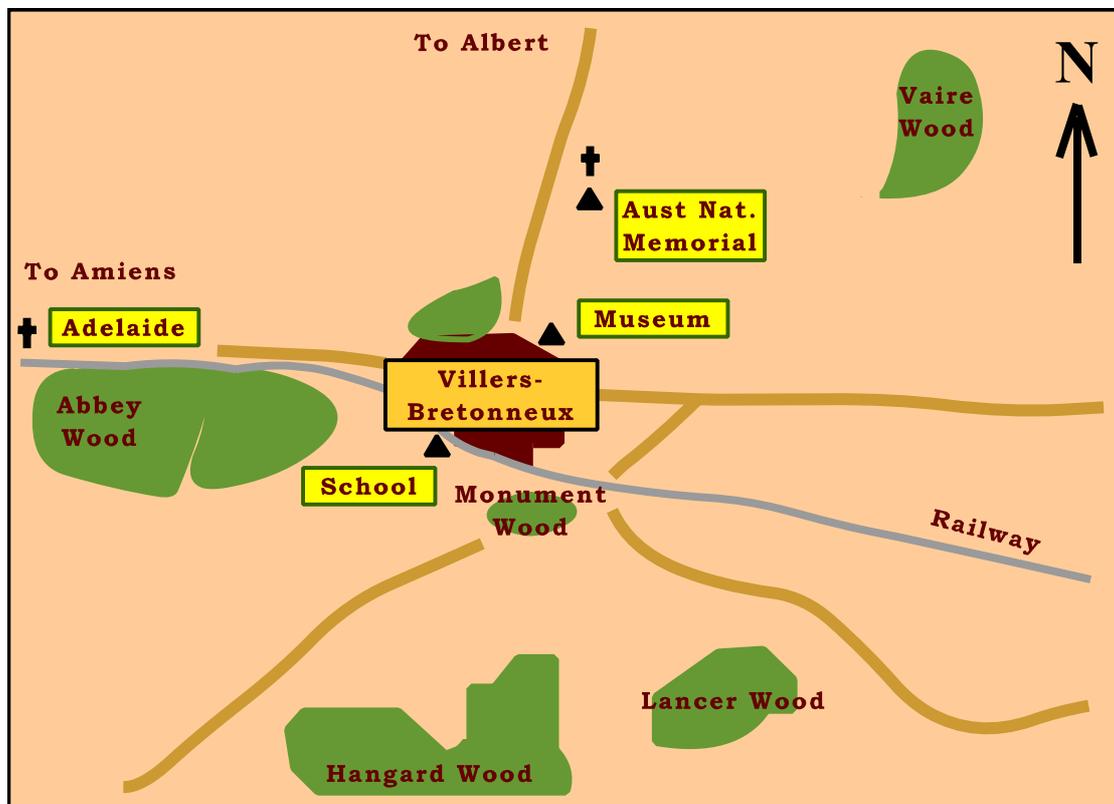
The French people in the villages welcomed the arrival of the Australian troops. Many sources quote Australian troops as telling the local women “Fini retreat Madame, beaucoup Australiens ici”, which means “No more retreat Madame, many Australians here” (McMullin, 2013)

Early on, Australian soldiers and their families created a fund to rebuild a school in Villers-Bretonneux by urging Victorian school children to donate a single penny. The Victorian Department of Education sent over £ 12,000 and a school was built in 1927. Every classroom and in the school yard the words “N’oublions jamais l’Australie” (Never forget Australia) is written.

Hotels and streets in Villers-Bretonneux are now named after Australian cities.(Robynvale-Euston, N.A)

The town is the site of Australia's main World War 1 memorial to those killed on the Western Front. This was built in 1938 having been approved at that site in 1923. Every year a commemorative service is held there on Anzac Day, 25th of April.

Many Australians continue to visit the region and town, looking for memorials with the names of their own ancestors, finding out about their family history or the history of people from their town, region or country, who travelled so far to make the ultimate sacrifice. They are welcomed by the people of the region.



(Anzacs in France 2001-2017)

Lessons for us

The Australian soldiers who fought in these battles to defend the village were all volunteers. They did not speak French and most would never have travelled out of Australia before the War. It would seem on one hand they did not have much in common with the people they were defending.

However many of the Australians were from similar size towns in rural areas, or were farmers and people of the land, like the people in Villers-Bretonneux. The bond that was forged in a time of strife brought people from two different sides of the world together. They found that there was more that united them, than divided them, including the vast distance between Australia and France.

The spirit of mateship and plucky defiance as well as endurance and the desire to help people, were shown in Villers-Bretonneux. That our relationship with Villers-Bretonneux continues today, and not only continues but thrives, indicates the importance of these qualities and the sacrifices made. Once such a relationship is forged, the Anzac spirit teaches us to revere, respect and maintain it.

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