

Speech

Address By

His Excellency General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC (Retd)

On the occasion of

Anzac Day Dawn Service Address

Villers-Bretonneux, France
25 April 2016

A century ago, the first of almost 300,000 soldiers of the Australian Imperial Force began arriving in France for service on the Western Front—many would come here and fight at Villers-Bretonneux.

Some were veterans of the cramped, squalid, disease-ridden trenches of Gallipoli: they were battle-hardened and bonded by all they had already endured.

Others were newer recruits, volunteers, eager to play their part: they were enthusiastic, and—perhaps blissfully—unaware of what was to come, even though many had rushed to join up after the first news of the carnage on Gallipoli's heights.

What they found here in these fields was beguiling.

This was a rural idyll: a landscape of picturesque villages; of bountiful crops and verdant fields; of billets, estimanets and the rhythm of country life.

Of course this was all to change—decimated by war: villages turned to rubble; farmyards reduced to burnt out skeletons; the countryside churned to muddy, life sapping battlefields.

The battles fought across these lands were of a scale unprecedented in the human experience: mighty artillery barrages tore men apart, and sent some insane; machine guns cut great swathes through the ranks of soldiers running toward their almost inevitable deaths; for the first time, the rumble of tanks echoed across landscape; and mortal combat became a daily reality for men who not that long ago, lived peacefully in cities thousands of miles away.

In the face of all this, the bond between soldiers grew stronger: they fought, lived and died for each other; their true character, their sense of mateship, their enduring honour, revealed in the heat of battle.

Of course they continued to long for their families back home.

Private Reginald Kenny—having learnt of his father's death—wrote home to his mother, urging her to stay strong, lamenting his own absence, and wishing he was there help.

'...please God I shall soon be back with my own dear loved ones...' he wrote in March 1916.

He was killed at Poiziers, just a few months later.

And for those at home, this war brought its own unique suffering.

For them, it was a war of isolation and uncertainty.

They suffered—not knowing what was happening on the other side of the world: anxious and apprehensive; waiting for the next letter, fearing what a telegram or a clergyman's knock at the door might mean; knitting socks and baking biscuits for comfort

Anzac Day Dawn Service Address

Published on Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia (<http://gg.gov.au>)

packs—desperately trying to do something, anything, to help their loved one and his mates so far away.

Often they were spared the explicit realities by diggers whose stoicism belied the full horror of the war.

Men like Lieutenant Colonel Ray Leane, a battalion commander, reassured his wife, Edith, that with his rank and position his 'life was safe.'

In reality Ray was often subject to artillery fire, and soon he was seriously wounded and returned home a changed man.

But banal reassurance from the front line was not always enough.

Owen Lewis was an Australian Airmen, one of four brothers to volunteer.

His letters, 'cheerful and full of optimism', continued to arrive every week for five weeks, even after news of his death had come through.

Each Friday his family gathered and read them together—an ongoing commemoration.

A month or so after the letters stopped a 'big tidy envelope' arrived.

In it was a photo of Owen's grave with a picture of his simple headstone.

Correspondence, life, and death, was complete.

Of course thankfully, gloriously, we Australians found some respite, comfort and another family behind the lines—the French.

The locals knew only too well the pain and price of this war: the familiar black dresses of grieving widows; the mantelpiece photos of men gazing out into living rooms to which they would never return.

Brought together by circumstance—the lives of soldiers and their hosts quickly became intertwined.

Maybe they were drawn together by the common experience, a shared sense of humanity, a mutual respect.

We will never really know for sure.

I suspect such things can't be—and aren't even meant to be— fully understood.

But I do know Australians fought for and re-took this town with all they had—and then a little more.

And I know the friendship shown to those soldiers was a precious gift in a time of lives forsaken.

Almost 100 years have now past and on this lovingly tended land, these fallen friends and allies rest in peace—together.

And we come to this place, this special place, on this special day, to remember them and to share our admiration and respect—just as in the coming months we will return to mark a century since battles at other places like Fromelles and Pozieres.

Because theirs was a triumph: of liberty, equality and fraternity; of camaraderie, freedom and a fair go.

A triumph between people from opposite sides of the world who—surrounded by war—found joie de vivre and the beauty of life together.

Let us never forget each other and what truly binds us.

On behalf of all Australians: Thank you, merci beacoup. Nous ne les oublions pas. Lest we forget.

Source URL: <http://gg.gov.au/speech/anzac-day-dawn-service-address>
