

REMEMBRANCE DAY 11 NOVEMBER 2013

Westbury Cenotaph, Tasmania

by Guy Barnett *

Remembrance Day, today, marks the 95th year since the end of World War I, known as the Great War. At 11am on the eleventh day of the eleventh month 1918 the guns fell silent and the four years of carnage ended. It was supposed to be the war to end all wars as its scale was unprecedented. 13 million people died.

Of the 416,000 Australians who enlisted to fight 331,000 were sent overseas to Europe, North Africa and the Middle-East, and Gallipoli. 61,000 died and 155,000 were wounded, gassed or taken prisoner. Most of these on the Western Front in Europe, although 8,709 died and a further 19,000 were wounded at Gallipoli.

As a proportion of our 4 million population at the time more Australians died or were casualties than any other nation. One in three who went to war returned unhurt, at least physically.

More than 2,700 Tasmanians died in World War I.

In less than fourteen hours in mid July 1918 Australia suffered more than 5,500 casualties in one failed attack on the German line at Fromelles, with mass wipe-outs at the hands of the German machine guns. Our war dead are scattered across Europe, in Asia and the Pacific, the Middle-East and elsewhere. Most lie in over 100 cemeteries proudly cared for by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. Thousands of their gravestones are inscribed "Known only unto God". Thankfully the bodies of over two hundred Australian soldiers were discovered two years ago

at Fromelles, France and they now have received an appropriate military service as a mark of respect.

It was at Gueudecourt, France on the 4th and 5th of February 1917 that Tasmania's own Harry Murray who served in the Launceston Artillery for six years won his Victoria Cross, the highest award for bravery that can be achieved in war time. Captain Murray led a force of 140 men in an assault on a German position known as Stormy Trench. During the battle he distinguished himself by encouraging his men, setting an example, leading hand-grenade bombing parties, leading bayonet charges, rescuing the wounded and carrying them to safety, crawling out into no-man's-land on reconnaissance, rallying his men and saving the situation by sheer valour. They were forced to withdraw due to the German's overwhelming fire power and only 48 of the 140 survived. Following his gallantry at Gallipoli and throughout the war on the Western Front he subsequently became Australia's most highly decorated soldier and a statue of him was unveiled by the then Governor-General, Major-General Michael Jeffrey in February 2006 in his home town of Evandale.

My grandfather HS (Stan) Barnett enlisted towards the end of the War with the Royal Flying Corp flying by-planes – a most dangerous occupation at the time. His nickname was 'Butcher Barnett' because he killed a sheep on landing during one of his training runs.

My wife's great uncle trained at Mona Vale near Ross with the Australian Light Horse and served in the Middle East and in the capture of Damascus.

Andrew Fisher who became Australia Prime Minister in September 1914 declared that "Australia will stand behind the mother country to help defend her to the last man and the last shilling". His sentiments reflected the common view of Australians at the time and most people believed the conflict would be over by Christmas 1914. Some say the war was futile, and had little relevance to Australian's at home. But

those who enlisted were **all** volunteers. If tyranny was to prevail in Europe, freedom could be eroded in Australia.

Now more than 102,000 Australians have made the ultimate sacrifice with 40 having been killed on duty in Afghanistan including Launceston's own, Corporal Richard Atkinson, First Combat Engineer Regiment, on the 2nd of February 2011.

The Australian Government's Honours and Awards Tribunal recently reviewed the deeds of 13 fallen Australian defence personnel to assess their merit in being granted a posthumous Victoria Cross. Two of those thirteen were from Tasmania and both from the Royal Australian Navy which celebrated its origin 102 years ago. Ordinary Seaman Teddy Sheean and Navy Cook Dick Emms, both with heroic stories to tell and substantial evidence to support their claim to Australia's highest war time honour for bravery. Tasmania has always punched above its weight when it comes to military service with thirteen of Australia's 99 Victoria Cross recipients coming from Tasmania. Not one of the thirteen reviewed by the Tribunal was recommended for a VC or an upgrade to their award. A great disappointment. But efforts continue to adequately recognise both these Tasmanian men.

There is nothing glorious about war. But when all other options are gone and both terrorism and tyranny is at large then it may be necessary to fight. Whatever one's view, the response is for us to ask if our lives today are worthy of their sacrifice? As the Bible says 'there is no greater love than this, than he who lays down his life for his friends'. What efforts have we made to make this a better community and country, for our children and theirs? This is our challenge. The courage, endurance, mateship and sacrifice demonstrated by those that died, the casualties of war and all who served, demand from us a response. What shall it be?

*Guy Barnett, military history buff, former Senator and Liberal Candidate for Lyons - guest speaker at the Remembrance Day service, Westbury 11 November 2013.