

## The Unknown Soldier

Address to Victorian Legacy

6th July, 1993

Last Monday 28th June was the 75th Anniversary of the event that sparked off the Great War. For it was on that day in 1914 that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austro-Hungarian Throne, and his wife, were assassinated by a Bosnian Serb at Sarajevo.

In the space of a few weeks there were more than 100 declarations of war by countries upon each other.

In a fever of August madness men in the combatant countries flocked to their flags. Everyone believed that his country was in the right and that God was on his side.

In Australia the declaration of war was hailed with great enthusiasm. "It is our baptism of fire", exulted the Sydney Morning Herald on 6 August, "Australia knows something of the flames of war, but its realities have never been brought so close as they will be in the near future".

Crowds gathered in the streets of Australia's cities to celebrate, laughing, cheering, and singing with strength and joy and

confidence. Strangers embraced as brothers, cheers were given on the slightest pretext, flags waved frantically, tumult and merriment ruled everywhere. The land was full of visions of glory and the historic importance of the occasion.

The outbreak of war was greeted with universally wild excitement. Well, almost. Those who knew what war was really like were aghast at the prospect before them.

But war was a powerfully attractive means of asserting national identity. The Boer War had given Australia a tantalising taste of such satisfaction, and by 1914 there were many Australians who, as Charles Bean the official war correspondent and subsequently official historian wrote later, "half consciously longed for the day when their untried people would be pitted against the fighters of another nation"

It was at Gallipoli that the Australian and New Zealand forces had their "baptism by fire".

The campaign lasted eight months and was a costly failure. Some 8,700 Australians were killed or died of wounds or disease; more than 2,700 New Zealanders suffered similar fates; another 32,500 British, Indian and French troops went the same way; and probably 150,000 or more Turks found their final resting place on the Peninsular.



The bulk of the Australian and New Zealand forces, rested and reinforced after their Turkish exertions, sailed from Alexandria to Marseilles in the early European spring of 1916. They were now headed for the Western Front in France and Belgium.

Nothing could have adequately prepared the Anzacs for the ordeals they were to encounter on the Western Front. For however desperate conditions had seemed on Gallipoli, life in the trenches would prove to be infinitely worse.

The war they would fight for the next 30 months was on a scale beyond anything at Gallipoli - the fortifications massive and elaborate, the soldiers counted in armies rather than brigades, their instruments of destruction more varied and lethal. The material and human resources of the most powerful industrial economies were mobilized to bear on a long snake of land just a few miles wide, twisting from Belgium down to Switzerland.

Just seven weeks of fighting around the village of Pozieres in the July and August of 1916 killed more Australians than had died in battle since European settlement of Australia. The 5th Division suffered 5,000 casualties in little more than a day, then the 1st Division took up the attack and lost men on a similar scale, and so through the AIF.

Of the battlefield of Pozieres, Charles Bean said it was more densely sown with Australian sacrifice than any other place on earth.

The details of the many battles in which Australians died in the Great War are today largely forgotten and are now recorded only as bywords for futile sacrifice. To Pozieres can be added such names as Fromelles, Mouquet Farm, Bullecourt, Messines, Ypres, Amiens, Villers-Bretonneux and Hamel. Some 46,000 Australians were among the 3 million who died in the fighting on the Western Front in France and Belgium.

All told, during the four years of the Great War, Australia, out of a population of only 4.9 million, had raised a military force numbering 417,000 of whom 332,000 took the field of battle with more that 59,000 killed or died of wounds, and 152,000 wounded.

It was out of that experience that Charles Bean came to the idea of a national war museum to commemorate the sacrifice of Australians in the Great War.

Sadly the Australian War Memorial - as it became - did not open until 1941 when the nation was again engaged in massive conflict. As a consequent, the Memorial came to embrace as well those who perished in the second world war, and today the Memorial stands as a monument to Australians who have died in the service of their country in all the wars in which we have been involved.



This year is the 75th anniversary of the end of the Great War and the last significant occasion on which veterans of that conflict will be present - there are only about 900 first world war veterans alive at this moment. And this year the nation will bring home the remains of one of their comrades, from a French or Belgian cemetery, to inter them in the Australian War Memorial's Hall of Memory at 11am on 11 November.

I want to talk to you now about the burials of unknown soldiers from 1920 to the present concluding with the plans for our own ceremony and some comments on its significance.

The war of 1914-1918 yielded more dead, and among them more Missing, than any other war in history, The term 'unknown soldier' became familiar during the war as unidentifiable remains were put into temporary and later permanent graves.

As one Australian soldier on the Somme wrote in the terrible month of July 1916: 'This afternoon tidied up the graves of a few "unknown soldiers. Some body's boys".'

The first tombs of unknown soldiers were inaugurated in London and Paris on 11 November 1920, the second anniversary of the ending of the war. These two quickly inspired others. Next year, 1921, Tombs of Unknown Soldiers were created in four other countries of the victorious alliance: the USA, Italy, Belgium and Portugal.

How was each body chosen? For the first two, London and Paris, by lot, and that practice was copied elsewhere. He had to be utterly, reliably unknown. As Ronald Blythe puts it: 'Classless, nameless, rankless, and ageless, this man would be the silent ambassador of the legion dead to the courts of the living.' For London four unidentified bodies were dug up on 9 November from sites of early battles in France and Belgium, sealed in coffins and driven in four motor ambulances to an army hut near Ypres. An officer who had not seen the coffins was then blindfolded and led into the hut until his hand touched one of the coffins.

For Paris eight bodies, each from a different region of battle, were taken to Verdun, the city which had itself become a living monument to French participation in the war, and they were laid in the coffins in an underground chamber of the citadel, where a newly conscripted corporal whose father was among the missing placed on one coffin a bouquet of flowers picked from a battlefield.

The Americans brought four coffins to Chalons-sur-Marne, where the US Army had been heavily engaged, and a corporal put a bouquet of roses on one of them.

On what journeys were the chosen bodies taken? The British coffin was escorted to the port of Boulogne on 9 November by a guard of honour picked to represent not only different sections of the army but also the empire, including private soldiers from Australia and



Canada. There it was placed inside a coffin made of oak from Hampton Court, created for the purpose by the British Undertakers' Association. Next day the coffin was carried to the destroyer HMS Verdun, assigned because of its name, and escorted across the channel by six destroyers. From Dover Castle it was given the nineteen-gun salute appropriate for field-m Marshals, and it travelled to London by train in a specially fitted funeral coach carriage. It spent overnight in the coach, and next morning, 11 November, was drawn across London attended by twelve pall-bearers: five admirals, four field-m Marshals, two generals and an air marshal. It paused in Whitehall for a ceremony at 11 am unveiling and dedicating the Cenotaph.

The French body travelled by train from Verdun to Paris on 10 November and spent the night in a chapel waiting to be carried through the streets next morning. The procession went past the Pantheon, on the Left Bank, before crossing the river and proceeding up the Champs Elysees.

The American body was taken in a special train to Le Havre and on a gun carriage from the train to the famous old cruiser Olympia, which had been Admiral Dewey's flagship when he sailed into Manila Bay to sink the Spanish fleet in 1898. The Olympia crossed the Atlantic and steamed up the Potomac on 9 November, guns saluting the body from forts. Crowds watched the flagdraped caisson, led by a war hero from the ranks, travel from the Navy Yard to the Capitol. There it remained until 11 November under the dome, on a catafalque

which had borne Abraham Lincoln and later the other murdered presidents Garfield and McKinley when their bodies had lain in state here. On the morning of 11 November it set off from the Capitol for its last journey.

Where was the Tomb placed? In London, within Westminster Abbey, which was both a church and a national pantheon, founded by William the Conqueror as an act of thanksgiving for victory and burial place over the centuries of monarchs and other great men. There had never been any doubt about the site.

In Paris, the tomb was placed under the Arc de Triomphe, commissioned by Napoleon and completed by the two regimes that succeeded him, the restored and liberal monarchies. It's hard now to imagine the Tomb anywhere else. But the unknown was placed under the arch only after much painful argument and debate.

In the USA the site chosen was the National Cemetery at Arlington, which housed already the Tomb of the Unknown Dead of the War between the States. This Unknown was to be lodged in an amphitheatre lately built within the cemetery for commemorative ceremonies. Germany's in 1930, was built into the Neue Wache, the New Watch, a monumental building in classical style erected to house the Palace Guard in 18th century Prussia.



With what ceremony was the Unknown buried? The ceremony was everywhere called a funeral. Six of the burials - about half - were performed within two and three years of the end of the war. We can assume that most people bereaved by the war were still experiencing grief; and we know that millions of them had been deprived of funerals. In the United Kingdom and its empire this deprivation was virtually total, for the imperial government had decided that no bodies were to be returned from the foreign fields in which they were all buried to the homelands where they were mourned. Only one corpse was ever returned to Australia (that is before Vietnam) and that was before the policy operated: General Bridges, killed at Gallipoli, was buried in a grave on Mount Pleasant, above the Royal Military College in Canberra of which he had been the first commandant.

What form did the tombs take? The first two, in London and Paris, were flat and flush with the surrounding floor or ground.

Arlington's was a sarcophagus above the ground, rendered more elaborate after some years. A competition in 1928 yielded a design for a sarcophagus 16 feet long, twelve feet wide and nine feet high, bearing figures reminiscent of those found on Greek tombstones: a male figure of victory, a female peace, and an American soldier. As for their war cemeteries and battlefield monuments, so for the Tomb

of the Unknown, the Americans built more grandly than anybody else, though their losses were lighter.

The Tomb at Paris was given a different sort of embellishment. A Flame of Remembrance fuelled by gas was installed on 11 November 1923. It was to burn day and night forever as a sign that the Unknown would never be forgotten, and rekindled at dusk each day as a sign that he was constantly in the minds of the living.

How were the tombs inscribed? In Paris, simply: Ici repose un soldat francais mort pour la patrie. 1914-1918. Here lies a French soldier who died for the fatherland - loosely translated. The diction is straight and economical: it doesn't even say Unknown, because that's taken to be obvious.

London's began fairly simple but didn't remain so. In 1920, on the coffin: A British Warrior who Fell in the Great War 1914-1918. For King and Country. On the first anniversary, 11 November 1921, this simple, though lofty, inscription was replaced by a far more elaborate one. The Unknown was covered in a blanket of purple language: more than 100 words in the highest of high diction, not counting five biblical texts around the edges, one of them reading: In Christ shall all be made alive.



The principal of the Liverpool Hebrew Schools complained about that in a letter to the Dean of Westminster Abbey implying that the man under the stone might be a Jew. The Dean, who had himself composed the inscription, replied that in a Christian church it was no unreasonable to express the Christian hope of resurrection. Moreover, the Unknown Warrior might even have been a Moslem or Mormon. "We cannot hope to please everybody."

The Tomb of the Unknown became everywhere a repository for wreaths, official and unofficial. Visiting heads of state would lay not only floral tributes but medals. America's Unknown was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour before he left French soil. The Warrior in the Abbey was not awarded a Victoria Cross but did receive from the Americans the Congressional Medal of Honor. The British reciprocated by conferring the Victoria Cross on the remains at Arlington. And so on.

Then came an even greater war. What embellishment or addition should now be made to the tombs? Nearly everywhere, the answer was none. The United States differed, eventually entombing bodies from World War II and Korea, both on Memorial Day in 1958, and from Vietnam on Memorial Day 1984.

Now we are undertaking to bury the remains of a member of the first AIF in the Memorial's Hall of Memory. After all these years, why?

But first, why not? Why not, when the sentiment for monuments and ceremony after the Great War was as strong in Australia as anywhere in the world. Surely some Australians would propose a tomb in the homeland for one of their unknown dead? And indeed they did.

In May 1920, Hugh D. McIntosh, local President of the British Empire League proposed that the remains of an unknown Australian soldier be brought home and buried in the still unbuilt federal capital of Canberra. It was a startlingly original idea in May 1920, for this was months before the plan for a tomb in London began to be hatched in the deanery at Westminster Abbey.

There was much debate and discussion and at one moment it was on the Federal Cabinet's agenda, but the issue was effectively settled at a federal congress of the RSL in February 1923 which passed the following resolution: "That no proposal for the reinterment in Australia of an unknown soldier from overseas bear the endorsement of the RSSILA, feeling that the sentiment of the Empire was expressed in the burial in London." This view about the mysterious unity of empire was not imposed on Australians by anybody in the imperial metropolis, London. Indeed, the Prince of Wales had expressed sympathy with the idea of an Australian Unknown. Sixty years ago, what that resolution called the sentiment of the Empire came spontaneously to enough Australian minds for the Australian Unknown to be vetoed. The RSL resolution was reported to people



who revived the idea from time to time. When the idea did come up somebody would say that the body in London could well have been an Australian.

The urge to have an unknown Australian soldier has, however, never disappeared.

And the 55th Congress of the RSL resolved in 1971 that the tomb of an unknown soldier should be incorporated within the Australian War Memorial. The Memorial's Board of Trustees, however, remained opposed to this concept as likely to detract from the Hall of Memory and everything came to naught until 1991, when the issue began to be considered afresh within the Memorial.

In that year - the Memorial's 50th anniversary - we looked again at how we might enhance the Memorial's commemorative function.

The names of the dead of the Great War were originally to have been inscribed around the walls of the Hall of Memory, but the numbers were so great that it was quickly realised that this would not be possible and the decision was taken to put them on bronze plaques along the walls of the Memorial's cloisters.

A noted architect of the day, Sir John Sulman, observed that this would leave an emptiness at the very centre of the Memorial. And this has forever since been true, despite the magnificence of Napier Waller's stained glass windows and the mosaic which adorns the walls and dome of the Hall of Memory.

I shan't bother you with the details of the debate and discussion we have had over the last two years other than to say tht it became the unanimous view that ownership of the The Hall of Memory had to go to an unknown soldier who would represent Australian dead of all wars. In this view we have been supported by World War I veterans, the broad, ex-service community, Legacy, War Widows, the Defence Force and the opinion of young people as well.

On 10th March this year the Commonwealth War Graves Commission in the U.K. endorsed our proposal - as in particular did its President, the Duke of Kent, and, we are told , the Queen.

With the help and advise of the War Graves Commission we will exhume only one set of remains, but they will be Australian and they will be unknown. Indeed, they will be totally anonymous so that they cannot be associated with any particular unit. This is important because he must represent all servicemen and women who have died in the service of our nation in time of war.



The journey will be from a cemetery in France or Belgium to the Australian National Memorial in Villers- Bretonneux, France, the remains to be handed over there to our representatives. They will lie in state at the Memorial in Villers-Bretonneux and at the Menin Gate in Ypres, Belgium, where the names of so many of our unknown dead are recorded. The remains will then be flown from Paris to Sydney and then to Canberra where they will lie in state in the King's Hall of the Old Parliament House. At 11 am on 11 November they will be interred in the the centre of the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial, a building that has been described as this nation's pantheon to democracy.

We, like the British and French, will have a tomb flush and flat in the floor of the Hall, not a raised sarcophagus. The design has been prepared by the architect Peter Tonkin and artist Janet Lawrence. (Peter was intimately involved in the design and execution of the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial unveiled in Canberra last October.) The 'grave' will be covered by a deep, rich red marble slab and will be separated by a polished black glass chasm from the rest of the pinkish marble floor. There will be a separation, therefore, between the "sacred" and what might be called the " profane" floor.

As the British Undertakers' Association played a role in 1920, so the Australian Funeral Directors Association will play its part in Australia and the Association has contributed handsomely to this

Memorial. I would like to pay a special personal tribute to Rob Allison for the part he has played in all of this both as a legatee and a leading figure in the Association.

The ceremony will be a funeral such as would be appropriate for a Field Marshal and the cortege as it proceeds will be accorded the 19 gun salute, at one minute intervals, proper to such an occasion.

The words on the tomb will be simple.

This is a moment in our history. As a people, far from the battlefields where our men and women died, we have been denied more than many the right to complete our grieving. This action will, symbolically, complete the grieving process so long unfulfilled. And it will unify and give deepened meaning to the Memorial's commemorative purpose, for the remains in the Hall of Memory will belong to one of the names on the Roll of Honour for those who died serving the nation.

It seems right that he should be from the Great War for there we had our "baptism by fire", there we founded the Anzac tradition, and there we suffered our greatest casualties in any conflict. And this will be the last significant anniversary when veterans of that war can still be present.



It seems right, too, that he is a "soldier" rather than a "warrior" in the high language of the 1920's, because that is what he was and because there are 23,000 unknown Australian soldiers buried on the Western Front in France and Belgium. He will nevertheless, represent all our war dead, men and women, not all of whom were "warriors".

One passage of Pericles' famous speech over the bodies of the Athenians killed in war runs -

"They gave their lives. for that public gift  
they received a praise which never ages and a  
tomb most glorious - not so much the tomb  
in which they lie, but that in which their fame survives,  
to be remembered forever when occasion comes  
for word or deed.....'

It is my hope that the Unknown Australian Soldier will give greater meaning and focus to the Memorial for future generations, more and more distance from the conflicts that have shaped our nation and our identity in this century and that, representing our dead of all wars, surrounded by the record of the deeds they performed, he will give encouragement to us all in endeavouring to fulfil the Memorial's purpose for the people of Australia.

( I wish to acknowledge Professor Ken Inglis on whose work I have drawn for this address. Ken is in the final stages of preparing an important work on the social and cultural importance of war memorials in Australia).