

## **Two Important Questions**

### **Why do Australians care so much about the war?**

That morning as we walked to the cemetery I was asked why Australians care so much about what happened to their family members during WWI. I have asked myself this question too and wonder if I will ever fully answer it for what is felt and what is known are so bound up together. The emotional side is almost impossible to put into words. The factual side is a little easier to write and speak about and has a lot to do with our nation's foundation of team-work and volunteerism.

Australia was a young nation, my home town of Bendigo settled just 64 years before WWI broke out. As a pioneering society, every citizen was important to the other. The first timber was felled for the first homes, the first villages created through team-work. The first fields were ploughed, sown and reaped with settlers helping each other. This support of each other is witnessed in the formation of unionised labour in the 1890s. It was witnessed in the team-work and mateship of the Australians in WWI.

Since settlement we have lived with the constant threat of fire, drought and floods, and to this day all Australians rush to the support of their countrymen. It is moving to see excess hay transported in lengthy convoys free of charge to drought stricken regions thousands of kilometres from our

region. It is heart rending to see convoys of fire engines pass through the town, laden with men who have volunteered their time and risk their lives to fight raging bushfires every summer. It is deeply moving to see communities sheltering families who have lost everything in one of these catastrophes.

It was this spirit of helpfulness that from 1914-1918 drove our nation to the aid of its far off homeland and its neighbours in France and Belgium. We were taught to *stand in the shoes of others*; to be grateful that *there but for the grace of God go I*; to *give and not take*. These teachings are written on our DNA.

Honkie and his comrades stood in the shoes of others and we cannot let them go. They are the finest expression of the Australian spirit.

With a population of just 5 million in 1914 every Australian family had someone who served overseas. Over sixty thousand families had someone who did-not return. Scores returned home damaged beyond repair and are still remembered.

Annual commemorations do not let us forget. Travel the length and breadth of Australia and you will find a memorial in every tiny village. Funded by communities and made of local stone they stand in red desert earth, in green mountain landscapes, along every coastal road, visual reminders of a terrible time.

There is ANZAC Day on 25<sup>th</sup> April, a national Australian holiday. Remembrance Day 11<sup>th</sup> November, when the nation

stops for a minute's silence. There is no forgetting, memories mingle with grief and pride in a tumult of intellectual confusion and deep seated emotion.

## **The Second Question**

### **Why Australians come to France when it is so far away?**

Australia is a country founded by travellers. It is a huge island at the bottom of the world, a long way from anywhere. Most pre - WWII children and my Baby Boomer generation were reared with stories of grandparents and great grandparents who grew up in the great city of London or a beautiful Scottish village, or a coastal town of the British Isles.

Every family has photographs or portraits of their ancestors, and the pretty cottages they came from on their walls or safely secured in albums. Letters and shipboard journals have survived the decades and are found in thousands of homes, and in all our libraries. Shakespeare, Dickens, Bronte are found in our book-shelves and presented as period drama on television or in films.

We love these shows and give thanks to our forebears who made the perilous journey to Australia to forge a life of

freedom and prosperity for their children and descendants. Their music is still played, songs still sang in our homes. At every significant occasion and every fun-filled parade Scottish pipe bands lead the way.

Since peace was declared in November 1918 wealthy Australians have travelled to the Western Front to see where their lost one lies. They, like everyone, were barely able to believe that centuries of military campaigns had followed them to the new world and that they, while so far away, were drawn into it.

In the early 1970s QANTAS, Australia's international airline, made inexpensive flights available to Australians. My generation leapt at the opportunity and quickly saved the \$700 one way fare to London. From there we backpacked, hitch hiked or had a Euro Rail Pass and travelled by train at night and saw the sights by day. Most stayed away three years and then returned to settle down, to develop a career or to raise a family.

While Baby Boomers were travelling, our parents, aunts and uncles were researching the family tree. They felt dislocated. Centuries of British and European life flowed in their veins. Australia was their homeland, yet something was missing.

Then finding out a few things, we their offspring, set out again to retrace the footsteps of our ancestors, to see with our own eyes where they came from, to meet family who still lived in the same villages and cottages.

We travel too, to see where our fallen lie, to search the battlefields to see where they fought. We stay close by, find it hard to leave, long to turn back the clock to restore the courageous one to our families. They cannot come to us, so we will go to them.

We have foreign correspondents all over the world who daily deliver good and bad news from abroad. Every conceivable military conflict is conveyed to us and many families have servicemen serving abroad.

In other words, while we are a long way from the rest of the world, it has always been close to us, in our heritage, our homes, our communities and our hearts.

