

# **Ministerial Statement Updating the House on the Recent Military Commemorations**

**House of Representatives**

**31 August 2016 - 0900**

Mr Speaker, I ask leave of the House to update Members on commemorations for the Anzac Centenary and the Century of Service.

On Monday at the Australian War Memorial, I stood with the Leader of the Opposition and many of our Parliamentary colleagues alongside serving sailors, soldiers and airmen, veterans of conflicts past, and their families at a solemn ceremony in the Canberra twilight.

On the eve of the 45th Parliament we reflected on the most solemn responsibility conferred on us, as our nation's leaders - the decision to send the men and women of the Australian Defence Force into harm's way.

The Anzac First World War Centenary of 2014 to 2018 is a powerful reminder of the cost of war, as well as the bravery,

sacrifice and service of all who served and whose legacy is the freedom and liberty we enjoy today.

The Centenary honours our original Anzacs and generations of servicemen and women who have worn the Australian uniform—in wars, conflicts and peacekeeping and peace monitoring operations—throughout a Century of Service. The milestones we have remembered and will continue to remember over the Anzac Centenary will sometimes mark defeat and, at other times, victory.

The crimson thread that binds them all is the selflessness and the courage of our servicemen and women and their commitment to upholding our values and freedoms.

Our commemorations are not a triumph of arms. We commemorate the triumph of the human spirit, the courage and resolve of those men and women who 100 years ago and ever since and, even as we speak today, put their lives on the line to keep us safe and free, to defend us and our values.

The Anzac Centenary is not just about the immense tapestry of our military history, it is also about each thread in that tapestry.

So we remember the battles, the campaigns - those we won and those we lost.

But we also remember each soldier in the trenches, about to go over the top to certain death.

We honour those young men, not much more than boys, mown down as they ran toward the gunfire, and those who lay in no man's land fatally wounded, thoughts only of home and family as their life ebbed away in an alien world of mud, barbed wire and death.

We honour the courageous who in their martial spirit were heedless of fear, and we honour those who, almost numb with terror, nonetheless pressed on to do their duty.

We honour those who fell from the sky and those whose resting place is the bottom of the ocean.

And we honour all those whose homes were changed forever by lives lost or broken by war.

This year has already seen:

- the 25th anniversary of the end of the First Gulf War
- the 75th anniversary of the Siege of Tobruk
- the 75th anniversary of the Battles of Greece and Crete
- the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kapyong, and
- the 50th anniversary of the end of the Indonesian-Malaysian Confrontation.

### **AIF on the Western Front**

On Anzac Day in April we looked to the Western Front with 2016 marking 100 years since soldiers of our First Australian Imperial Force commenced operations there in the First World War.

This theatre of war was a place of extraordinary courage and hard fought victory; but it was also a place of unimaginable suffering and loss.

In the Battle of the Somme alone, more than one million[2] allied and enemy troops became casualties—dead, wounded or missing.

Of the almost 417,000 Australians who volunteered for service in the First World War, more than 60,000 died—some 46,000 of them on the Western Front.

The horror and the massive loss of life on the Western Front had no precedent in the history of war. It was carnage on an industrial scale.

Day after day thousands of men were, in Charles Bean's words, "turned in there as into some ghastly giant mincing machine."

The technology of killing had outstripped the competence of the generals who directed it.

Lions were led to their death by donkeys.

The generation of the trenches, of whom my grandfather Fred Turnbull was one, would never forget the horror, never forgive the folly.

Last month, 19 July marked 100 years since the **Battle of Fromelles**.

In what has been described as the worst 24 hours in Australia's military history,[3] the Australian 5th Division suffered more than five-and-a-half thousand casualties—almost 2,000 were killed, died of wounds or were declared missing, and almost 500 became prisoners of war.[4]

They were the heaviest battle casualties incurred by a single Australian division in 24 hours during the First World War.

Just days later Australian soldiers entered the **Battle of Pozières**.

There, in darkness on 23 July, the 1st Australian Division took Pozieres in hard and intense fighting; the Germans responded by pounding the area with artillery. The capture of the town was a significant achievement, but in five bloody days the division lost 5,000 men.

Sergeant Archie Barwick wrote in his diary: "Heavy fighting - simply murder - men falling everywhere... expecting death at

every second. Dead and dying everywhere. Some men simply blown to pieces. Tired and sore at heart.”

Just two weeks ago we also commemorated a more recent event in our military history, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the **Battle of Long Tan**.

This battle was the most costly single engagement for our Australian forces during the Vietnam War. 18 Australians were killed and 24 were wounded.

On 18 August 1966, in monsoonal rain, the 105 Australian soldiers of D Company, 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, together with three New Zealand soldiers of their artillery forward observer party, faced an enemy at least 10 times greater in number.

It is to the great credit of our veterans who have travelled back to Vietnam to remember that battle, that they honour the many more Vietnamese who died and that they have made friends with their former foes.

On Vietnam Veterans Day this year, we recalled the courage of our troops on the ground; the skill of our pilots flying missions in support of ground operations; the distinction with which our sailors served; and all the personnel who supported our troops.

At the time, they did not receive the gratitude they deserved.

But their bravery and determination is now rightly acknowledged in our national story.

They have inspired—and continue to inspire—the service men and women who followed and still follow in their footsteps.

Australians do not glorify war let alone gloat about victories.

Our commemorations honour the human spirit, sacrifice of friend and foe, and “Lest we forget” points to many truths:

Lest we forget those whose sacrifice secured our freedom

Lest we forget the veterans and their families.

Lest we forget our obligation as leaders to resolve conflicts peacefully wherever possible.

Lest we forget never to commit our troops to conflict unless they are well led, well armed and equipped with all of the means to secure their objectives and, fighting done, return home.

Mr Speaker.

Serving our country can have a long-term impact on those who serve and on their families and it is important we acknowledge that reality.

Some soldiers, like Lance Corporal Robert Alex Bolton-Wood, who died near Pozières 100 years ago and whom we honoured at the Last Post ceremony at the Australian War Memorial last night, remain missing.

Lance Corporal Bolton-Wood is just one of some 18,000 Australians who died on the Western Front who have no known graves.

Tens of thousands more died on foreign soil and were buried there in military cemeteries, as was the case with some of our

soldiers who served in the Vietnam War and on Thai/Malay border operations.

On 2 June this year, the remains of 32 Australian servicemen and dependants made their final journey home from the Terendak Military Cemetery in Malaysia and Kranji cemetery in Singapore.

June this year also saw celebrations of the Returned Services League of Australia celebrate its 100th anniversary.

The organisation's motto 'the price of liberty is eternal vigilance' is a reminder that the fight to protect our freedoms comes at a cost and that our national interests must be effectively guarded.[6]

This House and the nation are united in our respect for the RSL and its century of service to veterans and their families and for the care and support it will continue to provide.

This week is Legacy Week and we are reminded of the support they provide for some 80,000 widows and 1,800 children, with

services such as counselling, special housing, medical, advocacy and social support.

We recall the words of Corporal Fred Muller, who was burying one of our own in the soil of Pozieres and with tears running down his cheeks said: “Never worry, my friend, I’ll look after your family.”

His legacy is our legacy as well.

The 29<sup>th</sup> of July marked another milestone with the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lavarack Barracks in Townsville.

The Barracks is home to 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Brigade. This 102-year-old military formation has a proud history which includes Gallipoli, the Somme, the Third battle of Ypres, Bullecourt and the Hindenburg Line.

Since the Lavarack Barracks opened, its soldiers have deployed to locations including Vietnam, Malaysia, East Timor/Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Iraq and Afghanistan.

Townsville is, as Peter Lindsay used to say, a Garrison City and recently also commemorated a tragic event which took place nearby.

On the 12th June 1996, soldiers from the Special Air Service Regiment were conducting counter-terrorist training with 5 Aviation Regiment in the High Range area, just outside Townsville. During night insertion exercises, two Black Hawk helicopters collided.[7]

We remember the three army aircrew and fifteen SAS Regiment personnel who were killed in this, Australia's worst peacetime military aviation disaster.[8]

As we look ahead this year we will also commemorate the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Maryang San.

Australian soldiers, fighting for the first time within a United Nations coalition, had already proved their value at Kapyong, helping to stem the massive Chinese Spring offensive and advance towards Seoul.

Thirty two Australians were killed, 59 wounded and three taken prisoner but allied forces inflicted heavy casualties on the Chinese.

Captain Reg Saunders, the Indigenous Australian commanding officer of C Company, 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the Royal Australian Regiment, wrote of the Battle of Kapyong, 'At last I feel like an Anzac and I imagine there were 600 others like me.'

Then, in early October 1951, at Maryang San came another fiercely-fought battle against superior enemy numbers.

Following two unsuccessful attempts by US forces to take the hills around Maryang San, the men of 3 RAR and their allies secured that strategically important feature.

In October this year, we will recall the taking of hills 317 and 355 and the tenacity of the soldiers of the 28<sup>th</sup> British Commonwealth Brigade.

Mr Speaker.

We remember events in our military history for good reason. And all too often, it can be uncomfortable to turn the pages of those histories and reflect on the similarities between those times and our own today.

They paint a picture of where we have come from as a nation.

They remind us of what it is that we fight for. Not to conquer but to uphold, and resist threats to liberty and rights—our own and those of others.

Australian men and women are currently deployed in the Middle East area of operations and many other parts of the world in this quest.

For more than a century, remarkable men and women have given themselves and their service for us, our freedoms and our nation's determination to build a better world.

They deserve our thanks, they deserve our remembrance and above all they deserve our wise leadership.

[1] <https://www.awm.gov.au/ww1/1916/essay/>

[2] <https://www.awm.gov.au/military-event/E158/>

[3] *Disaster at Fromelles*, Wartime, Issue 36 , P18

[4] Ibid

[5] Peter Burness, *Australians at The Great War 1914-1918* (Australian War Memorial - Murdoch Books), p. 40

[6] <http://www.rsl.org.au/Portals/13/The%20Hon.%20Malcom%20Turnbull%20Address.pdf>

[7] <http://monumentaaustralia.org.au/themes/disaster/aviation/display/90406-black-hawk-memorial>

[8] <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-06-11/survivor-remembers-1996-black-hawk-tragedy/7497914>

