

Combined Schools Centenary Commemoration of Armistice

Address by the Honourable Kim Beazley AC Governor of Western Australia

Thursday, 8th November

I would firstly like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet – the Noongar people – and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I want to acknowledge what the more than 2,000 of you young folk are doing this morning on behalf of all of us. We promised 100 years ago that we would never forget the sacrifices made for our freedom by the men and women who died in the Great War. You are keeping that promise. You won't forget this day. Memories of childhood fade. Some always remain. The way you have organised and run this ceremony won't fade for you.

Albany is the ANZAC town. You marched down York Street as the young men did more than 100 years ago. You stopped here. They boarded their ships. The Premier told me his Great Uncle marched down York Street, then to Lone Pine, then to eternity. He and they live on in our hearts.

November 11, 100 years ago, the guns went silent. The 10 minutes before they were anything but. Americans for example on one part of the front fired off all their remaining ammunition. A British machine gunner at 2 minutes to 11 fired a whole belt, stood up, took off his helmet, bowed to the German trenches and walked slowly back to his lines.

Apart from specialist elements Australians weren't at the front. We had been withdrawn to refit five weeks earlier when in a series of battles we had broken the main German defence line, The Hindenburg Line. In France itself our numbers had fallen below 100,000. We were no longer replacing ourselves. Recruiting in 1918 brought 30,000 – dead and wounded on the battle field that year 65,000. Still the refitted first and fourth divisions were moving up to the front line at the time of the armistice.

In many ways we just made it. We have never been as influential on the world stage as we were in 1918. Under General Monash the Australian Army Corp developed new ways of fighting which broke the trench warfare model of bloody attrition and stale mate. We substituted movement and fire power for substantial numbers of men. We were critical in the defensive battles at the beginning of the year which broke the last major German throw of the dice. Then in August we were the spear point of the counter offensive starting in Amiens then over the next few months breaking The Hindenburg Line. It was a benchmark of German intelligence all year that if you discovered Australians on your front you could expect to be attacked within 48 hours.

Our population was 5 million. Of men of military age more than half had enlisted. 420,000 of which 330,000 served overseas. 61,514 were killed, over 155,000 wounded. We need to imagine that. We have five times the population we had then. Calculate what the impact on us would have be if we had just lost 300,000 men and women in battle and had a million wounded among us. Further, in the 1920's another 60,000 died as a result of that war service, another 300,000 in our terms. There was not an extended family unaffected.

We emerged proud of ourselves. We had established an Australian type. It was really a definition of an Australian male. It wasn't until WWII that an ANZAC definition was gender inclusive. In 1914-18 we fought for Empire. In 1939-45 for survival. Proud but shattered. Our men came home but many more died. We were in many ways a shocked and devastated society, surrounded by ghosts. For me an overwhelming image from the welcome homes, was the 10,000 women in black, widows, who marched to the harbour in Sydney from where the men folk had left. Not the old women we imagine but women not much older than those here. We were a sadder nation but a more mature one.

We were more complex thinkers. Looking back over the four years why were we so committed at the beginning? Well many saw themselves as in the phrase of the day "independent Britons of the southern sun". Paradoxically a British diplomat Cecil Spring Rice wrote a poem in 1913 that captured that spirit. Verses 2 and 3 became the content of a popular English anthem "I vow to thee my Country" But it is the never sung first verse that carries the weight of this spirit.

*"I heard my country, calling, away across the sea.
Across the waste of waters, she calls and calls to me.
Her sword is girded at her side, her helmet on her head,
And around her feet are lying the dying and the dead;
I hear the noise of battle, the thunder of her guns;
I haste to thee, my mother, a son among thy sons."*