

## REMEMBRANCE DAY 2016

### KINGSCLIFF RSL

Distinguished guests, Veterans, Ladies, Gentlemen & Children! Thank you for the opportunity to address you on Remembrance Day this year.

It is 97 years since King George V inaugurated the first Armistice Day ceremony with the Grenadier Guards at Buckingham Palace at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour on the 11<sup>th</sup> Day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month of the year on the anniversary of the signing of the Armistice of WW1 in 1918. He believed it was fitting to honour those who had been killed in the carnage of WW1 with a simple ceremony that included a 5 minute silence to honour those who'd made the supreme sacrifice in the great war that had seen the mobilisation of some 17 million people across the globe and resulted in between 9 and 13 million perishing, many with no known grave.

Currently I am reading Roland Perry's biography of General Sir John Monash who led the Australian Army's 4 Brigade on Gallipoli, then the 3<sup>rd</sup> Division and eventually the Australian Corps on the Western Front from 1914 to 1918. It is no secret Monash was appalled at the losses that occurred during the many battles fought with dogged determination and unimaginative tactics and resolved to do his utmost to reduce this wastage and still achieve the objective. He witnessed Passchendaele and recently I read Ross Fitzgerald's review of Paul Ham's book "Passchendaele: Requiem for Doomed Youth". During the battles fought around this small Flemish town from July to November 1917 he notes "It was the worst year of the war for allied forces, a time of catastrophic loss and unimaginable carnage on the battlefields of the Western Front." "The troops were ordered to attack across fields of mud in pouring rain, knowing they faced massive losses. As an integral part of Field Marshall Haig's wearing down approach to the war "waves of young Allied soldiers were thrown at the German lines". In the then British Prime Minister Lloyd George's War Memoirs not published until the 1930's he even claimed that "the Passchendaele fiasco imperilled the chances of final victory". Evidence now suggests that during the time of his command Haig's forces were wiped out at a far higher rate than the German troops. Ham points out that these battles "ravaged the morale of the British and Dominion soldiers, whose spirit fell into the darkest slough of despond since the war began". This experience reinforced Monash's determination to raise morale by painstakingly planning the battles for Hamel and Amiens the following year to successfully overcome the German defences with the minimum loss of Allied lives. This is something we should never forget now or in the future when sadly we will most likely be called upon to fight again by the Government.

From my own participation over some years in London as the Australian Army Advisor to the Court of St James some 20 years ago, the period of silence had been reduced to 2 minutes and it was strictly observed in Whitehall where all traffic came to a halt and pedestrians stopped when Big Ben struck the 11<sup>th</sup> hour. However, the ceremony was actually held on

Remembrance Sunday which is closest to Remembrance Day at the impressive Gunners Memorial at Hyde Park corner under the auspices of the Royal British Legion (similar to our RSL). It was normally cold and often wet a fitting environment given the solemnity of the occasion and the weather of the Western Front across the channel from 1914 to 1918. It was short, simple and moving and following the ceremony we repaired to the Royal Artillery barracks at Woolwich for a curry luncheon to warm up.

Since ancient times vigils have been mounted over the slain and wounded after a battle but it wasn't until the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armistice that the remains of an unknown Australian soldier, exhumed from a WW1 military cemetery in France, was ceremonially entombed in the Australian War Memorial's Hall Of Memory and in 1997 the Governor General declared the 11<sup>th</sup> November to be Remembrance Day, urging Australians to observe 1 minute's silence on the 11<sup>th</sup> November to remember those who died or suffered for Australia's cause in all wars and armed conflicts. Even the impact of monumental battles with horrific attendant losses tend to fade from national public memory as the surviving participants pass on over time. Which brings us to the present Remembrance Day which does not compete with ANZAC Day, Kapyong Day, Vietnam Veterans Day or Afghanistan Day but complements them. Its inception set the Commonwealth and other nations to ponder the price of war in human sacrifice. As the then Prime Minister Paul Keating said in his eulogy to the Unknown Soldier in 1993 "We know that he was one of the 45,000 Australians who died on the Western Front. One of the 416,000 Australians who **volunteered** for service in the First World War. One of the 324,000 Australians who served overseas in that war and one of the 60,000 Australians who died on foreign soil. And one of the 100,000 Australians who have died in wars this century. He is all of them. And he is one of us. On all sides they were the heroes of that war; not the Generals and the Politicians, but the soldiers, sailors and nurses (and airmen) – those who taught us to endure hardship, to show courage, to be bold as well as resilient, to believe in ourselves, to stick together" and that is why we are here today.

## **WE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN.**

### **Acknowledgements:**

"Monash the Outsider Who Won A War" – Roland Perry 2007

Ross Fitzgerald – Review of Passchendaele: Requiem for Doomed Youth - Paul Ham 2016 in The Australian Review October 29-30 2016

"Review of Passchendaele: Requiem for Doomed Youth" - Paul Ham 2016

'Remembrance Day' article in Queensland RSL News Edition 05 2016. Republished from Australian War Memorial material including quotes from the eulogy delivered by the Prime Minister, The Hon. PJ Keating MP, at the funeral service of the Unknown Australian Soldier, 11 November 1993.

"Remembrance Day" - en.m.wikipedia.org 2016