

A PILGRIMAGE TO FRANCE AND BEYOND

IN THE STEPS OF HEROES

This journey started 100 years ago in France and Belgium where ordinary, but adventurous Australians carried out extraordinary deeds on the bloody battlefields of the Somme.

Like others on our journey, there was a personal dimension to this pilgrimage; my grandfather and great-uncle served on the Somme. Arthur Felix Bennett, a clerk with the Adelaide General Post office, enlisted as an infantryman on 24 September 1915. He served in the 10th and 50th Battalions and was gassed; returning to Australia a broken and sick man. Arthur was 36 years old and had three young children, one of whom was my mother. He died in Adelaide on the eve of WW2 as a result of the gassing in France and is buried in the soldiers section of Adelaide's West Terrace cemetery. Generations later I served as a rifleman in D Coy 10th Bn Royal South Australian Regiment.

My great uncle, Clement Aloysius Joseph Mahony, came from the small farming and fishing community of Port Broughton, on South Australia's Yorke Peninsula. Clement was 27 when he enlisted on 4 February 1915 and was posted as a trooper to the 9th Light Horse later posted to the 48th Battalion as an infantryman. While in France he was wounded and evacuated to a London hospital, where he fell in love with a nurse; they were engaged to be married. After convalescence in England, he returned to France and on 11 April 1917 he was killed in action at the bloody battle of Bellecourt, and in the hellish carnage of that battle he was never found; we visited this place. Private Mahony joined the ranks of those 18,000 Australians who have no known grave. His name is one of 46,000 inscribed on the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux. I often wonder what happened to his fiancée, Miss Ruby McLouglin, who wrote letters to the military authorities seeking any information on her beloved Clement.



We followed the exploits of these men, In *the Steps of Heroes* and visited those places where so many Australians gave their lives, Poziers, Bullecourt, Mont St Quentin, Fromelles, Villers-Bretonneux, Celtic Wood, Ypres, to name just a few. We remembered them during the ANZAC Day remembrance ceremony at Villers Bretonneux.

Of the 295,000 Australians who fought in France during WW1, 46,000 are buried in France and 132,000 were wounded; 18,000 have no known grave. The Australians suffered 64% casualties, the highest of all Commonwealth countries. It was the Australians, under the General Monash, who held the line against the Germans at Villers-Bretonneux and saved Amiens. British war correspondent, Philip Gibbs described the Australians:

By jove...Australians. There is no mistaking them, their slouch hats told one at a glance but without them I should have known. They had a distinctive type of their own, which marked them out from all the different soldiers along those roads of war...They had merry eyes (especially for the girls round the stalls)..Youth, keen as steel, with a flash in the eyes...with no respect for rank or caste unless it carried strength with it..

In Ieper, Belgium, I had the honour of laying a wreath at the Menin Gate, Last Post Ceremony not only on behalf of those South Australian battalions of the 1st AIF but in memory of all of those Australians who paid the ultimate sacrifice for freedom.



Laying a wreath at the Menin Gate ceremony

After the Somme we remembered those men and women of WW2 and the battlefields of Normandy; Bayeux, Longues-sur-Mer, “bloody” Omaha, Point-du-Hoc and St Mere Eglise all spring to mind.

Some reflections:

What a great tour; the commentary brought the personalities, battles and locations to life, however, it was our group that made our tour, great fun, a few tears, but lots of laughs. Most of our group were Vietnam Veterans who had joined me on our Vietnam trips and it was great to renew friendship and enjoy their comradeship.

The generosity of our French and Belgium hosts, who wined and dined us with such great bonhomie and patience. Our dinners were superb and the wine kept coming. Sitting in the sunshine or late at night out the front of the Duquesne Eiffel Hotel with a wine, beer or coffee, *telling lies* and watching the passing parade was hard to beat. Maybe it was those happy *hours* and a few great meals – and wine - at Le Bistro Gaspard in Avenue Duquesne, just up the road from our hotel and our unofficial command post. The generosity of Sophie, the manager of the Duquesne Eiffel Hotel and the free flowing aperitifs prior to our spectacular welcome dinner, will always be remembered.

Finding a cosy little restaurant or bistro on our free nights, the Accroche restaurant in Bayeux comes to mind, a tiny place near the cathedral, the meal and service were *magnifique*. Or was it sitting at the bar of the Novotel Centrum, Ieper, discussing tactics, strategy and maybe philosophy, something to remember?



In The Steps of Heroes group at Victoria School Villers-Bretonneux

ANZAC Day at Villers-Bretonneux of course made it all worthwhile. The miserable weather added to the occasion. I don't think any of us will forget that day. Talking with the two French journalists, Vivianne and Isabelle, on the meaning of ANZAC at our hotel, was very emotional; they were unaware of the Australian involvement and much moved by our stories.

26th July and meeting our Prime Minister at Villers-Bretonneux and his genuine engagement, not only with our group, but the school children from the Victoria school made the day. The goodwill and patience of the gendarmes all helped to make those two days so enjoyable. Remembering the fallen at the simple, but poignant Menin Gate ceremony moved us all and then, for some of us, a traditional Belgium stew at the buzzing Leshalles Markt Café. It was a great night in a great town.



Vietnam Veterans with the Australian Prime Minister at Villers-Bretonneux, 26 April
Front row L to R: Alex Pavlovich, Neil Macintosh, PM, Phil Brookes, Peter Sampson, Richard Jones
Back row L to R: John Zanotti, Noel Kitto, Gary Moulton, Bob Murray, Garry Hutchinson

Visiting the many cemeteries and battlefields, particularly those that had a personal dimension for some of us, brought the mixed emotions of the terrible loss of young men, but also happiness in that we could thank them for their sacrifice and wish them *God speed*.

The picturesque Normandy countryside, so green and peaceful, it was hard to imagine that great D Day invasion that rolled in from England to consume the mighty German juggernaut. We lingered over a great lunch, at La Marine restaurant; maybe our minds were cast back to those halcyon days in June 1944 when another generation of young men fought their way across this beachfront. The sun shone for us and the wine made us linger in this beautiful part of France.

Remember the beautiful *Old World* Hotel De France et Chateaubriand at Saint Malo? For us, this epitomised French hospitality. This place oozed charm and sitting at the cosy bar with friends was something that money can't buy.

No doubt our minds cast back to the beautiful American cemetery overlooking Omaha beach, like all the cemeteries we visited, moved us all, a fitting place for Heroes.

It all came to an end so quickly. Most of all, we enjoyed each other's company, friendship and good cheer.



Having a good time in Paris. Our final dinner at the Auberge Bressane

Another France tour? Some have asked. Yes, 2018 is a possibility to coincide with ANZAC Day and the centenary of the end of WW1. I'll keep you posted.