



DIGGER

"Dedicated to Digger Heritage"



Photo: A group of Diggers from Tumut, NSW, photographed in camp in France, 1917. Courtesy of Paula Cavanough, who writes: "My grandfather, Bill Sturt, standing at the back with his hand on Gus Keown's shoulder. 520 Percy McAlister is on the right of Gus Keown. Frank Henery and 506 Walter Malone are on the left end of the middle row and Fred Malone and Tom Malone on the left end of the front row." See also pages 2 and 20 for details of these men.

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Two pennies: linking Australia and Villers-Bretonneux

Vicki Bennett, Chelmer.

This story starts on the battlefields of the Somme. The Great War had been raging in Europe for almost four years and by April 1918, the trenches around Villers-Bretonneux were mud-drenched wastelands. The German Army was determined to capture Amiens, a town close to Villers-Bretonneux and only 70 miles from Paris, their final destination.

All that stood between the German Army and Amiens were the men of the 13th and 15th Brigades, Australia Imperial Force, and two British battalions. These courageous men started a very difficult advance, reaching the road to Amiens at 9.00 am and by the end of the afternoon the train station at Villers-Bretonneux was finally taken back.

On the evening of April 24th, 1918, this band of brave men turned back the German advance and by morning, Villers-Bretonneux was free of invaders. But this small village was shattered. Homes, public buildings, shops, the town hall, the church and the village school were all in tatters.

On the morning of April 25th, Anzac Day, officers did a head count of the soldiers who had died or were missing. Twelve hundred Australian soldiers died to recapture Villers-Bretonneux.

Years later in Melbourne, Victoria, a little boy who heard about this little town in France, had a dream to help rebuild the school in Villers-Bretonneux and decided he wanted to make a difference. This little boy, George, lived above his family's bakery in Albert Park.

So he woke early each morning, to care for the horses that drew the carts to deliver the bread.

First he led them from the stables into the quadrangle. He put their bridles over their heads and tethered them to the horse railings. Then he fed each of them a bucket of oats, so they would have full stomachs to do their day's work.

After the horses had delivered the bread, George washed and brushed their coats so they were clean and shiny.

Soon he had earned his first two pennies to help rebuild the school in Villers-Bretonneux. It was then that a bond was forged between George and Villers-Bretonneux that was never broken.

George was not alone, thousands of Victorian schoolchildren donated pennies. This initiative of the Victorian Department of Education became known as the Penny Drive or, as George called it, The Mile of Pennies.

George and his wife, Vida, eventually visited the school in Villers-Bretonneux in 1982 and were thrilled to be greeted by schoolchildren welcoming them with a stirring rendition of 'Waltzing Matilda'.

The Victoria School, on the rue du Victoria in Villers-Bretonneux, was rebuilt between 1923 and 1927. The school is a gift from the children of the State of Victoria, Australia, to the children of Villers-Bretonneux as proof of their love and goodwill towards France. Twelve hundred Australian soldiers, fathers and brothers of these children, gave their lives for the heroic recapture of the town in April 1918.

On the front of the school are two plaques, one in French and one in English, referring to this bond. In the quadrangle of the school, painted over a porch on a green background in yellow is written 'DO NOT FORGET AUSTRALIA'. This inscription is also found in French in each classroom.

After the War, Villers-Bretonneux became the site for an Australian National Memorial, opened on 22 July, 1938, by Queen Elizabeth (the Queen Mother), who laid a bunch of poppies given to her by a local schoolboy. She may have been thinking of her own brother, Fergus Bowes-Lyon, who was reported missing at the Battle of Loos in 1915.

This Memorial commemorates all the Australian soldiers who died in the First World War. The Memorial also lists the names of over 10 700 Australian soldiers who died in France and have no known grave.

Many years later, in 2012, an old man sat with his daughter, his blue eyes twinkling as he opened a small wooden box, took out two pennies and placed them in her hand. 'When I was a little boy, I raised money to help build a school in France. I have kept these pennies for you to take to France and give them to the school for me.'

George's daughter flew to France, found the little school in the village that her father had helped to build, and gave George's treasured two pennies to the headmaster of the Victoria School, Monsieur Holleville.

These two pennies are now proudly displayed in the French-Australian Museum in Villers-Bretonneux. They tell the story of a little boy who had a dream and made it come true.

Henry George McGregor, known as George, served his country in Borneo and Papua New Guinea during the Second World War. He also served as a Returned Services League state councillor for over 30 years, as a foundation member and chairman of the Community Services Committee. He was a driving force behind the “Girl in a Million” contest and was awarded the OAM in 1989.

Endnotes: (1) Vicki has written a children’s book based on her grandfather’s story. *Precis:* ‘Two Pennies’ is a powerful and poignant story about this little boy who with courage, hope and perseverance helped to rebuild this school across the oceans. ‘Two Pennies’ is written by Henry George McGregor’s daughter, Vicki Bennett. To order a copy of ‘Two Pennies’ visit www.vickibennett.com.au or www.boolarongpress.com.au. A YouTube trailer for the book can be viewed at <http://youtu.be/A0zon2sNjiQ>. (2) A documentary maker, McGirvan Media, has enlisted Vicki to assist in filming the ‘Two Pennies’ story as part of a bigger story about Villers-Bretonneux. Vicki is looking for other stories about Villers-Bretonneux at the end of WWI; especially looking for any soldiers who may have stayed behind to help rebuild Villers-Bretonneux and married local French girls.

Members’ visit to Gallipoli, 2015

Sue Tongue, Narrabundah, accompanied her mother, Daphne, to the Centenary of the Anzac Landing, having been successful in gaining places in the ballot. Daphne is the sister of John Laffin and the daughter of Charles Laffin [AAMC, 20th Bn] and Nellie Laffin nee Pike [AANS], who were both involved in the Gallipoli Campaign.

This report for *DIGGER* is about me and my elderly mother, whose mother and father both served in the Gallipoli Campaign. It was a pilgrimage. We were always conscious of representing our family in honouring them but, when we arrived at the Sydney Airport departure gate and saw many passengers wearing red poppies, we became fully conscious of being part of something much larger.

Belloc’s essay, ‘The Idea of a Pilgrimage’, helps me understand what just happened. It happens every year but 100 years after Gallipoli was very special. It was a ‘nobler kind of travel’ – whether you have religious faith or not. We were all going to a place that means so much to us, and all along the route we talked to each other, ‘ready to smile and admire’ and share our stories.

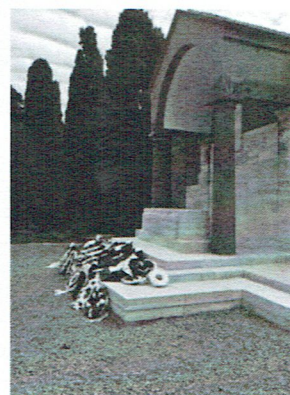
We travelled in luxury on a cruise ship from Athens to Cannakale and back to Istanbul. We saw wondrous sites and met wonderful Australians, New Zealanders, Turks, Greeks and others. We had many laughs from others’ quips. We knew how lucky we were.

Ideally a pilgrimage requires you to undertake something difficult to show your commitment to the memory of sacrifice. Our only difficulty was spending thirty hours without sleep travelling to the Gallipoli and Lone Pine services – and the toilets were a challenge! But it was worth it.

We arrived at the Gallipoli service at North Beach in the dark. When dawn broke, lighting up the cliffs and the Sphinx, the challenge of the landing was clear. The birds sang along with the beautiful Gallipoli choir, from the Gregory Terrace and All Hallows schools in Brisbane. The navy ships cruised slowly by. All the elements of the solemn service that we know so well, including the Catafalque Party, the Last Post, One Minute’s Silence and Reveille, were especially poignant in this place at this time.

After the Gallipoli service the Australians walked up to the Lone Pine service and the New Zealanders went to Chunuk Bair. Before the Lone Pine service, people who had relatives that served in the campaign were asked to stand as the MC called out ‘grandfather’, ‘uncle’, ‘great-uncle’. My mother stood when he called out ‘father’ and again when he called out ‘mother’. Later, several women came by to tell her stories of the nursing sisters.

Another highlight for us was visiting the beautiful island of Lemnos, where a special service was held at Mudros. We saw nurses there and showed them a picture of my grandmother in uniform at the 3rd AGH. My mother was hugged and kissed by them and an Australian navy officer. We walked in the cemetery where the Canadian nursing sisters are buried and where my grandmother walked just prior to the Evacuation. After a Greek Orthodox minister gave a moving service there, an Australian stepped forward to recite the Ode of Remembrance. **Right:** Wreaths laid in the Lemnos Cemetery.



Pilgrimages give you knowledge and meaning in many ways. In his speech at Gallipoli the Prime Minister concluded by encouraging us to be the best we can be. That will stay with me too.