

TWO PENNIES →

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Henry George McGregor, known as George, served his country in Borneo and Papua New Guinea during WWII. After settling in Brisbane with his family, he lived out his days in service of his fellow veterans as a driving force behind the RSL Girl in a Million quest, which raised funds for the work of the RSL in the veteran community. It is no coincidence, then, that George's charitable deeds began when he was a boy.

*Vicki Bennett*

**WORLD** War I 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 their final destination, Paris.

All that stood between the German Army and Amiens were the men of the 13th and 15th Brigades, Australia

Imperial Forces and two British battalions. These courageous men started a very difficult advance, reaching the road to Amiens at 9am. By the end of the afternoon the train station at Villers-Bretonneux was finally taken back.

On the evening of April 24, 1918, this band of brave men turned back the German advance, and by morning Villers-Bretonneux was free of invaders. But the 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 25 – ANZAC Day – officers did a head count of the soldiers who had died or were missing: 1200 Australian soldiers died to capture Villers-Bretonneux.

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





**“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.”**



George was not alone; thousands of Victorian schoolchildren donated pennies to the initiative of the Victorian Department of Education, which 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 Rue du Victoria in Villers-Bretonneux, was rebuilt between 1923 and 1927. The school was 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: 1200 soldiers – fathers and

brothers of the Australian children – gave their lives for the heroic recapture of the town in 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 July 22, 1938, by Queen Elizabeth, 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.

**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE LEFT:**

The ‘Do Not Forget Australia’ sign in the school’s quadrangle; Children outside Victoria College sing ‘Australia will be there’ at the opening ceremony of the school; A local schoolboy presents Queen Elizabeth with a bunch of Flanders poppies, which she later laid on the steps of the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux. (AWM: H17433)

**OPPOSITE PAGE:**

Henry George McGregor and his daughter, Vicki Bennett.

This memorial commemorates all the Australian soldiers who died in WWI, and lists the names of over 10,000 Australian soldiers who died on the Western Front and have no known graves.

Many years later in 2012, George sat with me, his daughter. His blue eyes twinkled as he opened a small wooden box, took out two pennies and placed them in my 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.”

I flew to France, found the little school in the village that my father had helped to build and gave his 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.

*For your chance to win a copy of Vicki Bennett’s book, Two Pennies, see page 84.* ←