

A Special ANZAC Day 2008

Part of Our Five Day Tour of The Somme

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I attended my first Anzac Day Dawn Service in Sydney on 25 April, 1969 six months into my two year stint as a National Serviceman and just over two years after arriving from England with my parents, brother and sisters as immigrants.

For about the last fifteen years I have attended the Riverstone Schofields RSL Sub Branch Anzac Day Dawn Service with my father, a regular attendee. Is it my imagination or is the weather at dawn in Riverstone on Anzac Day warmer than it used to be? I clearly remember it being very cold year after year. Gloves, hats and warm jackets were the order of the day.

This year Dad and I had the opportunity to travel to France to attend the first Anzac Day Dawn Service to be held at the Australian National Memorial at Villers- Bretonneux. On the walls of the memorial are engraved the names of 10,771 Australian soldiers who went “missing in action” on the Western Front in France and who have no known grave. This service was held on the 90th Anniversary of the Battle of Villers-Bretonneux which took place three years after the Gallipoli landings. Anzac Day services are traditionally held at the Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux every year on the Sunday closest to Anzac Day but this was to be the first Dawn Service.

As part of our package tour Dad and I stayed in Peronne, a town familiar to our troops in WW1. At that time our soldiers renamed streets in the town - Rue de Kanga, Melbourne Street, Circular Quay amongst others. Signs in shop windows on our arrival, printed together with an Australian flag read “We do not forget Australia” and “Welcome to Peronne”.

The day before Anzac Day we visited memorials and cemeteries including the Lochnagar Crater, The Ulster Tower, The Thiepval Memorial, The Windmill and The 1st Australian Division Memorial at Pozieres.

While in the Pozieres area the group found time to allow us to visit the Pozieres British Cemetery. Buried here is 6077 Private Robert Rankine, 2nd Battalion Australian Infantry, who died on the 10 April, 1917 aged 26. His headstone reads, “Only Good Night Beloved not Good-bye our loved one”. He is listed on the cenotaph in Riverstone, listed on the railway station Honour Roll, listed on the Schofields Public School Honour Roll and listed on the Riverstone Uniting Church Honour Roll. It was an honour and a privilege to be able to place a poppy on the grave of this Riverstone/Schofields man killed and buried so far from home.

On Anzac Day we were told to be ready to leave the hotel lobby at 2.30am, even though it was only a half hour drive to the memorial where the Dawn Service was to be held. Apparently our reserved seating could be lost if we were not there early. We arrived at the memorial which was situated at a turn off on a narrow country road at 3.00am where we joined a convoy of at least twenty coaches parked at the edge of a field. Walking silently and orderly up to the memorial, blue lighting on the ground being just enough to see our way, and up lights shining into the trees and on the Cross of Remembrance, we found our reserved seating. The weather was dry and clear but very cold and our thoughts were not far away from those brave souls here so long ago in such desperate circumstances.

The pre dawn lead up to the service was unusually solemn and also very peaceful due to the lack of any background noise. We were after all in the French countryside. No chance of hearing the Riverstone 'rattler' coming into the station from Vineyard, setting off the railway crossing bells as it pulls in on cue every year to join proceedings at the Dawn Service at home! Uniquely Riverstone.

The service itself was moving because, I think, of its simplicity. We were extremely impressed by the choice of readings, hymns and the various speakers' reflective tone. The wreath laying, as one would expect, was quietly dignified with many floral tributes laid by descendants of those who made the supreme sacrifice. Dad had been asked to lay a wreath on behalf of the New South Wales State Branch of the RSL, which we laid together.

Following the service we returned to Villers-Brettonneux Town to visit the Victoria School built with Australian funds in 1927. This school has a large sign erected on a building overlooking the playing area which reads "Never Forget Australia". After breakfast was served by the parents we were treated to a rendition by the primary school aged children of "Waltzing Matilda", sung unaccompanied in English in their strong French accents. There were not too many dry eyes in the crowd by the time they had finished. Our large tour group made a combined donation to the school of four thousand Euros as a continuing gesture of friendship and goodwill.

From the school we formed up and marched down the main street of the town, joined by other tourists and locals, totalling around 2,000 in all. We were given a wonderful reception by the locals and an official welcome by the mayor. An attempt for a quick Anzac Day beer in the local pub by Dad and I and two travelling companions was almost thwarted by an over zealous bus driver who ordered us with much finger pointing back on the bus. Phew, just made it.

After leaving the school we travelled to the Digger Memorial at Bullecourt.

The day after Anzac Day we visited Mont-Saint-Quentin, the Second Australian Division Memorial, Bellenglise, the Fourth Australian Division Memorial and the 17.7km long Riqueval Tunnel on the Canal de Saint Quentin. The tunnel, started by Napoleon in 1802, was used to great effect by the Germans, who at one point were hiding thirty four long barges of troops and supplies in the tunnel.

As the tunnel entrance was near Bellicourt, the group kindly allowed us to visit the Bellicourt British Cemetery where 3923 Private Edwin Augustus Schofield, 5th Battalion Australian Infantry, is buried. He died aged 37 on the 19 September, 1918. His headstone reads, "He lived as he died nobly". A slaughterman, Edwin is listed on the cenotaph in Riverstone, the railway station Honour Roll, the Riverstone RSL Honour Roll and the MUIOOF Honour Roll. Again, it was an honour and privilege to place a poppy on the grave of this Riverstone man, killed and buried so far from home.

Back on the bus we drove to the small High Tree Cemetery which contains the graves of the most easterly buried Australians in France. There are close to 50 allied soldiers buried here, only four Australians, two of which are unknown. We were told that in the past year only one tour group had visited this cemetery. We laid poppies on the four Australian graves.

Both Dad and I found the trip haunting at times but an incredibly memorable and moving experience especially the three days described above.

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