

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL MEMORIAL

Villers-Bretonneux



Australian Government

Department of Veterans' Affairs

Office of Australian War Graves



At the back of the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery is the site of the Australian National Memorial to the Australian soldiers who fought in France and Belgium and who lie under the battlefields. The Memorial consists of a great central tower flanked by wing walls carrying panels commemorating the 10,772 Australian casualties who died in France and who have no known grave. Those who died in Belgium and who have no known grave are commemorated on the Ypres (Menin Gate) Memorial to the Missing.

Private Thomas Cooke VC, 3055, 8th Battalion Australian Infantry is commemorated on the memorial. He died on 28 July 1916 aged 35 and was posthumously awarded the VC "For most conspicuous bravery" on 8 September 1916.

~ BACKGROUND ~

At the conclusion of the First World War, the Australian Government approved the erection of a National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux to commemorate the deeds of the Australian Imperial Forces on the Western Front.

Owing principally to the financial situation during the depression years, the construction of the memorial was delayed. However, in 1935 it was decided that the Imperial War Graves Commission (now Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC)) should be requested to erect a memorial to commemorate the Australian soldiers missing on the Western Front who were not commemorated elsewhere. CWGC invited one of its principal architects, Sir Edward Lutyens, to submit a design for the memorial. Sir Edward's design was accepted with minor modifications and construction commenced immediately by Maple & Company (Paris) Ltd. The foundations were laid by Monsieur Gileux of Amiens. The memorial was dedicated on 8 August 1938 by

King George VI of England, in the presence of the Queen, the President of France, Monsieur Albert Le Brun, Australia's Deputy Prime Minister Sir Earl Page and General Lord Birdwood, Commander of Operations at Gallipoli.



The Villers-Bretonneux area again became a battlefield during the Second World War and the memorial was extensively damaged. The two stone pavilions situated at the end of each wing of the structure were hit by shell-fire and some of their columns were broken. The walls, inscribed with the names of fallen Australian soldiers were very pitted and some

obliterated. Some of the stone facing was blown away, as was part of the balcony surrounding the central tower, which also suffered some pitting damage. In 1946–1948, in conjunction with the repairs to the memorial, an on-site caretaker's cottage was also built by the Australian Government.

The Memorial is now regularly maintained by the CWGC on behalf of the Office of Australian War Graves.



~ THE BATTLE FOR

VILLERS-BRETONNEUX ~

On 21 March 1918, after massing forces for one last offensive on the Western Front, the German Army staged a stunning breakthrough of the British lines in the St Quentin area near Peronne, France. Their intention was to drive a wedge between the British Empire and French forces on the Western Front and capture key ports.

The British were forced back across the old Somme battlefields of 1916. To the south, French divisions also fell back and reinforcements were rushed in. The Australian Corps, north of the German breakthrough, was ordered south to assist British and Canadian forces. Over the next month the 2nd, 3rd, 4th and 5th Australian Divisions fought at a number of locations in the area of the Ancre and Somme rivers. One of the key battles was by the 5th Division at Villers-Bretonneux on 24–25 April 1918.

Villers-Bretonneux was a key position, sitting on a plateau overlooking the lower area of the Somme, Avre and Noye rivers. On 4 April, the Germans reached Monument Wood, on the edge of Villers-Bretonneux. Among those facing the enemy were Australians of the 9th Brigade. When it looked as if the shattered village might fall, troops of its 36th Battalion charged and the Germans at Monument Wood retreated. The line in this sector was then secured for the time being.

On 17–18 April, after battles elsewhere, the Germans again began focussing on Villers-Bretonneux. German artillery lobbed mustard gas shells into the woods and gullies behind the township, inflicting over 1,000 casualties on Australian and British forces. Over the next few days, British divisions took over this sector but at dawn on 24 April the Germans again attacked strongly and in spite of intense fighting, Villers-Bretonneux fell. That day, British and German tank crews engaged in the first ever tank duel — one of the German tanks, *Mephisto*, was later captured and is a prized exhibit at the Queensland Museum, a unique tangible link to this historic battle.

British commanders planned an immediate counter-attack as they needed to recapture Villers-Bretonneux before the Germans could complete their defensive works.

The 13th and 15th Brigades, making up two-thirds of the 5th Australian Division, were given the task. The brigade commanders, Brigadier-Generals William Glasgow and Harold 'Pompey' Elliott, ordered to attack the village frontally in daylight, refused. It most likely would have failed and the casualty count would have been high. As Glasgow declared, 'If God Almighty gave the order, we couldn't do it by daylight.'

Many doubted the counter-attack could succeed. One infantryman wrote that it was 'an almost impossible proposition'.

The Australian official historian, Charles Bean, who was nearby, scrawled in his diary: 'I don't believe they have a chance'.

The 13th Brigade assembled for the main assault to start at 10.00 pm, earlier than Glasgow wanted. The Germans spotted his troops assembling and began firing from the heights. As the Australians advanced, they came under heavy machine-gun fire from woodlands. Sergeant Charlie Stokes, 51st Battalion, urged his platoon commander, Lieutenant C W K Sadlier, to deviate from the plan and enter the wood to disable the machine-guns. They destroyed six machine-gun posts in quick succession, enabling the advance to continue. For their initiative, leadership and gallantry, Stokes was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and Sadlier the Victoria Cross.

On the other side of Villers-Bretonneux, to the north, the 15th Brigade also advanced. The troops pushed hard to move past the village and, in a classic pincer movement, link up with the 13th Brigade to encircle the village and trap German troops holding it. In the darkness and confusion of battle, the 13th Brigade was not able to reach its final objective, pulling back slightly to consolidate. This meant the village was not completely encircled and some German troops managed to escape. After daylight, the Australians pushed on and

filled the gap, encircling and liberating the village. It never again, during World War I, fell into enemy hands.

The capture of Villers-Bretonneux with such speed and finesse astounded troops on both sides. It was another shattering blow to the Germans whose last great offensive faltered. A British observer described it as 'perhaps the greatest individual feat of the war' up to that time. The cost to Australia was some 2,500 men killed or wounded.

~ VILLERS-BRETONNEUX

MILITARY CEMETERY ~

The Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery is located between Villers-Bretonneux and Fouilloy, ten miles east of Amiens, and a little north of the straight main road to St Quentin. It rises from the road to a



plateau, overlooking Amiens, the Somme Valley and the village from which the cemetery is named. The cemetery contains 2,000 graves, of which 779 are Australians. A further 10 Australian casualties are buried in the Villers-Bretonneux Communal Cemetery.

~ ADELAIDE CEMETERY ~



Close to the town of Villers-Bretonneux is the Adelaide Cemetery containing 522 Australian graves. This cemetery is the exhumation site of the Unknown Australian Soldier who now lies at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra. The grave from which the remains were taken has its own special marker and can be located towards the rear of the cemetery, Plot 3 Row M Grave 13.

~ ANZAC MUSEUM ~



Located in the Victoria School, which itself is a memorial to Victorian soldiers, is the ANZAC Museum. The museum illustrates the role of the Australian troops in the war. Displays include uniforms, letters, personal items, and photographs, together with facsimile reproductions of official documents.

The town of Villers-Bretonneux is twinned with Robinvale, Victoria and has several Australian street names.

OTHER AUSTRALIAN SITES

~ VC CORNER

AUSTRALIAN CEMETERY ~

For many years, VC Corner Cemetery, which has no headstones, was the only memorial to the ill-fated Battle of Fromelles on 19–20 July 1916, which was the location of the first Australian attack in France.



VC Corner Cemetery is the only all-Australian Cemetery in France and on a screen wall is recorded the names of 1,294 Australians who died in the battle and have no known grave. The unidentified bodies of 410 of these casualties are buried under the lawns; each marked by an outline of the Cross.

~ AUSTRALIAN CORPS

MEMORIAL PARK, LE HAMEL ~

This small village was the site of one of the AIF's most successful battles, fought on 4 July 1918. Entirely under Australian planning and command, the victory established the pattern for Allied operations on the Western Front. The Australian Corps Memorial Park acts as a focal point for Australian visitors to the 1918 battlefields. The Park contains a walking trail past a series of interpretative panels as well as a central commemorative area. The remains of the trench at the Park



were the final objective for the attack on 4 July 1918 and the start point for operations on 8 August 1918 leading to the Armistice on 11 November 1918.

Le Hamel is only a few kilometres from the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux.

~ AUSTRALIAN MEMORIAL PARK

FROMELLES ~

The Australian Memorial Park is situated around the remains of German fortifications on the part of their line that was captured by the 14th Australian Brigade and held overnight on 19–20 July 1916. The Park now contains a major bronze sculpture, entitled "Cobbers", depicting the rescue of a wounded soldier. The Memorial Park also contains a battle exploit plaque.



The village of Fromelles has an excellent private World War I museum, dedicated to Australian–French friendship.

~ BULLECOURT ~

This town has several AIF memorials, the most important of which is a small memorial park in which stands a major sculpture in bronze — ‘The Bullecourt Digger’.

In the main street is the ‘Australian Slouch Hat Memorial’, a felt hat bronzed for durability. In the memorial park is a battle exploit plaque, other smaller memorials are in a sunken side road to Riencourt.



The town's people have designed a walking tour and brochures are available at Bullecourt's excellent private World War I Museum. Bullecourt can be reached from Bapaume through Ecoust St Mien or from Arras through Croisilles.



~ INFORMATION ~

Australian visitors to the Western Front are advised to contact the Office of Australian War Graves (OAWG) prior to departure in order to obtain details of the location of individual graves or memorials.

The address is:

Office of Australian War Graves

PO Box 21

Woden ACT 2606

Telephone: (02) 6289 6510

Facsimile: (02) 6289 4861

e-mail: wargraves@dva.gov.au

OAWG has available for sale a *Driving Tour Kit* containing a battle map, guide book, CD and postcards, at a cost of \$20 inclusive of GST. This kit may also be obtained from the Australian Bookshop in Paris, the Historial de la Grande Guerre at Peronne, the Cafe des Sports at Le Hamel and the Department of Tourism in the Somme, Amiens.

The Office also has available for sale a Michelin Map Atlas overprinted with the locations of cemeteries which contain Commonwealth burials in France and Belgium. The Atlas is \$20, inclusive of GST.

Brochures such as *A Guide to Australian Memorials on the Western Front, in France and Belgium April 1916–November 1918* and *The Australian Memorial Park, Fromelles* are available from OAWG free of charge.