

Good Morning

This morning, we are gathered here in quiet contemplation on the 100th anniversary of an Armistice, which came into effect on the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918. It was an Armistice, which brought to an end the immediate fighting in a bloody conflict that had impacted much of the world for over four years.

In our conversation this morning, I will try to convey the context of the Armistice and the broad sweep of events in the last months of the War, and, at the same time link these events to the individual service and commitment of the 203 West Guildford / Bassendean men who enlisted from this district and the 33 who paid the supreme sacrifice.

So why should we have this conversation some 4 or 5 generations after the Great War? Five years ago, for many families the only connection was perhaps some half-forgotten medals in the back of granny's keeping box. However the commemorative events associated with the centenary of World War One have provided the opportunity for many to reconnect with the stories of family members who served during of the war and to discover their motivations, values and aspirations. You have seen and heard this happening on this very spot since the rededication of this monument in 2014 as narrations on Anzac Day and Remembrance Day have told their stories of service, sacrifice and fortitude, not only from World War One but also to our present times.

Although we sometimes focus on the broad sweep of military history, commanders and units, these stories have reminded us, that our real history and community connection is based on individual contributions. We should also remember that while we may be relaying mostly military aspects, we must never forget the wives, mothers and families who remained at home; we should also remember the fragility, loss of health and the suffering of many of those who returned; and as we mark this centenary of the Armistice, we should never forget the loss forever, to Australia, of the talent and potential of over 62,000 men and women and what they could have given to this country had they survived.

But we return to the Armistice. In a terrible irony, the Armistice was achieved not through a great humanitarian gesture or sense of universal harmony but because one side in this epic struggle had mastered the techniques of industrial warfare. The Armistice was brought about because, we, the Allies, were able to dominate the enemy, the Central Powers materially, physically and mentally. This dominance, comprising the manufactured abundance of the tools of war, the skilled utilisation of the assembled military forces and the will to persevere to “finish the job” provided the context for the Armistice.

Faced with the realities of this growing battlefield dominance, one by one, the Central Powers sought to end their role in the war: Bulgaria on 29 September; Turkey on 30 October; Austria Hungary on 4 November; and finally Germany on 11 November 1918.

The achievement of the Armistice in 1918 was a challenge in which Australia, particularly the Australian Imperial Force under the command of lieutenant General Sir John Monash, played a significant role. But, the path to the Armistice was long and difficult.

We remember the gallantry at Gallipoli, the landing, the initial defence and the August offensive including the Nek in 1915, three names recorded here, average age 26.

We remember the slaughter on the Somme including Fromelles, Pozieres, Gueudecourt and Flers in 1916; 15 names, average age 26

We remember the agony of Third Ypres including Polygon Wood, Menin Road, Langemarck and Passchendaele in 1917; 10 names, average age 30; and

We remember the holding of the Anglo-French line during the Kaiserschlacht or German Spring offensives culminating with the capture and defence of Villers-Bretonneux by the AIF on 25 April 1918; one name, aged 34

But notwithstanding the casualty toll of all of these engagements, we cannot forget that the battles from August 1918 to the Armistice were the hardest fought and most costly in human life of any period during the war. Bassedean men were largely spared from this last sacrifice as are recorded here 4 names, average age 31.

The ten divisions from the Dominions, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, assumed a place, which cannot be denied them as the best fighting troops in any army. During the last few weeks of the war, the achievement of these divisions was greater in relation to their strength than that of any other formations.

From August 1918, the ten Dominion divisions constituted about one-fifth of the fighting strength of the British Expeditionary Force (the armies of the British Empire in France and Belgium) and suffered about one-third of the casualties.

Today we designate this period of the war as the Last 100 Days but at the time, the end of the war was not known and the motivation of our Diggers was a grim determination to see the job through to the end. This they did.

A foretaste of the *Last 100 Days* was provided by the Battle of Hamel on 4 July 1918. Now called “Monash’s Masterpiece”, it was an all arms battle, bringing together aircraft, artillery, tanks and assault troops, logistics and supplies and engineering infrastructure. The Battle of Hamel, under Monash’s direction brought together all of the tactical battle lessons learned through the trying times of the previous years. Monash calculated the battle would last 90 minutes. The objectives were achieved in 93 minutes.

A month later, on 8 August, these same lessons were applied at the Battle of Amiens. On that day, the German Army was so decisively driven from its fortified lines that General Ludendorff called it “the black day of the German Army”. For Germany it was the beginning of the end.

Beginning with the Battle of Amiens, the Australian Corps advanced through the Hindenburg Line, Mont St Quentin to Montbrehain, when the exhausted and depleted formations of the Australian Imperial Force were withdrawn from combat. Australia had almost literally fought to the last man and last shilling as promised by Prime Minister Fisher long before in August 1914.

The final victories leading to the Armistice were foreseen by General Monash, and nothing illustrates this better than in his Order of the Day distributed to the Australian Corps on 7 August:

To The Soldiers of The Australian Army Corps

For the first time in the history of this Corps, all five Australian Divisions will tomorrow engage in the largest and most important battle operation ever undertaken by the Corps.

They will be supported by exceptionally powerful Artillery and by Tanks and Aeroplanes on a scale never previously attempted. The full resources of our sister Dominion, the Canadian Corps, will operate on our right, while two British Divisions will guard our left flank.

The many successful offensives which the Brigades and Battalions of this Corps have so brilliantly executed during the past four months have been the prelude to, and the preparation for, this greatest culminating effort.

Because of the completeness of our plans and dispositions, of the magnitude of the operations, of the number of troops employed, and of the depth to which we intend to over-run the enemy's positions, this battle will be one of the most memorable of the whole war; and there can be no doubt that, by capturing our objectives, we shall inflict blows upon the enemy which will make him stagger, and will bring the end appreciably nearer.

I entertain no sort of doubt that every Australian soldier will worthily rise to so great an occasion, and that every man, imbued with the spirit of victory, will, in spite of every difficulty that may confront him, be animated by no other resolve than grim determination to see through to a clean finish, whatever his task may be.

The work to be done tomorrow will perhaps make heavy demands upon your endurance and the staying powers of many of you; but I am confident, in spite of excitement, fatigue, and physical strain, every man will carry on to the utmost of his powers until his goal is won; for the sake of AUSTRALIA, the Empire and our cause.

I earnestly wish every soldier of the Corps the best of good fortune, and glorious and decisive victory, the story of which will echo throughout the world, and will live forever in the history of our homeland.

Signed

John Monash

Lieutenant General

Commanding, Australian Corps

And so, mastery of the battlefield and hard fighting led to the Armistice, which came sooner than many had expected. There was wild jubilation and celebrations on the Allied home fronts, but perhaps just relief and weariness on the battlefield and the realization that it was all over and one could begin to look to a new future.

For the most part, the diggers at the hour of Armistice in 1918 did indeed look forward to a new future and a promise of a world fit for heroes. Sadly for many this promise was not to be and the Armistice transitioned to demobilization and disappointment and only 20 years later, another global conflict.

As we leave this memorial today perhaps we need to consider what many hoped the Armistice foretold – a step leading to a better world. Should we indeed take inspiration from the service and sacrifice recorded here, in this special place and strive for a future where we can commit ourselves to the value of mateship, to the value of working together in cooperation and good will, to the value of a fair go, to the value of equality of opportunity and to the value of rewards commensurate with effort.

That would indeed be a worthy recognition of this anniversary of the Armistice and provide and an living memorial to those commemorated here.

Lest We Forget

Delivered by Colonel (Ret'd) Robert Mitchell, CFD, UE

for the Town of Bassendean

Armistice Day 2018

Bassendean War Memorial