



VILLERS-BRETONNEUX: A DIFFERENT LANDSCAPE

AN AUTHOR'S REFLECTION ON REMEMBRANCE OF THE GREAT WAR IN AUSTRALIA AND FRANCE

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My work as an author and illustrator of children's picture books had for many years focussed on natural history. With the approach of the centenary of the Great War, I decided to take on quite a different subject—the role of the First Australian Imperial Force in France.

A search at the time of Australian children's books on the Great War revealed several about Gallipoli, especially Simpson and his donkey, but very few about the Western Front. The sprawling nature of the battles in Belgium and France makes it a difficult subject for younger readers. This has led to a situation where many people, older as well as younger, seem to equate the Great War principally with Gallipoli, the Western Front being seen more as a British fight. In the last few years this perception has begun to shift, and should do so even more as the Anzac Centenary commemorations move to France and Belgium.

I realised that to effectively communicate a story to younger readers, I needed a narrow focus on a single event. I can't remember where I first read about the battle of Villers-Bretonneux, but once I found out about it, and particularly what happened subsequently, and continues till today, I was stunned. This was a story that needed to be told, about events with a similar resonance in Australia's history as Gallipoli, yet, inexplicably, almost unknown to the general community. So *The Poppy* was born, a picture book that would attempt, in a small way, to gently introduce children to a momentous event.

The Battle of Villers-Bretonneux occurred in the last year of the war. In March 1918 the Germans commenced their final major offensive, which almost gave them victory. Although Operation Michael was stopped in many places, in the Somme the Germans punched a 60 km hole in the British lines. They were only 30 km from the vital railhead of Amiens, which was only 120 km from Paris.



Thanks largely to the Australian and Canadian Corps the offensive was stopped. It was during this time that the battle of Villers-Bretonneux took place, on 24/25 April 1918, ending on the third Anzac Day. General John Monash was at this time commander of the 3rd Division, and contrary to a common belief that he had a part in the battle, he in fact had no direct involvement. It was his 3rd Division, however, which had held Villers-Bretonneux until relieved by the 8th British Division on April 23, who then lost it to the Germans the next day. The British were tired but, fortunately for the Allies, two formidable AIF commanders and their brigades were available for a counter-attack.

Brigadier General Harold Edward Elliott (1878–1931) led the 15th Brigade of the Fifth Division. His men called him ‘Pompey’, a nickname which he disliked but which he could never shake off. He was famous for his stern discipline when training the 7th Battalion at Broadmeadows. On the day of the Gallipoli landing, 25 April 1915, Elliott was wounded and evacuated, not returning until early June. He soon won a reputation for cool courage. At Lone Pine on 8 August he relieved part of the 1st Brigade and for the next twenty-four hours held off the vicious Turkish counter attacks in hand-to-hand fighting. Of the seven Victoria Crosses awarded for Lone Pine, four went to Elliott’s battalion but his own work was not recognised. This was the beginning of an irritation for Elliott, which would later become an obsession.

In March 1916 he had been given the job of organising the 15th (Victorian) Brigade in the new 5th Division and was promoted to brigadier general. In July Elliott began his service on the Western Front where he fought in most of the great battles of the AIF. His Brigade took shocking losses at Fromelles, which was their first action, when his two assaulting battalions suffered 1452 casualties in less than twenty-four hours. Elliott had vigorously protested that No-Man’s-Land was too wide and that the attack was hopeless, poorly and hurriedly planned. The resulting slaughter nearly broke him, but after the battle, he went along the line, quietly greeting or consoling every survivor he could find, before returning silently to his headquarters and weeping inconsolably.

Thereafter, Elliott could be a difficult subordinate when the safety of his men was involved. At least twice after Fromelles he protested so

vehemently against attacks ordered by 5th Division headquarters that the operations were cancelled. His men loved him for it. Charles Bean described Elliott as:

[...] an outstandingly strong, capable, and sympathetic leader; and in his directness and simplicity, and in a baffling streak of humility that shot through his seemingly absorbing vanity, there were elements of real greatness (Bean 1941, 523).

After the war, he was deeply involved in the affairs of returned soldiers and redrafted the constitution of the Returned Sailors' and Soldiers' Imperial League of Australia, which is now the RSL.

The perceived injustices that Elliott suffered during the war, in particular his lack of promotion to a divisional command, began to obsess him more acutely upon his return to Australia. Elliott had what would now be described as post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. It became so severe that in 1931, at 52 years of age, Elliott took his own life while receiving treatment as an in-patient in a private hospital in Malvern, Victoria. After a short funeral service at his home at 56 Prospect Hill Road, his casket was drawn, with full military honours on a horse-drawn gun carriage to the Burwood General Cemetery. Thousands lined the funeral route.

The other Australian leader, Brigadier General Thomas William Glasgow (1876–1955), led the 13th Brigade of the 4th Division. He had served in the South African War as a lieutenant. In 1901 he was mentioned in dispatches and awarded the Distinguished Service Order. He enlisted at the outbreak of war and was appointed major in the 2nd Light Horse Regiment. He fought at Gallipoli, and on 7 August he led 200 New South Wales Light-horsemen in an attack on Dead Man's Ridge. All but 46 were killed or wounded. Glasgow was among the last to retire, carrying with him one of his wounded troopers.

In March 1916 when the 4th and 5th Divisions were formed, Glasgow was given command of the 13th Infantry Brigade. He led the Brigade in many important actions including those at Pozières, Messines, Passchendaele, Mouquet Farm and Dernancourt. In June Glasgow was promoted major



general and appointed commander of the 1st Division in Flanders, and was part of the successful offensive that ended the war. It was this promotion that Elliott had so desperately desired. Bean (1941) described Glasgow as:

[...] transparent as his own Queensland sky, but rugged as the Queensland hills, he was slow and even shy in giving his opinion, but, when he spoke, his good sense, force of will, and honesty of purpose carried their way in councils of war (571).

So we have two very different personalities leading the two brigades at Villers-Bretonneux—the fiery, temperamental, ambitious Elliott, and the calmer, taciturn, solid Glasgow. Both men, however, shared essential characteristics that made them supreme leaders of soldiers: they both had a firm grasp of tactics in modern warfare; they were in the front lines with their men to see the battle grounds for themselves, and to make decisions based on personal observations; they both had the courage to stand up to anyone when given orders they believed to be foolhardy or pointless; and, despite both being stern disciplinarians, they both cared deeply for the welfare of their men, and fought tenaciously to prevent useless casualties among them.

The German attack on Villers-Bretonneux on April 24 began with artillery, using both mustard gas and high explosive rounds. The German infantry with fourteen supporting tanks broke through the British 8th Division, making a 5 km wide gap in the British lines. This was followed by the first ever engagement between opposing tanks. Three British Mark IV tanks were involved, and although all were damaged, the German tanks either fled or were destroyed.

However, Villers-Bretonneux had fallen to the Germans who, from the north of the town, could clearly see the spires of Amiens Cathedral. Along with some British battalions, the job of retaking Villers-Bretonneux was assigned to Glasgow's and Elliott's brigades with some British support. The British wanted to attack as soon as the brigades were assembled, but Elliott and Glasgow saw that this would lead to a massacre. Glasgow, having reconnoitred the position, refused British orders to attack across the enemy's front. He said, 'Tell us what you want us to do Sir, but you must let us do it our own way' (Pedersen 2004, 107). He refused to attack at 8 pm in daylight: 'If it was God Almighty who gave the order, we couldn't do it in daylight.





Here is all your artillery largely out of action and the enemy with all his guns in position' (108).

The plan to recapture Villers-Bretonneux was relatively simple, but difficult and dangerous. The Germans had been able to place a significant number of men and machine guns in the town and along the railway embankment to the south and west. They had also established themselves in the woods to the west of the town. The Australian plan was for a surprise night attack, with no preliminary artillery bombardment. Two battalions (the 51st and 52nd Battalions, about 1,500 men) of the 13th Brigade, would attack eastwards to the south of Villers-Bretonneux. Three battalions (the 57th, 59th and 60th Battalions, about 2,400 men) of the 15th Brigade, would similarly attack from the north of the town towards the east and then swing south-east. Thus would the Germans be encircled and trapped.

However, against success were the facts that the planning had been done hastily, with many changes due to disagreements between the British and Australian commanders; the attack was being carried out over ground that the 13th Brigade had never seen, against an enemy who had been given substantial time to prepare a defence; and the whole operation was being done at night.

The 13th Brigade's southern attack began at 10 pm. Captain Robert Forsyth, medical officer of the 52nd Battalion, recalled:

[...] an officer shouted 'Still'. I could see a long single line of men standing motionless as far as I could see in either direction, and, as the light faded, the darkness in front started to tap, tap, tap, and bullets whistled round and the line shuffled forward with rifles at the ready like men strolling into fern after rabbits. The whistle of bullets became a swish and patter, and boys fell all round me, generally without a sound (cited in Bean 1941, 582).

This 'swish and patter' was in fact a deadly torrent of fire from enemy machine guns in the Bois d'Aquenne woods to their left. The British had assured Glasgow that the woodland was free of Germans—whereas at least six German machine gun posts were there. The left end of the advancing Australian line was cut to pieces. Lieutenant Clifford Sadlier wrote:





We wondered what had struck us. Before we had gone fifty yards, 39 out of 42 in my platoon were in the mud either dead or wounded. I hit the deck and saw that Charlie Stokes from another platoon was still alive, and two bombers [...] had also escaped the fire. I knew that if we did not clear out the edge of that wood, the 51st Battalion would be sitting ducks (Pederson 2004, 115).

Lieutenant Sadlier and Sergeant Stokes gathered another seven men and together they assaulted the Germans with grenades. Sadlier was badly wounded after taking out three machine guns, so Stokes and the two surviving men destroyed the rest of them. Sadlier was awarded the Victoria Cross for his actions. Stokes, despite having a citation that was virtually identical, was awarded the DCM instead, probably because he was only a sergeant. Despite taking heavy casualties the two battalions swept on towards their objectives. One German officer later wrote:

They were magnificent. Nothing seemed to stop them. When our fire was heaviest, they just disappeared in shell holes and came up as soon as it slackened. When we used Verey lights they stood still and were hard to see (Unnamed German officer, quoted in Browning 2000, 157).

By dawn on 25 April, the 51st and 52nd Battalions had not quite achieved their objectives but they had broken through the German positions to the south of Villers-Bretonneux and established a fairly secure line.

The northern attack battalions, the 15th Brigade, did not begin their advance until an hour after the appointed time. As the 59th Battalion advanced, they unleashed a banshee yell that was heard by the 13th Brigade fighting well over a kilometer away. This was a ferocious, often hand-to-hand attack, and as long as the night advance lasted, no quarter was shown to the Germans.

Very few prisoners were taken. Sgt Walter Downing of the 57th remembered:

A snarl came from the throat of the mob, the fierce, low growl of tigers scenting blood. There was a howling as of demons as the 57th, fighting mad, drove through the wire, through the 59th, who sprang to their sides—through the enemy. [...] Baying like





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hell hounds, they [...] charged. There was no quarter on either side. [The Germans] had no chance in the wild onslaught of maddened men [... The Australians] were bathed in spurting blood. They killed and killed. Bayonets passed with ease through grey-clad bodies, and were withdrawn with a sucking sound. [...] One huge Australian advanced firing a Lewis gun from the shoulder, spraying the ground with lead. [...] It is unlikely that any of the enemy escaped their swift, relentless pursuers. They were slaughtered against the lurid glare of the fire in the town. (Downing 1998, 118–119)

And so by the morning of April 25 the Australians, with some assistance from British units, had virtually surrounded Villers-Bretonneux. It took the rest of that day and into 26 April to completely secure the town and to establish a new front line east of it. It marked the end of the German offensive on the Somme which had begun with great success in March. Nearly four thousand Australians charged into battle that night. About a third of them—one thousand, three hundred men—died liberating the town. There were 2,500 casualties overall.

The victory at Villers-Bretonneux stunned everyone who witnessed it, on both sides. The highly decorated British Brigadier General George Grogan VC asserted that the attack was ‘perhaps the greatest individual feat of the war’ (Pederson 1004, 140). British Major Neville Lytton, OBE, wrote:

The importance of Villers-Bretonneux cannot be over-estimated. The Australians [...] made one of the most astounding manoeuvres of the war. [...] The] battlefield discipline of the Australians must be absolutely perfect, no matter what their billet discipline might be. [...] Even if the Australians achieved nothing else in this war [...], they would have won the right to be considered among the greatest fighting races of the world. (Lytton 1921, 163–164)

The Australian commanders were justifiably proud of what their men had achieved, and gave credit where it was due. Elliott wrote:

The fight became a soldiers’ fight purely and simply, and neither myself nor the Battalion Commanders could exercise any control upon it. The success was due to the energy and determination of





junior commanders and the courage of the troops. (Cited in Bean 1941, 641–642)

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In 2011 I lived in Paris for three months. In September, through a bizarre set of coincidences I ended up staying in Villers-Bretonneux with the past-president of the Franco-Australian Association. I spent most of my time photographing, sketching and researching locations for my book, and visited the two local schools—the Collège Jacques Brel and the École Victoria. I returned in November with some of the completed paintings, and worked at the schools for a few days, despite my appalling French. Fortunately, as I told the students, I can draw in French quite well!

The history of the École Victoria (the Victoria School) is where the extraordinary post-war part of the story begins. After the war, Villers-Bretonneux was adopted by the city of Melbourne. Such adoption happened in a number of places in Australia, with French towns adopted and money raised to help in their reconstruction. Victorian schoolchildren donated their pennies to help rebuild the town's school. To this day it is called the École Victoria, and is situated on Rue du Victoria. On a long board above the playground, in sky blue letters on a golden background, are the words 'Do Not Forget Australia'. The same words, in French, are in every classroom.

Interestingly, the École Victoria is only one of a very few French schools of this period to have a hall. Unlike Australian schools, halls simply weren't part of the average French school. This is an Australian-style school hall in the French landscape. The roof space of the hall has now become the Franco-Australian Museum. It is quite lovely to be quietly walking through the exhibition, with its unavoidable focus on sacrifice and loss, and to hear the sounds of children playing in the courtyard below. It is probably the most fitting memorial that any of the soldiers who were involved could have desired—a school full of happy, laughing kids who have no personal experience of war.

Of course, there is an official memorial at Villers-Bretonneux. A couple of kilometres north of the town, on a low, broad hill over which the 15th Brigade advanced on that April night in 1918, is the Australian National Memorial. It is dedicated to those Australians with no known grave in France,





those whose bodies were never found. Engraved on its stone walls are over ten thousand names.

To stand before that seemingly endless rollcall of the vanished is both deeply moving and brutally confronting. It is impossible to truly comprehend the horror that those silent names represent. Indeed, for many of the diggers returning to Australia after the war, the futility of trying to describe their experiences to those they had left behind became a source of deep frustration, anger and depression. Many returned servicemen wrote of the extraordinary disconnect they felt to everyone else, the loneliness and isolation.

They found it difficult to become civilians in spirit, for the war was etched into their souls. [...] They had killed men, and their bloodied hands turned awkwardly to gentler tasks and pleasures. [...] Once a year they were honoured for their part in the war, but they found it hard to accept an attitude which others easily adopted, that what was part of Australian life was also part of Australia's past'. (Gammage 1975, 275)

The wide, clean landscape to which many soldiers returned was so utterly alien to the Western Front that it may as well have been another planet. Many ex-soldiers never spoke of their experiences, except in the comradely safety of their local RSL. Others withdrew from society completely, even denying they ever went to war. The Western Front, to the average Australian, became a vague, dark morass of relentless slaughter that offered no respite from despair. It was a conflict of huge complexity and unimaginable horror that ground on for years, and was totally beyond the comprehension of anyone who had not been there. It was simply too vast, too awful, too depressing and very different from the conflict at Gallipoli, a relatively brief campaign in a very specific location. Even the landscape itself made it somehow more accessible to Australians—a hot, dry beach and scrubby cliffs. It also occurred in the first months of the conflict, long before the sickening reality of modern industrial warfare became apparent. In those early months, an air of a grand adventure still hovered over the battle. It was somehow a *cleaner* campaign, almost noble. After all, celebrating a noble defeat was a great British tradition. That is a huge over-simplification of course, but the actual events have become less important than the symbolic nature of what occurred—the first time Australians fought *as* Australians, and they did it magnificently. A mythology





grew, and a large part of it is myth. But its significance to our history cannot be denied.

For many years, the Australian experience in France has often been overshadowed by Gallipoli. Now I don't believe for a moment that the significance of Gallipoli should in any way be diminished, but I do believe that the Western Front deserves far more recognition. Years of war and hundreds of actions are not easy concepts for people to grasp, and so we tend to look for a moment that represents the broader idea. I believe the battle of Villers-Bretonneux is that moment; an Australian action, against terrible odds, that ended in a victory many historians consider one of the turning points of the war. And the coincidence of the date the town was reclaimed, 25 April—Anzac Day—adds to the resonance. Even on the night itself, the significance of the date was not lost on the men. Sergeant Downing wrote:

The moon sank behind clouds. There were houses burning in the town, throwing a sinister light on the scene. It was past midnight. Men muttered 'It's Anzac Day,' smiling to each other, enlivened by the omen'. (Downing 1998, 117)

Yet despite this, it is the French, rather than Australians, who have truly kept the memory alive. Only now, in the last few years, do we seem as a nation to be embracing the commemoration of the battle of Villers-Bretonneux. That is why I felt I needed to tell this story. That is why I wrote *The Poppy*, and why I wrote it for children. I believe that the name Villers-Bretonneux should be as much a part of our national consciousness as Gallipoli. And I believe that it is as children we need to learn this part of our history, so that, difficult as it is to pronounce, Villers-Bretonneux becomes a familiar part of an Australian child's vernacular, as Australian as kangaroo, Uluru, the Reef, and Gallipoli.

If you doubt that the battle of Villers-Bretonneux was indeed a defining moment, still honoured and remembered, let me finish with the following brief story. In February 2009, devastating bushfires swept through Victoria. Hundreds were killed and injured. Thousands were left homeless, entire towns rased. The burnt landscapes reminded many people of, and were frequently described as, a war zone. In Villers-Bretonneux, the people heard of the tragedy. They remembered the words at the Victoria School, the promises made by their grandparents to never forget a debt. The small





town raised 13,000 Euros nearly (\$21,000) and donated it to help rebuild the Strathewen Primary School, which had been totally destroyed in the fires.

N'oublions jamais l'Australie, Never Forget Australia. Never forget the lives that were given, the lives that were lost. The people of Villers-Bretonneux never have. Nor should we.

Melbourne

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