

FROM PARIS TO THE BATTLEFIELDS OF THE SOMME.

Of the 800,000 Australians that visit France each year, most alight in Paris to enjoy its many wonders from art, culture and literature, to fine dining, shopping and museums of historical significance.

Yet right next door to Paris is an area seeped in Australian history and well worth a visit - the Battlefields of World War I particularly *The Somme*. Whether your interest is personal, historical or simple curiosity, *The Somme*, attracts thousands of Australians each year.

My own experience touring the well-kept graves and monuments of the district was quiet and solemn. As I drove through the towns of Villers-Bretonneux, Péronne and stopped in Amiens for lunch, just as my grandfather had done during the summer of 1916, I visited the Cathedral in the centre of town and felt very small indeed, reflecting on what I took for granted in my life.

My grandfather was a country boy from just outside of Goulburn NSW (Taralga) who joined the A.I.F as a volunteer on 9th September of 1914, encouraged by the slogans of the day that promoted 'adventure', foreign travel' combined with the prospect of a 'short war' so he could be back home in time for Christmas.

By the time his training had finished, his troop ship, which left Woolloomooloo wharf in early 1915 'en route' for Europe, took a detour to Egypt. A brilliant, strategic, battle manoeuvre had been planned by Britain's ambitious Minister for War Winston Churchill whereby allied troops would seize the Dardenelles, take Constantinople with battalions of allied infantry (hopefully within only a few weeks) thus knocking the Ottoman Empire, a powerful German ally, out of the war altogether.

My grandfather did not arrive at ANZAC cove in the initial landing of late April but towards the beginning of summer when the heat, flies and overall conditions were particularly difficult. He often spoke of being 'dropped off' with his mates miles from shore, saying 'Jesus walked on water, but we sank straight to the bottom of the sea with heavy packs on our backs' as transport ships dropped them far from their destination, and where the phrase 'every man for himself' kicked in as they tried to swim or wade to shore while ducking bullets and sniper fire. Some men were killed before making it to the beach, right in the water – the shock and the bloodshed were brutal.

Gallipoli is an intrinsic part of our national history, well embedded in our collective memory. I am not sure how my grandfather survived there with only dysentery and a weak heart caused by rheumatic fever as a child to complain of. The journalism of Sir Keith Murdoch that ignored the convention of censorship of the time, arguably helped to end the Gallipoli assault as ANZAC troops retreated in December of 1915, possibly the only successful part of the entire campaign.

Battle hardy, my grandfather together with his surviving mates from the 13th Battalion, were then sent to Marseille on a troop ship and on by train to Paris, then further north to near Amiens.

How gruesome Gallipoli must have seemed compared with the trenches of *The Somme*, is unclear. Northern France was a whole new experience - the stench, the mud, the death, the dying, the wounded, the constant bombardment, and of course the gas. He and his mates had a good sense of humour and were always on the lookout for a friend in need of help, or of comfort where as little as a cigarette or a mug of tea, worked wonders. His first exposure to enemy machine gunfire was unrelenting. The first few times he went over the top of his trench, towards enemy lines, he found

that being over 6 feet tall was a definite disadvantage. Before one advance, ('over the top men') a catholic priest touched him on the shoulder to let him know that 'God would be with him' to which he replied 'I don't think so' yet it was a cross that saved his life. His mother a practicing catholic, had given him a small bible with a red book mark in it and a gold cross that he kept in his left breast pocket of his uniform, the one of course that covers the heart.

The bullet that July day in 1916 that came straight for his chest, miraculously hit the centre of the cross, bounced off, shattered and found its way into his left shoulder, with splinters entering his head and back. This was the wound that knocked him unconscious in no man's land where he was dragged to safety by one of his mates from the 13th and eventually handed to stretcher bearers. His earlier wounds - sprayed by gun fire in the back of the legs and lower torso had been patched up in a certain manner, and he'd been sent back to the trenches soon after, but these current wounds were serious.

His left arm was subsequently saved from amputation despite the infection that had set in, by Sir Hugh Poate - a passing surgeon who knew his family in Australia, and who was visiting the Australian Field Hospital in *Etaples, France* by accident or coincidence on the day my grandfather was carried in for urgent treatment. Most of the shrapnel was removed from his head, legs and back, and he was eventually repatriated to Kent, Britain for longer term care where he remained for many months, before being well enough to return to NSW in 1917.

But some young men never came home. The French Government and the people of France care for them with great dignity and respect. ***They will not grow old and age will not weary them; they rest in peace, in a corner of France that is forever Australia.***

I was delighted with the decoration bestowed on my grandfather in 1999 (posthumously) by the French Government the 'Médaille de Reconnaissance de la Nation' (WWI), for his courage and bravery on *the Somme* in 1916.

It is one of my most prized possessions.

Nicole Forrest Green

**The Australian National Memorial
Villers-Bretonneux, France**



**Grandfather burying ANZAC soldiers
Lone Pine, Gallipoli Turkey**

