

Address by the French Prime Minister Édouard Philippe
Inauguration of the Sir John Monash Centre

Villers-Bretonneux, 24 April 2018

Mr Prime Minister,

Madam Minister,

Mr Prefect,

Members of Parliament,

Mr Chair of the Community of Communes,

Mayors,

Elected representatives,

“He is entirely alone now with his little life of nineteen years, and cries because it leaves him.” The young man who was crying was German. The man who wrote that was also German. It was Erich Maria Remarque. It is taken from his book “All Quiet on the Western Front” which was inspired by the horrors he, along with millions of others, witnessed in the trenches. Coming here, seeing this centre and tour, looking at the names of the 11,000 Australians who died for France and for freedom, I could not help thinking of the terrible loneliness which these thousands of young Australians must have felt as their young lives were cut short in a foreign country.

A foreign country. A faraway country. A cold country whose earth had neither the colour nor texture of their native bush. A faraway, foreign country which they defended, inch by inch, in Fromelles in the Nord region, in Bullecourt in Pas-de-Calais and of course here, in Villers-Bretonneux. As if it were their own country. And it is their own country. *“The earth is more important to the soldier than to anybody else,”* continues Erich Maria Remarque, *“the earth is his only friend, his brother, his mother. He groans out his terror and screams into its silence and safety”*. For many young Australians, this earth was their final safe place. For many of them, this earth was the final confidante of a thought or a word intended for a “loved one from the other side of the world”. Loved ones who would only learn the sad news several months later.

Prime Minister, as a keen student of history, I can tell you: it is rare to turn the tide of a battle. And even rarer to do so twice in quick succession. The first time was right here, on 24 April 1918. The Germans wanted to finish things off. In a letter to his wife in January 1918, Australian Brigadier General Harold Elliott, known as “Pompey”, wrote: *“The enemy are sending all the best men from the Russian front, and any prisoners we get are full of tales of the preparations the Bosche are making to settle us for good this time.”* One of the goals was to take Amiens. To get there, they had to pass through Villers-Bretonneux. On the 17th, it was raining shellfire. The Australian troops stood firm. In fact, they went one better because on

the 24th, at 10 p.m., with the help of the British, they counter-attacked. After the fiercest of battles, parts of which took place on the very site of the memorial, they repelled the Germans and went down in history.

And that's when the tide turned for the second time. **It was then that a meticulous, wise and dogged man took centre stage. An engineer, the son of Prussian Jewish immigrants who had worked hard to pay for his studies and had quickly joined the army reserves of a young Australian nation. That man was John Monash.** It was 4 July 1918. The Allies were back on the offensive. But thanks to Monash, they had a new attack strategy. They were combining tanks with infantry, using the tanks as “moving fire” to allow the men to advance in relative safety. **After 93 minutes, the troops had completed their mission. This has been noted in history because Monash, with typical British composure and Prussian precision, had calculated that the operation would take 90 minutes.** So he was not far off the mark, at a time in the War when, as you know, soldiers often fought for hours to gain just a few metres. This strategy, which even surprised the Germans, would subsequently be employed on a much larger scale, with the outcome which we all know. **So this was how this Australian engineer, with his unerring instinct, came to be hailed as one of the best Allied tacticians, on par with France's Estienne and Britain's Fuller.**

Then came the episode which perhaps struck me the most. It was when King George V of the United Kingdom and the British Dominions, Emperor of India, grandson of Queen Victoria, **conferred a knighthood on the field of battle to the son of Prussian Jewish immigrants** who had gone to Australia to start a new life. **An act which has come down to us through the ages, and which reminds me of an act by another great king - this time a French one.** I am talking about Francis I, who on 15 September 1515, at the battlefield of Marignano, **dubbed Chevalier Bayard** “the knight without fear and beyond reproach”. And so, after this gesture by George V, **Australia had its Bayard. The Bayard of the bush.**

We cannot relive these stories. The mud, the rats, the lice, the gas, the shellfire, the fallen comrades - we can never truly imagine what it was like. **So we must tell them. We must show them. Again and again. Show the faces of these young men whose lives were snuffed out in the mud of the trenches. Show the daily lives of these 20-year-old volunteers from far away who listened only to their youthful courage, to their love for their country, or that of their parents or grandparents, to die here in Villers-Bretonneux. Show it with the help of modern technology, without taking our eyes off the names etched onto the memorial - names which are real, not virtual.** We must also embody, experience and pass on the friendship which now unites the people of the Somme, the Hauts-de-France region and its representatives, and the thousands of Australians who come here each

year to pay their respects. For them, I have just one simple message, which I believe all schoolchildren in the north of France now learn: “*We will never forget Australians*”. To which you reply in Australia, “*Lest we forget*”.

We will never forget their courage. **We will never forget that they sacrificed their young, happy and peaceful lives to experience the horrors of war thousands of miles from their homes, when they had no obligation to do so.** We will never forget that 100 years ago, **a young and brave nation on the other side of the world made history by writing our history.** “Lest we forget”.