

Address by the French Prime Minister, Mr Édouard Philippe

Anzac Day Dawn Service

25 April 2018

Prime Minister,

Your Highness,

Minister,

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Australians know him well; the French, little or not at all. Today, as the sun rises, I would like to talk about him. A photo shows him aged 16 or 17 – he lied about his age to join up – in his new uniform. His boyish face contrasts starkly with the long bayonet attached to his proudly held rifle. This man is Alec Campbell, the last Australian survivor of the battle of Gallipoli. He left us, Prime Minister, in 2002. His death greatly moved Australia. We felt that same emotion in France, too, when Lazare Ponticelli, the last surviving French Great War veteran, or “poilu”, died in 2008. With him, the living, physical link that tied us to the terrible tragedy of the war was broken. All that remained was our collective memory and firm desire to keep it awake.

I do not know if, on 25 April 1915, the thousands of young Australians realized as they set foot on the peninsula of Gallipoli, that their nation too, **Australia, was stepping into history with them.** Some will

perhaps say that Gallipoli is an odd cradle for a nation. Especially for a Pacific nation. All those who love history know that a few dozen kilometres away stood the proud city of Troy. They also know that, in 481 BCE, the great Persian King Xerxes sought to connect the two banks using a pontoon bridge to invade Greece from Asia Minor – an epic recounted in one of the first ancient tragedies of Aeschylus: *The Persians*. **To remember is to acknowledge the courage of these hundreds of thousands of Australian volunteers for whom distance could not justify indifference to the world's fate.**

The battle was ill-prepared and ended in disaster. **Gallipoli joined Verdun, the Second Battle of the Aisne and the offensives of the Somme among the slaughters of the First World War.** Then these young Australians met the mud. They met the lice, the rats, the gas. They met the bombardments, the lives cut short, the cold and the hunger. They met fear, discouragement and tears. But on 25 April 1918, they met victory. And what a victory! At Villers-Bretonneux, three years after Gallipoli, the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) brought to a halt the enemy offensive on Amiens, at the cost of a heavy sacrifice accepted by the 13th Brigade of the 4th Division and the 15th Brigade of the 5th Division, commanded by William Glasgow and Harold Elliott respectively. They experienced these happy and tragic events alongside their British, Commonwealth, Belgian and of course French allies. 313,000 Australians fought in France and Belgium. One in two was wounded in battle. One in six never made it

home. And it is on the beach at Gallipoli, on the fields of the Somme, where we fought side-by-side, that between these nations our brotherhood of spilled blood was forged.

In 1943, in his book *The Peace*, the great German writer Ernst Jünger wrote: “*The First and Second World Wars are connected like two fiery continents, linked rather than separated by a chain of volcanoes*”. **So history repeated itself. That of an old continent tearing itself asunder. That of a young nation – your nation – coming to the aid of old countries – ours. You were there in the Middle East. You were there in the Mediterranean. You were there at Bardia in Libya, on Egypt’s border. You were there in Greece, in Crete, in Syria. You were there at El Alamein, in Sicily, on the Western Front. And of course, you were there in the Pacific, in New Guinea and in the Philippines.** Wherever French, British, American and Commonwealth troops fought, Australia was there. Sometimes to defend its own territory. Most often to defend that of the others. Cool-headedly, and with fervour. And with that bravura full of panache that I believe is now known as “Anzac Spirit”.

Yes, you sometimes have to die far from home to honour and defend your country. This very hard, sometimes bitter reality is still well known to French, British and Australian families today. That is why, if you will, Prime Minister, Your Highness, I would like to spare a thought for our soldiers – your soldiers, our soldiers – who are risking

their lives in the Sahel, in Syria, in the Middle East and elsewhere to protect ours. Through them, in the solitude of distance, I like to imagine that a touch of that brotherhood from the trenches lives on, what you would call “mateship”.

I am told that, shortly before he died, the Australian press dubbed Alec Campbell “the last sentinel of Gallipoli”. **That is perhaps the mission that befalls us. That of being sentinels, vigilant ones at that. Watching over the memory of Alec Campbell and of Lazare Ponticelli, and of all their millions of comrades to whom we are indebted for their sacrifice. Sentinels watching over the values that unite us and that are far greater than the oceans that separate us.**

Lest we forget.