

# TOPIC 12: French Connections

## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

If you visit the old battlefields of the Western Front today in France or Belgium, you can find evidence everywhere of the Australian presence here between 1916 and 1918. In the war cemeteries are the graves of thousands of men of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), casualties of the great battles fought at places like Fromelles, Pozières, Bullecourt, Ieper (Ypres) and Péronne. Every Anzac Day, there is an official ceremony of remembrance at the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux, and in the town itself there is a museum dedicated to the memory of the AIF. There are similar museums at Bullecourt and Fromelles. Every night at 8 pm sharp, police stop the traffic under the Menin Gate in Ieper (Ypres) and buglers of the Ieper Fire Brigade sound the Last Post over the 56,000 names of the 'missing' on the panels of the great memorial. Over 6,500 of those names are Australian soldiers of the AIF.

But perhaps the most dramatic link between Australia and the old Western Front can be seen at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. There, in the Hall of Memory, lies the body of an Unknown Australian Soldier, entombed on 11 November 1993. His body was brought from Adelaide Cemetery at Villers-Bretonneux in France, where it had laid in French earth for seventy-five years. He is undoubtedly one of the more than 61,000 Australians who died in World War I and whose names are recorded on the Australian War Memorial's Roll of Honour. Among them are 45,000 who died on the Western Front. At the funeral of the Unknown Soldier, a veteran of the Western Front, Robert Comb, cast some earth from Pozières over the coffin and uttered the words;

*Now you're home, mate.*

*Every Anzac Day,  
there is an official  
ceremony of remembrance  
at the Australian  
National Memorial at  
Villers-Bretonneux,  
and in the town itself  
there is a museum  
dedicated to the  
memory of  
the AIF.*

## AIMS

Students at Level 1/2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Know that there are many connections between France and Australia as a result of the war</li></ul>
Students at Level 2/3:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Critically evaluate some commemorative memorials</li></ul>

## CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Level 1/2/3	The materials in this topic show only a fraction of the ways in which the Australian experience on the Western Front can be seen in northern France and western Belgium. Teachers might set an assignment for students to find information about the many cemeteries, museums, memorials and monuments that exist in the area, and use this to plan a class excursion to the area.
-------------	--



Memorial plaque from 1919 at Villers-Bretonneux

AWM REL00770

Today there are many places on the Western Front (northern France and western Belgium) that have strong connections for Australians. One of these is the town of Villers-Bretonneux.

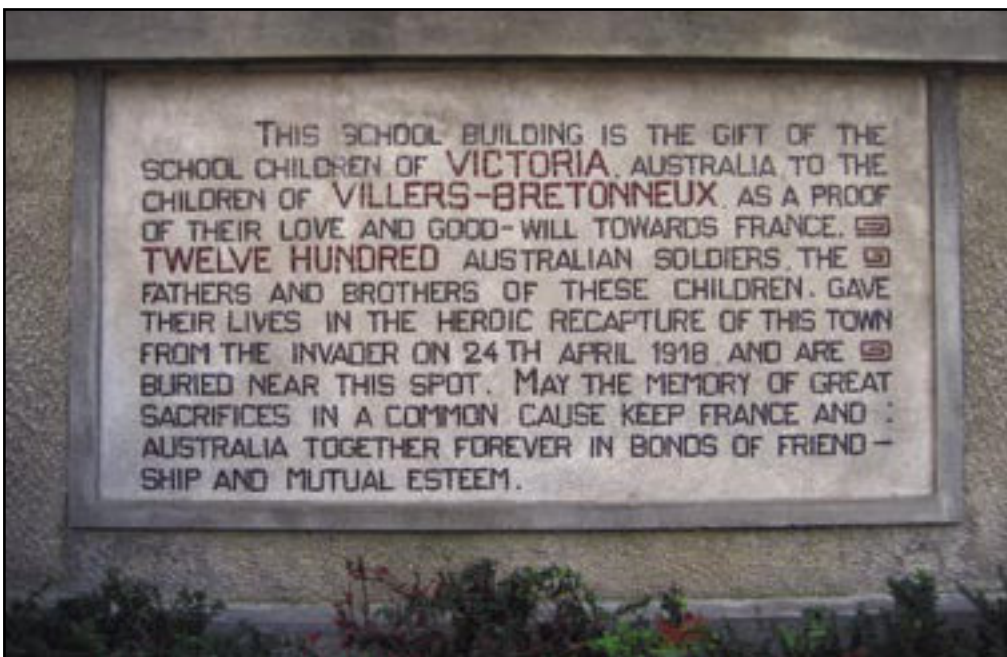
The small town of Robinvale lies all but five hundred kilometres to the north west of Melbourne in Victoria. Its founder was a man called Herbert Cuttle who named it after his son Robin who had been killed in an air battle over the Somme near Villers-Bretonneux in 1918.

Most of the troops who liberated Villers-Bretonneux in 1918 had come from the State of Victoria and as Robinvale and Villers-Bretonneux were of comparable sizes they decided to establish themselves as twin towns in 1984.

Robin is commemorated on the Arras Flying Services Memorial and the uniform on display there was kindly donated by the family.

In Robinvale there is an area of their park which is named after its French twin town, and by all accounts it has the largest windmill in the southern hemisphere.

- Find Villers-Bretonneux on a map of France.
- Look at this information about the town and surrounding area and explain why this special connection exists. (You may need to get help from a French-speaking teacher or student in your school to understand these plaques.)



Memorial plaque at Villers-Bretonneux school

Department of Veterans' Affairs



Logo of the town of Villers-Bretonneux

## NATIONAL MEMORIAL

---



Department of Veterans' Affairs

Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux

- 1) The connection to Villers-Bretonneux probably exists because:
- The area looks like Australia
  - There are many Australians buried there
  - Australian people settled there after the war
  - Australian troops helped drive the Germans out of the town
  - Australians provided money to help re-build the town after the war

Explain your choice.



The Commonwealth War Graves Commission maintains thousands of graves of Allied servicemen in cemeteries on the Western Front. Australians are buried in many of them.

- Why do you think these cemeteries are maintained?



Headstones in a war cemetery in France

Department of Veterans' Affairs

There is also a special memorial to the missing at Ieper (Ypres), with the names of thousands of soldiers who have no known grave, carved on the Menin Gate. Every evening there is a special ceremony of remembrance for these men and women.

- Why do you think the ceremony is held?
- Why would many people still visit, even though they may have no direct connection with anyone named on the gate?
- Is this type of tradition and remembrance important? Explain your reasons.



Buglers at the Menin Gate Memorial, Ieper (Ypres)

Department of Veterans' Affairs

There are also many memorials to the AIF Divisions in the area, in places that were special for the men. When the Germans occupied the area again in World War II they did not interfere with these memorials, except for one.



AWM P02205.011

Memorial to the men of the 2nd Anzac Division, Mont St Quentin, France

- ▮ What is the symbolism of this statue?
- ▮ Why do you think the Germans destroyed it?
- ▮ Do you think that they were justified in their actions? Explain your ideas.
  
- ▮ If you were to go to France would you want to visit the Western Front? Explain your reasons.
- ▮ The bones of soldiers are still being found, nearly ninety years after the fighting ended. There have been proposals to build an airport in the area that would cover many of these undiscovered remains. Many people objected to it. Prepare a set of arguments for and against the development of the area.