



The Villers Bretonneux Memorial Cross

Replica cross, St. Anne's Church

Gallipoli landing in 1915.

On an interior wall of the Anglican Church of St. Anne's, Ryde in Sydney is a large wooden cross commemorating the Australian soldiers of the 51st Battalion A.I.F. who died in the battle which took place at the small town of Villers Bretonneux in northern France. The 51st Battalion was raised in Egypt in March 1916, with almost half of its compliment coming from the 11th Battalion who had survive the tragedy of the

There were 2 separate attacks on the township of Villers Bretonneux as the German troops were anxious to capture the town located on high ground overlooking the city of Amiens, which was at that time, a pivotal point in the Battle of the Somme. If the Germans were able to capture the town, their artillery shells could reach the city of Amiens.

The 2nd attack on Villers Bretonneux took place on 24th and 25th April, 1918. After constant shelling which damaged every building in the town, the German army advanced in a dawn raid and occupied the town on 24th. The counter-attack by the Allied troops, which contained several divisions of Australian troops, attacked the town in a pincer movement on 25th April at 10.00pm. It was the Australian battalions who routed the German troops and they were forced to withdraw to 25 km to the south of the town. The Germans never recovered from this retreat and dismissed the idea of trying to re-occupy the town of Villers Bretonneux. There were 2,500 Allied troops killed during this encounter.

This 11th battalion was originally formed in Western Australia and the new troops which brought it up to full strength in 1916 were fresh recruits from that state. Arriving in France, on 12th June 1916, this newly formed battalion were thrust into the bitter conflict on the Western Front, just 4 weeks after their initial training.

After the battle ended, there were five crosses erected in the military cemetery at Villers Bretonneux, one representing the headquarters staff that died in the battle and the other four crosses representing the deceased soldiers of the battalions which had taken part in the conflict. The 51st Battalion suffered most casualties in the encounter, and of the 1000 men in the Battalion, 362 either lost their lives or were severely wounded.

Of the 5 crosses originally erected in 1918, only 2 remained when they were removed from the cemetery in 1933. One was installed in St. Anne's Ryde and the other, dedicated to the 50th Battalion, which came from South Australia, was placed in the South Australian War Memorial.

The cross is a replica of one taken from the battleground cemetery at Villers Bretonneux in France in 1933 and dedicated in St. Anne's church on Armistice Day 1934. Prior to the original cross being installed in St. Anne's Church, the Administrative Commander of the 30/51st Battalion, Major J.W. Russell wrote to the incumbent minister, Rev. C.A. Stubbin and asked if the church would be the 'resting place' of the cross taken from the battlefield. The Archbishop of Sydney was consulted and he agreed to the request, and the cross was mounted on an attractive cedar backboard and installed at a special service. On this historic occasion, 500 army personnel were involved in a parade in Ryde Park and at this time, the 51st Battalion was known as '*the Field of Mars Regiment*' with headquarters located in Monash Road, Gladesville

Following WWI, the 51st Battalion headquarters moved around the country and in 1936 it had relocated to Cairns, Northern Queensland. The colour patch worn by the battalion members is a configuration of two half-circles, with the colours of Brown Chocolate over Saxe Blue. As the 51st Battalion was originally formed as the 11th Battalion in Western Australia, and many of the survivors returned there following the war, it was understandable that eventually a request for the cross to be transferred back to Western Australia, would be forthcoming.

A request was received by the Rector of St. Anne's church, the Rev. Donald Begbie from former members of the 51st Battalion Association in W.A. in 1947, asking for the cross to be sent to its rightful home, Perth. I remember that a considerable amount of correspondence was then exchanged between the Association members and the Rector and parishioners of St. Anne's church concerning the inquiry,

without any positive result being achieved. Eventually in 1956, the original cross was transferred to Perth and installed in St. George's Cathedral, Perth on Armistice Day, that year.

This move may have been brought about as the result of a petition, signed by a group of the survivors of the 51st Battalion who fought at Villers Bretonneux being presented to the Anglican Archbishop of Perth in 1951. It sought the relocation of the cross in Perth. In turn, it appears the Archbishop wrote to the Archbishop of Sydney, suggesting that the cross should be brought back to where the 11th Battalion, which became the 51st Battalion, was first formed. The transfer of the cross took place in 1956.

In compensation for the loss of the cross, a replica was commissioned by the Dept. of the Army, and built by Mr. Cleve Parker of Killara, in Sydney. This cross was installed in the place occupied by the original cross on the interior wall of St. Anne's church, and a brass plate, underneath the cross, records the details:

The original cross of which this cross is a replica, was erected on the battlefield at Villers Bretonneux, France in 1918, and dedicated in St. Anne's church, Ryde on Armistice Day 1934 to the members of the 51st Battalion AIF who made the supreme sacrifice during the Great War, 1914-1918. Because the 51st Battalion was mainly a Western Australian unit, the original cross was transferred to St. George's Cathedral, Perth, W.A. in 1956 by mutual agreement of the parishioners of this church and the 51st Battalion Association.

It is recorded that following the installation of the replica cross in St. Anne's Ryde, a second cross was constructed and consecrated by the Chaplains General and given to the 51st Battalion Assn. which was at that time stationed in Cairns, North Queensland. The cross was to be installed in St. John's Anglican Church, Cairns, but this event has not as yet been authenticated.

The original memorial cross was constructed by a soldier; Horatio Julian from timber found in the ruined town of Villers Bretonneux and it was painted and sign written by another, Walter Rich and installed in the cemetery outside the town, under the supervision of Lieutenant Reginald Wood. It was dedicated at the site by Chaplain Donald Blackburn, and it remained in the battlefield cemetery until September 1933. When it was returned to Australia and installed in St. Anne's church, Ryde, it was again dedicated by Chaplain Donald Blackburn. Incidentally, when the cross was forwarded to Perth and placed in St. George's Cathedral on Armistice Day 1956, the dedication ceremony was once again performed by Chaplain Donald Blackburn.



Original cross in St. George's chapel

The first major battle the 51st Battalion was engaged in was at *Mouquet Farm* in August and September 1916 and in this battle at least 1/3 of the battalion was killed. After this encounter, the remainder of the battalion retired 'behind the line' and performed other duties throughout the bleak 1916/17 winter. During this lull in the conflict, the numbers of troops in the battalion were 'replenished' and built up to full strength. In early 1917 the battalion took part in an advance on the German lines and forced the enemy troops to retreat back to the Hindenburg Line, an elaborate fortification which the Germans had established in the early stages of the war. Later the same year, the 51st Battalion were engaged in the *Ypres* sector of the battle in Belgium and fought in the *Messines* area in early June. They were also involved in the *Battle of Polygon Wood* in late September 1917. Another bleak winter reduced the battle to a less intense engagement between the opposing troops. The collapse of the Russian participation in the war in October 1917 was as a result of the onset of the revolution against the Tsar. A resurgent attack by the German forces was anticipated on the Western Front and it came in late March 1918.



The cemetery at Villers Bretonneux

The 51st Battalion was engaged in the battle to defend *Dernancourt* on the river Arlene. It was here that a determined effort by the Germans was repulsed on 5th April and a counter attack took place later that same day. There was always a concern that the German troops would endeavour to mount a counter offensive, and it took place on the 24/25th April 1918. During this devastating battle, there were 1200 Australian troops who lost their lives in the battle at Villers Bretonneux.

During the bitterly fought battles in which the 51st Battalion was involved in throughout WWI, there were numerous military awards earned by the battalion, and they included:

(1)Victoria Cross, (1)D.S.O. and Bar, (1)O.B.E., (16)Military Crosses and 2

bars, (16)D.C.M. (122)Military Medals and 5 Bars,(8)Military Service Medals (25)Mentioned in Dispatches and (8)Foreign Awards. The huge casualties experienced in the many encounters by the battalion were 34 officers and 851 other ranks killed and 50 officers and 1634 other ranks wounded or captured.

The Villers Bretonneux battle was the first time in WW I in which an armoured tank forces were opposed to each other. The British Army employed 3 Mark IV tanks and the Germans used 3 A7V's.

The German troops occupied the township on the 24th April and it was retaken by Australian troops of the 4th and 5th Divisions the following day. The 51st Battalion was involved in this legendary attack and they helped to dislodge the German troops from the village. In the cemetery at Villers Bretonneux there are 770 Australian soldiers buried. At a service held in the ruins of the township on 14.07 1919 to remember those soldiers who had lost their lives, the Mayor said:

The first inhabitants of Villers Bretonneux to re-establish themselves in the ruins of what was a flourishing town, have by means of donations, shown a desire to thank the valorous Australian Armies, who with the spontaneous enthusiasm and characteristic dash of their race, in a few hours drove off an enemy who had 10 times their numerical strength. They offered a memorial tablet, a gift which is but the least expression of their gratitude, compared with the brilliant feat accomplished by the sons of Australia. Soldiers of Australia, whose brothers lie here in French soil. Be assured that your memory will always be kept alive, and that the burial place of your dead will always be respected and cared for.

The memorial to the Australians who died in the battle is located just outside the town, and in front of the memorial are the graves of 170 Australians from the 51st Battalion as well as those of British soldiers who were killed in the same conflict.

The Villers Bretonneux School was rebuilt and inaugurated on 25.05.1927, with the assistance of donations of money subscribed by schoolchildren from Victoria, many of whom had relatives involved in the actual conflict. Above the blackboard in the classrooms of the school are these words: *Never let us forget Australia* The school is called the Victorian school and attached to the outside of the building is a dedication plaque which reads:

This school building is the gift of the school children of Victoria, Australia to the children of Villers Bretonneux as a proof of their love & good will towards France. Twelve hundred Australian soldiers, the fathers and brothers of these children, gave their lives in the heroic recapture of this town from the invader on 24th April, 1918 and are buried near this spot. May the memory of great sacrifice in a common cause keep France & Australia together forever in bonds of friendship & mutual esteem.

Even to this day, the people of the small french town continue to express their gratitude to Australia. During the tragic bushfires which swept through Victoria in 2009, several public schools were destroyed, and the schoolchildren of Villers Bretonneux contributed to a fund which was supported by donations from 4,135 residents of the town. It raised a sum of £10,000 which was donated to help rebuild the school at the small Victorian township of Strathewen.

An Anzac Day ceremony is held on 25th April every year in Villers Bretonneux and while traditionally, Anzac Day is intended to commemorate the unfortunate landing on the Gallipoli peninsula in 1915, the townsfolk of Villers Bretonneux memorialise this same day, as it was on that day in 1918, when the German troops were driven out of their town. When Allied troops launched their massive offensive against the German troops in early August 1918, the 51st Battalion was involved in the conflict and only withdrew from the battle late in the month. Shortly after the Armistice on 11th November 1918, the Battalion began 'breaking up' and was disbanded soon afterwards in 1919.

For many years, a special Dawn Service on Anzac Day has been conducted on the Gallipoli peninsula where the Australian and New Zealand troops landed on Turkish soil in 1915. These pilgrimages are still very well patronised by Australian and New Zealand tourists and backpackers who gather in large numbers to commemorate the sacrifices made on this memorable day on this foreign shore.

In July, 1938 the official dedication of the British War Cemetery at Villers Bretonneux was performed by the newly crowned King George VI. In 2008, after the cemetery had undergone extensive refurbishment with a large tower being constructed and a podium for Anzac Day services to be conducted from. The Australian government decided that the emphasis on the celebration of the Anzac Day Dawn Service observances overseas that year, would incorporate France as well as Turkey and the memorial cemetery at Villers Bretonneux became the focal point for this service, with the official Dawn Service being held there. The Western Australian Government arranged for the original cross was taken from Perth for the service held in the war cemetery and a replica of the cross, made from stone quarried in Western Australia

was also taken to France at the same time. This stone cross is now on permanent display in the grounds of a nearby church and it is suitably identified with a plaque which details the occasion. With the inaugural Dawn Service at Villers Bretonneux in 2008 and the renewed enthusiasm which many Australians have developed to visit both the Gallipoli Peninsula and the Western Front in Europe for Anzac Day commemoration services, perhaps this small town in northern France might assume a similar role to that of Anzac Cove on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey, a site for a commemorative service for Anzac Day Dawn Service for those who undertake the pilgrimage.

The beautiful cedar backboard on which the replica cross is mounted in St. Anne's church was presented as a gift by the relatives of John Steer (1857-1902) who was Sunday School Superintendant and also a Churchwarden at St. Anne's church. He was by profession an organ builder and he tuned and repaired the church organ whenever it was necessary. A small metal plate inconspicuously attached under the ledge on which the cross rests records these details:

'This foundation was placed in memory of John Steer, died Feb.16 1902'

The replica cross on the interior wall of St. Anne's Church, Ryde, serves as a constant reminder of the tragic loss of life incurred in the battle for the small town of Villers Bretonneux, but it also demonstrates that out of the carnage of war, a lasting friendship and enduring respect has been generated between the people of that small town in Northern France and the people of Victoria, Australia.

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