**Speech given by Stephen Brady AO CVO**

**St Peter’s Eastern Hill Charitable Foundation Dinner**

**15 November 2018**

Thank you for your kind welcome, Krystyna.

Good evening, everyone, community and friends of St Peter’s and the Lazarus Centre, fond callers on the Cross of Sacrifice.

It’s only a few days since the centenary of the Armistice that ended the fighting of the First World War.

A fifth of the membership of this club, the Melbourne Club—110 or so of its members—had joined up for active service.

In 1923, when the club published its first postwar membership list, at the top were the names of the twelve members who’d lost their lives.

The military and service being very much a part of the club’s history, we’re in congenial surrounds tonight.

It was 5am Paris time on the 11th of November, 1918 when representatives of France, Belgium and Germany met in a railway carriage parked in a French forest at Compiègne and signed the Armistice.

Bells pealed from church steeples, factory whistles blew, rejoicing erupted from Paris and London to cities and towns across Australia.

Travel through France today, and you’ll see and sense that World War One and the Armistice are deeply embedded.

It is a massive graveyard of fallen soldiers. Poppies still grow in Flanders Field. There are scores of neatly trimmed cemeteries, silent as churches, with row after row of orderly white crosses. There are hundreds of small memorials.

Among them are memorials and cemeteries for lost Australians – 46,000 killed in action in France and Belgium. 18,000 of them have no known grave.

The Anzac centenary has been one of Australia’s most significant periods of commemoration – 100 years of our involvement in World War One, concluding with Remembrance Day just gone.

The very first Anzac Day commemoration was held in 1916.

On the Western Front the tradition was continued by soldiers at Bullecourt in far northern France by the soldiers who’d previously been at Gallipoli.

Having moved to another theatre of war, they remembered their fallen mates with a ceremony on the front line and a simple wayside cross.

Ever since then the locals of this tiny French village have quietly maintained the same tradition every ANZAC Day.

Each year, during my time as Australia’s Ambassador to France, I would attend a quiet and moving ceremony at the same cross.

During my time as Australia’s Ambassador to France, I would attend this quiet and moving ceremony at the very same place.

I was privileged in those years to have stewarded or been part of a number of the centenary commemorations in France:

* The Battle of the Somme
* The Battles of Fromelles, Pozières, Le Hamel, Arras and Villers-Bretonneux
* Caterpillar valley, for New Zealand
* and the Canadian Battle of Vimy Ridge.

The memorials, the ceremonies, the symbols, the simple gestures that help us commemorate and help us understand things bigger than ourselves, are at the heart of diplomacy too.

They make common, everyday sense of complex issues of state. They engender national pride and identity. They connect and motivate citizens. They gather people and their stories and yearning to belong.

And they’re why we’re here tonight.

The Australian War Memorial started something terrific for the Anzac centenary – the Commemorative Crosses project.

Two thousand Australian school kids wrote their own messages of hope and thanks on small, beautiful crosses that, with the Australian Embassy’s help, have made their way to the fields of remembrance across France.

Two of them placed by Peter and me, on the graves of Australia’s two youngest soldiers, both aged 16 – Privates WA Smith and HB Harris, buried in Saint Sever cemetery at Rouen, near the military hospital where they died from their battle wounds.

While the cross observes the ecumenical in human loss, the most widely recognised secular symbol of remembrance has to be the poppy.

The poppy’s seed springs to life when the soil it’s been resting in through winter is disturbed.

It is often the first flower to return after battle, and it grows with such profusion that it turns the land blood red – a sign of new life when everything else has been destroyed.

In Christian terms, I guess you could say it brings to mind the blood of Christ and the the hope of resurrection.

Five years ago, two sisters-in-law here in Victoria, Lynne Berry and Margaret Knight, set out to crochet 120 stemmed poppies to plant at the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne for Remembrance Day 2014, in honour of their fathers who’d fought with the AIF and the British Army.

This private act of remembrance caused an extraordinary outpouring of fellow feeling and collective action.

Before long it became a huge community project, a movement almost – *5000 Poppies*, the women called it.

Former Victorian Premier, Ted Baillieu, with the enthusiastic support of his wife, Robyn, made the inspired suggestion that the poppies be part of the Anzac centenary commemorations.

In the years since, over one million poppies, each one unique, have been handcrafted by women and men around the world, and travelled far.

I remember when the poppies came to the centenary commemorations of the Battle of Fromelles in 2016.

They were installed at the Cobbers Memorial at Australian Memorial Park, Fromelles, to honour the more than 5,500 Australians lost there in only 24 hours – one of the bloodiest battles in Australia’s history.

To look out onto a meandering, dancing field of red is really quite something. You can’t help but weep, and smile, and hope.

And right now these timeless poppies have made their way to Canberra:

* the most dazzling red carpet you’ll ever see in the Parliament House forecourt and marble foyer,
* and in line’s sight, 62,000 of them upright on the lawns of the Australian War Memorial, a tribute to each Australian life lost in World War One – 19,000 Victorians included, a great many of whom were killed on the Western Front.

For not a big state, Victoria was generous in its war effort.

Early losses at Gallipoli in 1915 spurred a spontaneous rush in Victorian enlistments – over 21 and a half thousand in the month of July alone.

Compulsory military service had been quickly and vigorously embraced by Victoria’s middle class, and by Melbourne’s powerful.

Remember too that Melbourne was the seat of the Federal Parliament all through the First War years, indeed from Federation to 1927.

Close networks made Victoria tick – ties and friendships forged through family, school, business, sport, church, and clubs like this one.

And their preferred newspaper, the *Argus,* in the main—the *Age* and the *Herald* too—gave near unanimous support for conscription.

The shared sentiment was that the war must be won. There was no sacrifice too great. No one class should bear the burden alone.

The conscription referendum led by Prime Minister Billy Hughes in 1916 of course ultimately failed. For Victoria, the vote and ferocity of feeling on both sides left lasting divisions.

The yes campaigners believed military service to be the greatest act of patriotism and, as such, unassailable.

Of the 330,000 Australians who served overseas, there were 114,000 Victorians – 19 infantry battalions, 4 light horse regiments and 6 other specialist units.

Among them was Melbourne born, General (later Sir) John Monash, appointed to lead Australia’s 4th Brigade.

Of its four, the 14th Battalion carried Victoria’s banner. Monash proudly described it as “a thousand of the very flower of youth of the city of Melbourne”.

Monash went on to command Australian troops in Egypt, then on the Western Front. There, in 1918, he demonstrated his strategic brilliance in battles that were pivotal to enemy defeat.

And after the war, as Director General of repatriation and mobilisation, Monash dedicated himself to helping those returning from the Front find employment.

On Anzac Day this year, then Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull opened Australia’s newest museum, set on the grounds of the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery in northern France and near the Australian National Memorial.

It is a tribute to the men and women of the First World War.

And, naturally, it is named in Monash’s honour – the Sir John Monash Centre.

But it doesn’t tell Monash’s story; rather, it tells Australia’s story of the Western Front in the words of those who served.

Inside the Centre is a giant, truly magnificent and powerfully evocative tapestry, five metres by two and half metres, titled *The Morning Star*.

Designed by Victorian artists, Lyndell Brown and Charles Green who served as Australia’s official war artists in Afghanistan and Iraq, and made by weavers from the Australian Tapestry Workshop here in Melbourne,

it depicts soldiers’ experiences on the Front against the backdrop of an Australian countryside – the place they fought for and carried with them.

The weavers used the same intricate, pain-staking manual techniques used in Europe in the 15th century – France and Australia’s stories woven together through an ancient French craft.

It must be said that the tapestry could never have happened without the enormous generosity of the Tapestry Workshop’s patron, Baillieu Myer, and other Victorian donors, Anne and Mark Robertson, Janet Calvert Jones and others.

The Sir John Monash Centre is also the hub of the Australian Remembrance Trail along the Western Front, spanning around 200 kilometres.

With the help of local French and Belgian communities over many years, the trail remembers Australian service, linking Australian battle sites through memorials, cemeteries, museums, and an impressive array of learning resources.

One landmark that is close to Victorians’ hearts is the Franco-Australian Museum commemorating the battle at Villers-Bretonneux fought on Anzac Day 1918.

The battle marked the end of the German advance in the Somme. 2,400 Australians were killed.

The museum is within the school that was destroyed during the battle and rebuilt with money raised by donations from Victoria.

The story of the Penny Drive, the mighty fundraising campaign by Victorian school children after the war, is legendary, and now wonderfully told in the children’s book ‘Two Pennies’ by Melbourne author and film maker, Vicki Bennett.

The school was suitably renamed Victoria School—L’Ecole Victoria—and on its inauguration, Anzac Day 1927, the words, “N’oublions jamais l’Australie” were inscribed in the school hall – Never Forget Australia –

also, incidentally, the title of a documentary made by Bennett who is clearly captivated by the Villers-Bretonneux story.

These words, these memorials are founded in the lives and stories of people, and crafted in memory of human effort.

They speak volumes of the friendship between France and Australia – a friendship driven by love and goodwill shared between our people, then and now.

On the opening of the Sir John Monash Centre, French Prime Minister, Edouard Philippe, reflected his country’s feeling for the Australians who served on the Western Front:

“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.”

Prime Minister Philippe said we can’t relive their stories, we can’t even truly imagine them. But we can, and must, tell them, and show them, again and again.

As a mark of French commitment to this spirit, just four days ago, I attended a ceremony on November 11th in Paris when Prime Minister Philippe – in the presence of our Governor-General – announced the establishment of the France Australia Centenary Trust with myself to be the inaugural Chair.

The trust will promote cultural and educational linkages between our two countries, and I am pleased to inform you that Krystyna Campbell-Pretty has accepted my invitation to join the Board.

…….

It was a distant war for Australia. Ours were expeditionary forces, dispatched to fight in foreign countries. For those who fell, that’s where they remained.

With a single exception. The unknown Australian soldier recovered from Adelaide Cemetery near Villers-Bretonneux and interred in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial – the soil from the Pozières battlefield scattered in his tomb, his one death to signify all.

Families, friends, loved ones in Australia never had the opportunity to say goodbye. Very few could afford to travel to where they fought and fell.

It was left to those at home to consecrate their service and sacrifice; to hold onto their memory; to bring them home, in their own way.

Australia’s official war historian, Charles Bean, wrote:

“What these men did, nothing can alter now. The good and the bad, the greatness and the smallness of their story will stand...

It rises, as it always will rise, above the mists of time, a monument to great-hearted men; and for their nation, a possession forever.”

The First World War produced many rituals and monuments in honour of that possession forever:

* the dawn service and march on Anzac Day,
* the 2 minutes silence on Armistice Day,
* the poppies, the rosemary sprigs,
* the memorials in suburbs, villages and towns around the country, and certainly throughout Victoria.

These stories that we possess forever, the ones we must tell and show again and again, are indeed stories of the good and the bad, the small and the great.

They can be heroic, messy, conflicted, heartwarming, and all of these things at once.

When news of war came to Melbourne there was excitement and jubilation. As the first troopships left Port Melbourne in October 1914, they were decked with streamers, serenaded by bands, and uplifted by reveling crowds.

There was percolating anxiety and grief too because of course death in devastating numbers did inevitably follow.

And there was intense pride and admiration.

Victorian, Captain Albert Jacka was the first Australian to be decorated with the Victoria Cross for his actions during the Gallipoli campaign.

Later, among seven Australians, four more Victorians—Burton, Dunstan, Tubb and Symons—earned VCs for their bravery during the savage battle of Lone Pine on the Turkish Gallipoli ridge.

The whole of Victoria was taken by their courage, resourcefulness and mateship – what came to be called “the Anzac spirit”.

How could all this be reconciled? Could a parent who’d lost a son be comforted by the nobility of his sacrifice, his fine Anzac spirit?

And when silence fell on Armistice Day,

* what then for those returning?
* or those already returned, wounded and damaged?
* or those left behind with the enduring silence and sadness of loss?

Built by the St Peter’s community in 1924, faithful to the style of the French wayside cross, and the only one of its kind in Australia,

the Cross of Sacrifice:

* is for all those who never made it home from World War One,
* and for those who did,
* and for those who never left, but kept on loving and caring and waiting for war to end and life to somehow be restored,
* so they might all feel at one again.

In the decades since, the Cross has only grown in its capacity to bring people together, in the local community and from beyond.

It is visited by so many, every day, in the unifying space on St Peter’s apron. It bears the weight and light and hope of stories and hearts over many, many decades.

This morning I walked up to take my time to look at the cross.

And now it needs some TLC so it can keep doing its job, and take on a great deal more.

Making room to sit and think about home, and loss of home,

* for those who served and died in World War One,
* and for those in this community who are without homes, not due to war, but the travails of modern life.

There’s a long history of generous giving in Victoria. I don’t need to document it; many of you here are at its heart, and know it well.

Krystyna, you are at the heart of the Cross of Sacrifice project, and you’re fondly and proudly known for your philanthropy in this state – thank you.

During the years of the First War, clergy here in Victoria delivered 19,000 casualty telegrams to Victorian homes.

On arrival, those envelopes meant only one thing to the family members who opened their doors to receive them.

The envelope in front of you this evening contains none of that grief and anguish, only the hope and opportunity you’re able to give it.

Thank you, everyone.