Jump TO Article

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Jump TO Article

# The Australian War Memorial: its past and future

A shortened version of an address to the Institute on 29 July 2014 by

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Director of the Australian War Memorial

*The Australian War Memorial guards the soul of the nation – the record of the men and women who have served Australia in war and other operations, from the Sudan in 1885 until today. In making those stories accessible to the current generation, it shows us who we are as a people and what we stand for. That is why the Memorial is so important, not only to our past, but more so to our future.*

**Key words:** Australian War Memorial; Charles Bean; Brendan Nelson; Last Post Ceremony; World War I; Afghanistan.

Last year, Air Marshal Geoff Brown, Chief of Air Force, had his Turkish counterpart at the Australian War Memorial. The Turkish General pointed to the name in bronze of one of those theatres in which Australians have fought and died over more than 100 years and he asked me why Australians had been there. I said: "General, that is a very important question because, in answering it, you will discover who we are as Australians." And I pointed down Anzac Parade across the lake to our Parliament and said the political capital of the nation is there, but the soul of the nation is here. It is not the building so much as the stories of the service and sacrifice of 2 million Australians who wear and have worn the uniform of the Royal Australian Navy, the Australian Army and the Royal Australian Air Force over more than 100 years. The power is in the story.

### Tom White

Thomas Anderson White was born in Adelaide in 1886. An agent for the Adelaide Steamship Company, he became engaged to the love of his life, Elaine Champion, in l913. He played lacrosse for South Australia from l908 to l912 and excelled in rowing, representing South Australia competitively the length and breadth of Australia. It was said in l912 that he was the finest oarsman South Australia had ever produced.

Two weeks after the declaration of war on 4 August 1914, he joined the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and went into the 10th Battalion. We have a photograph of him sitting on the pyramids in Egypt with his great mate Lance Rhodes. We have another photograph of him with Sergeant John Gordon and eight other A Company men – only three of the nine in that photograph returned to Australia.

The 10th Battalion was one of the battalions in the Gallipoli landing on 25 April 1915. Tom White volunteered to row one of the boats. His great mate, Arthur Blackburn, who would be awarded the Victoria Cross the following year at Pozières, later wrote that the rowers were in the most dangerous position in the boat. Such was the danger that the officers were reluctant to order men to row. Tom laughed and joked, but volunteered to row and did this with athletic vigour to get the boat to the shore. As the boat hit the shingles, he slumped to the side. He had been shot through the pelvis. He died on the hospital ship somewhere between Gallipoli and Alexandria. He was 29-years-old.

Elaine Champion subsequently married. Tom had written 28 letters to her from the time he left Adelaide to the eve of the Gallipoli landing on 24 April; and one of her daughters recently came to the War Memorial and donated those 28 letters to us.

### The Birth of a Nation

The great English 19th century philosopher, John Stuart Mill, distilled two key ingredients that he considered were necessary for a nation. The first was that its people would want to be governed as one single country, as one people. The second was a commonality of feeling – one deeply rooted in language, literature and history.

In l901, the legal architecture of our country was given birth after a generation and a half of bitter, divisive debate. But it was not until those cataclysmic events began unfolding in 1914, with Australians being sent overseas with the AIF, in Australian uniform, with an Australian Flag, and then with the deep divisions that emerged in Australian society domestically, that our story was born. Every nation has its own story. This is our story!

The First World War was not only a disaster for the 100 or so countries involved, it was for three countries, New Zealand, Canada and Australia, a series of events that gave birth to our sense of confidence in who we are and our place in the world. It is very difficult to imagine an Australian prime minister before the First World War standing up a United States president, as Billy Hughes did at Versailles, and asserting Australian interests above whatever the United States wanted. But such was the confidence that the nation had in itself, notwithstanding the immense cost, as we emerged from the war.

**The Memorial's Origins**

Charles Bean was Australia's First World War official historian. Of all the things he recorded, the event which to me says it best is an incident before the assault on Lone Pine. In the pre-dawn darkness in the forward trench, an Australian soldier called out: "Is Jim here?" A second voice from the far step replied: "Right here, Bill". "Youse blokes mind movin' up a bit? Him and me are mates and we're goin' over together."

In late July 1916 at Pozières, Australia had 23,000 casualties in six weeks. Bean recorded in his diary that many a man lying out there at Pozières, or in the low scrub at Gallipoli, with his poor, tired senses barely working through the fever of his brain, has thought in his last moments: "well, well it's over, but in Australia they will be proud of this".

Bean was asked by a mortally wounded Australian: "Will they remember me in Australia?" In consultation with some of his colleagues, he then resolved that, at war's end, he would build the finest memorial and museum to the men of the AIF and the nurses.

It is very tempting to forget that, during World War I, Australia had a population of less than 5 million. One million men were of an age that could volunteer; and, from a nation to its credit twice rejecting conscription, 417,000 volunteered, 330,000 went overseas, by war's end there would be 62,000 dead, another 60,000 would die within 10 years of returning to Australia, and by 1928 there would be 120,000 on disability pensions.

Leadership is about vision. A comprehensive sense about who we are, where we want to go, why we want to get there, and challenging people to rise above themselves and their own self-interest to serve the broader interest of the cause, of the group or, indeed, of our society.

It was finally in l948 that Bean would articulate his vision for the Memorial, seven years after its official opening on Remembrance Day 1941; and every single day we recite it to those who are at the Memorial and those who are watching our Last Post Ceremony online. Not only is it in the Orientation Gallery as you come into the Memorial, I have also had it placed in the Western Courtyard Gallery where we hold many official events: "Here is their spirit, in the heart of the land they loved, and here we guard the record which they themselves made".

**Brendan Nelson**

Why did I apply to become the Memorial's Director? My maternal great-grandfather served in World War I; and my grandfather, his brothers and my father served in World War II. Fortunately, all of them returned. My formative experiences were of growing up in a household surrounded by black-and-white photographs of young men and women in uniform. Then, when practising medicine and doing home visits in the 1980s, not only would there be the photographs of young men and women looking forward to lives too often that were not lived, in some there would also be a room untouched since 1916. So, as one goes through life, layer upon layer of understanding are added to it. Then, when I was Minister for Defence, it changed my attitude to what I really regarded as being important.

I took the diplomatic job in Brussels with NATO because we had gone into a NATO-led war, but had had very little relationship directly with NATO. Prime Minister Rudd said: "I want you to bust down the doors and get us to the table". I felt that it was another way that I could serve the men and women who wear our uniform. After nearly three years in the job, we had had a transformation in our NATO and European Union relationships, but I felt I could not achieve more by staying another year. I wanted to do something meaningful back in Australia.

In March 2012, I learnt that the Director of the Australian War Memorial, Steve Gower, was retiring and that the government was prepared to have a non-military person, a non- historian in the role. A light went on inside my head and I applied for the job. I was asked in the interview about being the director when I did not know much about military history and had never run a museum. I replied that there are 330 people working at the Memorial plus 275 volunteers who are experts in their fields. Experts, though, have a tendency to see the world through a straw and in the end someone has to apply intellectual rigour to the process of exercising judgement as to what is in the best interests of the Institution, but more importantly of the nation that it serves. I would regard my role as not only being a manager of the Memorial, but a leader of it and as an ambassador for it.

Of all the things I did in Europe, it was the time I spent in the battlefields and cemeteries of Flanders and northern France that were the most meaningful to me. The Menin Gate was built by the British Government at the end of the First World War in Ypres to commemorate the 90,000 British and Commonwealth soldiers who were killed in Flanders whose bodies were never found. There are 6159 Australian names on the Menin Gate. On the last night we were in Belgium, my wife and I went to the Menin Gate and the chairman of the Last Post Association said: "Ambassador, this is your 73rd visit". I said: "I would have come every night had the Menin Gate been in Brussels".

When I was told my appointment as Director had been approved by Cabinet, a friend said: "Brendan, I can't believe you are doing that. You are wasting your life. You have far more important things to do for Australia than rearrange its history." I replied that if you can find something that you are passionate about and are paid to do it, you should do it. And while it is our history, it has much more to do with our future. What happened in our past – in Sudan, Southern Africa, China, the First World War, the Second World War and subsequently – what has been done by men and women in our uniform in war and other operations, has everything to do with our future.

In my last job, many Europeans would ask me: "Why is Australia so committed to Afghanistan?" I used to give four reasons:

- We saw 3000 civilians murdered on September 11, 2001, in Washington and New York, including some Australians. We treasured our alliance commitment with the United States and would do whatever was necessary to support them.

- Just over a year later, 88 Australians were murdered in Bali by three men trained by al-Qaeda under the protection of the Taliban in Afghanistan.
- Our generation is facing a resurgent totalitarianism. My great-grandparents' generation saw off fascism in the 1930s and 1940s; my parents' generation faced down totalitarianism in the context of the Cold War; and now my generation is facing a resurgent totalitarianism in the form of people who have hijacked the good name of Islam to build a violent political utopia and we don't see it as something that should be left to others.
- The fourth reason, which has been part of the decision-making matrix by every government in my country that has ever made the decision to send men and women to war, is: "what is the right thing to do?" We deploy our forces because it is in Australia's interests to do so, but we only deploy them if we also judge it to be the right thing to do.

**The Memorial Today**

When I was in Afghanistan in October 2012, a soldier said to me: "When I take my son to the Australian War Memorial, I can show him what his great-grandfather did, I can show him what his grandfather did, but I can't show him what I am doing".

The challenge to those of us who lead the Memorial today is to remain true to Bean's vision in a world that is vastly different and to make the history live. We also have to move away from the idea that we only tell the Australian story of war, peacekeeping and other operations when they are long over.

The Memorial is many things. One of them is that it is part of the process that helps men and women returning from operations come to terms with what they have done and the impact it has had on them. I can only imagine what it was like in 1973 for men returning from Vietnam to a deeply divided country. I wonder if the Memorial had been able to tell the Vietnam War story sooner, more broadly and more deeply, then possibly some of them may not have suffered as much as they have.

One of the challenges I have set for us is to get Australians to look beyond the broad brush strokes. It is tempting for Australians to think only of the Gallipoli landing. Fewer appreciate that there was also an 8.5-month-long Gallipoli campaign. Fewer still are aware of the campaign in France, let alone the one in Belgium, or in the Sinai and Palestine, or a war at sea, or in the air. The temptation is to settle for broad brush strokes, let the past become a distant stranger and not appreciate the range of individual sacrifices made in our name.

Following a $32 million redevelopment, the World War I Gallery will reopen at the end of November. Ten of the 13 dioramas will be on display; they have been fully restored and a modern soft lighting will be used to help bring them to life. We will explain the origins of the war and why Australians were so enthusiastically involved. We will remind Australians there was a peace movement, albeit a small one. We will talk about enlistment, Rabaul, embarkation, Egypt, France, Belgium, Palestine and the Hindenburg Line. There will be more on the cost of the war. Individual stories will be told of men who came back from the war, got on with their lives, and made a very positive contribution to the nation; and there will be other stories of loss and grieving. Once visitors have reached the end of the gallery, they will be left with a deep sense of pride in what was achieved, but balanced by a sober understanding of the cost.

I have introduced a Last Post Ceremony. When I used to attend the Menin Gate Last Post Ceremony, I used to wonder why they didn't tell us something about the men named on the wall. So at our Last Post Ceremony we are doing that. The ceremony starts with an Australian Flag appearing, we remind people of the vision of Charles Bean, we sing the national anthem, a piper plays a lament, and wreaths are laid at the Pool of Reflection. A member of the ADF in uniform then reads the story of just one of the dead, the ode is recited and the Last Post is played. Each day, a photograph of the person whose story will be told that evening is displayed in the Memorial.

At 5:30 p.m. on 4 August, the first of the 62,000 names is due to be projected onto the Memorial just below the dome. Every night for four years, we will project the name of one of them. Each name will come up 30 times for 30 seconds. You can find out on the website when a name you are interested in will be projected. The night we did the trial it was bleak, but you could still read the name halfway down Anzac Parade.

We have also installed speakers in the cloisters. From the speakers you can hear, very softly, the voices of year 6 students from right across the country reciting the name and age of death of each of the dead. The ABC has been using its 35 regional stations to make the recordings. So far, we have had 6000 students recording the names, aided by a web-based App provided by Google. So, 100 years from now, people will be hearing what these kids recorded in our generation.

In 2010, shortly after I arrived in Brussels, I received a letter from a Hobart man, Peter Pickering, of the Sons of the British Empire. He wrote that his organisation consisted of volunteers who were deeply committed to Australians understanding the sacrifices made on the Western Front. They made little wooden crosses in their garages and spoke at schools. I agreed to be their Patron, sent them a cheque for $500 and told them, if they sent me the crosses, I would get them placed on Australian Graves. At the Anzac Day Dawn Service at Polygon Wood in 2011, a cross was placed on each of 564 Australian graves by Pickering's volunteers.

I have ordered 100,000 crosses incorporating the War Memorial centenary logo to be placed on Australian graves of all conflicts in far-off lands. That is happening as we speak. So popular has it been that we are now ordering more. It is making the history live and getting it down to individual stories to which people can relate.

Google is producing an online tour through the Memorial for us. The History Chanel has filmed a "Behind the Memorial" series with Neil Oliver. The initial episode is due to air on 4 November this year. They have produced six 1-hour episodes and they now wish to do a second series.

We are also building a travelling exhibition for the centenary which will traverse the story of the First World War from beginning to end.

We opened our Afghanistan exhibition on the 6th August last year. Chris Masters of Four Corners fame worked with our team to put it together. I am very proud of it. What is more important, the defence personnel themselves are proud of it. Called “Afghanistan, the Australian Story”, it enables veterans to see, hear and feel something of what they have done. We have a number of artefacts: the cowling from the Blackhawk that brought out three of our dead in 2010; the storage bin from a Bushmaster destroyed in November 2012; and a 30-minute video with very rich imagery, from going to Afghanistan, bridge building, the fighting, the ramp ceremonies, the coming home, to reflections on post-traumatic stress disorder.

**Conclusion**

I am determined to get more space for the Memorial. We need be able to tell the story of Afghanistan fully, of Iraq, the Solomon Islands and East Timor. We have had 60,000 men and women that have made over 90,000 deployments in the last 15 years. It is more than embarrassing that we haven’t been able to tell their stories properly. There are also some stories from the Second World War, Catalinas among them, which need to be told and for which we do not have the space. I have told the Prime Minister we need $84 million before this decade ends.

The world is changing in ways we do not fully understand. There are ongoing problems in Eastern Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East; there is the always fractious relationship between Russia and Europe; and the transatlantic relationship appears to have waned in recent years. The world we have known is about to end. We are entering a world we have not seen since the Franco-Prussian War and the Ming dynasty.

When you prosecute your foreign policy into Asia and the Pacific, you should not seek to export Western values and human rights – don’t go lecturing China, Malaysia, Vietnam, Indonesia or anyone else in our region about values. The thing to be most firm about is your own values. The nations in our region respect countries and people who are clear about who they are and for what they stand. That is why the Australian War Memorial is so important, not only to our past, but more importantly to our future.

**The Author:** Brendan Nelson, a medical practitioner, came to national prominence as National President of the Australian Medical Association (1993-1995) and in 1996 was elected to Federal Parliament as Member for Bradfield. He was Minister for Education, Science and Training from 2001–2006; and Minister for Defence in 2006–2007, where he oversaw major new investments in defence. From November 2007 to September 2008, he was Leader of the Opposition. He resigned from Federal Parliament in October 2009 to become Australian Ambassador to Belgium, Luxembourg, the European Union and NATO – he forged deep links with the communities of Flanders, where almost 13,000 Australians lost their lives during World War I. He became Director of the Australian War Memorial on 17 December 2012.