

MEDITERRANEAN

SIGGY AND HEATHER | TRIP AROUND THE MEDITERRANEAN | SUNDAY, 23 JUNE 2013

A Day of Remembrance

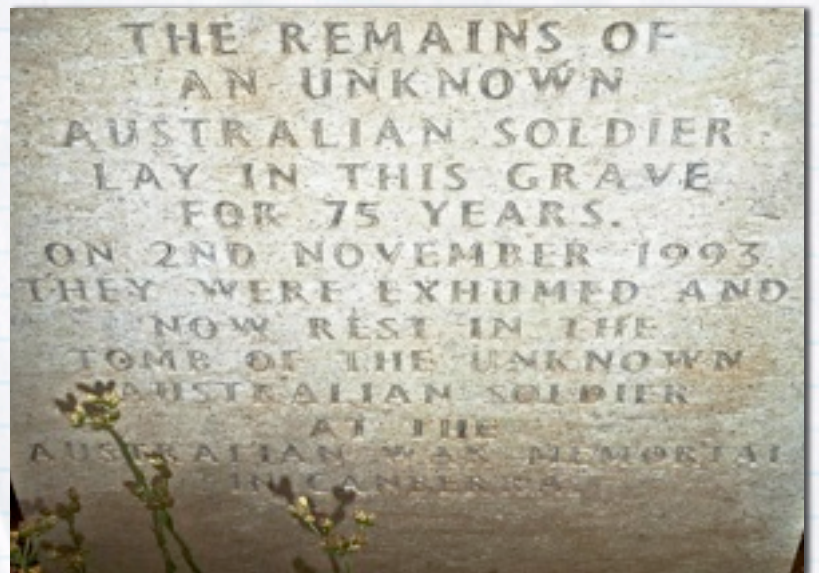
So many things to remember about today. Sombre moments at memorials, meeting and sharing stories with fellow compatriots, almost getting lost in the biggest village jumble sale, savouring the walk through a village that is inexorably linked to Australia and a chance encounter with an absolutely delightful French couple. These are memories we will always cherish.

We woke, yet again, to a bleak morning and headed off to nearby Villers-Bretonneux. It is in the heart of the Somme area where Australians saw a great deal of combat during WWI. This small town is home to the Australian National War memorial. It is 2 kms out of town in a beautiful isolated spot. The main building is 32m high and stands behind the headstones. Buried with the Australians are Canadians, Irish, English and Scottish soldiers.

Although the wind was blowing a gale we both wandered around the headstones and read the inscriptions on the walls and graves. A group of Brisbane school kids were there and we talked to their teacher for quite some time.



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COLLATERAL DAMAGE The Villers Bretonneux WWI memorial sustained major damage during one of the WWII assaults. It was repaired but bullet holes and shrapnel scars are still visible in some places.



DANGEROUS BUNKERS? Manicured grass with deep bunkers? Not a golf course but some of the original WWI battlefield bunkers beside the Le Hamel memorial.



BACK TO? Heather was too absorbed in looking at old school photos at Villers Bretonneux to notice the very intricate wooden roof structure of the old town hall.

Heather exhibited a bit of rabid nationalism by carrying and regularly waving a little Aussie flag. She also gathered some more poppies to hopefully smuggle through customs with ones she collected from Gallipoli (Turkey).

Next stop was the Adelaide War Cemetery. As the name suggests, it was started by Australians for their dead but also has about 500 soldiers of other nationalities. It is from here that the "Unknown Soldier" (who lies in the War Museum in Canberra), was exhumed. We met an Aussie couple who are spending a few weeks going around all of the WWI sites. We had a great chat.

Heather wanted to see the Victoria School. It was built from proceeds donated by Victorian school children after WWI. We headed towards it but our path was blocked by a community event of some sort. We parked the van and walked down to join the masses. It turned out to be a combination of jumble sale, fun fair and back-to school. Needing a wine glass to replace one we smashed, we headed towards the "jumble". After some confused conversation with a stall holder, Heather was presented with the glass free of charge. The lady, about 70ish, realized that we were Australian and got all excited. She kissed Heather and insisted on asking us to wait whilst her husband came out of the house. He had apparently been to Australia a few times and we believe he had something to do with this town "twinning" with Robinvale in Victoria. Later, Heather went back to thank her again for the gift and she insisted we wait again whilst she went inside and came out with some more souvenirs for us. Many kisses later and we were finally away.

We eventually found the school. Being a Sunday it was closed. It apparently has signs in the grounds, telling it's students "not to forget Australia". The sign on the front of the school says it all. Have a look at the picture. It was a good day to be an Aussie.

After a long lunch in the van, we headed to a nearby memorial and cemetery at Le Hamel. It commemorates the battle that liberated this area and the Australian army in general. It is in a very appropriate location - in the middle of an isolated farming community - in an elevated place, of course. The wind was blowing and the rain had joined in. The wind and rain and grey skies actually enhanced our experience. The crops were swaying violently and the flags were really straining against their restraints.

We walked the circuit that explained the tactics used by General John Monash. The site was ours. No one else was silly enough to be out in this weather. We loved the tranquility and symbolism of the place.

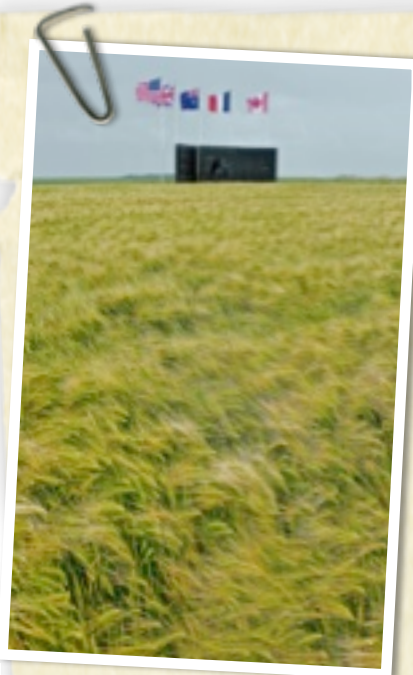
After going back to the van we met another Aussie couple - Brisbanites this time. We shared our experiences and thoughts. A good day all round.



BATTLE FACTS

750,000 ALLIED AND GERMAN SOLDIERS LOST THEIR LIVES IN THE SOMME AREA. THERE ARE OVER 300,000 NO NAME GRAVES.

SURPRISINGLY, OF THE 121,000 AMERICAN SOLDIERS WHO LOST THEIR LIVES DURING WW1, 52,000 DIED IN BATTLE. THE REST DIED FROM SPANISH FLU (A TYPE OF BIRD FLU THAT ORIGINATED IN USA).



MONASH

JOHN MONASH WAS THE FIRST ALLIED COMMANDER TO WIN A DECISIVE BATTLE AGAINST THE GERMANS IN WWI. THE INNOVATIVE TACTICS HE USED WERE ADOPTED BY BRITAIN IN FUTURE BATTLES. MONASH, AFTER WHOM THE MONASH UNIVERSITY IS NAMED, METICULOUSLY PLANNED THE SURPRISE ATTACK USING COVERT TANK ADVANCES AND A CO-ORDINATED ARTILLERY BARRAGE.



THE RED BARON & A TANK STORY

IT IS CLAIMED THAT AUSTRALIAN GROUND GUN FIRE DOWNED THE INFAMOUS GERMAN - THE RED BARON. HIS PLANE WENT DOWN ON THE FIELD SHOWN IN THE PHOTO. THE FIRST EVER TANK ON TANK SKIRMISH ALSO HAPPENED ON THIS HILL. IT RESULTED IN THE BRITISH TANK BLASTING THE GERMAN TANK. THE ONLY REMAINING TANK OF THIS TYPE CAN NOW BE FOUND IN THE MUSEUM IN BRISBANE.



