

Speech by Mayor Robert Bria

Opening of Avenue of Honour at St Peters

Saturday 6 September 2014

Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated.

August, 1914. Europe's last summer.ⁱ

For more than a decade, the Great Powers of Europe, united by bloodlines but divided by geography, inched closer to war.

The assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophia, heirs to the Hapsburg Empire, on 28 June 1914, set the Allies and the Central Powers on what appeared to be an irresistible collision course.

Alliances were invoked, diplomatic cables flowed back and forth, ultimatums were issued and ignored, armies were mobilised.

In her Pulitzer-prize winning book *The Guns of August*, Barbara Tuchman described the tension-filled days of July 1914 that followed the assassination.

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“War pressed against every frontier. Suddenly dismayed, governments struggled and twisted to fend it off. It was no use.”

Tuchman went on.

“Appalled upon the brink, the chiefs of state who would actually be responsible for their country’s fate attempted to back away but the pull of military schedules dragged them forward.”ⁱⁱ

The day after Britain declared war against Germany, Australia’s Prime Minister, Joseph Cook, told the country: ‘Australia is now at war’.ⁱⁱⁱ

Andrew Fisher, who would become Prime Minister one month later, pledged that Australia would ‘stand beside the mother country to help and defend her to the last man and the last shilling’.

For Australia – still an ‘adolescent’ in the family of nations with a population of nearly five million people – unity with the other Dominions of the British Empire was paramount.^{iv}

From cities, town and villages across the country, men and boys – some as young as 14 years old – responded to the call to arms to fight in a war which broke out in Europe one day, and touched Australia the next.

The spring of 1914 would take the flower of Australia's youth and transport them to what the London *Economist* described at the time 'as perhaps the greatest tragedy in human history'.^v

A generation had not yet passed since Federation in 1901, and yet it was the Federation Generation that would be summoned to give testimony to our national identity and character half a world away.

First on the cliffs of Gallipoli, and then in the trenches on the Western Front.

Thus, along with our New Zealand comrades, the ANZAC legend was born.

After the Armistice was signed on 11th November 1918, many said it was the 'War to end all Wars.'

More than 61,000 Australian soldiers were killed, and nearly two and half times as many wounded.

The scale of the loss of life had a dramatic impact on communities, large and small, across the country.

Even before the war ended, trees were planted in honour of each soldier who fell. Many had plaques for each victim.

By the early 1920s more than 500 Avenues of Honour had been established, nearly 40 of them in South Australia.

Among the fallen was Lance Corporal Philip de Quetteville Robin, a resident of St Peters and old scholar from St Peters College.

A Bank Accountant by profession, Robin also made a name for himself on the sporting field, playing 71 league games for the Norwood Football Club between 1908 and 1914.

His honours included the Reserves Magarey medal in 1907, seven State games and the Club Champion award in 1911.

Robin enlisted on 24 August 1914 – only five days before his last game for Norwood against North Adelaide – and served in the 10th Australian Infantry Battalion.

Records from the Australian War Memorial state:

“Philip Robin was one of the first to enlist and sail in the S.S. Ascanius, October 20, 1914.”^{vi}

Robin’s Commanding Officer was another local, Lieutenant Colonel Stanley Price Weir, who attended Norwood Primary School. At the time war broke out, Weir lived in Second Avenue, in what was then known as East Adelaide.

On his wedding day in Egypt on 17 January 1915, Robin and his bride Nellie, an army nurse, were toasted by Weir:

"We have known Pte. Robin as a brilliant footballer. When he wore the red and blue of the Norwood club, he played hard and clean, and helped to win the game for his side. Now that he has donned the colours of his country, red, white and blue, I am sure he will be as good and brave a soldier as he was an exponent of football. We hope that when we have defeated our enemies he will return to South Australia with his wife, to peace, long life and prosperity."^{vii}

Landing at Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, Robin, along with Private Arthur Blackburn – who would later be awarded the Victoria Cross – **made it further up the Gallipoli hills than any Australian that day, some 3 kilometres inland to** Scrubby Knoll.

Robin was killed in action at Gallipoli only three days later and is buried at the Lone Pine Memorial.

His father, a resident of Sixth Avenue, St Peters, learned of his death on 19th June.

Mr R. Smeaton, Manager of the Bank of Adelaide, Murray Bridge, where Robin worked when he enlisted, said this of his death:

"When in time we learn the circumstances of his death I feel sure we shall hear that he died foremost in a charge, helping to make traditions for our army, and fighting for his country. A more noble death it is not possible to conceive."^{viii}

Today, we gather to honour the ultimate sacrifice of Lance Corporal Philip de Quetteville Robin and all servicemen and servicewomen from the City of Norwood Payneham & St Peters in the Great War, and all subsequent conflicts.

We dedicate this ANZAC Avenue of Honour to their lives, their memory and their legacy.

A correspondent during the war, Charles Beane, would write:

“They’re not heroes. They do not intend to be thought or spoken of as heroes. They’re just ordinary Australians, doing their particular work as their country would wish them to do it. And pray God, Australians in days to come will be worthy of them.”^{ix}

While many words have been written in the 100 years since the start of World War I, one feels that today there are no words that can adequately describe the suffering and the sacrifice of those who died for their country.

Perhaps today is not a day for words as much as it is a day for reflection. A time to remember.

And a time to give thanks to those ‘Ordinary Australians’ – men and women – who served our country in extraordinary times and gave up their tomorrows so that we could live today.

ⁱ David Fromkin, *Europe’s last Summer: Why the World went to war in 1914*, Vintage, 2005.,

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- ⁱⁱ Barbara Tuchmann, *The Guns of August*, Random House, 1962, p, 72,
- ⁱⁱⁱ *The Advertiser*, 5 August 1914, p. 14.
- ^{iv} Charles Bean, Volume I, p.
- ^v Fromkin, *Europe's last summer*, p. 5.
- ^{vi} Australian War Memorial, www.awm.gov.au/people/rolls/R1653001/
- ^{vii} Norwood Football Club, www.redlegsmuseum.com.au
- ^{viii} *Chronicle* (Adelaide), 19 June 1915, p. 17.
- ^{ix} Charles Beane, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, p. xx