

Our Guest Speaker Mrs Honor Auchinleck generously gave her permission to publish her presentation in full:

The Battle of Cambrai: Challenge and Change

Thank you, Peter, for your kind introduction and thank you very much for inviting me to be the guest of honour and the first woman to provide the annual address at your Cambrai Commemorative Lunch. It is a special day not only because it marks the 104th anniversary of the Battle of Cambrai beginning on 20 November 1917 and the introduction of tanks or 'curious monsters' as some described those early tanks, but because we are at long last able to gather and enjoy one another's company once again.

The town of Cambrai and the surrounding area has been fought over since Roman times so conflict is not new. The Germans occupied it during the First World War and with the Luftwaffe hitting it during the Second World War, the damage and town's subsequent reconstruction is perhaps better remembered than the 'curious monster' tanks! Unfortunately, we haven't visited Cambrai to hear a little about the creative way the French speak about their former enemies! Suffice to say, different people remember historical events differently.

The hallmarks of the battle of Cambrai in November 1917 were **challenge and change** just as we, in a totally different way have met challenges and we've had to accommodate change through the 2019-2020 fires and Covid. History and everything that we have experienced over the last couple of years has given us all a bond and shared memories - the very glue of those who serve, and of communities, perhaps particularly in regional areas.

More recently we have seen the role of Defence broadening. It was soldiers from 5/6 Royal Victorian Regiment in Melbourne and from the Engineer Regiment in Brisbane who came to help our communities in the immediate aftermath of the Black Summer fires in January last year. Those soldiers who came to the Upper Murray turned their hands to anything that needed doing; they were self-sufficient, well disciplined, well organised, well-motivated and they simply got on with the job. They tore down burned fencing, cleared fallen trees from roads and piled huge quantities of burned wire. Importantly they brought with them their good spirits and a can-do attitude and they did it well. Lamingtons seemed very popular at morning tea! Only a few days later in early February 2020, Majors Peter Branagan OAM and John Baines came to help take down more burned fencing and I have a photograph of them sitting in the tractor bucket, having morning tea (cake provided by Major Baines!) and both wearing great big smiles and black soot from the fires like camouflage paint! You might imagine it was a great day for Mark and me. Throughout history farmers and the Light Horse have had a close relationship with stockmen from the Upper Murray enlisting in the Light Horse and then returning home on their final leave to help their families with the harvest and other farm jobs. The letters country boys wrote from the front are often full of concern for how the family was managing back on the farm. Loss of life and war injuries after both World Wars changed the face of farming and change continues.

Recently I read on the 7 News website about the workers needed - particularly in Western Australia - and scores of ex-servicemen and women have already expressed a desire to help "fellow Australians in trouble".

An idea came to retired Lieutenant Colonel Garry Spencer as he sat in his Melbourne home watching a TV program about the plight facing growers across the country - something he says borders on "a national emergency". I understand Garry launched Operation Grain Harvest and apparently remarked on the ABC's Landline 'If you can drive a tank, why not a header!' Garry's words caught my attention, but he isn't alone with prime mover Major General Gus McLachlan and many others who are helping with the harvest.

More recently we have seen the Army on the streets assisting authorities, policing and encourage people to remain indoors during lockdowns. Unlike some I like to see military people in our communities and I find it reassuring that we have armed forces personnel who are able and trained to carry out tasks we can't do ourselves. Many tend to forget that defence is also about civil defence and defending our population and assets in natural disaster as well as conflict beyond our shores. Defence and the farming communities have a long history in the Anglo European traditions. The yeomanry were men from small landed families, who in many instances knew what it was like to defend their own properties. The term goes back to Medieval and Elizabethan times in the late sixteenth century. The yeomanry came to the fore when it was feared that the French Revolution would incite civil violence and even Revolution in England. I hope it never comes to civil unrest here in Australia. The British yeomanry have a strong cavalry association and are like the Australian Light Horse in so far as both tend to be resourceful, versatile and adaptable to almost any task. They are people who think 'outside the box', a quality that is as relevant today as it was in the earliest days of both the yeomanry and the Light Horse.

While in country areas the relationship between civilians and the Defence Forces has benefitted due to the help of military personnel during the fires and subsequently during Covid, other challenges are developing. Australia is becoming increasingly factionalised and over time factions have been empowered by the combination of the recognition of minority rights and freedom of speech. Social media seems to be providing relatively uncontrolled multiple platforms for the expression of opinion, anger and disparaging personal remarks, to say nothing of that expression so beloved of Donald Trump – ‘fake news’!

The need for the protection and representation of individual and minority rights has a long history with a growing profile after the First World War when various countries were persuaded to accept obligations to minority groups living within their boundaries as a condition of entry to the League of Nations. The Polish Minorities Treaty signed in 1919 became a template for other treaties. As the atrocities against the Jewish people and other minority groups during the Second World War became known, the rights of individuals and minorities received urgent and renewed attention and were eventually enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights published 10 December 1948.

While undoubtedly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights is vital for the protection of individuals and minorities, it seems that it has also been open to abuse and has possibly led to the empowerment of violent minorities and individuals determined to exercise their own wills as we have seen recently on Melbourne’s streets to the detriment of the majority and the distress of many.

Recently I had a phone call from a gentleman advocating the promotion of Monash and Chauvel to Field Marshal as a way for revitalising an Australian unity. I suppose I didn’t really give the gentleman concerned an opportunity to ask if I might support the cause, before I asked him what dead Field Marshals could do from the grave? I pointed out that there would be an element in the community who wouldn’t even know who Chauvel and Monash were, let alone want to find out or care. Other people might question the commemoration of ‘dead white men’. Disparaging comments could well become another focus for angry posts on social media and we don’t need another source of controversy. While I have the greatest admiration for my grandfather General Sir Harry Chauvel and General Sir John Monash and I honour their memories and those men who served with them, we need to stand up to our own challenges, just as generations have had to do before us.

With our ADF personnel under pressure from both home and abroad, I have become increasingly concerned about the effect on our returned service personnel of the profile given to mental health. With manpower such a crucial asset, it seems that we have something akin to another form of ‘social emergency’. It seems there is a growing public expectation that those who have served, particularly on overseas operational postings, will return with some mental health problems. While undoubtedly many of our returned service personnel need help, they don’t need some of the accompanying labels that impact on their relationships, their ability to find future employment and a plethora of other aspects of their lives. In some instances, the help they receive is not the help they so desperately need. Having spotted the problem, we need to find a solution. Just as ADF personnel have come to our aid during the fires and Covid, now it is our turn to give something in return.

For the last couple of years as a Chauvel Foundation Board member I have been working (within the constraints of the 2020 fires and Covid) on a Light Horse Trail, photographing and recording memorials and places of Light Horse significance. Through mapping trails and creating online and hardcopy brochures, the aim is to give our Light Horsemen their place in the spirit of Anzac. And on a more regional level to bring the Light Horse history alive as part of local histories and the identity we pass on to our children and to those who visit and come to live in regional Australia. We are encouraging descendants and those who are interested to come forward with photographs and stories, with the stories possibly becoming a part of the Chauvel Foundation’s online anthology and with links to the Trail. Where possible I would encourage returned servicemen to help us create the trail. My hope is that such an interest will give those who are struggling to find their way in civilian life an absorbing interest which takes them with a purpose out into regional Australia. Such a project could be a force for unity and be adapted to anything from projects in schools to works in men’s sheds, U3A series lectures and possibly associated local field trips. It could come to represent a new beginning for some. I hope local RSLs will be interested. I believe my grandfather might see the Light Horse Trail as an appropriate way to help those who are struggling and to recognise those who have served their community and country. Something similar could be done for General Sir John Monash. We have much to do and many Light Horsemen and the exploits of many to remember. We need help to record and commemorate, Lest we forget.