

A NATION REMEMBERS

As much of the world works through a somewhat daunting calendar of First World War anniversaries, information professionals everywhere – from galleries and museums to public libraries and in schools – are finding novel ways to help them understand the time, the places and the people of the so-called ‘war to end all wars’.

The Australian War Memorial was the vision of Charles Bean, Australia’s official First World War correspondent. The Memorial exists to ‘commemorate the sacrifice of those Australians who have died in war. Its mission is to assist Australians to remember, interpret and understand the Australian experience of war and its enduring impact on Australian society.’ At its helm is the Director, Dr Brendan Nelson, a former Federal Opposition Leader and Minister in the Howard government. He has held the Memorial position since 2012, when preparations for an extensive centenary program were coming to a head.

Here is their spirit, in the heart of the land they loved; and here we guard the record which they themselves made.

- Charles Bean, 1948

Dr Nelson’s time in public life and his diplomatic experiences as Ambassador to the European Union, and as Australia’s Special Representative to the World Health Organization and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), have helped shape his vision for the Memorial. In a speech to the National Press Club in Canberra, shortly after taking up his appointment, Dr Nelson recalled the many visits he had made to European battlefields and the importance of understanding the past in the development of vision and leadership.

‘The Memorial’, he said, ‘is about our past, it is about our history, but more importantly it’s actually about our future. A people that neither knows nor, more importantly, understands its history, in my view, is dangerous.’



Dr Brendan Nelson: War gives us a sense of what makes us tick.

He went on to say, ‘It’s not until you come to the Australian War Memorial and you stand in the Commemorative Area, and you look around the wall and you see the name in bronze of those places where Australians have fought and died over a century – Sudan, southern Africa, Gallipoli, Borneo, Vietnam, Korea, Afghanistan – and ask yourself, why were Australians there? In answering the question you get a sense of who we are and what makes us tick.’

Treading the fine line between commemoration and celebration is a balancing act the Memorial faces every day, but perhaps even more so as the centenary of Gallipoli campaign approaches. Gallipoli, however, is only one element of a much larger story.

As Dr Nelson explains: ‘The First World War was many things, but the naiveté, sheer courage, bloody sacrifice, deep domestic divisions, generation of mourning, and pride in what had been achieved, all combined to give our nation its story. It is the war that changed us – and made us.’

The Australian War Memorial’s centenary program is extensive and varied, with different projects designed for its many audiences. The program includes the newly redeveloped permanent First World War Galleries, which reopened late last year, and the previous, temporary exhibition Anzac Voices, which presented a very personal side of war through diaries and letters from the front. In the new galleries, visitors are able to view many items from the collection that have never previously been displayed. They can also see the names of the more than 60,000 men and women, recorded on the Memorial’s First World War Roll of Honour panels, projected onto the outside of the building in a display that will continue uninterrupted until 2018, as a constant reminder of the price our young nation paid during that terrible conflict.

As a result of the Anzac Connections project, virtual visitors and researchers will be able to take advantage of better online access, including enhanced search functions, and links to the National Archives of Australia collection.

Each year more than 140,000 schoolchildren visit the Memorial, and they, too, are actively involved in centenary projects. Students visiting during the centenary are being invited to write their names and that of their school on a wooden cross, with each cross eventually to be placed

on the grave of a First World War soldier somewhere in Europe. Schoolchildren are also recording of the names of those Australians on the Roll of Honour to create a background soundscape for the cloisters in the Memorial's Commemorative Area.

As Dr Nelson expresses it, 'More than ever before, we tell the individual stories of loss, disfigurement, grief and mourning. Although the new First World War Galleries see visitors leaving with pride in what was achieved, it is informed by a sober understanding of the cost.'

NEW GALLERIES FEATURE UNIFORM WITH A STORY

While his artillery batteries were emplaced on Bolton's Hill overlooking Shell Green at Anzac, Colonel Charles 'Rosie' Rosenthal, later major general, occupied a small dug-out near the gun pits. It was just a hole in the ground some eight feet square by eight feet deep, with a timber roof covered by a layer of sandbags; Rosenthal considered it rather a good 'possie' as from it he could observe the Turkish positions from Gaba Tepe to Lone Pine.

But it did not afford much protection against shell-fire, as he and one of his battery commanders, Major Burgess, a New Zealander serving with the Australians, found to their cost on the afternoon of 5 May, 1915. At around 5pm that day the Turks began to shell the battery positions. The two officers sat close against the side of the wall, making the most of the little protection the dug-out offered, but a Turkish shell penetrated the roof, burst, and momentarily stunned them. After the smoke had cleared, Rosenthal saw that Major Burgess had a gash in his neck, and Rosenthal himself had been peppered with shrapnel, receiving a total of 36 wounds, including in the back, the left arm, and the right knee. Fortunately, only two were of a serious nature.

Rosenthal kept his damaged blood stained tunic as a souvenir of the event and it is now on display in the Memorial's First World War Galleries.

Damaged tunic of Lieutenant Colonel C Rosenthal.
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Captain Thomas Walter White, sitting second from the left, July 1915, Basra. Courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, A02253.

CAPTAIN WHITE'S TURKISH ODYSSEY

Australia's air force commitment to current operations in Iraq comes almost 100 years after our airmen were involved in the Mesopotamian campaign of 1914–18. Intended to counter the Turkish threat to the Anglo-Persian oil pipeline and the strategically important area at the head of the Persian Gulf, the campaign began in November 1914. The Australian Flying Corps' contribution, the Mesopotamian Half-Flight, arrived at Basra in May 1915.

One pilot of the Half-Flight was Captain Thomas Walter White, who was born on 26 April, 1888, in Hotham, Victoria. On 13 November, 1915, White and his observer, Captain Francis Yeats-Brown of the Royal Flying Corps, were flying low over telegraph wires west of Baghdad on a mission to destroy the vital communication link. White managed to bring the plane down safely, however the aircraft was damaged on landing. Yeats-Brown jumped out and destroyed the telegraph poles and wire while White held off a party of approaching Arabs.

Unfortunately, the downed telegraph wire was caught in the plane's propeller and this, along with the aircraft damage and the rough ground, made take off impossible. Overwhelmed by the hostile Arabs, White and Yeats-Brown were saved by a group of Turkish gendarmes who took the men prisoner.

White endured Turkish captivity for over two and a half years. In August 1918, White and several other prisoners were being escorted through Constantinople to attend medical appointments. The train they were on crashed and White, along with a British officer, seized the opportunity to escape. They managed to evade recapture and boarded a ship bound for Odessa. The two men made their way to Salonika, arriving one week before the Armistice in November 1918. White went on to have a successful political and diplomatic career, interrupted only by his service in the Second World War. He passed away in October 1957.

The private record collection relating to Captain Thomas Walter White has been digitised as part of the Australian War Memorial's Anzac Connections project and can be found on the Memorial's website.

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