

Remembrance Day Address, Crows Nest Uniting Church, 11 November 2018

Thank you for the invitation.

I want to acknowledge at the outset, that there are people in our church today, whose military experience and connections far eclipse my own. Of course, I acknowledge and respect that.

Today is a day of respectful remembrance.

But today we need perspective. Our Australian story must be set in its context: the context of a protracted world catastrophe. That story should rattle our souls, not rouse our national self-esteem.

Quite rightly, on this day we remember first the impact on the Australian people. The total of Australian war deaths from the 330,000 people sent abroad – counting the 550 suicides and the 8,000 war-related deaths in the aftermath of the war – was probably 72,500.

Not easy deaths. For example, the Australian memorial to the missing at Villers Bretonneux has 10,730 names. There are another 6,191 Australian names among the missing listed at the Menin Gate, plus 791 unidentified Australians at Tyne Cot. So, in France and Belgium, where 46,000 Australians were killed, over 17,000 of them are ‘missing’. Missing? That is, unidentifiable, blown to pieces, or buried by shells. We should stand back in awe: 51 months of this industrialized killing, men reduced to abattoir refuse, in Christian Europe.

But the figures of our dead pale beneath the global statistics: probably a total of 17.8 million people were killed across the globe.

Part of respectful remembrance is about posing hard questions: for what purposes were Australian lives spent? Did our

government carefully weigh costs and objectives, and press for an early peace, if this was possible?

This means widening our focus: from a peephole into the Australian trenches, to a panorama on the wider war.

Let us weave some of our local stories (thanks to the research of Lorna Bassett) into the global story.

Corporal Edward Fergusson, a motor engineer from Crows Nest Presbyterian Church. He has just turned 20, lives with his parents at 29 Willoughby Road, and enlists on 24 August 1914, not quite three weeks into the war. He departs Australia with the first convoy, 1 November 1914.

He is on board his ship, just getting his sea legs, when the war in Europe widens dramatically into a war in the Middle East: Britain and France loyally follow Russia in declaring war against the Ottoman Empire in that first week of November. Britain annexes Cyprus, and proclaims a protectorate over Egypt. The scramble for the Ottoman Empire is on. Fergusson learns a few days out from Egypt that his battalion is not going to Aldershot to train and on to France and Belgium to save them from an invader – instead, he will fight in a new war.

Corporal Edward Fergusson dies on Gallipoli, 2 May 1915, aged 20. He will never learn that the secret diplomatic deal underpinning the whole campaign, the Straits and Persia Agreement, was signed between Britain, France and Russia just a couple of months before, in mid-March 1915. It promised to Russia the spoils of the fighting: the city of Constantinople and the Straits; and in return Russia agrees to double the size of Britain's sphere of interest in oil-rich Persia, which they have partitioned.

Let us hope Fergusson's parents never read in the press that in October 1915 the new prime minister Billy Hughes told the parliament: 'I do not pretend to understand the situation in the Dardanelles, but I know what the duty of this government is;

and that is – to mind its own business, to provide that quota of men which the Imperial Government think necessary.’

Captain Charles Linklater MC, an officer, in civilian life a wool merchant, from Gillies Street Wollstonecraft. He lands on Gallipoli on 26 April 1915: day two of the campaign. He will never learn that on that very day the second diplomatic deal underpinning Gallipoli is signed, the secret ‘Treaty of London’. That is, on day two, as the Anzacs are digging in, their landing is used by the diplomats in London as a veritable shoulder charge, to bounce Italian negotiators into a new treaty. The Italians sign, promising to join the war. The lure is a British promise to give Italy a share in the booty in any wider carving up of the Ottoman Empire. London depicts the Anzac Cove landing as a ram raid that would bring the whole of the Ottoman Empire tumbling down.

Captain Linklater survives Gallipoli. He arrives in France in November 1916. He endures that winter of 1916-17, so he must have read talk of peace in the papers. For, on 12 December 1916, the Germans announce a Peace Note, offering to end the war by round-table negotiation. A few days later, 18 December 1916, the American President Woodrow Wilson, issues his Peace Note, offering the chance of US-led mediation. Leaders on both sides in the war ultimately reject this way out. They preferred to speculate on still more war, in pursuit of a military victory, war-at-any-cost, so that they can impose peace terms on the loser.

Linklater never lives to see it. He is killed at Messines in June 1917 – torn apart by artillery, no doubt, for his name is on the monument to the missing at the Menin Gate.

Linklater will never learn more of the secret diplomacy underpinning his on-going war in France in 1917. In February of 1917 the Russians and French do another deal that prolongs the war – France agrees to turn a blind eye to Russian expansionism across all of eastern Europe, and Russia agrees to turn a blind

eye to French expansionism into the Rhineland of Germany. The so-called 'Left-Bank of the Rhine' Agreement.

Similarly, Linklater will not live to hear of the other peace opportunities of 1917, the Reichstag Peace Resolution of July, the Papal Peace Note of August, the Stockholm Conference proposal of the summer, and various neutral nations' approaches, and behind-the-scenes 'peace feelers' involving Austria. All these offers are all repelled, suffocated, and censored out of the press by those politicians determined to fight on to 'the bitter end' – including our own Billy Hughes.

Linklater's name is to be projected on the Hall of Memory at the AWM in Canberra on 10 January next year.

Private Henry Thomas Hilton Borig, a 21 year-old. He has been living with his mother, Mary, at 172 West Street. He enlists at Warwick Farm in August 1915 – fair hair, blue eyes, Methodist. The war is a year old. 'Labourer' he writes as his occupation – like the overwhelming majority of those who volunteered to serve in the AIF, young working-class men, with little or property, and their careers just beginning. Borig departs Sydney in October 1915. He is ill, like so many, in Egypt. In February 1916 he is shipped to Marseilles. The Anzacs are to be thrown into the Western Front for the first time, at the battle of the Somme in high summer, beginning 1 July 1916. Borig is killed on 22 July – after a mere fortnight of battle.

Neither Borig nor his family will ever learn that just two months previously, in May 1916, Britain and France had agreed secretly upon plans to divide between them the entire Ottoman Empire, in the oil-rich Middle East, from Palestine to Iraq, the secret 'Sykes-Picot Agreement'. A reminder that the war persists in Europe, in part, so that war aims can be won across the globe.

Lieutenant Herbert Hilton Fergusson, also a motor mechanic of Willoughby road, brother of Edward, also fights in France in that summer of 1916. He endures 'shell shock, burns' and 'gun shot wound – head' 23 July 1916, and is hospitalised in

England. Sent back to France, he suffers from ‘shell shock again’ in July 1917 – ‘frequent haemorrhages’ ‘bronchitis’, ‘since being wounded in the lung’. Sent back again on 3 February 1918. The very next day, Lloyd George and Clemenceau issue the ‘Versailles Declaration’, shutting the door on any negotiations with Germany, announcing there is only one task now: military victory.

Fergusson dies just short of his 23rd birthday on 9 August 1918. His grieving parents will never read that just a week before his death, the British War Cabinet Secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey, advised that the war must go on, in order to obtain Britain’s war aims in the Middle East, in particular to secure Persian and Mesopotamian oil, which – in this last year of a war to end all wars, he describes as ‘vital for the next war.’ Therefore, ‘the control over these oil supplies becomes a first class British War Aim.’

This interleaving of the local and the global points to truths that are not pretty: war aims were constantly enlarged and corrupted by plans for imperial aggrandisement, on all sides; and thus, the war was prolonged; and many promising opportunities for a negotiated peace were thwarted.

Today, it is the hundredth anniversary of the Armistice. For some, it is the moment of victory. For some, victory heals all wounds. For some, today simply marks the end of our ‘Great War’ – another stand-tall moment in our ‘see-how-great-we-are’ story.

But we need to look beyond *our* story.

To start with, the armistice of 1918 did not end the killing. Vicious civil wars escalated in Central and Eastern Europe during 1919. There was starvation and atrocity in Russia for at least the next three years. Wars of ethnic cleansing erupted in Asia Minor and the Middle East.

It had been a global conflict.

Throughout this audience, no matter from where you come, there are people whose forbears were touched, or crushed, by the conflict, wherever they lived.

The war sucked in vast numbers of troops and labourers. Africans, Indians, Asians and Pacific Islanders served in Europe, and beyond Europe. For example, there were 16,000 Indian troops at Gallipoli. 138,000 Indians fought alongside British forces on the Western Front in 1915. Altogether some four million dark-skinned, non-Europeans served in uniform, or laboured, for the European-led armies.

And after the armistice, Germans continued to die. In Germany, more than 760,000 civilians (mostly the very young and elderly) had already died in the food crisis created by the British-led blockade. (Infant mortality almost doubled, so that 365,000 children aged 1-5 died, from 1915-18). This was cruelly worsened by the victors' decision to prolong the blockade of the Central Powers *after* the armistice. It is estimated that more than 250,000 Germans died *after* the armistice, from malnutrition, and another 200,000 from the influenza pandemic. The blockade was not lifted until 12 July 1919.

Our contributions here are not pretty. Australia's Prime Minister, W. M. Hughes, was among those pressing hard in the British cabinet in October 1918 for keeping up the blockade after the armistice. He told the Imperial War Cabinet in November 1918 that 'that 85% of the German people are as bad as the ex-Kaiser ever was, and are as deserving of death.' Opposing any emergency food shipments to Germany, Hughes told his advisers in March 1919 that 'starvation would do anything. That is how you will exact any terms from Germany.'

The under-fed people of Central Europe, and the Ottoman Empire, and notably Persia, were exposed to the influenza pandemic of 1919 in a seriously weakened state. Millions perished. The Versailles 'peace' in Europe was not signed until June 1919.

On Remembrance Day we will each have our own thoughts – about men and women touched by war that you have known. And I do not presume to tell you how you should think.

But speaking for myself, I want to reject the alibis that are trotted out to justify this frenzy of killing – that there was ‘no alternative’, that great things were achieved, that our nation was reborn, as if in some sacrificial fantasy, through the shedding young blood.

The Tasmanian-born Liberal MP, Len Outhwaite, said it best in the British House of Commons in February 1916. He warned that fighting on toward a military victory, at any cost, would mean ‘hoisting the flag of victory over an international graveyard.’ And so it was in 1918.

As ever, the alternative to war lies in that long, long struggle, to build a new order, that matches the rule of law in our civil society with the rule of law in international affairs. The alternative to war lies in building a culture that genuinely regards war with infinite regret, as marking diplomatic failure, as lamentable – not the inexhaustible wellspring of our national character. For if it is that, it is a wellspring poisoned by the blood of our own children.

The peace ahead of us demands the strengthening of the international institutions, and the international laws, progressive things have been so painfully built up by the brave souls from every land who have come before us.

Australians believe in the right to make war – in self-defence, and as a last resort. The problem is that, in our tradition of expeditionary warfare, our wars are seldom incontrovertibly in self-defence, and seldom incontrovertibly a last resort. Properly understood, the centenary might serve as a moment to commit ourselves to a new task: to ensure that decisions to deploy our service men and women abroad, premeditated decisions, shall be

taken away from handfuls of ministers, and given instead to the nation's supreme democratic body, the parliament.

Douglas Newton