Remembrance Day 2018—the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I

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Update to a 2008 paper by Brooke McDonagh and Laura Rayner
Foreign Affairs, Defence and Security Section

All hyperlinks contained in this publication were correct as at 24 October 2018.

Executive summary

• This year marks the 100th anniversary of the end of World War I. Each year at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month we stop to observe one minute of silence to remember those who served and died in wars and armed conflicts.

• While the fighting stopped on 11 November 1918 as a result of separate armistices being signed with Austria, Bulgaria, Germany, Hungary and the Ottoman Empire, the war did not officially end until the Treaty of Versailles was signed on 28 June 1919.

• What followed was an annual armistice commemoration on 11 November, which became known as Remembrance Day after World War II.

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Introduction

By 1918 death had lost its individuality. The high casualties suffered by most Australian battalions often reduced them to half-strength. Constant reinforcements arrived and many of them didn’t last more than a month. It was hard to have long-term mates because death was so common and so random. Death was not exceptional; it was the normal condition. Its uniqueness had an impact only on the soldier’s devastated family, and the advice to them normally came as a brief, bureaucratic formula letter. A few platitudes became a receipt for a life.¹

This Remembrance Day—11 November 2018—marks the 100th anniversary of the armistice which ended World War I (1914–18). On this day, as in years before, Australians will observe one minute of silence at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, to remember and commemorate those who served and died in all wars and armed conflicts.

Armistice Day

The Armistice

Armistice: an agreement made by opposing sides in a war to stop fighting for a certain time; a truce; origin early 18th cent.; from French, or from modern Latin armistitium, from alma ‘arms’ + stitium ‘stoppage’.²

In late 1918, after over four years of unremitting bloody warfare, Germany (now under a newly-appointed civilian government and having endured heavy defeats over the previous four months) called for the suspension of fighting—an armistice—so as to secure a peace settlement.³ In late September 1918, the chief German strategist, General Ludendorff, had recommended that Germany make peace, then changed his mind. However, the German Government ignored his change of heart, and in late October sent a delegation across the French line to begin negotiations. Faced with ‘widespread strikes at home, mutiny in the fleet and revolution threatening in a number of regions, the delegation had little choice but to sign’.⁴

At 5.10 am on 11 November 1918, an armistice was signed by the Allies and Germany, and the following order was issued to all opposing forces:

Hostilities will cease at 11:00 today, 11 November. Troops will stand fast in the line reached at that hour.⁵

After 52 months of slaughter and loss, the guns of the Western Front finally fell silent—at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month—11 November 1918.⁶ This moment was chosen by the Allies as the time for the official commemoration and remembrance of those who had died in the war.⁷

One hundred years on, while it is commonly accepted that the war ended at 11 am on 11 November 1918, that is not quite correct. This was when the fighting stopped. An armistice is not surrender, nor was this armistice the only one. There were a total of five armistices arranged

¹  R Black, ‘A home never to be revisited’, The Sydney Morning Herald, 10 November 2007, p. 28.
⁵  Williamson, op. cit.
⁷  Ibid.
between the Allies and the US and their enemies in 1918, being Bulgaria, the Ottoman Empire, Austria, Hungary, and Germany. One hundred years on we consider that the German army of November 1918 was a defeated force, but that is in hindsight. The German Armistice (or Compiègne Armistice) did not require Germany to demobilise its army—that happened with the Treaty of Versailles. In the meantime, despite having to surrender large quantities of equipment, ‘the German army remained, on paper at least, a formidable force’; as long afterwards as the spring of 1919, this situation was causing some unease in the face of growing political calls for Allied demobilisation.8

The Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the Armistice

On the day of the Armistice with Germany there were ‘few Australian troops at the front’—most were returning to ‘the line’ from a period of rest 80 miles to the rear.9 During the heavy fighting between the beginning of June and 5 October 1918, the Australian Corps had suffered ‘almost 35,000 casualties including over 7,000 dead’. The withdrawal from the front line of the Australian infantry battalions, comprising the majority of the approximately 100,000 Australian soldiers on the Western Front, was at the insistence of Prime Minister Billy Hughes. Hughes, who was visiting Britain at the time, believed that the Australians were being used as ‘shock troops’.10 However, ‘Australian support units remained fighting with the advancing armies up to 11 November’. There were divisional artillery and trench mortar batteries, four Australian air squadrons, as well as salvage companies, sappers and tunnellers. It was tunnellers and pilots who seem to have been the last Australians to die in battle on the Western Front.11

The AIF’s official historian, C.E.W Bean, found that the intensity of reactions to the news of the Armistice increased the further he went from the front:

But generally, in the forward area when there arrived the great moment for which everyone had longed for four dreadful years, nothing whatever happened, at least outwardly, to distinguish that day from others. It is true the air seemed a little flat—like stale soda water—one missed the reverberations that had filled it continuously for years. Otherwise, on that day and for weeks later, life at the front went on as usual.12

On the day of the Armistice:

The 1st and 4th Australian Divisions were then arriving in the region about le Cateau. Neither there nor at the front was there any general demonstration - the sound of guns ceased; the gates of the future silently opened. Wonder, hope, grief, too deep and uncertain for speech, revolved in almost every man’s mind while, in the British zone at least, army life went on as usual pending the next decisions.13

For some, the reaction was one of stunned disbelief. According to the diary of an Australian signaller, he and his friends:

... just stood quiet and looked at one another as though they couldn’t take it in ... as if they were afraid it might not be true.14

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13. C.E.W Bean, ‘Chapter XXI—the war ends’, *The Australian Imperial Force in France during the allied offensive*, op. cit., p. 1053.
The personal accounts of Australian soldiers’ experience of the Armistice support Bean’s reports that reactions to the Armistice were more strongly expressed the further from the front the soldiers were. For instance, Ashley Ekins (Head military historian at the Australian War Memorial) notes that ‘some AIF battalions did not even record the armistice in their war diaries’. Soldiers billeted in French towns reported joining in the joyful celebrations with flags waving, wine flowing freely and all restraint thrown off between locals and allied troops of all kinds. Some of the 60,000 Australians in the UK on 11 November ‘reinforced the Australians’ reputation for hooliganism’. At around midnight on 12 November, Dominion soldiers using timber they had ransacked from bus signs and road dumps, ‘built bonfires at the base of Nelson’s Column in Trafalgar Square. The huge blaze left scars on the monument that are still visible today’.

An Australian occupation force?

It is clear from a letter written on 12 November 1918 by the Australian Corps commander, General John Monash, that he expected his Australian troops would become an occupying force in Germany. He expected that the Australian Corps would follow a day behind the retreating German troops to the Rhine, a distance of 200 miles. The Australian Corps was to ‘represent the Dominions in the South Army of occupation’. It was not going to be easy. The Germans had been fighting a ‘retiring battle … destroying railways, bridges and road junctions so completely that a great part of the [Allied] infantry was now unable to keep up with them—and had in parts actually lost them’. Monash recognised that the Australians’ march into Germany would be ‘a stupendous and difficult operation, owing to the lack of good roads, paucity of railways, and the entire absence of supplies in the territories which we will occupy’.

In the end, despite Prime Minister Hughes’ initial request on 11 November that Australian troops be part of the occupation, ‘only No. 4 Squadron, Australian Flying Corps, No. 3 Australian Casualty Clearing Station and some of the railway operating men reached Germany’. The majority of the First AIF returned home over the course of 1919.

Repatriation—getting the troops home

The story of how the AIF kept nearly 200,000 restless troops occupied while they waited to return home was told by the official historian, C.E.W Bean, in ‘The war ends’—Chapter XXI of the official history volume, The Australian Imperial Force in France during the Allied Offensive 1918.

Planning for the repatriation of the AIF had begun as early as December 1916, but was not far advanced when the Armistice was declared, due in most part to the failure of the Australian Government to provide details of its policy—particularly who would be going home first and how the troops would be kept occupied for the estimated year it would take to return all of them to Australia. There were 95,000 troops in France and Belgium, 60,000 in Britain (reinforcements, sick, wounded and convalescents) and 30,000 in Egypt and Mesopotamia, so the task would take some organising. On 21 November 1918, Lieutenant General John Monash was appointed Director-General of Repatriation and Demobilisation. Monash decided that the troops ‘must now be instilled with a “reconstruction morale”’—a vision of themselves as useful members of the

15. Ekins, op. cit.
16. Ibid., p. 11.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., p. 1057.
nation. To this end, ‘Monash seized on the AIF education scheme’, just as it was coming into operation. Although the ‘education scheme did not achieve all that was hoped’, several thousand Australian troops did take advantage of its attempts to provide professional technical and general courses to help the troops return to civilian life.

Some Australian troops were already on their way home when the Armistice was signed. In September 1918, two months special leave in Australia had been granted to 6,000 Australian troops who had left Australia in 1914—the ‘originals’. The priority for repatriation of the rest of the force from Europe was made on essentially the same basis: ‘first to come, first to go’. In this, Australia followed the preference of the troops themselves, rather than the plan preferred by the British of repatriating according to the demands of industry, or the Australian Government’s initial preference for repatriation by regiment.

Despite obstacles such as disputes over the space allotted for hammocks by the Admiralty on board the ships (deemed inadequate by Australian standards), ships were provided more quickly than had been expected and by the end of September 1919 only 10,000 Australian troops remained in Britain. In 1919, Australian soldiers in Britain were marrying at the rate of 150 per week and they and their families (amounting to a total of 15,386 wives, children and fiancées) were also brought to Australia. Sometimes there was one last obstacle. When the troopships reached Australian waters, the ship was quarantined if influenza had been detected on board, causing a great strain on discipline. However, this course of action possibly delayed the dreadful post-war epidemic that was sweeping the world, and probably saved Australia from a heavier civilian death toll.

Returning home on troopships, Australian service personnel, scarred physically, emotionally or mentally, reacted in a variety of ways—some laughed and cheered that they had survived, some cried quietly at all that they had seen, but the majority were silent, ‘… deep within the turmoil of their thoughts, and it was only their eyes that betrayed the truth of what they had had to do and endure’. Reputedly, these Australian soldiers said they could smell the Australian bush even before they could see land, or even ‘detect the subtle but unmistakeable smell of a distant bushfire’.

The cost of World War I

There are various estimates of the number of people killed and wounded in World War I:

This first modern world conflict had brought about the mobilisation of over 70 million people and left between 9 and 13 million dead, perhaps as many as one-third of them with no known grave.

Unprecedented in scale and horror, the First World War had involved 35 countries and mobilised more than 70 million people, of whom some 9 million were killed, more than 21 million wounded and 8 million reported missing or taken prisoner. Countless other human beings were left hideously and permanently disfigured, shattered in mind and body. Four mighty, centuries-old empires—German,
Austro-Hungarian, Russian and Ottoman—and their reigning dynasties were expunged from the map. Vast swathes of Europe were devastated.  

A total of 65,264,810 men were mobilised by all nations involved in World War I. Of them, 7,449,087 were killed, 21,215,226 were wounded, 7,750,945 were listed as prisoners or missing and some 36,415,258 were non battle casualties. Of the total force mobilised by all nations the average casualty rate was 56 per cent.  

**Australian casualties**  
Almost half the eligible male population of Australia enlisted during the war. The impact of the war on the population of Australia, which in 1914 numbered just under 5 million, can be gauged from the number of casualties outlined on the Australian War Memorial’s website:

In his 2005 Remembrance Day speech, the former governor-general, Major General Michael Jeffery, summed up the terrible human toll:

Tragically, the legacy of physical and mental trauma claimed as many Australian lives within the following decade as were lost during the war itself. Of those who returned to Australia, 60,000 died within ten years of their return because of ‘… the maiming effects of poison gas, what was termed shell shock and other serious physical disabilities. Then there was the insidious toll taken by alcoholism, violence, broken marriages and suicide’.  

**The economic cost**  
According to the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–18*, the monetary cost of the war up to mid-1934 was £831.3 million, which equates to approximately $82 billion in 2018 prices:  

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32. Williamson, op. cit.  
35. Australian War Memorial, ‘1918: Australians in France—the cost of war’, AWM website. The AWM also lists the official number of service deaths for World War I as 61,555 (from 4 August 1914 to 31 March 1921): AWM, ‘Deaths as a result of service with Australian units’, AWM website.  
37. Black, op. cit.  
38. The 2018 figure was adjusted using the Reserve Bank of Australia’s pre-decimal inflation calculator to convert 1934 pounds to 2017 dollars and the last 12 months’ Consumer Price Index to convert the 2017 figure into 2018 dollars.
expenditure was met out of loan money to the extent of £262,507,829 and out of revenue to the extent of £71,087,125 (including interest and sinking fund charges amounting to £46,469,102).

The smaller sum, £43,398,098, consisted of indebtedness to the Government of the United Kingdom for payments made, services rendered, and goods supplied to or on behalf of the Australian army during the war. But the total cost of the war is not comprehended within the expenditure to the end of the financial year 1919-20. Expenditure on repatriation and pensions was a direct consequence of the war, and that continued to be a very heavy drain upon the finances of the Commonwealth in later years. The total cost to 30th June, 1934, had reached the figure of £831,280,947, inclusive of war gratuities, interest and sinking fund. 39

**The political and social cost**

Historian Joan Beaumont noted in a lecture she delivered at the Australian Parliament in March 2014 that the conscription debates in Australia during the war prompted the ‘shattering and reconfiguration of the political party system’, which ‘resulted in a significant shift to the right in federal politics that would last for a generation’. 40 Beaumont also acknowledged that the impact of the war ‘left Australians inward-looking, almost xenophobic, traumatised by grief and deeply divided by the political rancour over conscription and the inequality of sacrifice’. 41

**The legacy of the First AIF**

Despite the horror of World War I, and despite finishing his history in 1942 when Australia was again at war, the official historian C.E.W Bean, completed his final volume on a sombre but positive note:

> What these men did nothing can alter now. The good and the bad, the greatness and smallness of their story will stand. Whatever of glory it contains nothing now can lessen. It rises, as it will always rise, above the mists of ages, a monument to great-hearted men; and, for their nation, a possession for ever. 42

**Commemorating the Armistice**

**Is it Armistice Day or Remembrance Day?**

In recent times, there has been some confusion as to whether the day is Armistice Day or Remembrance Day. After World War II, the Australian and British governments deemed it more appropriate to commemorate the sacrifices made in all conflicts and changed the name of the day to Remembrance Day. 43

The tradition of Armistice Day continued until January 1946 when Britain proposed to the Dominions that National Remembrance, Thanksgiving and Dedication should be observed on the
Sunday before 11 November, unless 11 or 12 November fell on a Sunday. In March 1946, the Chifley Government agreed to the observance of Remembrance Sunday, although remembrance and dedication had been more the focus of Anzac Day. However, there was some disquiet expressed by the Annual Congress of the Returned Sailors’, Soldiers’ and Airmen’s Imperial League of Australia (RSS & AILA—now the Returned and Services League or RSL) in 1949 that, with the substitution of Remembrance Sunday for Armistice Day; ‘the nation had really lost something of great spiritual significance in the discarding of the simple ceremony of two minutes’ silence which was the principal feature of Armistice Day gatherings’. The RSS & AILA did not want to discard Remembrance Sunday, but wanted the two minutes silence on 11 November reintroduced, as this had been ‘the principal feature of Armistice Day’. In October 1950:

The Commonwealth Government therefore informed the United Kingdom Government ... that it was proposed in future to revert to the procedure followed prior to 1946 and that Remembrance Day would be observed in Australia on 11 November, the ceremony of two minutes’ silence taking place at 11 a.m. This would not however preclude services of commemoration being held in the Churches on the appropriate Sunday.

In 1997, Governor-General Sir William Deane issued a proclamation formally declaring that 11 November each year would be ‘known and observed as Remembrance Day’. In the proclamation, the governor-general also urged all Australians to ‘... observe, unless impracticable, one minute’s silence at 11:00am on Remembrance Day each year to remember the sacrifice of those who died or otherwise suffered in Australia’s cause in wars and war-like conflicts’.

A period of silence

According to the Australian War Memorial’s website, a period of silence of either one or two minutes is said to have been first suggested by Edward George Honey, an Australian journalist working in London. Under a pen name, Honey wrote to the London Evening News in May 1919, suggesting ‘five minutes of national remembrance’ to be observed anywhere that people chance to be: ‘Church services too, if you will, ... surely in this five minutes of bitter-sweet silence there will be service enough’. His suggestion was joined by another from an influential South African politician, Sir Percy Fitzpatrick, whose son had been killed in France in 1917 and who, in October 1919, proposed to a friend in the British Cabinet that a period of silence be observed on Armistice Day in all the countries of the British Empire. Fitzpatrick’s suggestion was forwarded to King George who invited both Honey and Fitzpatrick to a rehearsal involving the Grenadier Guards where five minutes was found to be too long and two minutes was decided upon. Elizabeth Williamson’s Wartime article, ‘Eloquent Silence’, describes the story in detail.

The King issued a special proclamation on 7 November 1919, which was carried by all national newspapers in Britain:

Tuesday next, November 11, is the first anniversary of the Armistice, which stayed the world wide carnage of the four preceding years and marked the victory of right and freedom.

45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. WP Deane, Proclamation, Special Gazette, no. S 437, 30 October 1997.
50. Williamson, op. cit.
I believe that my people in every part of the Empire fervently wish to perpetuate the memory of that great deliverance and of those who have laid down their lives to achieve it.

To afford an opportunity for the universal expression of this feeling it is my desire and hope that at the hour when the Armistice came into force—the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month—there may be for the brief space of two minutes a complete suspension of our normal activities. During that time, except in the rare cases where this may be impracticable, all work, all sound, and all locomotion should cease, so that in perfect stillness the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the glorious dead.

No elaborate organisation appears to be necessary. At a given signal, which can easily be arranged to suit the circumstances of the locality, I believe that we shall all gladly interrupt our business and pleasure, whatever it may be, and unite in this simple service of silence and remembrance.51

The silence was observed at the Armistice Day ceremony in London and in towns throughout England in 1919. The Governor-General of Australia, after receiving notification of the King’s proclamation, held a ceremony on the federal Parliament House steps in Melbourne, where he read the King’s message to a ‘great crowd’. The ceremony transformed the city into ‘a vast cathedral’.52 According to The Argus, ‘there was something electric in the King’s appeal, and Melbourne’s citizens were quick to respond to it. Nothing spectacular marked yesterday’s ceremony. It was the spontaneous tribute of the people’.53 Tens of thousands of people also attended a public service in Martin Place in Sydney.54

In 1920, the governor-general was again notified of the King’s hope that, throughout the British Empire, two minutes silence would be observed at 11 am on Armistice Day. The prime minister informed all the state premiers of the King’s request and again a short ceremony was held on the steps of the federal Parliament House in Melbourne.55 According to tradition, the first minute was for giving thanks for the survivors and the second minute was a time to remember the fallen.56

Edward Honey died in 1922, but his idea was embraced and a lasting tradition established. In recognition of this, fifty years after his death, a memorial plaque set in natural rock was unveiled in the grounds of Melbourne’s Shrine of Remembrance as a permanent tribute to him.57

The Unknown Soldier

In 1920, the London commemorations on the second anniversary of the Armistice included the funeral, with full military honours, of an unknown soldier from the Western Front battlefields. The remains were interred in Westminster Abbey and over one million people paid their respects at the Unknown Soldier’s tomb over the following week. French commemorations in Paris that year also included the interment of the remains of an unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe. Over the years, the majority of other Allied nations also adopted the tradition of entombing unknown soldiers.58

51. ‘From the archive, 7 November 1919: the King’s plan for silence on Armistice Day’, The Guardian UK (online), 11 November 2014.
52. Amess, op. cit.
55. Amess, op. cit.
56. Williamson, op. cit.
57. Williamson, op. cit.
Although bringing home an unknown Australian soldier had first been planned in the 1920s, it was not until 1993, on the 75th anniversary of the Armistice, that the remains of an unknown Australian soldier, exhumed from a French World War I military cemetery, were entombed in the Australian War Memorial’s Hall of Memory. The prime minister, Paul Keating, gave a speech at the entombing of the Unknown Soldier in which he said:

This Unknown Australian is not interred here to glorify war over peace; or to assert a soldier’s character above a civilian’s; or one race or one nation or one religion above another; or men above women; or the war in which he fought and died above any other war; or of one generation above any that has or will come later.

The Unknown Soldier honours the memory of all those men and women who laid down their lives for Australia. His tomb is a reminder of what we have lost in war and what we have gained.

We have lost more than 100,000 lives, and with them all their love of this country and all their hope and energy.

We have gained a legend: a story of bravery and sacrifice and, with it, a deeper faith in ourselves and our democracy, and a deeper understanding of what it means to be Australian.

Throughout the country, ceremonies were conducted simultaneously in towns and cities, culminating at 11 am with the burial and the traditional two minutes silence. According to the Australian War Memorial, this ‘ceremony, which touched a chord across the Australian nation, re-established Remembrance Day as a significant day of commemoration’.

Poppies

In 19th century English literature, poppies symbolised sleep or a state of oblivion. While this symbolism continued in World War I, the poppy also began to be associated with the sacrifice of bloodshed. The poppy is a symbol of the battlefields on the border of France and Belgium, where more Australians lost their lives during World War I than at Gallipoli. Poppies flourish in disturbed soil and red poppies were among the first plants to grow in the ruins of these battlefields in northern France and Belgium. According to soldiers’ folklore, ‘the vivid red of the poppy came from the blood of their comrades soaking the ground’.

A popular poem from World War I, In Flanders Fields, was written by Canadian John McCrae who, in 1915, was inspired by the sight of poppies on the Ypres battlefield. He was the first person to describe the poppy as a flower of remembrance:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place: and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.

We are the Dead. Short days ago
We lived, felt dawn, saw sunset glow,

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63. Ibid.
Loved and were loved, and now we lie
In Flanders fields.

Take up our quarrel with the foe:
To you from failing hands we throw
The torch; be yours to hold it high.
If ye break faith with us who die
We shall not sleep, though poppies grow
In Flanders fields.  

The poem was published by the English magazine *Punch* after apparently being submitted anonymously. After the war, the impact of the poem was still keenly felt. The poem inspired Moina Michael from the American YMCA to write her own poem in response and to wear a red poppy. At an international gathering of YMCA secretaries in November 1918, Michael spoke of the poem and poppies. This inspired the French secretary of the YMCA, Madame Anna Guérin, to approach organisations throughout the allied nations to raise money for widows, orphans, and needy veterans and their families through the sale of poppies. It soon became tradition in Allied nations to wear a red poppy on Armistice Day in remembrance—a tradition which remains to this day.  

In Australia in 1921, the RSS & AILA began selling silk poppies imported from French orphanages for a shilling each for Armistice Day—‘five pence was donated to a charity for French children, six pence went to the League’s own welfare work, and one penny went to the League’s national coffers’. The RSL continues the tradition of selling poppies on Remembrance Day, which raises funds for its welfare work.  

At the Australian War Memorial, red poppies can be found pushed in beside names on the panels of the Roll of Honour—a practice which began on Remembrance Day in 1993 as a spontaneous gesture by people waiting to pay their respects at the funeral of the Unknown Australian Soldier.  

**Rosemary**  
Sprigs of rosemary are commonly worn on Anzac Day, but can also be seen on Remembrance Day. The herb, an ancient symbol of remembrance and fidelity, was believed to assist in the improvement of a person’s memory. As rosemary grows wild on the Gallipoli peninsula, it has a particular significance for Australians as a symbol of remembrance.  

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64. Australian War Memorial, ‘*Poems: In Flanders fields*’, AWM website; J King, ‘*Passchendaele ... we died in hell*’, *Perspective*, 11 October 2007.  
66. Ibid.  
67. Ibid.  
68. Australian War Memorial, ‘*Commemoration: rosemary*’, AWM website.