

**The Hon Alan Griffin MP
Minister for Veterans' Affairs
Commemorative Address at the
Anzac Day Dawn Service, Villers-Bretonneux, France
Friday 25 April 2008**

On behalf of the Government and people of Australia, it is my privilege to welcome you to this special Anzac Day Dawn Service.

The Anzac story, which leads us here this morning, began at this time, on this day, in 1915.

Thousands of Australian soldiers left their ships and landed before dawn on Turkey's Gallipoli peninsula, in their first major action of the Great War.

More than 2000 Australians were killed or wounded on that day alone, the first of 25,000 Australian casualties, including more than 8700 who lost their lives during the eight months of the Gallipoli campaign.

Through their exploits on Gallipoli, the men of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps forged a reputation for courage, determination, and a willingness to stand by their mates when things got tough.

On the first anniversary of the Gallipoli landings, Australians back home held their first Anzac Day commemorations.

By then, many of the Gallipoli troops and other units of the Australian Imperial Force were being sent here, to the Western Front.

In the trenches of France and Belgium, our small nation suffered horrific losses.

In July 1916 at Fromelles, in the first Australian action in France, the 5th Australian Division suffered more than 5000 casualties in a single night.

By the end of the war, our forces on the Western Front lost more than 46,000 men, including those listed here on the Memorial to the Missing.

46,000 men, lost. From a population of only five million.

But the Australians showed again what they were made of.

Like the Anzacs before them, the Australians who fought and died here on the Western Front, earned a reputation among allies and enemies alike as tough, courageous and determined soldiers.

These Diggers helped win some of the most important battles of the war and were awarded 53 Victoria Crosses for valour.

One Victoria Cross was earned here, 90 years ago, during the battle to drive the German forces from Villers-Bretonneux.

The Germans had captured the town from British forces on the morning of the 24th of April 1918 – British and Australian soldiers were determined to get it back.

On the night of the 24th, the Australians moved into Villers-Bretonneux from two points – the north and the south.

As you have heard, the Australians attacking from the north moved across this very ground, over-running the enemy positions.

In the south, men of the 51st Battalion were pinned down by machinegun fire until Lieutenant Clifford Sadlier and Sergeant Charles Stokes led a courageous charge into the woods that eliminated six machine-gun posts.

Lieutenant Sadlier was wounded twice and was later awarded the Victoria Cross – Sergeant Stokes was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal.

Thanks to their courage, and the men who fought with them, the Australians broke through from the south and by dawn on Anzac Day – at this time, on this day, 90 years ago – the Germans were retreating.

The liberation of Villers-Bretonneux came at the cost of some 2400 Australian casualties, a major victory that helped stop the German spring offensive on the Western Front.

It was from the new front line established here, and strengthened in the following months, that the Australian, British and Canadian forces would attack on 8 August to inflict their decisive defeat on the Germans at Amiens.

90 years later, the events around Anzac Day 1918 are still remembered and marked here in France. But this story is not as well-known in Australia as it should be.

It must be said that our strong connection with the Anzacs at Gallipoli has, over the years, overshadowed our commemoration of the Australians who gave so much on the Western Front.

So this morning, on this 90th anniversary, I am proud to see so many Australians present for this special Anzac Day Dawn Service, and I know there are many more watching back home.

Today is a time to remind ourselves that we were here. That our men and women gave their lives here in the service of our nation – in the defence of France and the ideals that we share.

Today is a time to renew the friendship between Australia and France that has grown from our shared history.

And, today is a time to say ‘thank you’ to the people of Villers-Bretonneux.

Long ago, you promised that the memory of the Australians who fought and died here would be kept alive.

You have kept your promise and today, on behalf of the Government and people of Australia, we express our deepest gratitude for the care and respect that you continue to show to our fallen.

Merci.

Merci d'entretenir leur mémoire.

Merci de veiller sur enfants de l'Australie tombés au champ d'honneur.

(Thank you. Thank you for keeping their memory alive. Thank you for looking after Australia's fallen sons.)

Lest we Forget.