

Good morning, Colonel Miller, Official Secretary to the governor of NSW, Madame Premier, Ministers Stokes, Elliott and Mitchell, members of Parliament, Mr Brown, State President of the RSL, guests, and fellow students.

Today we honour the memory and sacrifice of the ANZACs, in the First World War, and in all in wars- and particularly in 2018, on its 100 year anniversary, reflect upon the Armistice; the end of the war we commemorate. Today we ask, what does the ANZAC legend tells us as Australians and how can we seek to understand, interrogate and honour it?

The ANZACs fought a long and gruelling battle for their nation; a battle that not only preserved its freedom but forged its identity. But when we feel thankful for what their sacrifice bought, we must also recognise what that sacrifice was. The potential and in many cases, actual cost of death or severe injury. The sacrifice of family, education and potential. The sheer intensity of the physical and psychological suffering of wartime conditions. And then for those who returned, war became a lifelong commitment. Soldiers who were forced to bear the weight of the death of others, comrades and enemies alike, now forced to bear the weight of traumatic memories and often social dislocation and mental illness.

But while we can never fully represent or understand the awfulness of war, it speaks to something hopeful in all of us that from the midst of tragedy arose good. Prior to World War One, war was the sport of gentlemen, something trained for, to quote Wellington, “on the playing fields of Eton”. The rank and file soldiers, drawn from the lower classes, occupied a separate world. The First World War with its unparalleled carnage experienced by every grade of soldier, changed that. Background no longer mattered as it once did, and this was in part responsible for the development of the Australian culture of mateship and egalitarianism, where the divisions that loomed so large in day to day life were rendered negligible by shared hardship. And soldiers who returned from the battlefield found themselves ever after deeply bound to other individuals from whom they would in any other circumstance have been divided by chasms of social difference; of class, of ethnicity, of education.

It is also worth noting our position in 2018, 100 years from the Armistice. Signed on the 11th of November 1918, the Armistice marked the cessation of hostilities and withdrawal of troops- the Armistice marked peace. And this year’s centenary offers a unique vantage point from which to reflect on the nature of peace and war. Besides its obvious historical significance, I think there are two aspects of the Armistice that invite particular reflection today:

The first is that the Armistice was engineered to optimise symbolic resonance. Its coming into effect was delayed five hours so as to fall exactly on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. The delegation that met in the Armistice carriage during those three days in November was correct in thinking that symbolism and tradition are exceptionally useful. They help us remember, help us organise the chaos of suffering, and help us integrate historic moments into individual identities. The metaphors that spring up around war, though at times reductive, unify and commemorate, and the Armistice itself affirms the critical importance of modern ANZAC traditions.

The second feature of note is just how difficult the Armistice was to negotiate and sustain. It needed to be prolonged three times before the 1920 Treaty of Versailles was eventually concluded fourteen months later. And it involved harsh conditions for the already compromised Germany, and heavy concessions on both sides. Peace and war is not a binary; the two often coexist, and peace takes remarkable effort and a very long time. And

imagining that war gives way to peace by a simple transition – or more dangerously a transition that can be reduced to a single treaty, or intervention, or détente– is an expectation doomed to failure, and an expectation that by that failure makes conflicts feel more intractable than they really are. In retrospect, with the help of decorated moments like the Armistice, we frame war within a broader narrative of peace. But it is far more difficult and important to do that in the midst of conflict, when peace is not yet in sight and all we may have to grab onto is its spectre- that narrative is one of the few things that stops us from becoming apathetic, and occasions us to embrace the uncommon political virtues that extraordinary circumstances demand: of tenacity, generosity, imagination.

In the end, however, the Armistice is a symbol whose power derives from the lives and deaths of those who fought in war, for peace. And it is thanks to them- our parents and grandparents, our siblings, our neighbours and our fellow Australians- that out of the evil of war came so much that is good about contemporary Australia, things indomitably optimistic- whether real or legend, in either case important. Possibilities of self-sacrifice materialised where without such adversity they never would, and with the deaths of so many a national identity of equality and sacrifice was born. Of course, it's easy to celebrate the human spirit when you're so far removed by time and context from the circumstances to which that virtue was defined in opposition. That distance is a space in which it becomes easy to spout truisms, and to disengage through the cynical or the saccharine from suffering that often feels too great or too alien to ever understand. And with those truisms arises a far greater danger- that we lose the ANZAC spirit needed to fight for contemporary peace; for equality, for the embrace of difference, for the protection of the weak, the wounded and the alien in our midst. Because in the end, the ANZAC tradition is as complex as its forefathers; both devastating and optimistic. And it demands of us as contemporary Australians- our memory, our respect, and most of all our peace.