

## **ANZAC Day on the Somme**

ANZAC Day on the Somme dawned cool yet clear and sunny. The boys were up early for breakfast and then we were off to our first ceremony at the Australian National Memorial at Villers-Bretonneux. We arrived early so as to avoid the crowds and blocked streets and with our official ANZAC security pass we were directed straight through and were able to park right at the entrance. The boys had about 40 minutes to look around before preparing for the ceremony and we were all touched by the sadness that it evokes.

So many young lives lost so profoundly illustrated by the rows and rows of gravestones, inscribed as they are with messages of love and loss from their families. The boys have been interested in the history of the Somme since we arrived and their explorations gave them time to read and learn some more. The view from the tower across the memorial and the valley is breathtaking and given the beautiful weather we are experiencing it was possible to see for kilometres.

The ceremony itself was long but moving. Attended by many special guests including Ms Penelope Wansley, Australian Ambassador to France and Mrs Marjorie Jackson-Nelson Governor of South Australia. The combination of the official delegation laying the wreaths, other students participating in the readings and prayers and our boys' singing created a very moving service and no-one could help but be affected by it.

After the service had finished it was straight on to our coach and on to the French Monument within the town of Villers-Bretonneux itself. This ceremony recognised the many French lives lost during the conflict and while more low-key was still well attended by dignitaries including the Ambassador and the boys sung the national anthems of both France and Australia. Afterwards we walked down to the Victoria Primary School built after the war with funds raised by Victorian School children. The banner which hangs permanently in the school 'Remember the Australians' is a constant reminder of close connection between our two countries. We were treated to a lovely morning tea before we had to reboard the coach for our next engagement.

The town of Bullecourt played a crucial role in the conflicts of 1917 with the area around the town being of such strategic importance that both sides were prepared to sustain heavy losses to secure it. 10 000 Australians lost their lives fighting for this patch of land and the service in the village was poignant and very much highlighted the special contribution of the Australians. Again the special guests had travelled to the village and shared this time with us. The boys sang both National Anthems again, but also 'God Save the Queen'.

This ceremony then moved into a street march. The boys joined the service personnel, returned servicemen and special guests in a march to the 'Diggers Memorial'. The whole village joined in the walk up to the memorial on a ridge above town. Under the sunny skies and with a cool breeze the boys again led the crowd in the singing of the national anthems.

At each of the ceremonies we received many wonderful compliments from both the general public and the staff of the Australian High Commission. It was a very tiring day with the boys essentially on their feet all day, but they demonstrated great composure and dignity while doing so.

We rolled back into our hotel tired but satisfied on a job well done.