

**90<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE END OF WW1**  
**REMEMBRANCE DAY 2008**

Just a few months before the acts of heroism that earned Bill Currey a Victoria Cross, General John Monash was appointed the commander of the Australian Army Corps.

Monash is one of my heroes.

His life characterises for me the indomitable Australian spirit; our ability to respond to whatever challenge comes our way, whether the cause is war or weather or want.

Enjoying success in a career before the war, Monash saw the clouds gathering across Europe and set about preparing himself for the coming conflict.

He landed at Gallipoli on April 26<sup>th</sup> April and left at its end, eight months later, with a reputation as a leader upon whom men could rely, a commander who meticulously planned for battle and someone who understood the value of life at a time when so much was wantonly wasted.

By the war's end Monash had earned many honours.

Knighted on the field of battle, regarded by a future Prime Minister of Britain as the greatest soldier of WW1, distinction came Monash's way despite what one historian describes as his handicaps: his Jewish faith, Prussian heritage, colonial birth and a militia, not regular army, background.

Monash's wartime success reflects another Australian characteristic: that a person's reputation and achievements are determined by their own efforts, and not based upon who their parents were, the size of their bank balance or a string of qualifications.

But on this day, the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of WW1, it is another aspect of Monash I want to highlight – one Members of Parliament recognise in so many veterans we have the honour and privilege to meet.

Despite all the success and distinction it brought him, Monash was no reveller in war, never one to take pride from the death and destruction that armed conflicts create.

As he wrote in a letter to his wife in 1917:

*I hate the business of war – the horror of it, the waste, the destruction, the inefficiency. My only consolation is the sense of doing my duty to my country; which has placed a grave responsibility upon me. I owe something to the men whose lives and honour are in my hands to do as I will. But once my duty is done and honourably discharged, I shall with a sign of relief turn my back once and for all on the possibility of ever again having to go through such an awful time.*

Those 416,000 Australian men and 2500 Australian women, who enlisted in WW1, did so out of a keen sense of duty to this nation.

More than 63,000 – one in five of those who served overseas – paid the ultimate sacrifice, to ensure that we, their grandchildren and great grandchildren, might live lives as free, and as full of opportunity, as they had enjoyed before the outbreak of war.

All those who returned – like Monash – were dedicated to what would ultimately prove a forlorn hope: that no one should again be required to endure the hardships, experience the terrors and witness the horrors of war.

As Leader of the Opposition and the Liberal Party, I am pleased to again, publicly, acknowledge the sacrifice of that generation of men and women who went to war in defence of the freedoms we now enjoy and that we all too often take for granted.

Despite their experiences, regardless of the injuries they suffered, returned veterans like Bill Currey sought to make this State and nation a better place.

They did so despite carrying the scars of that conflict, scars that altered the course of their lives, sometimes changed their personalities, and, all too often, shortened their life spans.

Eight years after the end of WW1, almost 23,000 veterans were in hospitals around this nation.

One of them, Private William Shirley, had sailed to war in January 1916.

Like many, he suffered from ailments resulting from the inhumane use of gas during the fierce battles of the Western Front – plus the added complications of tuberculosis.

Between 1926 and 1928, Bill Shirley was cared for at Lady Davidson Convalescent Hospital located at North Turramurra, within the electorate of Ku-ring-gai.

For eighteen months and despite ill-health, Shirley laboured to carve out of the sandstone a one-eighth size model of the Great Sphinx of Giza. He did so as a personal memorial to his fallen comrades. Bill Shirley died not long after completing this unique monument.

The Sphinx sits there today – just near the gates of Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park – and has been used by local school students on Remembrance and Anzac days to honour the sacrifices of Bill Shirley, Bill Currey and all other veterans of that terrible conflict.

William Matthew – Bill – Currey is rightly honoured as the only Victoria Cross winner to ever sit as a Member of this Parliament.

Not once, not twice, but three times on 1 September 1918, Currey displayed what one of his commanding officers described as “*conspicuous gallantry and daring*”.

First, under machine gun fire, Currey captured a 77 mm German field gun that had been wreaking death and injury upon his Company.

He followed up by single handedly rushing an enemy strong point comprising 30 men and 2 machine guns, killing 4, wounding 2 and causing the others to flee.

Later that same night, Currey volunteered to get a message to an isolated Company. His feat is best described in the words of his commanding officer:

*Private Currey volunteered to carry a message over the open ground, which was swept continuously by intense Machine Gun Fire.*

*He crossed the ground, but, being unable to locate the Company, returned for further directions and immediately went out again but was still unable to locate the Company. During this trip he was very badly gassed. Despite this he made a third attempt and this time was successful. He brought back valuable information which was urgently needed and shortly afterwards the Company withdrew. His magnificent courage and devotion to duty undoubtedly saved the lives of many of his comrades.*

Capt W E Smith  
OC B Company, 53<sup>rd</sup> Battalion AIF

For his courage, Currey was awarded the Empire's highest honour – a Victoria Cross.

Instituted in 1856 – the same year Britain granted NSW responsible government – VCs are to this day made from the metal of Russian guns captured at Sebastopol during the Crimean War.

Just sixty-seven VCs were awarded to Australians during WW1.

The day of Bill Currey's exploits – the 1<sup>st</sup> of September 1918 – was a momentous day in the annals of Australia's military history.

On the same day Bill Currey earned his VC, five other Australians also gained the nation's highest honour – Albert Lowerson, Robert Mactier, and Edgar Towner, along with two other New South Welshmen: Alexander Buckley (of Warren) and Arthur Hall (of Granville).

Alex Buckley and Bob Mactier died carrying out their acts of courage.

It should be noted that the VC is the only military bravery honour that can be awarded posthumously.

Many other Australian soldiers perished during WW1 without any recognition despite having carried out extraordinary deeds of self-sacrifice in defence of their mates, this nation and a commitment to freedom.

Remembrance Day allows us to recall and honour the deeds of all those men and women who gave their lives in the desire that we could continue to live freely and safely in this country.

This motion also permits us to recognise others who served in this place, and in uniform, throughout our history - people ranging from Major D'Arcy Wentworth who was elected to the 'blended' Legislative Council in 1843 through to Major Charlie Lynn in the current Parliament.

Their service across 54 Parliaments can be as obvious as the plaque displayed in this chamber in honour of Lieutenant Colonel George Braund, the Liberal Member for Armidale, and Sergeant Ted Larkin, the Labor Member for Willoughby, who died at The Nek and Lone Pine during the Gallipoli campaign.

Or the service of these former Members can be less obvious.

In reading Bill Currey's condolence motion, I was struck by the contribution of the then Leader of the Opposition, another Liberal, Vernon Treatt,

Treatt spoke warmly of the comradeship that Currey brought with him to Parliament.

But he also spoke, with the first hand knowledge of a gunner who was there at the time, of the impact of the actions of Bill Currey's 53<sup>rd</sup> Battallion on other troops:

*Many Australian troops feared that the Germans would make a stand at Peronne and prevent the continuance of the advance. When we learned that the Somme had been crossed and Peronne captured there can be no doubt of the stimulating and inspiring effect upon the Australian troops.*

As we pause to honour Bill Currey today, and agree to erect a memorial in his honour, I urge the Speaker to compile a record of the names of all those who have served the colony, State or nation, before or during their service in this place – and the other place – so that their memories can help remind us of the truly important and honourable task of politics.

Mr Speaker, in February 1929, General Sir John Monash (rtd) officiated at the opening of the Cenotaph in Martin Place.

Two year's earlier, on Anzac Day, he declared:

*On us who have survived the stress of war and who have been safely returned to our homeland is laid the duty of helping to restore to Australia the mighty loss of that legion of men by devoting our lives and energies to that class of nation building in which they would have shared had they been spared.*

Monash and the other 400,000 are today reunited; watching us as we seek to carry on that task of nation building for which too many gave their lives.

They responded without hesitation, they never gave up. Regardless of risk, they knew their mates would never let them down.

We owe it to their memory – their sacrifice – to keep the flames of freedom and opportunity alive in this State and nation.

We owe it to ourselves, to salute their courage, to admire their determination, to honour their mateship.

Lest we forget.