

Good morning staff, students and special guests.

Today is Friday 19th April when I am writing this and on this day I have had the honour of standing on the World War One Battlefield of Fromelles as Chaperone to the recipient student of the Premier's Anzac Prize Tour 2024. It was here at Fromelles that 5,500 Anzac soldiers were killed or wounded in what is described as Australia's worst 24 hours of military history. It was far worse than anything the Anzacs had encountered at Gallipoli and many of the Australian soldiers that had survived that campaign would meet their end on these bloody fields.

Today, Fromelles is very peaceful. Though the sky is dark, the air cold with wind and rain, I feel the peace here but also sense a deep tragedy. Two flags fly high to mark the ground where the German line held fast and tore down the Australian soldiers thundering in towards them. These flags, one Australian and one French, acknowledge a deep respect the French people have for our Anzac soldiers and the heavy price paid in their service to Australia though they were fighting for and in a foreign land.

A memorial statue called "Cobber" shows a soldier carrying his mate as though stepping off the battlefield to safety. The Battle of Fromelles took place in July 1916 and it wouldn't be until after the armistice in 1918 before the Australians could return to clear this battlefield and collect our dead. Australian official war correspondent, Charles Bean, wandered over the battlefield in 1918 and observed, "We found the old No-Man's-Land simply full of our dead", he recorded, "the skulls and bones and torn uniforms were lying about everywhere". These remains would be gathered up and buried at the VC Corner Cemetery.

There are no individual graves here, simply a stone wall inscribed with the names of 1,299 Australians who died in the battle and who have no known graves. When I look out and back across this open flat field from VC Corner, I see that Australian flag flying high in the short distance across a muddy field and it is a sudden hollow feeling to realise I am standing here where so many of our young Australian men died.

It is an extraordinary experience to stand in the footsteps of our Anzac soldiers. In a few days time I will stand on the ground where a small brook runs through an open green paddock outside of the town of Messines (Mesen) in Belgium. Somewhere in this field my Great Great Uncle Alfred Fitzgerald lays buried. He was killed in action on 10th June 1917 in the Battle of Messines. He has no known grave. For many soldiers it was not possible to move them all for official burial and they were left in the open fields or buried where they were found. As part of this Premier's Anzac Prize tour, I was required to research a soldier and my choice was to find my relative Alfred Fitzgerald. With help from our tour guide and historian Nigel, we have pinpointed Alfred's final location and will visit this place. While you are participating in the Anzac ceremony at school, I will be standing on the old World War One battlefields outside of Messines, remembering and honouring Alfred Fitzgerald.

Anzac Day is about the soldier, it is about their experience and it is about you and how you will choose to honour and remember them. On Anzac Day, Thursday 25th April I will be representing you, our Urangan State High School students and staff, our school region and our Queensland state at the Villers-Bretonneux Anzac Day ceremony in France.

Although I am half a world away, I encourage you to rise early on Anzac Day, attend the Dawn Service or later Main Service at the Freedom Park Memorial. Participate in the march and uphold the traditions of remembering the Anzacs and all soldiers who have fought in war and served in our armed forces. I am constantly reminded of the deep sacrifice of so many young Australians, who gave their lives in the service of our country. This incredible experience of visiting the Western Front has reinforced my belief in upholding the Anzac tradition of remembrance. I am deeply honoured to share and pass on these traditions to the students I teach and will proudly represent you all this year on the Western Front in Belgium and France.

Lest We Forget.