

ANZAC DAY — BATTLE OF VILLERS-BRETONNEUX

Statement

HON TJORN SIBMA (North Metropolitan) [9.52 pm]: I wish to make a brief statement marking Anzac Day, which occurs in two weeks' time, particularly because this is the final year of the Centenary of Anzac 2014 to 2018. Over the last four years Australia has remembered and commemorated the service and dedication of our armed services personnel who have engaged in armed conflict across the four corners of the globe for more than a century and who have served, as always, with distinction. I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate the federal government, the previous state government and the current McGowan government for their commitment to continuing to honour the service of our men and women through the many and varied initiatives that have been implemented and are still being implemented as part of the Centenary of Anzac.

I have observed during my time that community sentiment and respect for this country's armed services history has waxed and waned and that probably over the last two decades or so the groundswell has taken a more positive and probably generous view of armed service in all its complexity than has sometimes been the case in our society. I observe that this sentiment is largely ceremonial and a little bit abstract, and I wish that there was a better, more enduring commitment, both at the level of community sentiment and government engagement and corporate engagement for the welfare of returned services personnel to improve and assist their transition back into civilian life.

I wish to speak about one historical individual who was integral in profoundly changing the course of the war on the Western Front in the latter stages of the First World War—that is, Major General Harold “Pompey” Elliott, one of Australia's greatest fighting generals. We often mark our commemoration or respect for armed service personnel on Anzac Day and automatically, almost reflexively, focus on the Gallipoli campaign. That is completely understandable and correct, but it does not tell the whole story about the service of Australians over time and in different places. A battle that has loomed or taken on a bit more significance in recent years is the battle of Villers-Bretonneux. That town was overrun by Germans in 1918 but was soon recaptured by the Australian Imperial Force in a counterattack undertaken on 24 and 25 April 1918—approximately Anzac Day 100 years ago.

Members might ask: Why focus on that battle? What is its importance? There are probably a number of reasons for that. Perhaps we can be prompted by the respect and esteem demonstrated by our friends in France, because 14 000 kilometres from Australia, every schoolchild in the town of Villers-Bretonneux understands that battle and how significant it was, and appreciates the sacrifices made by strangers from half a world away 100 years ago. It is partly because there is a war cemetery outside the village in which 770 Australian soldiers rest forevermore and that through that village there are street names such as Rue de Melbourne and Rue de Victoria. That is a commemoration of Australians' connection to their town and their freedom. It is also partly because every blackboard in the local victorious school—and again forgive me my French—is marked with the words, “N’oublions jamais l’Australie”, which is “Let us never forget Australia”. I think that also means, “Never let us forget the sacrifice that those Australians made.” If that is good enough for French schoolchildren today, it is certainly more than good enough for us.

I close by saying that the postwar experience of Brigadier Pompey Elliott, later to become Major General Pompey Elliott, marked all the promise and potential that that man demonstrated on the war front. He was a noted lawyer. He went on to become a senator for the state of Victoria. He was fundamental to the creation and reconstitution of what became the Returned and Services League of Australia, but he sadly took his own life in 1931. Unfortunately, that person of great historical value and virtue probably serves as the dark emblem of what can happen to servicepeople who return to this country and who are not appropriately supported.

I acknowledge that battle and that person, and I look forward to representing the Leader of the Opposition and the state Parliamentary Liberal Party at this year's Anzac Day dawn service in Albany. I wish to conclude on these three simple words: Lest we forget.