

Hello. My name is Grace Coppinger.

I was given the privilege of speaking to you all today because of a trip I went on last year. Through school, I had the chance to participate in a World War One Battlefields tour, which took myself and 20 other students across the countryside of Belgium and France. We experienced many amazing things on our journey, and were given some incredible, invaluable, insights into what it might have been like to fight in the First World War, as well as the impact Australian soldiers had in those areas.

As we zig zagged across the Belgium/France border, we visited many military cemeteries. These were cemeteries unlike any I'd ever seen before. Stark white headstones, all lined up perfectly, facing the same direction. Each one was inscribed with a name, a date of death and the Australian insignia, if that is, they weren't one of the many unknown soldiers, unnamed but not forgotten. It is a hard thing to do, walk through a cemetery you can't see the end of. Harder still when you imagine each of these headstones being a person. I cannot imagine what it would be like for the families of those, we as country, have lost.

While we were away, we learnt a lot about the sorts of sacrifices that fill cemeteries like the ones we visited. Sacrifices these brave men made for their country, for their friends, and for their families. I don't mean to stand before you today and tell you any of the students on the tour, myself included, could ever fully grasp the horrors of war, because we can't.

What I do mean to share however, is how thick the mud is in Belgium. Just walking through a paddock took us a good half hour, and along the way we found live bullets and buttons off an officers shirt, half a grenade and a collection of various sizes of shrapnel. Remnants from a time long ago which would have seen the paddock dug with trenches, littered with bodies and barbed wire.

I also want to share with you how scary it is, even without an enemy pressing towards you, to have a man yelling at you while you try to fit your gas mask. I can only describe it as pressure on your chest and in your heart, frantically fumbling with straps and buttons that just won't click. As a group, we participated in a Platoon Experience which saw us dress in the full kit of a World War One soldier. There is a lot to say for experiences like that one, ones I know I won't forget and I doubt could ever be taught in a text book. It wasn't to glorify war, it wasn't for fun at all. It was to help us as twenty first century teenagers, understand the hardships, burdens and perils of a soldier and the bravery, courage and mate ship it took, to fight such a battle.

Our trip didn't just reveal how horrifying the war was however. It showed us another side of the war, that maybe we are not taught enough about.

It's the side, not of what we lost in the war, but what we achieved and how those achievements are remembered.

It's remarkable to see the way people in these rural areas of Belgium and France, people who still remember the war, or whose parents did, they change when you say you're Australian. Maybe they thought you were British or American, so they treat you like any other tour group, but once they know you're Australian, you are nothing but welcome, everyone smiles at you.

There's a town called Villers-Bretonneux, and in their primary school is a huge billboard.

On a gold background in big green letters it says, "Never Forget Australia". In the same school there is a museum dedicated to Australian soldiers and is open to the public.

I cannot begin to explain to you all how it feels to stand inside Menin Gate after dark, the bugles, which every night without fail play the Last Post, echoing down cobbled streets, off walls forever carved with the names of those we have lost, Australian soldiers and all those who fought beside them. However I can safely say that it's not a feeling that quickly goes away.

We went to towns that Australian soldiers saved, protected and helped rebuild, towns such as Villers-Bretonneux which was saved by the AIF on the 3 year anniversary of ANZAC Day. In these towns, there is little else you can do but feel proud. Proud to be an Australian, proud to have the privilege of living on in the memory of everyone who fought in the war, lost and returned. That we are safe to grow old, living happy lives in this lucky country is a true testament to the courage, bravery and sacrifice shown by these great men.

I would like to take this moment to give my deepest, most sincere thanks to all of the community groups and people who helped fund and support Broadford Secondary College's World War One Battlefields Tour, many of whom are here today. I know I'm the voice through which the entire tour speaks, when I say that the trip was truly eye-opening and makes us feel everyday, let alone ANZAC Day, truly lucky to live where we do, in the memory of our ANZACs.

Thank you.