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PRIME MINISTER

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REMARKS BY THE PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA
THE HON R J L HAWKE AC MP
AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL
VILLERS-BRETONNEUX - SUNDAY 18 JUNE 1989

Citizens of France, fellow Australians

The great Napoleon said:

"It is geography alone which decides the policy of nations".

No nation understands the meaning of this better than France in this century.

And no place in Europe has seen its results in history more than the Somme.

Yet, for all its truth, this memorial to Australians who died fifteen thousand miles from home bears witness that there are other truths about the spirit of man which transcend the mere facts of geography.

For why, we must ask ourselves, did so many thousands of young Australians volunteer - and let us remember that they were all volunteers - to come to fight, so many of them to die - in these foreign fields, so far from home?

The memorials to be found in every city and township around Australia - most far less imposing than this - very often bear the inscription: For King, God and Country. But their own diaries and letters home give a different emphasis.

Some express the spirit of adventure.

But their most constant theme - one strengthened by the sufferings of the war - is the characteristically Australian one of mateship - expressing, indeed, that ideal of "fraternite" enshrined by the French Revolution, but, containing a meaning at once more simple and more subtle, and one which is uniquely Australian.

Yet, whatever the motives and ideals of individuals, they came to serve a greater cause, greater perhaps than most of them realised, or, with their typical Australian diffidence about their own importance, would have acknowledged or articulated.

The remarkable impression made by these young Australians was expressed by Prime Minister Clemenceau when he addressed them in the field in July 1918 after the series of battles which had saved Amiens and turned the tide of the last drive upon Paris:

"When the Australians came to France, the French people expected a great deal of them... but we did not know that from the very beginning you would astonish the whole Continent. I shall go back tomorrow and say to my countrymen - I have seen the Australians. I have looked into their faces. I know these men will fight alongside of us again, until the cause for which we are all fighting is safe, for us and for our children".

Yet the very generation of French men and women and Australians, of whom Clemenceau spoke, were to face another and even more terrible ordeal barely twenty years later.

We do not come to these consecrated fields today to glorify war.

And in no sense does it glorify war to honour the sacrifice made by those who fought in these wars - as we may regard it now - the long civil war of Europe.

Yet citizens of France, fellow Australians

I ask you to consider with me this great point: that today we stand on the threshold of a more hopeful era for the peace, human rights and fundamental unity of Europe - better-founded, more strongly grounded, than at any time in the past 75 years since the Great War - the first World War - began.

It will take much courage and resolution on the part of many to cross that threshold.

The courage and resolution of those we honour today was of a different order, facing a different kind of challenge.

Yet it is a great truth that the challenges of peace often require as much courage as the challenges of war.