



PRIME MINISTER

123/92

STATEMENT BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING MP

COMMEMORATIVE MISSION TO FRENCH BATTLEFIELDS

On this anniversary of Armistice Day, I am pleased to announce that the Federal Government will fund a commemorative mission to the French battlefields in 1993.

I envisage this journey - involving a number of First World War veterans - as a national tribute to the sacrifices of Australian service personnel.

The visit, likely to take place in August or September next year, will be a forerunner to the 75th anniversary of the end of the First World War, in November 1993.

Thousands of young Australians participated in WWI, and therefore there was a great impact on most Australian families. The casualty rate was very high, particularly in France in the final years of the war.

Of the 313,000 soldiers who embarked from Australia, 53,000 died in France and Belgium. About 18,000 have no known grave.

Because of the success of the pilgrimage to Gallipoli in 1990, we now propose that a limited number of veterans travel to the Somme, an area where Australians fought with valour in 1918. The number might be of the order of one or two from each State. The delegation would be accompanied by administrative and support staff.

The mission will coincide with the anniversary of Australian attacks on Mont St Quentin and Peronne in 1918. This fighting is held by many historians and Australian veterans to be a brilliant action which effectively removed five German Divisions from the fighting. It resulted in 3,000 Australian casualties.

It is expected that the group will also travel to Villers-Bretonneux and Bullecourt, where Australian veterans have longstanding links with the French people.

This year's Federal Budget provided \$2 million for support of military commemorations for the period 1992-3 to 1995-6.

CANBERRA
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