



Following their footsteps



The Menin Gate at Ypres, Belgium.



The memorial to Australian and British soldiers at Bullecourt.



The plaque to Australian soldiers on the town hall at Bellenglise, France.



The Digger statue and Australian flag at Bullecourt.

More than 48,000 Australian soldiers were killed on the Western Front during World War I, buried in 523 cemeteries across northern France and Belgium. As Anzac Day approaches, Manly travel agent Mat McLachlan has produced a guide for those wishing to visit the famous battlefields and cemeteries. By **JOHN MORCOMBE**



“Some of the inscriptions bring tears to your eyes, simply because of that distance. There is one that reads: ‘Would some kind mother passing on, stop and pray for my dear son’”

GROWING up in West Wyalong, Mat McLachlan grew up surrounded by the respect shown for veterans of the two world wars, including for his grandfather, who fought in World War II.

Years later, and with six years of research behind him, Mr McLachlan set off to explore the World War I battlefields and cemeteries of the Western Front. He has now published a guide - *Walking With The Anzacs* - for those interested in exploring the places where 48,000 Diggers fell while defending France.

“There’s no good answer as to why I got interested in this,” he said.

“It’s just something that fascinates me.

“My father had a good understanding and respect for military service so I grew up to respect it too.”

In 2002, along with his wife Merrin, Mr McLachlan made his first visit to the Western Front.

“My wife used to live in France and still has family there, so that made it easier for us,” he said.

“In 2002 we lived in the United Kingdom for a year and because they’re only a few hours away, I was able to visit northern France and Belgium quite often.

“Since then I’ve been there a dozen times and I’ve spent about a year there in total

walking around the battlefields and cemeteries.

“I’ve also been to Gallipoli, Korea and Vietnam.”

What he found moved him deeply, especially when reminded of the great distance the Australians died from their homes.

“You see headstones for a 21-year-old lad from Wagga or Ballarat with an inscription from the family,” he said.

“Some of the inscriptions bring tears to your eyes, simply because of that distance.

“There is one that reads: ‘Would some kind mother passing on, stop and pray for my dear son’.

“It’s sad to think they died so far from home and their families never got to visit their graves.

“The situation was different for the families of English soldiers - it’s only half a day’s travel for them so they had the opportunity to visit the graves.

“Australian families never had that - many never had the chance to see where their son was killed or where he was buried.”

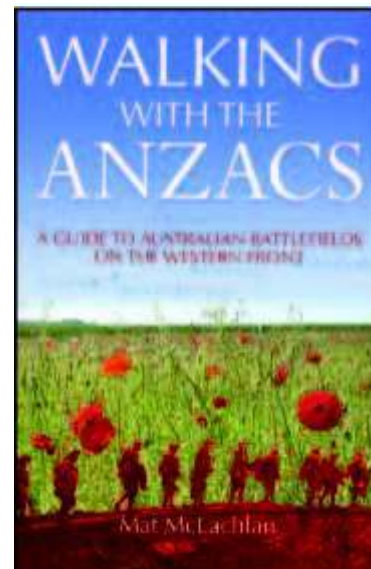
Mr McLachlan believes it was due to distance that there was a strong sense of Australian nationalism in the cemeteries and an emphasis on being Australian.



The Tyne Cot Cemetery in Belgium.



The Mud Corner cemetery near Messines.





“The talk about the futility of war is a bit off the mark but the tragedy of the enormous number of casualties is what makes it a moving thing when you’re over there”

“In addition to the cemeteries, there are specific villages that were liberated by the Australians, such as Villers-Brettoneux, which has always had a strong bond with Australia and is home to the Australian National Memorial in France,” he said.

“It has names of 11,000 Australians who have no known grave in France and there is a sign in the school above the playground which says Never Forget Australia.”

Despite the savagery of the battles and the enormous death toll, Mr McLachlan believes “it was a war that had to be fought”.

“The war wasn’t senseless, given the politics in Europe at the time,” he said.

“The German government was practically run by the military.

“There is also a common perception that

the English generals were all bunglers but in most cases they weren’t.

“It was a modern war, with machine guns and repeating rifles and artillery.

“Two-thirds of the casualties were caused by artillery.

“The talk about the futility of war is a bit off the mark but the tragedy of the enormous number of casualties is what makes it a moving thing when you’re over there.”

Mr McLachlan’s guide takes visitors across the cemeteries and 14 major battlefields, with names that have resonated down the years - Ypres, Messines, Polygon Wood, Passchendaele, Fromelles, the Somme, Pozieres, Villers-Brettoneux, Bullecourt, the Hindenburg Line and Mont St Quentin, where Manly Olympic gold medallist Cecil Healy was killed just 74 days before the Armistice was signed. Healy’s name has just been

added to the Manly cenotaph and will be blessed on Anzac Day.

Mr McLachlan’s book includes detailed guides to each of the battlefields, including information about the men who fought there, walking tracks, remaining landmarks and memorials to the men who fought and fell, and even where to stay.

Mr McLachlan, whose family owns Harvey World Travel at Manly, is travelling to France in August to take part in an archaeological dig on Australian trenches at Ypres and will lead a tour of Gallipoli and the Western Front next Anzac Day.

Walking With The Anzacs by Mat McLachlan is available at local book shops. RRP \$40. □



Mat McLachlan has just written a guide to WWI Australian battlefields and cemeteries on the Western Front.

Picture:
ANNIKA ENDERBORG