

SOMME MIST

By Mark Cornell

It's a misty morning, the white sun smoulders behind a silver veil of cloud.

We're on the early morning train to Amiens, north of Paris. It's September 2014, a hundred years since the outbreak of World War 1. Amiens is a town located in the battlefield known as The Somme. I'm about to fulfil a long held dream to visit my Great Uncle Edward's grave. He was killed in the battle of Mont St Quentin in September 1918.

When I was fourteen my Pop, Thomas Cornell, gave me a gold medallion which belonged to his older brother, Edward, it was given when he volunteered back in 1916. It has the Australian coat of arms on it, surrounded by the words, "For King and Country." On the back, the engraved words state, "Presented by the residents of Mt Waverley to E. Cornell on enlisting for active service- 1916." He tried to volunteer with his brother Charlie, when the war first broke out in 1914 but was rejected due to a chronic injury he'd sustained from pushing the plough. Edward was a market gardener and worked on the Cornell's family farm in the now suburban Mount Waverley. He was devastated when Charlie sailed off without him. But in 1916 with a huge casualty rate and declining number of volunteers, the authorities weren't as strict as before when it came to health standards, and Edward was allowed to join. I'll never forget Pop polishing the medal before he gave it to me, he had a tear in his eye as he told me Edward was his favourite brother and was a gentle soul.

I treasure the medal and have worn it off and on for forty years now. Edward had it with him when he died. I have an official document that records Edward's personal effects shipped back to Australia after his death, it mentions the medallion. I wonder if it was on the sweetheart's chest when his heart stopped beating? My Great Auntie Alice, died when I was nineteen, she was close to Edward, lived in the Cornell family home and never married. I read somewhere the trauma of the death of a loved one in the Great War, flows through the blood of the succeeding generations. Pop made it a point to hand over to me a small cardboard box Alice had kept for sixty years. It contained Edward's medals, photos, documents, letters, and handmade silk postcards sent back from France. I read everything

straight away. There's letters from his Chaplain and friends which tell of how he died. Edward and another soldier were carrying a wounded officer down Mont St Quentin when they were hit by German artillery. The other soldier was killed instantly, (I suspect the officer was too,) Edward was badly wounded on the side of his body and head, and died on the operating table.

I rub my eyes as we step off the train at Amiens, we've been up since 5.30. The mist has lifted and it's a beautiful sunny day. Our tour guide Barbara, rocks up in a mini-van with a large Australian flag emblazoned on the side, her company is called True Blue Tours. When Barbara introduces herself she instantly strikes me as larger than life, generous, and with a passion for The First World War. She tells us that the War was the greatest disaster in the two thousand year history of Western Civilization. She gets no argument from my wife Kimberly or fifteen year old son Thomas. I reply, "You're not wrong Barbara."

Barbara takes us to Amiens Cathedral which is still intact despite two world wars and the burning of the township, they've only just finished cleaning off the smoke stains from World War 2! The Cathedral is identical in style to Notre Dame. Barbara tells us it's the largest Gothic Church in France. She takes us to a plaque which expresses gratitude to the Australian, New Zealand and American armies who defended the city between March and April at the height of the German's 1918 offensive. We're then shown a statue up in the rafters of a weeping angel. It represents that moment in life when we discover in our childhood that death is going to take us all away. I remember that moment when I was about seven on summer holidays with my Pop and Nana down in Rosebud. I was devastated and cried all night. I couldn't handle the fact that one day Nana and Pop weren't going to be here anymore. Barbara tells us the statue was a favourite of the soldiers before they went off to the Western Front. I realize Edward would have seen it.

Barbara tells us our next destination is the village of Villers-Bretonneux. As we drive through the vast flat brown fields of The Somme I realize how you would have been seen for miles around by your enemy as you stumbled across No Man's Land, there was no cover or escarpments. It's no wonder they dug trenches. Barbara pulls the van up and points to a forest

covered hill on the outskirts of Villers-Bretonneux. We step into the warm embracing French sunshine. She tells how hundreds of Australian soldiers hid up there on Anzac Eve 1918.

‘Now up until Anzac Day the Germans had been on the offensive for thirty five days, sweeping the British Army before them. The Germans had negotiated an armistice with the Russians in December 1917. As a result they had a million more soldiers to throw into the conflict on the Western Front.

They hoped to smash the Allies before the American reinforcements arrived in France , they were well on the way to doing that until the Australians hiding in the forest on top of that hill joined in on the conflict.’ Barbara’s knowledge of our troops astounds me. You hear all these stories the French don’t like foreigners and are quite aloof. We’ve been in France for days and neither, Kim, Tom or I have experienced any of that nonsense.

I’d read about these men and how when they marched to the front they tried to convince the retreating British to join them but it didn’t happen.

However when the fleeing villages saw them they shouted to each other. “The Australians are here,” and returned to their homes.

‘Now picture this,’ Barbara said, ‘two exhausted brigades yet they were determined because it was the third anniversary of Anzac day. They attack in the early morning darkness without artillery support and catch the Germans completely by surprise. They captured the village and take 1000 prisoners. It was the first setback of the German’s 1918 offensive and it was your countrymen who did it!’

‘Another Australian military victory that goes largely unrecognized,’ my American born wife Kimberly states.

We enter the heart of the village and Barbara takes us to the Victoria School. It has a plaque out front which states;

‘THIS SCHOOL BUILDING IS THE GIFT OF THE SCHOOL CHILDREN OF
VICTORIA AUSTRALIA TO THE CHILDREN
OF VILLERS-BRETONNEUX AS A PROOF OF THEIR LOVE
AND GOOD WILL TOWARDS FRANCE. TWELVE HUNDRED
AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS THE FATHERS AND BROTHERS

OF THESE CHILDREN GAVE THEIR LIVES IN THE HEROIC
RECAPTURE OF THIS TOWN FROM THE INVADERS OF 24th
APRIL BURIED NEAR THIS SPOT. MAY THE MEMORY OF A
GREAT SACRIFICE IN A COMMON CAUSE KEEP FRANCE
AND AUSTRALIA TOGETHER FOREVER IN BONDS OF
FRIENDSHIP AND MUTUAL ESTEEM.'

Surely Thomas Cornell would have given a few quid to this school? I think to myself. There's a large sign out in the main playground which says; 'NEVER FORGET THE AUSTRALIANS.'

As soon as we step into the school hall we immediately smell the scent of Australian wood.

'Oh Barbara this smell is distinctly Australian, it reminds me of an old hall built up in the Dandenong Ranges just before World War 1. I can smell the resin in the timber; it's such a unique smell,' Kimberly smiles.

'That's amazing Kimberly because this wood was shipped from Australia to build the school. I think it's called Australian Maple. It makes me so happy to know that you pick up the scent of Australia in a hall in France. It makes me feel that it's more Australian,' Barbara replied. The wooden hall's timber has a golden brown sheen to it. Kim's right, I remember Auntie Alice's house had the same scent. Up on top of the school walls are beautiful carvings of our unique animals. We make out a possum, a Lyre Bird, a Platypus, a cockatoo and as a Collingwood supporter I'm glad to say that there's a carving of a magpie with his wings proudly stretched out.

This is my first visit to a non-English speaking country. I have overlooked the reverence the people here have for my countrymen. All Australians have forgotten! We focus on the great tragedy of Gallipoli. But compared to the Western Front, Gallipoli was a side show. Not to mention that once we gained an Australian commander on the Western Front, John Monash, our men won a series of victories. Why aren't these achievements celebrated as much as Anzac? 'Australian's don't blow their own trumpet like other countries,' Kimberly once told me. Well in this increasing age of digitalization, U.S cultural imperialism and negativity, there's even more of a need to get our stories out there.

Just before we had lunch Barbara takes us to a field full of shell holes. We stop on the side of the road to look into a pocket of forest, and sure enough below the trees we see scores of overgrown craters.

‘How come the local farmers don’t get rid of them Barbara?’ I ask.

‘Because there’s too many of them, the farmers prefer to let them be.’

It’s an unearthly vision, a pock marked field like the moon; despite being overgrown with ivy you can still make out the circular shapes. Even after a hundred years you get an idea of the destruction the shells wrought. I’ve had my mind on Edward all day, the artillery he and his mate caught! I slowly shake my head from side to side.

Barbara takes us to a local French Restaurant; the first thing I order is a beer. She tells us about Monash’s first battle as Corps Commander of the Australian army. Where he constructs a giant replica of Hamel and its surroundings and through a series of talks, advises his troops to familiarize themselves with the objectives of the upcoming battle. Something like this has never taken place on the Western Front before. Most of the British commanders saw themselves as fair too superior to associate with their troops. Another radical step Monash took was to familiarise his troops with tanks. They’re reluctant because the machines were useless at Bullecourt. They either broke down or got bogged and left our men exposed to withering German fire. However Monash, through a series of drills which take place for weeks, got his men used to them, some of the diggers adopted a tank and wrote pet names on them.

I order a meal and another beer and listen to this amazing French woman who has such a reverential knowledge of my countrymen.

‘On July 4th a heavy mist, unusual for summer, descended onto the battlefield. Monash used artillery and planes to smother the sound of the sixty tanks making their way up to the front. Just before Dawn each morning preceding the battle, he’d shot off a series of coloured smoke bombs to give the impression they were shooting off mustard gas. It worked, the Germans were forced to wear gasmasks which restricted their vision and movement. Then on July 4th the tanks suddenly emerge from the smoke and mist only metres away

from the Germans front line. The Diggers themselves were a quicker and more mobile force than before, because they didn't have to wear packs. The Diggers obtained their supplies from planes and tanks. The days of slow pack mules were over. The enemy's front line was shattered within seconds. Monash had calculated that if it went to plan the battle it would take ninety minutes, he was wrong it took ninety three minutes. In that small amount of time, Monash accomplished what other British Commanders had never achieved. Don't forget some Commanders had pushed their troops for months to gain a few metres. After the Battle of Hamel, the Commanders of the Allied Armies ordered the Generals to adopt Monash's tactics, they did and the Germans were pushed back. So it was your Commander John Monash who was responsible for turning the tide of the war. You Australian should be aware of this. Hamel was a major victory for the Allies and was the beginning of the end for the Germans.' Barbara sipped her mineral water.

We three were stunned. I'd read a lot about the war, had a knowledge of Monash. But I suppose I'm a victim of a widespread belief that the Western Front was a tragedy, ebbing into the grey mists of time. We all have images of slow straight lines of soldiers being massacred by the machine gun. Nothing positive came out of that war, but here was a soldier from The Antipodes who had figured out how to defeat the Germans without sending thousands of young men in to certain slaughter. One of his maxims was, "Industrial Protection," in other words protecting men as much as possible, with tanks, planes, creeping artillery, smoke bombs, anything, to reduce casualties. I reflect on how tragic it was that nobody in Australia knew this heroic story. Monash was knighted by George VI after Hamel, and was seriously considered to take over command from that great nincompoop, Field Marshall Douglas Haig. But two things in the jaundiced eye of the British establishment stood against him, he was a colonial, and perhaps even worse he was Jewish.

Nowadays kids wrap themselves up in flags, paint flags on their faces, and shed tears at dawn on the beaches and cliffs of Gallipoli. However the pilgrimage should begin in Gallipoli and continue through the Western Front towards the eventual defeat of the once

powerful German Army. Our young men were in the thick of it; sometimes the amount killed in Gallipoli was equalled in one day of fighting in France until Monash took command.

We bought a small wooden cross with a poppy on it and a small Australian flag at Villers-Bretonneux and bear them to Edward's grave. I've inherited old black and white photos of his grave and can't believe Barbara is taking us to his military cemetery of Hem Farm. I keep swallowing; my stomach's been in my throat all day. I think of my Pop, my Nana, who I promised just before her death that if I ever had a son I'd call him Thomas. Barbara pulls her True Blue van up in the tiny village of Fuellieres and there it is, a quiet, square little cemetery next to a farm. Tom and I jump out and march through it with a copy of a map kept by Aunty Alice. Kimberly films us. We find Edward's humble grave straight away, below a white rectangular piece of stone. I keep placing kisses upon his headstone as I talk to him. I introduce myself as Tom's grandson then introduce our Tom. We promise never to forget him. All three of us sit down next to his grave and talk to him until we all become tearful.

The gravestone tells how he died age thirty at the battle of Mont St Quentin. He fought with the Twenty Second Australian Infantry. One of his officers when writing back to Edward's parents called Mont St. Quentin, "that most impregnable fortress." It had been held by the Germans for four years, bristling with barbed wire, fortifications and machine gun nests. The Twenty Second had been fighting non-stop for seventy two hours when they took the decision to storm the mount. The Germans were caught completely by surprise and chased off the battlefield. Some historians claim it was the most heroic battles of World War I.

Edward's parents had placed the words, "Our darling Ted he died for us," on Edward's grave stone. So they called him Ted! Charlie had a son christened Edward, but we all knew him as Uncle Ted. Uncle Ted fought in World War 2 for six years without a scratch. I helped him write his biography before he died, but that's another story. I take a handful of stones from Edward's grave for my Dad. Barbara subtly shifts the mini- van, we wipe our

eyes, then Tom promises Edward that he'll bring his family back to visit him. For some unknown reason I shout a Cooee as we leave the cemetery. Kim and Tom do a Cooee as well.

We write in the visitor's book, (it's full of loving words from many families around Australia,) and as we get back into her True Blue van, she tells us the visitors books and cemeteries on the Western Front have never been vandalized. Barbara takes us to our last stop, Mount St Quentin.

It's a high hill. Barbara tells us it got the name from an Irish monk St. Quentin who built a monastery on top of the hill in the sixth century. I smile as Barbara tells us that a number of place names in France are named after Irish Monks who came to France after the collapse of the Roman Empire. These brave men were seen as the torch bearers for Western Civilization, for they not only bought the teachings of Christ but also the wisdom of ancient Rome and Greece. One of the reasons I'm smiling is my mother's side of the family are Irish. The first place we visited in Europe was Ireland, and we're still basking in the glow of a wonderful trip. I wonder if Edward knew there was an Irish monastery on top of the mount he was charging, and was he taken into St. Quentin's care?

The ugly reality was that a pillar box for German artillery stood on top of the hill. The men in that box would have directed the shellfire that killed Edward. The Twenty Second Battalion was ordered to shout like bushrangers as they charged up the hill. I can't help but think some of them would have shouted out Cooees. I wonder if this order came directly from Monash? As a young boy he met Ned Kelly at Jerilderie, the bushranger was said to have given him some good advice, Monash never revealed what it was, but said his meeting with Ned was one of the highlights of his life, and speculated on what great soldiers the Kelly Gang would have made.

A large statue of an Australian soldier now stands high on the peak of Mont St Quentin. I imagine a khaki hoard of yelling screaming soldiers storming up this hill. I can see them cutting barbed wire, shooting, bayoneting, throwing hand grenades at German machine guns. Yet Edward's last act was to try and rescue a fellow soldier. His last vision

would have been coming down this hill, burdened by the weight of an unconscious officer. I wonder have we managed to communicate with him somehow. With his body in the womb of French soil, did he hear our voices? After death is it possible to share an experience with your blood relative? The crying angel in the cathedral tells me it is. So does the Somme sun and mist. So does my vision of Mont St Quentin. I can't help but think Edward lived all of his life on a mount, then was killed coming down one in France.

Unfortunately Barbara has to rush us back to Amiens. She plays military music on the way. Advance Australia Fair comes on. Barbara senses that I can't stand it then plays Waltzing Matilda which sends shivers up and down my spine. We give each other hurried kisses and hugs and run for the train at Amiens.

It's now dusk, the bloated sun is red. As I leave The Somme, I can hardly see anything, the light's blinding, the carriage is red, the surrounding land is red. The mist returns to caress the battlefield with her moist fingers and transform our train into a shadow. Back home my mother nods when I tell her it was a very spiritual day, my frail father acknowledges the stones as I place them in his palm.

Bio

Mark is of Irish ancestry. As a child he grew up listening to stories; either in the form of tall tales told by his extended family or the lyrics of his favourite songs on the radio. He started writing poetry when he was seventeen. He has traveled to Ireland twice and during one of these visits was married to Kimberly in a Registry Office in Dublin. Mark has been writing Short Stories and Novels for a number of years. He now works as a Conciliator with Consumer Affairs.