

## Presentation of the project: “A night in the trenches”

The project entitled “A night in the trenches” was born out of the idea of understanding as precisely as possible what the soldiers of the First World War went through. On the occasion of the centenary and in a region where the scars of this war are still very present, it seemed important to us to become involved in a strong and personal way in understanding our past, that of our ancestors, that of the soldiers who came from all nations to fight on French soil.

To try to experience this first-hand, we wanted to spend a night in a trench, in situ.

Firstly, we had to understand who these soldiers were; French, Australian, how they lived, where they came from, and under what conditions they experienced their presence on the front, far from their loved ones and constantly facing death.

In partnership with the Telopea Park School/Lycée Franco-Australien de Canberra, we became interested both in the French soldiers, the “Poilus” and the Australian “Diggers”.

We worked on two books: *Les Batailles de Bullecourt de 1917*, a historic account by Philippe Duhamel, and the novel *Au revoir là-haut (The Great Swindle)* by Pierre Lemaître, which received a French literary prize, the Prix Goncourt, in 2013 and was adopted for cinema by Albert Dupontel in October 2017.

Why choose this episode about Bullecourt? Philippe Duhamel explains this very well in the introduction of his book:

This book tells the story of a tragedy, that of the two battles of Bullecourt, in April and May of 1917. Bullecourt is a place of remembrance, located about fifteen kilometres south-east of Arras. We will never know precisely the very high number of victims because thousands of bodies were never found. They were buried in the ground or torn apart by the ever more intense bombings. We can however estimate the total number of victims within a range of 15,000 to 20,000 on the single territory of this small municipality.

This account by Philippe Duhamel also immersed us in the harsh reality of the fighting and reminded us of the courage of the Diggers who sacrificed their lives for our country:

### Chapter XXV: 3 May 1917

3:45 a.m. was also Zero Hour for the first waves of the Australian 2<sup>nd</sup> division. The men attached the bayonets to the rifle barrels and advanced with great strides, east of Bullecourt, with a distance of 2 to 3 metres between them, along a path protected by an embankment the height of a man, to the right. The German artillery immediately resumed shooting and focused it on the 6<sup>th</sup> brigade. The latter, to the left of Chemin Maret, continued to advance under intense fire. The 22<sup>nd</sup> and 24<sup>th</sup> battalions bravely made their way behind the artillery's barrage of fire through the gaps in the barbed wire. This wire was well cut, but only in places. The men, who were often injured, would crawl on the hands and knees like animals in the middle of the barbed wire or in the shell holes. Captain Joseph Slater was injured by shrapnel. He hung on to the barbed wire, where the corpses of the battle of April 11 were still hanging. His blood slowly draining out of him, he would soon die. On the left flank, however, the 22<sup>nd</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> battalions were less protected and were under fire from the garrison from Bullecourt... The Australians occupied the trench littered with corpses whose legs and rifles were protruding. The German survivors were prostrate. The horror of the place was indescribable. The dead jeered in a tragic rictus, the injured still moaned in their holes...

Pierre Lemaître also evoked the difficult experience of being a soldier:

In 1916, at the start of the Battle of Verdun (ten months of sustained fighting, 300,000 dead) the region of Chazières-Malmont, which was not far from the front lines, accessible by road and close to the hospital which was the primary supplier of corpses, had come into its own as a practical place to bury soldiers. On numerous occasions, the shifting battle lines and strategic uncertainties had

encroached upon the sprawling quadrilateral which was now the resting place of more than two thousand corpses – no-one knew the exact number, some said there were five thousand buried here, which was not impossible, this war had broken all records.

Pierre Lemaître, *The Great Swindle*, “November 1919”, MacLehose Press 2015.

Despite all that, hope always wins out, and after the horror comes reconstruction, as underlined by Philippe Duhamel:

... Jean-Baptiste was not wrong to hope for a rebirth. One day the skylark came back to sing at dawn. Another day a red flower, the poppy, began to grow all over the former battlefields. A frail and vulnerable flower, and yet it reflects the intense red colour of the sun. The Chinese legend tells us that it was once a white flower that became red from the blood of the dead. Great Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, who lost so many young soldiers for us on these lands, adopted it as their emblem for the anniversary date of 11 November. This flower, which began to grow everywhere, even on the roadsides, gives us one hell of a lesson in humility and self-confidence, love and reconciliation with all men. It embodies the rebirth of nature.

After studying these two books, we worked on letters of the French Poilus and Australian Diggers, in French and in English, thus further delving into the parallels of life on the front between the French and the Australians. In fact, even though they were of different nationalities, even though some were defending their homeland while others were on the opposite side of the world, far from their native land, their fate was identical.

For example at the start we find the optimism of the French, a certain enthusiasm and strong patriotism, like in the letter by Maurice Maréchal, who was 22 years old in 1914. After the war he would become one of the greatest cellists in the world. From 1914 to 1919 he bore the ID number 4684, was a second class soldier and liaison officer. In May 1915, another French soldier offered him a cello made from a wooden door and an ammunitions box. This cello, which was signed by Generals Foch, Pétain, Mangin and Gouraud, is today kept in Paris, at the museum of the Cité de la Musique.

2 August 1914

First day of widespread mobilization. Yesterday morning, I resolved to act in French!... I turned back instinctively towards the town, the cathedral was alive and it said: “I am beautiful from all my past. I am Glory, I am Faith, I am France. The children who gave me life, I love them and I will watch over them.” And the towers seemed to rise towards the heavens, held up simply with an invisible magnet. And Meyer said to me: “Do you see the cannonballs in the cathedral?” I went to the infirmary, I will be in the armed service and if anyone harms France, I will fight. Throughout the evening, mothers and wives came to the railings. The wretched things! Lots of them cried, but many of them were strong. Mum will be strong, my dear little mother, who is indeed French too! I received her letter this morning, Sunday... It contained this letter, a letter from a young girl who could perhaps have replaced Thérèse one day. If I leave and if I die, I beg of my dear mother to tell her how much her letter touched me... how much I appreciated her righteousness, her courage, her grace.

Maurice Maréchal

In the same way a young Australian fighting in the Dardanelles campaign shows his sense of duty and his pride in fighting for his country and for the values he believes in:

**4 May 1915:**

***Mary, I know you never understood why I left; you reproached me for abandoning you, for leaving you alone with our newborn son, Paul. And yet, I do not regret having left, the war I am waging had to be waged. If we do not fight the Fascists in Europe, in 10 years we will have to fight them on our own soil... I left for you, for you and our son, for his future, I hope that one day you will understand; I love you both,  
Your Oliver.***

Then, confronted with the horror of the fighting, despondency and disillusion quickly set in. This is what Maurice Maréchal expressed in one of his letters, dated 7 September 1914:

I was singing Victory, Victory. My heart was beating in my young breast, I was drinking in the fresh air... and for the first time we were gaining ground. And all my childlike joy was shattered. Here, a lieutenant from the 74<sup>th</sup>, there, a captain from the 129<sup>th</sup>; everywhere, in groups of 3 or 4, sometimes alone or still in the position of the recumbent shooter, red trousers lay about. These were ours, our brothers, our blood. We brought one back: he wasn't dead, but out came a groan, that was no more than a death rattle, an uninterrupted wail. Poor thing, no support, no mother to console him. He had a gaping wound on his head, he was going to die. I saw his identity tag: "Louis Barrière, 4<sup>th</sup> Office, 1913". He was 20 years old.

***The same sentiments were expressed by the second class soldier, John Ambrose Ware, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> Australian Infantry Battalion, in one of his letters sent to his mother from France:***

***"Well the twenty men went up again the second time. Not the same twenty as we had two killed and seven wounded the first time, but we were closely followed by more of our men and out of the second twenty only four of us came back unscathed, to say nothing of the others that followed, that was only one day or a portion of it. And that is only a trifle compared with the big guns and smaller ones that play on our trenches (shell hole is a better name) all day and night. ...to try to describe a battlefield to you would be impossible, but if ever you saw a sheep camp in time of drought you will know how many sheep died in one night; our men are lying about just the same, only a drop of blood to show where they are hit."***

The conditions of the war (cold, filth, mud, hunger, disease amongst other things) were also mentioned in a similar way, whether by French or Australian soldiers. Thus wrote Adolphe Wegel, a young French soldier, in 1915:

1915

I don't know if I could sleep in a bed now, we are used to sleeping on the ground or on straw when we can find some. I haven't taken off my clothes for two months now, and I only took off my shoes last night to sleep; I hadn't taken them off for at least fifteen days.

Let me tell you a little about how we spent the night in the trench. The one we were in... is about 100 metres long, dug on the edge of a small wood, 3 metres in; it is one metre deep with the soil piled in front, which means that we can stand in it without being seen. It is generally 15 cm wide with wider areas in parts so that we can pass each other when we meet.

Adolphe Wegel

***And on the Australian side we can hear the voice of young Oliver in 1915:***

***29 April 1915:***

***The fighting continues; it has become trench warfare. Nothing moves. For three days now we've had to dig trenches and remain quiet. There are rats running about everywhere, and a shortage of clean water. Most of our company has already become sick from the dirty water we have to drink...***

***Your Oliver***

But the soldiers, both French and Australian, held strong and demonstrated great courage, right to the end.

To supplement these letters, we studied photos of Diggers taken by Louis and Antoinette Thuillier, exhibited at the Centre d'Interprétation of Vignacourt and kept at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. These photos, helping us to put faces to the fates, have helped us to create records of the Poilus and to imagine the stories of these men who sacrificed their lives for us 100 years ago.

After spending a night together in a trench, we understood the meaning of camaraderie and what helped the soldiers to keep their spirits up. Even though our experience was much less traumatic than that of the soldiers, we understand even better the importance of their sacrifice. Many of them wanted to wage war on war.

We, young French and Australian people in 2018, wish to remember.

It is essential to transmit this memory of what these men experienced, to remember together so that the peace in which we live will continue for a long time to come.

Don't forget Australia.