

INAUGURAL HEADSTONE PROJECT DINNER
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE BARBARA BAKER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
CLAREMONT RSL, SATURDAY 18 FEBRUARY 2023

It is a great pleasure for me to be able to attend this inaugural dinner of the Headstone Project, Tasmania.

I pay my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community and recognise their continued connection to land, sea, and waters. I acknowledge the impacts of colonisation upon our First People and commit to a future that listens to and respects Aboriginal stories, culture and history.

May I acknowledge among us:

- the Honourable Craig Farrell MLC
- the Honourable Josh Willie MLC
- Jen Butler MP
- Senator Tammy Tyrell
- Gavin Pierce MP
- and Defence Representatives, Lieutenant Colonel Neil Grierson and Wing Commander Andrew Johnson

The attendance of these dignitaries speaks to the importance of this Project.

We all know that many Tasmanian soldiers volunteered for service in the First World War. Many did not return. In most cases, they were interred in cemeteries close to the battlefields where they died. Of those who did return, there was a large number buried in unmarked graves. This may have arisen because their families did not understand the process for applying for a war grave or did not have the resources to provide a marked grave. Also, some of the men may have had no remaining families or their families were estranged, amongst other reasons.¹

Given the significant service provided by those returned soldiers to our Nation, it is tragic that there would be nowhere to commemorate their service and sacrifice. Essentially, they are not remembered for what they did or for what they had been through.

¹ <https://www.theheadstoneproject.org/faq/> accessed 8 Feb 23

In 2010, John Trethewey, a Tasmanian historian was researching World War One veterans. John discovered that some were in unmarked graves. That led to the Families and Friends of the First AIF in Tasmania initiating The Headstone Project. The Headstone Project began in 2011 in response to the research that indicated there were some 600 returned servicemen interred in Tasmania, and as many as 12,000 Australia wide, in graves that were not marked. More than 300 of these unmarked graves were in the Cornelian Bay cemetery.²

Andrea and Bob Gerrard, who are with us this evening, were amongst the first members of the Headstone Project. I am sure that they were justifiably proud that the last of the 316 graves in Cornelian Bay were finally dedicated in December 2018.

In Tasmania, the majority of soldiers identified had served with the 12th or 40th Battalions, as infantrymen. The current 12th/40th Battalion, the Royal Tasmania Regiment, actively supports the work of the Headstone Project team. The Battalion provides military personnel, as honour guards, when gravestones are unveiled.

As the Representative Colonel of our Royal Tasmania Regiment, I fully support that linkage. I hope that it will continue to provide appropriate, albeit belated, recognition of our soldiers' sacrifice on behalf of our Nation.

One of those soldiers, James Maynard from Cape Barren Island, was one of 18 local aboriginal men to volunteer for service in World War One. His grave was eventually marked, in Launceston, in 2018.³ It was especially poignant that his descendant, Corporal Brad Maynard, serving with the 12th/40th Battalion, was there to participate in the dedication.

The Headstone Project is a volunteer group that undertakes significant research, verification, and communication with families regarding their deceased relatives and the plans to provide a headstone for their graves. Materials are often provided by generous donor partners.

Headstone Project work is done by volunteers, members of the local community and, in Tasmania, by people undertaking the 'work for the dole' scheme. I acknowledge and thank them all for their work.

² <https://www.theheadstoneproject.org/category/sa/> accessed 8 Feb 23

³ <https://www.examiner.com.au/story/5549308/finally-at-rest-in-carr-villa-memorial-park/> accessed 8 Feb 23

Since 2018, the State and Federal Governments have provided grants. From 2019, the Department of Veterans' Affairs has provided funding for the placement of bronze plaques on gravestones.

The Project has had the support of many senior community representatives. Former Governor-General Sir Peter Cosgrove, former Governor Kate Warner, then Chief of Army Angus Campbell and Brendan Nelson have all been involved in some way.

The success of the Project in Tasmania has prompted researchers and volunteers to set up Headstone organisations elsewhere. In South Australia, with around 30 members, the first headstone was dedicated in 2017. There is continuing research to identify and mark graves there. In Queensland, research in 2018 by the Goondiwindi RSL Sub-Branch found four World War One diggers without a headstone. Those graves have been marked and dedicated with good local support. The process of identification and marking continues there. In other States, work is beginning to establish Headstone Projects.

In this work, we in Tasmania have led the way – in this case by providing a mechanism to identify and recognise those soldiers who, for whatever reason, did not have a headstone at the time of their burial.

I commend and thank everyone involved in this Project: Andrea for her unfailing leadership and advocacy, all the volunteers and Australian Defence Force supporters, members of local, state and federal government, and sponsors who generously provide their expertise, materials and labour to make the headstones for our returned veterans.

On ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day we hear the words “Lest we forget”. The Headstone Project activates those words and demonstrates the commitment to make them a reality – to remember those who served our country and provide recognition of, and a place to remember, what they did.

Thank you.