

**OUR FORGOTTEN HEROES: FOREIGN MILITARY AWARDS PRESENTED TO
TASMANIANS DURING WORLD WAR ONE, BY D. M. WYATT, OAM, RFD
BOOK LAUNCH SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AM
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
ANGLSEA BARRACKS, HOBART, WEDNESDAY 9 MARCH 2015**

Thank you Malcolm.

And congratulations to you Doug on putting together yet another important chronicle of Tasmania's military history.

I think we know all too well that when events of the past are neglected they invariably become badly misinterpreted, if not forgotten altogether — and so we can say by that measure that the heroes in this book are now in fact no longer forgotten, which is a credit to the author Doug Wyatt.

One of the things I like about this book is that together each individual's "contribution", as it were, generates a collective story that is most admirable, being a story of courage and valour far from home. And this reinforces what I said, that it is important for the record that Doug has compiled *Our Forgotten Heroes: Foreign Military Awards Presented to Tasmanians during World War One*.

So it is that the book records fifty World War One Tasmanians — there may possibly be more — who were recipients of twelve categories of foreign awards from five countries. Time prevents me from referring to each recipient — though I will certainly be referring to a number of individuals — but what I would like to do by way of giving you an indication of the scope of the book is to name the awards.

They were as follows —

Awarded by France:

The Legion of Honour, 4th Class, Officer;

The Legion of Honour, 5th Class, Chevaliers;

The Medal of Honour with Silver Swords;
The Medal of Honour, Bronze;
The Military Medal;
The Cross of War.

Awarded by Belgium:
The Order of Leopold, Officer;
The Cross of War.

Awarded by Serbia:
The Cross of Karageorge, 1st Class, and 2nd Class.

Awarded by Italy:
The Bronze Medal for Military Valour.

And awarded by the US:
The United States of America Distinguished Service Medal.

This being Tasmania with its small population, I'm sure there may well be some of you who have family connections to some of the individuals listed in the book. And as it happens, I do too. My daughter Meg's father-in-law is the son of Corporal John MacMichael Bignell, who was awarded the Belgian Cross of War.

A total of 406 Belgian Cross of War medals were awarded to members of the Australian Imperial Force, of whom 22 were Tasmanians.

Prior to the war John Bignell had been a jetty builder, resident at Bellerive. He was 36 years old and single when war broke out in 1914. He enlisted at Claremont Camp on the 17th of January 1916 and was assigned as a Sapper to 8th Field Company Engineers, 5th Divisional Engineers.

Some six weeks later he embarked at Sydney aboard HMAT *Star of Victoria*, for the battlefields of Europe. He was wounded in action, with a gunshot wound to the left shoulder and in October 1919, a few months after his return to Australia, he was discharged from the military as Medically Unfit.

The Recommendation for John Bignell's being awarded the Belgian Cross of War read as follows:

“For valuable services and gallant conduct under fire. On the night of 1st September 1918 he ably assisted his section officer in the reconnaissance for, and the construction of a heavy girder bridge across the Somme at Peronne under hostile machine gun and shell fire; by his great coolness and determination he set a splendid example to all ranks. His devotion to duty throughout the operations since [the 8th of August 1918] has been most marked.”

It's not surprising that one of Australia's great war heroes, Tasmanian Major General John Gellibrand, KCB, DSO, DSM, features multiple times in the book. He was the recipient of The French Legion of Honour 4th Class, Officer; the United States of America Distinguished Service Medal; and the French Cross of War.

The bar is set very high for the US Honour. It may only be awarded to persons other than members of the Armed Forces of the US for wartime services only, and then only under exceptional circumstances, with the express approval of the President in each case.

Furthermore the citation itself is that the individual, and I quote: “... has distinguished himself or herself by exceptionally meritorious service to the Government in a duty of great responsibility. The performance must be such as to merit recognition for service that is clearly exceptional. Exceptional performance of normal duty will not alone justify an award of this decoration.”

John Gellibrand has long had his rightful place in history. But how about, say, Private Frederic Oliver Gray of North Bruny Island, 3rd Field Ambulance 1st AIF? I'm sure you know about him, but I certainly did not and I should think that's case for just about everyone. Yet, consider the citation which led to him at age 20 receiving the French military Medal — a relatively commonly awarded medal, with some half a million being awarded in World War Two. That suggests, if you like, lesser acts of courage. But listen to this, and I quote:

“At, Lagnicourt, France, on the 15th April 1917, Private Gray during the attack by the enemy worked with exceptional courage and devotion attending wounded men under heavy artillery and machine gun fire. On several occasions Private Gray was seen by the officer in charge of Companies who launched the counter attack, to move out under extraordinarily heavy fire in view of the enemy and give first aid to our wounded, also carrying them back to a covered position. His conduct throughout this action is deserving of the highest praise and his quick and valuable services undoubtedly saved many lives.”

So not only was that young man incredibly brave, there were others whose lives they had him to thank for; and this to me simply reinforces the value of having a story like Private Gray's come to life again in this particular form, a book, which can be read as a thoroughly Tasmanian story.

I had said that there are fifty Tasmanians in *Our Forgotten Heroes*. I have been able to do justice to only a very few. But that does mean that, in order to get the full picture, there can be no excuse for not buying a copy of it!

Congratulations again Doug, you have added once more to your lengthy personal list of publications and, just as importantly, to the official record of the island of Tasmania.

I therefore now have much pleasure in declaring launched Doug Wyatt's *Our Forgotten Heroes: Foreign Military Awards Presented to Tasmanians during World War One*.

Thank you.

