

**REMEMBRANCE DAY ADDRESS**  
**HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC**  
**GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA**  
**HOBART CENOTAPH, WEDNESDAY 11 NOVEMBER 2020**

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land: the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights. And on this Remembrance Day we should remember the 1000 or so Indigenous Australians who fought in the First World War, at a time when most could not vote and none were counted in the census, as noted in the Australian War Memorial Encyclopedia.<sup>1</sup>

At the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month 1918, the guns on the Western Front fell silent after more than four years of continuous warfare during which 70 million people had been mobilised to fight and between 9 and 13 million people were killed, perhaps as many as one-third of them with no known grave. Armistice Day, or Remembrance Day as it has been known since the end of the Second World War so that all war dead could be commemorated, is being celebrated very differently this year for a good reason, namely Covid 19, a pandemic which rivals the Spanish flu, one of the worst pandemics in human history.

This year it is appropriate to remember not just those who died fighting for their country in war but also those who survived World War I only to die of Spanish flu before they could return home; and it is also appropriate to remember the estimated 50 million world-wide who died as a result of that pandemic, indirect victims of the Great War.

On this day in 1918, celebrating the armistice was a cause of concern for medical authorities because of the so-called Spanish flu, a pneumonic influenza which had erupted in January of that year, was spreading and becoming more virulent.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian War Memorial, 'Indigenous defence service',  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/indigenous> accessed 1 April 2019.

By October 1918 it has resurfaced with a vengeance on the Western Front. To quote historian Dr Kate Ariotti of Newcastle University:<sup>2</sup>

Crowded conditions in trenches, the movement of soldiers from the frontlines to rest areas where they mingled with civilians, the concentration of sick and wounded in hospitals, the transient populations at military depots and training camps, and lowered resistance caused by (for some) years of fighting meant the virus spread easily.

It became a serious problem for the Australian Imperial Force – 11,700 Australian soldiers on the Western Front were admitted to Field Ambulances suffering from influenza in late 1918. The close quarters nature of trench warfare helped it spread and mutate in a way we haven't seen in the hundred years since.

By November 11<sup>th</sup> 1918, the second wave was spreading through Britain, the United States and even New Zealand – in Auckland the District Health Officer banned any official celebrations of the armistice. He was concerned that crowds would spread the disease further. But official celebrations went ahead in many other towns and cities and it is believed that this contributed to the spread of the disease in New Zealand. In Britain and the US, the story was the same, the armistice celebrations helped spread the virus.

With the signing of the armistice up to 170,000 Australian soldiers required transport back to Australia. Major cities such as London filled with soldiers waiting to be returned to their homeland, increasing both their risk of exposure and the likelihood of carrying it across the sea. Soldiers returning home at the end of the war were identified as potential carriers and had to undertake preventative measures such as inoculation, fumigation and quarantine.

Australia had been proactive in implementing maritime quarantine on 17 October after receiving news of outbreaks in New Zealand and South Africa.

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<sup>2</sup> 'Historians reveal little known histories of the Spanish Flu'

<https://www.newcastle.edu.au/newsroom/faculty-of-education-and-arts/historians-reveal-little-known-histories-of-the-spanish-flu> accessed 4 November 2020.

Returning soldiers, looking forward to joyful family reunification and celebrations recorded their frustrations with quarantine. In a letter to his sister Private William Dunbabin wrote:<sup>3</sup>

If all goes well I am leaving here [Melbourne] tomorrow for Hobart. When we get there we have to do seven days isolation on Bruny Island. .. If they give me half a chance I will bolt and not do the quarantine. I expect they will land on us Bruny though and not give us a chance to escape.

It is thought that something like 9000 soldiers passed through the quarantine station at Bruny – and many of the buildings including the fumigation room remain as a reminder of that pandemic.

Despite the strict quarantine measures, hundreds of thousands of Australians contracted Spanish flu before the end of the pandemic and an estimated 12 to 15,000 died – far fewer casualties than in other parts of the world but nevertheless a devastating blow to a country reeling from the loss of 60,000 soldiers.

As I have said, it was to cause about 50 million deaths world-wide, far more than the deaths from combat casualties in World War One. In fact it may have killed between 3% and 6% of the global population. If we compare that with Covid-19's 1.2 million deaths world-wide and 907 Australian deaths, we can understand the seriousness of Spanish flu.

So this year 2020, in the midst of Covid-19, I think it we should remember not merely all those who sacrificed their lives in armed conflict but also those who lost their lives, the soldiers, members of the defence forces, the doctors, nurses and civilians who lost their lives as a consequence of war and the mobilisation and movement of large numbers of troops and related personnel mingling previously isolated populations which spread the pandemic and led to so many deaths.

Lest we forget.

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<sup>3</sup> Allister Mills, 'Spanish flu: The flu went on and on' Australian War Memorial, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/the-flu-went-on-and-on> accessed 4 November 2020.