

Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize

Question 2: In a speech by then Prime Minister, Paul Keating when the remains of the Unknown Soldier were returned to Australia in 1993, he said that because the war was marked by appalling waste of life, it might be thought that the Unknown Soldier died in vain. But, “Out of the war came a lesson which transcended the horror and inexcusable folly. It was a lesson about ordinary people – and the lesson was that they were not ordinary. On all sides they were the heroes of that war.” Discuss what you consider to be the accuracy of Mr. Keating’s comments within the context of the Australian Imperial Force’s involvement in 1916 at Pozieres and Mouquet Farm.

LCS Member
Word Count: 1,188



The site of the village of Pozieres, February 1917. The cross marks the grave of Tasmanian Captain Ivor Margetts.

“ordinary

[awr-dn-er-ee]

adjective

1. of no special quality or interest; commonplace; unexceptional
2. plain or undistinguished
3. somewhat inferior or below average; mediocre
4. customary; usual; normal”¹

It was November 11th 1993, Remembrance Day, when Prime Minister Paul Keating presented a eulogy for the Unknown Soldier. The Australian political and military leadership decided to repatriate the remains of an unidentified Australian soldier from World War One, so that our nation could recognise and honour the sacrifice that his death represented.

“Out of the war came a lesson which transcended the horror and inexcusable folly. It was a lesson about ordinary people – and the lesson was that they were not ordinary. On all sides they were the heroes of that war.”²

While Keating’s comments were inspiring, they are only partially accurate. Should the “lesson” we learnt come at such a great cost? Should we ever refer to those who achieved extraordinary acts of heroism as “ordinary”? In multicultural Australia should we not respect and promote that heroes come from all sides?

Earlier in his speech, the Prime Minister noted that *“the war was marked by appalling waste of life”³* and because of this many had assumed the Unknown Soldier perished in vain. World War One was known as the war to end all wars, but that was indeed not the case. It is unknown to many Australians that although Gallipoli was the opening battle for the ANZACs, it was not the longest, the most difficult environment, or the fight laden with most suffering. The Somme Offensive was a series of battles along the Western Front in France. Between July 23rd and September 3rd 1916, the Australian forces played a major part in this offensive, to reclaim Pozieres and Mouquet Farm from Germany. In the six weeks that these divisions were battling, the Australians suffered over 23,000 casualties, which is almost equivalent to the losses in Gallipoli in eight months.⁴ Charles Bean, a World War One historian and war correspondent experienced the anguish first hand and wrote that Pozieres Ridge *“..was more densely sown with Australian suffering than any other place on earth.”⁵* Paul Keating’s terminology of *“appalling waste of life”⁶* fits perfectly in this situation. Some people would argue with the Prime Minister’s comment, saying that each man laid down his life for a higher cause, the safekeeping of their country. Every war wastes innocent lives, although the bravery and courage of those who sacrifice themselves for their homeland should be respected. Out of the horror of the Western Front, greater lessons should be learnt than ordinary people rising

¹ Definition of ordinary - <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/ordinary>

² Paul Keating eulogy of Unknown Soldier - <https://www.awm.gov.au/talks-speeches/keating-rememberance-day-1993/>

³ Ibid

⁴ Statistic from – <http://anzacportal.dva.gov.au>

⁵ Quote Charles Bean – <http://www.ww1westernfront.gov.au/pozieres-windmill/on-this-spot-the-windmill-pozieres.php>

⁶ Paul Keating eulogy of Unknown Soldier - <https://www.awm.gov.au/talks-speeches/keating-rememberance-day-1993/>

to greatness in exceptionally difficult circumstances. I feel very strongly that this lesson was learnt at far too high a price.

The Unknown Soldier was, and still is an illustration of one of the many Australian men and women whose lives were tragically ended by this war. Out of the thousands of corpses that littered the battlefields of Pozieres and Mouquet Farm, very few were able to be identified.

"I lost, in three days, my brother and two best friends, and in all six out of seven of all of my officer friends (perhaps a score in number) who went to scrap – all killed. Not one was buried, and some died in agony." ⁷

This quote is from Lieutenant John Raws who was involved in heavy fighting at the battles of Pozieres and Mouquet Farm. As a journalist before the war, he wrote many descriptive letters to family members, one of which recounts his friend's deaths and gives an insight into the amount of carnage in war. Every brave soldier came from a family of their own, they were not "unknown" when they left our shore; these were average Australian men and women. To consider these soldiers as "ordinary" (meaning mediocre or unexceptional) is disrespectful to their incredible service, yet each person serving Australia was an ordinary (meaning usual or normal) person doing extraordinary acts. We should never refer to these people who offered their lives for the freedom of future generations as undistinguished, commonplace or of no special interest.

Captain Ivor Stephen Margetts, originally from Wynyard, was a soldier who perished at the Pozieres wasteland, for it was no longer a village. Margetts was known for his lively spirit and hard work. Stretcher bearer, Private M^cKenzie had this to say after his death:

"He was the best man going. The men loved him. I cried like a kid when I found he was dead. I think he went because he was too good for the beastliness of war." ⁸

While there is no specific act of bravery marked on his war record, Margetts' character positively impacted the morale of his comrades. Amongst the brutality and terror of battle, people looked to him as a leader and encourager. Margetts was no ordinary person, but a valiant soldier who gave hope and courage to others in the midst of adversity, and is most certainly a hero.

"The Unknown Soldier we inter today was one of those who by his deeds proved that real nobility and grandeur belong not to them empires and nations but to the people on whom they, in the last resort, always depend." ⁹

Frank MacDonald was one of these dependable people that Paul Keating referred to. His input in the 40th battalion was rewarded when he received the Military Medal for courage under fire. Frank repaired the communication lines between the headquarters and the trenches and is still considered a hero even though fighting was not his main responsibility. Having a hero from the town I go to school in, is an inspiration. Without people like Frank willing to do "ordinary" work, the Australian forces would not have survived. If ordinary, normal Frank MacDonald can rise to greatness through sheer determination and courage in difficult circumstances, maybe we all can.

Although Prime Minister Keating was discussing an Australian soldier in his eulogy, war is a worldwide phenomenon. Australia has public holidays for remembrance and many other countries pay respect to their people lost in this way too. If we count Australian soldiers as heroes, then we

⁷ Quoted Lieutenant John Raws –

http://www.australiansatwar.gov.au/stories/stories_war=W1_id=130.html

⁸ Quoted Private M^cKenzie – <http://www.awm.gov.au/images/collection/pdf/RCDIG1053324--1-.pdf>.

⁹ Paul Keating eulogy of Unknown Soldier - <https://www.awm.gov.au/talks-speeches/keating-remembrance-day-1993/>

should also respect the allies and enemies. Paul Keating said, "*on all sides*" ¹⁰ they were heroes. As an Australian with a German grandparent and an Italian great grandparent, it is important to me that we, with Paul Keating, recognise that everyday people suffered and rose to become heroes from every side.

Captain von Hentig was an army officer for the German army, who suffered immense casualties too. He described the Somme as, "...*the muddy grave of the German field army.*"¹¹ Another German writer suggested that "*The tragedy of the Somme battle was that the best soldiers, the stoutest-hearted men were lost; their numbers were replaceable, their spiritual worth never could be.*"¹² Each side represented would now agree to the tragic waste of life World War One delivered. Just like Australia, the German army had soldiers performing extraordinary acts of heroism for their country and lost exceptional men and women in the gruesome stalemate. In 2016, one hundred years after the Somme offensive, we should recognise that heroes of war come from all sides.

The battles of Pozieres and Mouquet Farm, like the Unknown Soldier, were buried in history for many years. The bloody, corpse littered Western Front was testament to the waste of life that is inevitable in war, but their sacrifice should not be forgotten. Plain, undistinguished, usual, normal might have been how these men and women were once described, but their persistence, bravery and resilience during the hell of war, prove them extraordinary and worthy of our admiration. Pozieres Ridge and Mouquet Farm were strewn with unknown soldiers from many countries, both allies and opposition. It is only respectful on the centenary of these battles that we honour not the fight itself but those from all sides who served and sacrificed their lives. None of them were ordinary people, but rather valiant Australian men and women who were forced to adapt under exceptional circumstances to fight for their country's freedom. I am honoured that they did.

Lest We Forget.

¹⁰ Paul Keating eulogy of Unknown Soldier - <https://www.awm.gov.au/talks-speeches/keating-remembrance-day-1993/>

¹¹ Quote by Captain von Hentig – <http://roadstothegreatwar-ww1.blogspot.com.au/2015/06/ten-quotes-about-battle-of-somme.html?m=1>

¹² Quote by unknown German writer – http://www.johndclare.net/wwi3_DuffCooper_interp_Somme.htm

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