

H E John Pilbeam
Australian High Commissioner to the Caribbean
Anzac Day - Thursday 25 April 2019

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen

We meet today not to glorify war or praise victors, but to remember those who served their countries in times of conflict and to reflect upon their selfless sacrifice. This year, on the First of September, we mark the Eightieth Anniversary of the beginning of the Second World War, the war that brought three Australians and a New Zealander far from their homes - though not to a foreign place - to die defending Caribbean shipping and harbours from submarine attack.

But let's begin with the joint military history of Australia and New Zealand. 104 years and a few hours ago, at dawn on the 25th of April 1915, thousands of young Australians and New Zealanders, the first ANZACs, along with troops from Great Britain, France, India and Canada, landed at Gallipoli, in modern-day Turkey. When the campaign was called-off, eight months later, nearly 55,000 allied soldiers – and 56,000 soldiers from the Ottoman Empire – had lost their lives. As on other major battle-zones of the First World War, there were scenes of suffering unimaginable today.

In that War, 38% of Australia's male population enlisted and half of them died or were injured. Afterwards, a special commemoration – ANZAC Day – began and so it became our tradition that on the 25th of April - on what old soldiers used to call the one day of the year - we, as Australians, New Zealanders and their friends, would gather across our nations, and in small groups across the world, to remember those who served in the defence of their nations. Here in Port of Spain, we remember, in particular, the young Australians and the New Zealander who now rest forever just a few yards away from us.

Like many in this cemetery, they laid down their lives during what's been called the U-boat war in the Caribbean. During that campaign, fought mostly in late 1941 and early 1942 around the time the US entered the Second World War, German (and a few Italian) submarines, ranging heroically far from bases in occupied France, sunk over four hundred neutral and Allied ships, mostly in the Southern Caribbean.

The submarines' main targets were vessels supplying an embattled Britain - tankers bringing fuel from Venezuela and Trinidad and freighters bringing food from South America and Australia and New Zealand. Before the convoy system was imposed, shipping concentrated on Trinidad's north coast before each vessel made its run across the Atlantic. And where shipping gathered, the U-boats gathered too - the seas off Toco were known as Torpedo Junction. The submarines, operating mostly at night, also attacked harbours in Curacao, Aruba, Port of Spain and St Lucia. Inter-island trade was brought almost to a standstill and even the smallest schooners would only dare sail in the broadest daylight. Blackouts were imposed in the Caribbean's coastal towns.

The four ANZACs buried here were part of the ultimately successful Allied response to the U-boats' bold offensive. Today, let's honour these airmen with names and the little we know of their lives. Before war broke out eighty years ago, all were civilians who answered their country's call - none was a serviceman.

The first to die, in August 1941 at the age of twenty-two, was a New Zealander, Leading Aircraftsman Brian Hamilton, who was stationed at HMS Goshawk - the Royal Navy's flying school at Piarco.

Two Australians, both from rural Victoria, 23 year-old Pilot Officer Jack Walker, formerly a retail manager, and 22 year old Flying Officer Geoff Risbey, formerly a bank clerk, died when their anti-submarine patrol aircraft crashed in September 1942 while trying to land in a storm at Edinburgh air base, near today's Chaguanas.

Barely a fortnight later, 22 year old Alan Morris, formerly a Melbourne salesman, died while test-flying a Lockheed Hudson aircraft along with four US servicemen he'd offered a joy-ride to. When Royal Air Force Association members, a War Museum team and High Commission staff visited Morris' crash-site near Rio Claro in 2016, they found the site threatened by an agricultural development and gathered the last fragments of his aircraft. These are now displayed in the High Commission's foyer as a memorial to all ANZACs.

Today, our ANZACs - Brian Hamilton, Alan Morris, Jack Walker, Geoff Risbey and Alan Morris - rest in peace. Almost eighty years ago now, they died for their countries – Australia and New Zealand - here in Trinidad.

A fitting tribute to them all was paid by an Australian schoolgirl. She wrote on one of the memorial crosses we laid on an ANZAC grave here last year:

Each of you were special
Each of you had courage
Each of you helped keep our country safe

I'm glad you could all join us this morning. If you've been inspired today to face the challenges of the present by the examples of the brave men and women who served their countries in times of conflict and chaos, and who gave their all, your presence here today won't have been in vain.

Thank you.