

## PLANTING THE TREE OF REMEMBRANCE AT THE OXLEY COLLEGE

Today, I have a very special gift for The Oxley College. It is a *Tree of Remembrance* which is to be planted in honour of all those who've served and died for their country. In the years ahead, this small seedling will grow into a magnificent leafy monument, tall and eloquent in its silent testimony to the supreme sacrifice made by so many.

This Turkish Pine seedling has a very special story to tell. It is a direct descendant of the famous Lone Pine that grew high on the ridge overlooking ANZAC Cove, the little beach at Gallipoli where 16,000 British, Australian and New Zealand soldiers landed at dawn on April 25, 1915 in their ill-fated attempt to seize the Dardanelles, the strategic Strait, in north-western Turkey, guarding the ancient Turkish capital, Constantinople. The aim of the ANZAC mission was to knock Germany's ally, Ottoman Turkey, out of the First World War.

But, by the end of that first ANZAC Day, 107-years ago, over 2,000 young Australian soldiers lay dead and it was clear that the whole strategy would be a complete debacle. The Australian commanders were so appalled by the carnage inflicted on their young soldiers, that they recommended an immediate evacuation. But the Commander in Chief, the British General, Sir Ian Hamilton, refused, saying "you've got through the difficult business – now all you have to do is dig, dig, dig until you're safe." Thus, and forever after, Australian soldiers have been known as "Diggers" – the term that's become synonymous with their courage, their mateship and their endurance.

Four months later, in August, 1915, the Turkish defenders, who were well concealed in deeply fortified trenches along the ridges, had taken a terrible toll in firing down upon the young ANZAC soldiers. The Australian and New Zealand infantrymen were of course, impatient to take the fight up to the enemy. And so, in the face of withering enemy fire, they embarked upon a daring frontal assault, using their bayonets like picks to help them scale the steep and crumbling hills and there in savage hand-to-hand fighting, they attacked the Turks in their trenches. In the frenzied four-day assault that became famous as the Battle of Lone Pine, over 2,000 young Australian soldiers were killed. Many of them were not much older than the Oxley College Year 12 boys. Between 6,000 and 7,000 Turkish soldiers were also killed. Although the battle of Lone Pine failed to dislodge the Turkish defenders, it was instrumental in laying the foundations for Australian military traditions that endure to this day.

After the failure of this August offensive, when the British High Command finally called a halt to the slaughter: 44,000 allied soldiers had been killed and at least 87,000 Turks had also died. General Sir Ian Hamilton was relieved as Commander in Chief and his replacement, Lieutenant General Sir Charles Munro began to plan what was to become one of the most successful retreats in the history of warfare. Over five nights in December, in the depths of a

bitterly cold winter, over 90,000 men were silently and secretly evacuated by boat from ANZAC Cove with only a handful of casualties.

During the retreat, one young Australian soldier, Corporal Keith McDowell, risked his life to crawl across No Man's Land toward the shattered remains of the Lone Pine tree. There he retrieved a single pinecone like this one, tightly packed with the seeds that would eventually give life to this young tree. Corporal McDowell hid the pinecone in his knapsack and slithered down the hill to re-join his mates on the beach at ANZAC Cove. He carried that souvenir pinecone with him as a good luck token as he went on to fight against German forces on the Western Front in France and Belgium. There, shell-shocked and gassed, he survived some of the worst battles of what was supposed to be "the war to end all wars." And when he was eventually invalided home to Warrnambool in south-western Victoria, he brought with him the haversack containing his precious pine cone.

During the 12 years that he took to fully recover from his injuries, Keith McDowell gave little thought to the pine cone. But then, one day his wife mentioned that her aunty, Mrs Emma Gray, had a gardener's "green thumb" and may be able to use her skills to prize the seeds from the tightly sealed cone. Well, Mrs Gray did manage to extract five fertile seeds from the cone and she succeeded in propagating them. The seedlings were planted at Melbourne's Shrine of Remembrance and at the Warrnambool Botanic Gardens. Over the next 60 years those trees grew to over 23 metres and in turn produced seed cones of their own. This seedling was grown from one of those trees nurtured at the Warrnambool Botanic Gardens. It is a direct descendant of the Lone Pine that the ANZAC soldiers knew so well at Gallipoli. It will therefore hold a special significance for the Oxley College community as we watch it grow and grow, standing as a living green memorial, eloquent in its silence.

The inspiration for the *Tree of Remembrance* came from our granddaughter, Isabella Francipane, who is currently in Year One at Oxley. Isabella asked for a tree that would "grow up to the sky." And that's exactly what we have here. The seedling is only 35cm tall at the moment but after more than 300 years or so it will have grown to over 35 metres tall and spread its lovely, shady lower limbs out over 15 metres around the trunk which will be from one to two metres in diameter. Generations of Oxley students yet-unborn will be able to sit in the shade of those massive limbs and reflect on the enduring ANZAC legacy, captured in three poignant words: **Lest We Forget**.

***This talk to the Oxley College Student Body, was delivered by Bruce Stannard AM, on April 26, 2022, to mark the planting of The Tree of Remembrance, Mr Stannard's gift to the College.***