

Australian War Memorial offers opportunity for primary school children to connect with 62 000 Great War dead

David Stephens

The concept

Before Brendan Nelson was Director of the Australian War Memorial he was an Australian Ambassador in Europe. He visited [Tyne Cot War Cemetery in Belgium](#) and was captivated by a feature in the visitor centre there, the recorded voice of a young woman reciting the names and age at death of the 11 950 Commonwealth dead buried in the cemetery.

According to Anne Bennie, Centenary of Anzac Coordinator at the Memorial, Dr Nelson thought the Tyne Cot exhibit was 'incredibly moving and to have young Australian school children connect with those names on the Roll of Honour [would be] the start of a journey for a lot of them. It's a very practical way that they can first have engagement about this.' Honest History recently interviewed Ms Bennie about the project that developed from Dr Nelson's visit to Tyne Cot. The project is entitled [Roll of Honour Soundscape](#).

The project

The project envisages Australian primary school children, ideally Year 6 children, aged approximately 11 and 12 years, recording the names and age at death of all 62 000 Australian men and women killed in World War I. The recordings will be done either in ABC studios around the country or via a Google app. The app will enable schools in remote areas to participate in the project. The app will display the names, the child will read the names and the recording will be transmitted to the Memorial. Dr Nelson saw the app in operation earlier this month and was impressed by its simplicity and user-friendliness. The Memorial is particularly concerned to involve rural and regional children because so many World War I soldiers came from these areas.



Soldiers c. 1907 (source: Flickr Commons/Star Series postcard, published by G. D. & D., London; photo: pellethepoet who writes: 'Bought from an eBay seller in Weston-super-Mare, United Kingdom. I felt an immense sadness when I first saw this image, knowing that some (if not many) of these boys may have been killed in the trenches of the Western Front during the First World War. It's fun playing at soldiers as a child, but the real thing is a different matter altogether ...'

The names will be recorded during the four years of the centenary and played continuously over speakers in the World War I Roll of Honour Cloister at the Memorial. Visitors to the Cloisters, [Dr Nelson says](#), 'will hear these young voices, progressively, slowly just recite the name of each one of them and their age at the time of their death'.

Each child will read a number of randomly chosen names. They will not be able to choose the names they read, for example, the name of a relative. The Memorial is concerned to treat all of the deaths in the same way, noting that other elements of the Memorial, such as the daily Last Post Ceremony, offer 'personalisation' of remembrance.

The recordings will become part of the Memorial's permanent collection. The information about individual soldiers is publicly available in service records though age at death is not always known; recitals of these names will be followed by the words 'age unknown'. Discussing the decision to use age at death, Ms Bennie said 'we just thought it was poignant'.

The reaction

The project has been well-received by schools and students. Canberra school principals reacted positively to the invitation to join the pilot study while government, independent and Catholic schools in other states and territories are responding well to invitations coming to them through education administrations, often through National Curriculum officers. Media coverage and the Memorial's website item has helped publicise the project. Some children in the pilot program researched the backgrounds of the soldiers whose names they read out.

While the project did not need to be approved by the Memorial's Council the Council is being kept fully informed of progress, as with all centenary projects. The Memorial has not yet felt the need to involve history teachers' associations or teachers' unions.

Normal parental permission arrangements will apply to the project and the Memorial expects that schools participating will have opting-out arrangements in place for students whose parents do not wish them to participate. 'We are not making people do it', Ms Bennie says. The ABC was aware of protocols about ethical dealing with children when making recordings, it would not be possible to identify children from recordings and names would not be held in the Memorial's collection against the recordings.

As for possible psychological effects on the children participating, for example, an effect deriving from researching the details of a combat death, 'we are dealing through the education departments and the schools. So we're not expecting the child to be on their own in their bedroom recording names.' The situation was no different from any other form of research into something horrifying or distasteful where material is taken home and researched unsupervised. Targeting Year 6 as the ideal was related to 'having children of an appropriate maturity, so that they could really understand what they were doing', rather than children who were too young to comprehend or older children who may have moved beyond this level of engagement.

The logistics

While Ms Bennie preferred to talk about the 'the experience the kids go through' rather than the process – 'You start talking about logistics and you get away from what the purpose is' – it is clear from [the numbers involved](#) that participation in the project will be confined to a small proportion of Year 6 children. Every year roughly 270 000 children do Year 6. They attend approximately 7000 schools. If every child participating in the project recites, say, 10 names – the actual number read

will be flexible – there will be 6200 children involved in *Roll of Honour Soundscape* out of the approximately one million children who will pass through Year 6 in the four years of the centenary.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

ART09852

The inauguration of the Australian War Memorial, Canberra, ANZAC Day 1929 by Louis McCubbin (source: Australian War Memorial ART09852; oil on canvas; a view from the bottom of Mount Ainslie and looking towards what is now Anzac Parade and Parliament House)

During the ACT pilot project one school held a competition to see who would read the names, asking the children to write a short piece on what they understood about the war. Similar selection exercises may be necessary Australia-wide. On the other hand, if numbers are lagging, the Memorial may go back to schools who have previously participated, noting that there will be four Year 6 cohorts during the centenary years. In war commemoration, as in war itself, logistics is inescapable.

Connecting with the young

There are other parallels between the project and the war it commemorates. While the Memorial recognises that there were relatively few soldiers killed at ages 16 or 17 – the average age of men who enlisted was around 25 – there is clearly a ‘youth connecting with youth’ motif in the project.

This is a very practical way [[says Dr Nelson](#)] of connecting past sacrifices with the present and the future. Young Australians recording the Roll of Honour and age of death prompts them to reflect upon and understand that there were real men who had real lives and gave those lives in the name of freedom... [W]e are bringing young Australians [[he adds](#)] to a direct understanding that there were individual sacrifices made in our name and these young Australians gave their lives *for us*. (Emphasis in original)

The role of teachers

How this connection is made will depend very much on the school and the teacher. Ms Bennie believes whether or not children participate in the project is primarily a matter of flexibility and imagination on the part of teachers.

The teacher is the person that says what appropriate and what’s not... Things that teachers bring into the classroom are teachers’ choices, in terms of appropriate material. If a particular school chooses not to associate with this program they won’t ... If a teacher wants to bring potentially new technology and things into the classroom they will. If a teacher wants to teach from an activity book or just talk about the good stories within a conflict or a

world war they will. Teachers are always looking at new ways to engage students. You are not going to be able to force it on teachers who don't have an open mind to bring something into the classroom.

There are some teachers who simply teach to the national curriculum or to NATPLAN, who just 'tick off' activities like 'civics and citizenship'. 'Then there are the teachers who really want the kids to explore different areas. It's about what teachers want to do as part of the extra-curricular activity.'



Anzac Day at Braidwood, NSW, 1996 (source: National Archives of Australia A6135, 11755626)

Questions

People – teachers, parents and citizens – considering the *Roll of Honour Soundscape* project may, however, consider the project raises broader questions, for example:

- What is the nature of the 'connection' that the project seeks? Is the aim simply that 11 and 12 year-olds will understand that people die in wars – that the 'real lives' Dr Nelson refers to can be cut short – or is it that these children should fully appreciate the circumstances of these deaths – evisceration, dismemberment, decapitation, thirst, loneliness, panic and terror? Should children of this age have to come to grips with these details? If they should not, should such projects be targeted at ages where death in war can be fully and honestly depicted?
- If, as Dr Nelson says, the objective is 'connecting past sacrifices with the present and the future', what future thoughts and actions is the project likely to underwrite? Does involvement in it help make an 11 or 12 year-old more or less likely to accept or make similar 'sacrifices' in later life? If socialisation towards particular attitudes and behaviour is the aim will these attitudes and behaviour be confined to civilian pursuits such as emergency services or will they include military service? Does laying stress on sacrifice give a distorted view of service?
- Is it realistic 100 years on to talk about lives being given 'for us', even if we accept that people at the time, or perhaps immediately afterwards, believed that these lives had been given 'in the name of freedom'?

The third question above is, of course, one that attends all commemorative exercises, not just the *Roll of Honour Soundscape* project. Like the other questions, it is one that the teachers of Year 6 children – and the rest of us – are going to have to grapple with continually over the next four years.

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