

The 2015 John Laffin Memorial Lecture

The 2015 John Laffin Memorial Lecture was held in the BAE Systems Theatre at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra on Sunday 5 July. Canberra was experiencing one of its coldest winters with the overnight temperature of -7C. This winter experience and the distance were more than offset by the quality of the venue and the Lecture program with the accompanying “behind the scenes” tour of parts of the War Memorial.

24 Members and guests attended the presentations and tours. Vice President Jim Munro was Master of Ceremonies and gave an overview of John Laffin's contribution to establishing the military history and the expansion of the Western Front Association and the establishment of FFFAIF. Apologies were conveyed from His Excellency, General the Honourable Sir Peter Cosgrove AK MC, President Russell Curley and Committee Member Lorraine Curley, Treasurer Robyn War, Secretary Kathryn Barton and Commemorations Officer Margaret Snodgrass and Committee Members Arlene Ronsisvale and Maurice Campbell. Apologies were also received from former President Craig and Kath Laffin and Anny De Decker along with others unable to attend. The use of the BAE Systems Theatre and Western Courtyard at the AWM were without charge, courtesy of the Director, FFFAIF member Dr Brendan Nelson, who was an apology as he had a commitment in Belgium. The Ode was recited by member Lt. Col. Paul Simadas (RFD).

Member **Tony Cunneen** engrossed the audience with his presentation on *The Home Front 1914-1918* which focussed on how the leading figures in Australian society reacted to and participated in or contributed to the Great War, as well as the experiences of less well known Australians. Tony's presentation augmented his recent article DIGGER magazine. The presentation was both interesting and entertaining, and this significant time in history was brought to life by Tony's presentation with an added humanist dimension.

Robyn Van Dyk, head of the AWM Research Centre spoke about *some the Memorial's key centenary projects*, particularly those related to digitising more of the Memorial's data records and linking these with other of the Memorial's databases as well as linking them with those of other institutions such as the National Archives, National Library, State Libraries and the AIF Project at ADFA (part of the University of NSW) in the quest to give a more integrated and almost seamless online experience for users. Robyn outlined approaches to resolving the ambiguity in not having a unique identifier for each Australian who served in WW1, with multiple Service numbers being issued in the enlistment process, Officers not having Service numbers, transfers, military units changing throughout the War and some Australians serving with British or New Zealand forces. The complexity of indexing the database material to enhance search capability was also addressed e.g. there are over 1,000 documents in the Monash Collection to index.

Following lunch, Robyn with Maggie, (who volunteers in the art section of the Research Centre,) led tours highlighting different aspects of the Memorial. Robyn covered more than 100 years of Australian military mapping with maps from the Boxer Rebellion, through historically significant maps from Gallipoli, to contemporary approaches to military mapping utilising satellite imaging. The challenges of storing and digitising maps of different sizes and scales as well as issues of military sensitivity and copyright were covered.

Maggie explained the symbolism in the Courtyard surrounding the Pool of Reflection and the Hall of Memory, including the mosaics, stained glass windows and the dome. This was followed by taking Members and guests through the refurbished WW1 Gallery,

highlighting the melding of original dioramas with contemporary interpretive approaches using touch screen technology.

Members and their guests participated in 3 Luck Door Prize draws and 3 Raffles prizes for books related to the Great War, or authored by John Laffin. Members contributed \$528 through and entry fees and raffles towards the \$1,060 catering and security costs with FFFAIF contributing the remaining 50%.

Feedback from the day has been overwhelmingly positive, with most attendees having gained new insights into The Great War and the Australian War Memorial.

Jim Munro
7 July, 2015