

## Sir John Monash Centre, Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, France

- 2.1 The Department of Veterans' Affairs (DVA) seeks approval from the Committee to construct the Sir John Monash Centre (SJMC) behind the Australian National Memorial (ANM) in Villers-Bretonneux, France.
- 2.2 The primary objective of the project is to construct an interpretive centre and gallery which will showcase Australian materials, craftsmanship, culture and technology. When completed, the SJMC will use integrated multimedia systems and interactive displays to provide an overview of, and context for, Australian operations on the Western Front during the First World War.<sup>1</sup>
- 2.3 The estimated cost of the project is \$93.2 million.
- 2.4 The project was referred to the Committee on 13 May 2015.

### Conduct of the inquiry

- 2.5 Following referral, the inquiry was publicised on the Committee's website and via media release.
- 2.6 The Committee received one submission and one supplementary submission from DVA. A list of submissions can be found at Appendix A.
- 2.7 The Committee received a briefing from DVA and conducted public and in-camera hearings in Canberra on 26 June 2015. A transcript of the public hearing and the public submissions to the inquiry are available on the Committee's website.<sup>2</sup>

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1 DVA, submission 1, pp. 1, 13.

2 <[www.aph.gov.au/pwc](http://www.aph.gov.au/pwc)>

## History and location

- 2.8 During the First World War, Australian service on the Western Front was widespread, extending from the Channel Coast of Belgium in the north, to Villers-Bretonneux in the south and from there to Montebrehain in the east. Between 1916 and 1918, 290,000 Australians served and 46,000 died in this region.<sup>3</sup>
- 2.9 Villers-Bretonneux is located 143km north of Paris. It was here that the great offensive of 8 August 1918 commenced, led by Australians and Canadians. In conjunction with British offensives to the north and French offensives to the south, events at Villers-Bretonneux ultimately led to the end of the First World War.<sup>4</sup>
- 2.10 The ANM was designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens and records the names of 10,738 Australians who died in France during the First World War and who have no known grave.<sup>5</sup>
- 2.11 Australia was granted perpetual use of the ANM site by the French Government in the 1920s and in April 2015, acquired two additional parcels of land adjacent to the site.<sup>6</sup> The proposed construction site is at the rear of the ANM and on land adjacent to the Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery, which contains more than 2,000 graves, 731 of them Australians.<sup>7</sup> The site is located on the boundary of the Fouilloy township, approximately two kilometres from the town of Villers-Bretonneux.<sup>8</sup>

## Need for the works

- 2.12 In December 2003, Prime Minister Howard requested the then Minister for Veterans' Affairs commission a feasibility study for the establishment of an Australian visitors centre on the Western Front, where Australia's main war effort was focussed.<sup>9</sup>
- 2.13 Conducted in 2006, the feasibility study examined a number of potential sites<sup>10</sup> and stated:

For Australian visitors the facility will provide a memorable understanding of the circumstances in which their countrymen

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3 DVA, submission 1, p. 7.

4 DVA, submission 1, p. 11.

5 DVA, submission 1, p. 1.

6 DVA, submission 1, p. 14.

7 DVA, submission 1, p. 1.

8 DVA, submission 1, pp. 6-7.

9 DVA, submission 1, p. 2.

10 DVA, submission 1, p. 2.

fought and died as well the indelible impact this sacrifice had on Australian society.

For European visitors, particularly students, Australia's role on the Western Front is relatively unknown. This perspective is easily changed with high quality communication. However the chance to explain Australia's involvement in the overall context of the Western Front is an opportunity to foster the bond and strengthen European relations.

This document outlines a facility of excellence in design, interpretation, communication and operation with two clear objectives:

- 1 To enhance all visitors' understanding of Australia's role and sacrifice at the Western Front.
- 2 To establish and operate an outstanding visitor facility providing international standard interpretation that serves to strengthen Australia's presence and foster European relations.<sup>11</sup>

2.14 Additionally, it specified the facility should be of an international standard, referring to the following characteristics:

- Credible/authentic/authoritative:
  - ⇒ The facility is endorsed at an official/government level as the custodian of this subject, the presentation of information related to the subject and presentation to the public.
- Accurate/scholarly:
  - ⇒ The information presented is accurate, well researched and scholarly in foundation.
- Appropriate facility standards:
  - ⇒ The facility will be characterised by appropriate international standards of showcasing, lighting, security, and environmental control.
- Uniqueness:
  - ⇒ A world class small museum or interpretive centre will typically contain elements that are considered unique, i.e. elements that cannot be seen or experienced anywhere else.
- Range of experience:
  - ⇒ The visitor experience in a small world class interpretive centre will contain a range of experiences from traditional contemplative display to high impact presentation utilising

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11 DVA, *Facility Development Plan*, 2006, p. 6.

the latest in audio-visual technology to effectively communicate with the visitor.<sup>12</sup>

- 2.15 Following this, three options were developed in 2008 for constructing a centre on the ANM site.<sup>13</sup>
- 2.16 The 2009-10 Federal Budget committed \$10 million to the establishment of an Australian Remembrance Trail (the Trail) along the Western Front. French and Belgian partners committed a further \$25 million. The Trail comprises museums, interpretive centres, walking trails and extensive web based resources.<sup>14</sup>
- 2.17 In 2014, the Government confirmed it would establish the SJMC at the rear of the ANM site.<sup>15</sup> The Prime Minister reiterated this commitment in April 2015, during his address at Villers-Bretonneux, saying:
- Soon, this shrine will be more than a place to mourn and reflect; it will also be a place to learn and to understand. A new centre, bearing Monash's name, will tell the whole story of Australia's part in the Allied victory here on the Western Front.<sup>16</sup>

### Expected visitors

- 2.18 The number of visitors to First World War sites across the Western Front has doubled over the period from 2005 to 2014; from 300,000-400,000 to 788,000.<sup>17</sup>
- 2.19 Despite being included in the official Trail, current visitation routes along the Western Front do not usually pass the ANM. Therefore, a key requirement of the SJMC is to be of outstanding quality and sufficiently compelling in character and impact to change patterns of visitation to the battlefields.<sup>18</sup> The interpretive design will offer visitors an experience not found elsewhere on the Western Front.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, it will provide a single day experience for those unable to take the five or more days necessary to visit all the sites along the Trail.<sup>20</sup>
- 2.20 In 2014, 47,000 people visited the ANM.<sup>21</sup> Research and modelling undertaken in 2008 estimated visitor numbers to the SJMC would reach

12 DVA, *Facility Development Plan*, 2006, p. 48.

13 DVA, submission 1, p. 5.

14 DVA, submission 1, p. 2.

15 DVA, submission 1, p. 5.

16 DVA, submission 1, p. 3.

17 DVA, submission 1, p. 8.

18 DVA, submission 1, p. 4.

19 DVA, submission 1, p. 6.

20 DVA, submission 1, p. 2.

21 DVA, submission 1, p. 8.

90,000 per year. In 2015 commemorative specialists revised this predicted figure to 110,000 people per year.<sup>22</sup>

- 2.21 The SJMC is targeted toward visitors of all nationalities, including Australians, and especially tourist retirees (groups and individuals) and the large number of British, French and German school students who visit the Somme battlefields. Consequently, interactive displays will be available in English, French and German.<sup>23</sup>
- 2.22 The SJMC, like similar visitor centres along the Western Front, will not charge entry fees.<sup>24</sup>

## Options considered

- 2.23 A number of potential sites for the centre were examined in 2006. These included Ypres, Fromelles, Bullecourt, Hazebrouck, Le Hamel, Sailly-le-Sec and Bellenglise, Pozières and Villers-Bretonneux.<sup>25</sup>
- 2.24 A Facility Development Plan (FDP) study commissioned by DVA in 2006 identified the ANM at Villers-Bretonneux as the preferred location for a centre on the basis of:
- research and consultation amongst Australia's leading historians of the First World War identifying the ANM as the site that represents all Australian Imperial Force Divisions and as a site of a major Australian victory;
  - the site's ability to support an interpretive centre that explains the whole story of Australia's involvement on the Western Front battlefields; and
  - the location of the ANM as an appropriate site for commemoration and remembrance consistent with other national visitor centres on the Western Front (Canada, South Africa and the United Kingdom).<sup>26</sup>
- 2.25 As noted earlier, three options for constructing a centre on the ANM site were developed in 2008. Each option was assessed on appropriate design and form, accessibility and integrating with the existing site with minimal impact.<sup>27</sup>
- 2.26 During the briefing, the Committee heard that visitors could make the

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22 DVA, submission 1, p. 8.

23 DVA, submission 1, p. 14.

24 DVA, submission 1, p. 6.

25 DVA, submission 1, p. 2.

26 DVA, submission 1, p. 2.

27 DVA, submission 1, p. 5.

return train trip from Paris to Villers-Bretonneux, via Amiens, in a day. Visitors can take local transport to the ANM which is approximately two kilometres from the train station at Villers-Bretonneux. There are no current plans to run a shuttle bus service, however DVA agreed this may be considered in the future.

2.27 Villers-Bretonneux is approximately 32 kilometres from the Anglo-French Thiepval Visitor Centre, and a further 60 kilometres from the Canadian memorial at Vimy.

2.28 At the public hearing, the Committee asked DVA to comment on the site in terms of location relative to other memorials along the Trail. In responding, DVA noted that it was conventional for visitors centres for each country to be located close to their own national memorial:

They [the Canadian and British interpretive centres] are both at their national memorials. So putting our interpretive centre at our national memorial is in keeping with that practice... Clearly there were other locations where Australians served with distinction on the Western Front – in Belgium and further north, principally Pozieres; perhaps Fromelles, Ypres. But at the end of the day the first AIF [Australian Imperial Force] survivors themselves and government at the time chose Villers-Bretonneux as the place for our national memorial, where the 10,700 who have no known graves are commemorated. It is our national memorial.<sup>28</sup>

2.29 The Committee found that DVA has considered multiple options to deliver the project and has selected the most suitable option.

## Scope of the works

2.30 Much of the new building will be below ground to reduce intrusion on the landscape. The car and bus parking areas are likewise concealed in a way that remains respectful of the site's existing cemetery and memorial and the surrounding battlefields.<sup>29</sup>

2.31 The SJMC comprises the following major elements:

- an interpretive centre building of approximately 1600m<sup>2</sup> gross floor area;
- a fit-out comprising a range of high-quality interactive, multimedia interpretive displays;
- an immersive gallery manufactured in Australia utilising Australian materials, expertise and technology;

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28 Major General Dave Chalmers AO CSC, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 3.

29 DVA, submission 1, pp. 6.

- a range of highly immersive and interactive multimedia content;
  - an integrated building control system and leading-edge multi-language 'bring your own device' interpretive experience;
  - site access road works, including staff, coach and visitor parking;
  - site infrastructure and grounds maintenance facility to support the operation of the SJMC;
  - significant civil, horticultural and landscaping works; and
  - feature lighting to the ANM.<sup>30</sup>
- 2.32 The design will showcase Australian materials, craftsmanship, culture and technology in detailed finishes and timber panelling, unique architectural design and the multimedia control systems.<sup>31</sup>
- 2.33 The interpretive design will extend beyond internal display and entry areas to external surrounds and parking facilities.<sup>32</sup>
- 2.34 At the public hearing, the Committee sought further information on the proposed design. DVA stated that while there is a cost in constructing the facility to be partially submerged into the landscape, it is not a significant cost.<sup>33</sup>
- 2.35 DVA go on to comment:
- The design of the building could have been above ground, it could have been fully underground. The design selected is, as you see, semi-underground. That is principally in order to keep its sight lines out of the view of the memorial itself so that the Lutyens-designed memorial is not compromised by having another building sitting behind it.<sup>34</sup>
- 2.36 When asked if the Lutyens Trust had any hesitation regarding the works, DVA responded:
- The Lutyens Trust has opposed every single development by any country in any proximity to a Lutyens' memorial. That is an article of faith for them... We did give them an indication early of what we were considering. We asked them to provide their views on the things that might shape the project. We have negotiated with them twice. The outcome of our last meeting in London in the first week of May was actually extremely positive. They made generous
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30 DVA, submission 1, pp. 12-13.

31 DVA, submission 1, p. 13.

32 DVA, submission 1, p. 13.

33 Major General Dave Chalmers AO CSC, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 3.

34 Major General Dave Chalmers AO CSC, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 3.

acknowledgement that we had respected the work of Lutyens. They were particularly taken by the way that Cox [Architecture] had designed a building that was complimentary to the original geometry of the site and in fact became a logical extension thereof. They were particularly impressed by the fact that the building was sunken and had the roof surface that we have discussed today. They are very pleased that a couple of elements of the Lutyens' design that fell out of the project as a result of cost savings in 1937 and 1938 are going back in. They were very pleased with the unbuilt paths that we speak of.<sup>35</sup>

- 2.37 DVA also assured the Committee that neither the site nor design made the facility vulnerable to water damage:

We have had a geotechnical survey done on the site. We think of the Somme as being low-lying; this site is on the top of the hill. There is an excellent rock base. There is some fracturing in this. We do not anticipate drainage problems, although drainage does get some special attention in the design. There is a cost element that comes with this. But one of the things which draw us to this site – beyond the original logic of our government's decision in the 1930s – is that we own this site effectively. We purchased it in the 1920s. Under treaty arrangements we returned it to the French state. They hold it in perpetuity, in trust, for Australia's use. By having this site on which we can work almost immediately, in terms of a project which is under a very tight schedule, we are able to excise ourselves away from complex negotiations around land acquisition on any other possible site.<sup>36</sup>

### Multimedia interpretative display

- 2.38 The interpretive displays and visitor experience will be supported by a smartphone/device application and website. The SJMC will be a fully integrated building, allowing remote management and support of all building systems and multimedia displays and hardware.<sup>37</sup>
- 2.39 At the public hearing, the Committee expressed some concern over the heavy reliance on multimedia and queried the potential for incorporating a tactile-based experience. DVA responded by stating:

The multimedia approach is driving the centre largely, but there are some selected iconic objects that will be built into the centre as

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35 Mr Chris Appleton, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 12.

36 Mr Chris Appleton, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 4.

37 DVA, submission 1, p. 13.



well. The power of multimedia, particularly with emerging audiences, is that it gives us the capacity to structure an experience for school groups, so within the broader curriculum areas that are outlined within Europe and Australia we can tailor information to that particular school group and feedback information which they can take away and incorporate in projects back at school.<sup>38</sup>

2.40 Additionally, DVA commented on provisions for visitors without access to a smart phone or device:

...for those without a phone who arrive at the site, we have an explanation of the site, of the Lutyens design and of the key points. It is a screen based design and you will be able to interrogate that and get some answers from that. Of course, other people will have their phone with them on that first visit up through the site. Once visitors arrive in the building, the proposal is that there will be a small number of devices that the visitor services officers will be able to offer to visitors.<sup>39</sup>

2.41 Finally, the Committee sought assurance that the multimedia system could be adequately managed from Australia. DVA responded:

...we have been involved in the design of a number of centres within Australia – the Perth Mint and the Bombing of Darwin experience up in Darwin at East Point. The Darwin centre is built in a cyclone zone; it is quite a robust building. We can monitor that from Australia. We know exactly what is happening with the projectors. We know which piece of equipment is operating – when it is up, when it is down. We know the lamplights within projectors. We know the lamplights of screens. We know all of that kind of stuff. So, in terms of setting up a maintenance program and a maintenance schedule, that can all be built in and factored in. Of course, you do need somebody to get up a ladder at some stage, and that will be managed with management people and maintenance people in France.<sup>40</sup>

## The visitor experience

2.42 At the public hearing, the Committee commented on guided experiences offered at two war Canadian memorials in France and queried the use of Australian volunteers to act as guides.

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38 Mr Russell Magee, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 5.

39 Mr Russell Magee, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 10.

40 Mr Russell Magee, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 7.

- 2.43 The Student Guide Program in France is managed by Veterans Affairs Canada (VAC). It began in 1963 with three paid guides at the Canadian National Vimy Memorial in France. In 1997, the guide program expanded to the Beaumont-Hamel Newfoundland Memorial, also in France.<sup>41</sup>
- 2.44 Currently, the guide program employs an average of 45 Canadian students each year. Students must be bilingual and have relevant experience. While guides are needed at both sites year round, each guide is only hired for a period of four months.<sup>42</sup>
- 2.45 DVA explained to the Committee:
- The interpretive approach in this centre is designed to be self-guiding. We are going to ask people to make choices about what they want to hear, the thematic line they want to follow and what language they want to hear it in. The technology of this place will allow the visitor to be located in the centre and she will cue certain things to respond as she approaches, which are in accordance with the preferences that she has recorded for visiting. So the need for someone to escort you through this place will be much less.<sup>43</sup>
- 2.46 Nevertheless, the Committee remains interested in exploring options to implement an Australian student guide program for the SJMC. This is discussed further under Committee comments.

## Accessibility

- 2.47 At the public hearing, the Committee queried how those with limited mobility might access the site. DVA assured the Committee the designs are fully compliant with both Australian and French access codes.<sup>44</sup>
- 2.48 DVA did, however, point out one area that was not compliant:
- ...the area that is not compliant is in coming up the middle of the cemetery; that is on a grassed embankment...<sup>45</sup>
- 2.49 In addition, DVA advised that the car park provided some access restrictions:

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41 Veterans Affairs Canada, accessed 28 July 2015  
<<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/information-for/students/student-guide-program-in-france>>.

42 Veterans Affairs Canada, accessed 28 July 2015  
<<http://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/information-for/students/student-guide-program-in-france>>.

43 Major General Dave Chalmers AO CSC and Mr Chris Appleton, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 4.

44 Mr Joe Agius, Cox Architecture, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 8.

45 Mr Joe Agius, Cox Architecture, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 8.

One of the restrictions on that site is that it is a battlefield. There are the battlefield lines of sight. The reason that the car park is down there is that it is shadowed within the slope of the hill so that it is not visible from the towns on either side or even from the memorial itself. So there is quite a restriction put on us by the local planning.<sup>46</sup>

- 2.50 Provisions will be made for visitors with limited mobility; a path will run along the outside edge of the military cemetery, rather than up through the grassed section<sup>47</sup> and vehicles may drop passengers outside the building before parking.<sup>48</sup>
- 2.51 Subject to Parliamentary approval of the project, construction is expected to commence in January 2016 and be completed by October 2017. Fit-out will be completed in February 2018 ready to commemorate the centenary of the Battle of Villers-Bretonneux in April 2018.<sup>49</sup>
- 2.52 The Committee finds that the proposed scope of works is suitable for the works to meet its purpose.

## Cost of the works

- 2.53 The estimated cost of the project is \$93.2 million.
- 2.54 At the public hearing, DVA told the Committee that the capital cost for the works will be absorbed by the Department of Defence with no impact at all on programs administered by DVA or to veterans themselves.<sup>50</sup> Operating costs will be the responsibility of DVA.<sup>51</sup>
- 2.55 Additionally, the Committee queried why the SJMC was markedly more expensive than other memorials. DVA responded:

In this instance, you get what you pay for. If you are going to build an interpretive centre for an amount of \$6 million or \$10 million, then you do not get the size of interpretive space that is in this proposal, and you do not get the quality of multimedia interpretive product that we have. So the proposals that you are talking about are simpler and smaller designs.<sup>52</sup>

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46 Mr Ian Fletcher, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 6.

47 Mr Joe Agius, Cox Architecture, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 8.

48 Mr Chris Appleton, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 5.

49 DVA, submission 1, pp. 1, 29.

50 Major General Dave Chalmers AO CSC, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 4.

51 Major General Dave Chalmers AO CSC, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 11.

52 Major General Dave Chalmers AO CSC, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 3.

- 2.56 DVA expanded on this point later in the hearing:
- In the functional design brief which the Commonwealth devised, we spelt out that this building and its contents needed to be sufficiently compelling in character that they would change patterns of visitation to the battlefield, and there is a cost premium in that. The concept for interpretation you have heard outlined is without peer. That also comes at a significant cost but it is our belief that that very significant point of distinction is going to draw a new audience to this very important site.<sup>53</sup>
- 2.57 DVA provided further detail on the project costs in the confidential submission and during the in-camera hearing.
- 2.58 The Committee considers that the cost estimates for the project have been adequately assessed by DVA and the Committee is satisfied that the proposed expenditure is cost effective. As the project will not be revenue generating the Committee makes no comment in relation to this matter.

### Committee comments

- 2.59 The Committee commends DVA on its commitment to honouring Australians who have served on the Western Front. The SJMC will be an innovative and engaging way for visitors to learn about Australia's military history.
- 2.60 While acknowledging that the design of the SJMC is primarily intended to allow visitors to be self-guided, and that it is very different to the Canadian memorial at Vimy where visitors are guided through a still recognisable battlefield, the Committee believes that an equivalent Australian student guide program is worthy of further consideration. Although the SJMC facilities and location mean that it would not be appropriate to implement a program identical to that supported by VAC, the Committee believes that some aspects of the Canadian model could be adapted and implemented at the SJMC to complement and enhance the visitor experience.
- 2.61 The Committee did not identify any issues of concern with DVA's proposal and is satisfied that the project has merit in terms of need, scope and cost.
- 2.62 Proponent agencies must notify the Committee of any changes to the project scope, time, cost, function or design. The Committee also requires that a post-implementation report be provided within three months of completion of the project. A report template can be found on the Committee's website.

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53 Mr Chris Appleton, DVA, transcript of evidence, 26 June 2015, p. 9.

- 2.63 Having regard to its role and responsibilities contained in the *Public Works Committee Act 1969*, the Committee is of the view that this project signifies value for money for the Commonwealth and constitutes a project which is fit for purpose, having regard to the established need.

### **Recommendation 1**

- 2.64 **The Committee recommends that the House of Representatives resolve, pursuant to Section 18(7) of the *Public Works Committee Act 1969*, that it is expedient to carry out the following proposed work: the Sir John Monash Centre, Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, France.**

### **Recommendation 2**

- 2.65 **The Committee requires the Department of Veterans' Affairs to provide it with a progress report when the project has reached the halfway point on the anticipated delivery timeframe, in addition to the mandatory post-implementation report to be submitted within three months of project completion.**

### **Recommendation 3**

- 2.66 **The Committee recommends that the Department of Veterans' Affairs examine the work of Veterans Affairs Canada in managing the Canadian Student Guide Program in France to determine if aspects of this model can be adapted and implemented at the Sir John Monash Centre, Australian National Memorial, Villers-Bretonneux, France to enhance the visitor experience.**

