

*Address by H.E. Mr. Miroljub Petrovic, Ambassador of the Republic of Serbia,  
to the Commemorative Academy "Serbia in the Great War – Australian Testimonies"  
at the Australian War Memorial, Canberra 25 October 2014*

Honoured Guests

- Dr Peter Hendy, member of Parliament and representative of Minister for veteran affairs Senator Ronaldson,
- Commodore Peter Quinn, representative of Chief of Defence Force,
- Mr Peter Collas, representative of RSL National President,
- Your Excellence Ambassador Delgado, DIN of Diplomatic Corp,
- Excellences,
- Your Grace Bishop Irinej,
- Your Grace Bishop Iakovos of Greek Orthodox Church,
- Very Reverend Stavrophor Protopopov of Russian Orthodox Church,
- Dear members of Serbian community from Perth, Melbourne, Sidney, Adelaide, Canberra and other part of Australia,

Ladies and Gentlemen - dear friends!

I wish to acknowledge the Ngunnawal people as the traditional owners and custodians of land on which we meet today.

Let me thank you all for coming today to share this commemoration of the Serbs and Australians who took part side by side in the Great War.

Today we remember the tragic event which befall both our countries hundred years ago. At the same time, we remember the self-sacrifice and generosity of spirit which is other, human side of the tragedy of war.

In October 1914, the Great War was already raging in Serbia. It started on the night of the 28<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> of July. This is one week earlier than the 4<sup>th</sup> of August which is recognised as the date of the official outbreak of the Great War.

As the President of the Republic of Serbia, Mr Tomislav Nikolic said: "Serbia entered the Great War in order to survive as a nation."

In October 1914, Serbia already had a significant victory behind her: the Battle of Cer, which took place from the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> of August. Historiography tells us that this was the first Great War victory of the Allies.

In the days to follow this significant battle, the skirmishes continued in the Valley of the Drina River, leading up to the next great military engagement of the Serbian Army: the Battle of Kolubara. This battle has gone down in military history as a masterpiece of tactics according to all military schools of thought.

Meanwhile, the real tragedy for Serbia was still to come. In the next year of the war – 1915 – a terrible epidemic of typhus spread through the nation. The military attacks from different directions also increased in intensity, which visited great suffering on the civilian population.

The only escape was retreat to the south, for the Army and the civilians, across the Albanian mountains, and evacuation to the Greek Island of Corfu. After a respite of some months, the Serbian Army regrouped to go into battle again on the Salonika Front in 1916, side by side with French, Russian and British Army.

This whole period of war is marked by tragedy but also by the demonstration of great acts of humanity and solidarity of the world with Serbia. There were sympathetic observers everywhere, including Australia.

Particularly Australia, whose volunteers came to be medical practitioners, nurses and workers in unit of the Scottish Women's Hospitals with the Serbian Army on the Salonika front led by Agnes Bennett, assisted by two more Australian doctors, Dr Alice de Garis and Dr Lillian Cooper. The transportation of the wounded was overseen by Mary Bedford from Brisbane.

Two of these volunteer women are being remembered today: Stella Miles Franklin and Olive Kelso King.

Today's occasion is particularly significant for all of us here because it highlights the bond between our two countries: Australia and Serbia. This bond is historical and this history has its roots in the Great War.

Both countries – Australia and Serbia – fought for a common ideal: freedom, justice and democracy. Serbia gained these after losing 28% of her total pre-war population. The casualties of war and disease amounted to a horrendous figure near of one point two million.

We hope that with today's commemorative event we are doing our sacred duty: to keep alive the memory of the sacrifices of all those who were involved in the Great War, the benefits of which we – the descendants of that generation – are enjoying.

The sad fact is that the events in the Balkans which took place in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have had the effect of clouding the historical memory of Serbia's heroic role in the Great War.

That is why we see it as our mutual duty today, to restore our collective cultural memory about the past bonds of our two nations and two countries.

We are trying to do this by bringing to light authentic but still little known historical testimonies which demonstrate that we were allies and that we pursued common goals in the past.

These common goals should be the basis of our friendship and cooperation in the future. This is our task here today!

Honoured friends,

In today's program you will be able to view the original uniform of a Serb soldier from the Great War, who was on permanent display in the Australian War Memorial from foundation more than 50 years.

I would like to express my special gratitude to staff of the Australian War Memorial led by Director Mr Brendan Nelson for his understanding and support for today's commemorative event.

I invite you now to enjoy today's program which has been put together through the collaboration of many members of the Serbian community in Australia and various community organisation. These are all named in the program.

So without further ado, I declare the commemorative program of "Serbia in the Great War – Australian Testimonies" – open.