



REMEMBRANCE DAY

Facts for Students

Remembrance Day marks the anniversary of the resolution (end) of the First World War (the Armistice) on 11 November, 1918.

The First World War

World War I (WWI) was originally known as the Great War. It began in August 1914 when Britain and Germany went to war. Many countries, such as Australia and New Zealand (who formed the famous ANZACs), immediately declared their allegiance to Britain and joined the war. This partnership was known as the 'Allied Forces'.

The main nations in the Allied Forces were Britain, France and Russia. Later, they were supported by countries such as Canada and the United States. The Allied Forces fought the Central Powers: Germany, Austria-Hungary, Italy, and the Ottoman Empire (Turkey).

During the four years of World War I, Australia was involved in some of history's most tragic conflicts (such as the famous landing at Gallipoli), and horrific battles on the Western Front (France and Belgium) and in the Middle East.

The Armistice

In 1918, after suffering a number of defeats and heavy losses, the German forces agreed to an armistice (a truce) with the Allied troops and this signalled the end of WWI. The treaty was signed at 5am on 11 November 1918, but did not officially come into effect until six hours later at 11am. The armistice was met by celebration around the world; people yelled, cheered and danced in the streets.

For this reason, Remembrance Day was originally called Armistice Day. In Australia, it was renamed in 1997.

The name change broadened the meaning of the day, widening the focus from World War I, to a day which commemorates those who served in any war or conflict.





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Remembrance Day traditions

A minute of silence

Every year, nations around the globe fall silent for one minute at 11am on the 11th day of the 11th month to remember those who have served their country during war.

This practice stems from King George V's declaration on 6 November 1919 that people throughout the Commonwealth should suspend their normal activities so that in "perfect stillness the thoughts of everyone may be concentrated on reverent remembrance of the Glorious Dead".



A red poppy

The Flanders poppy was one of the first plants to grow on the blood-soaked battlefields of France and Belgium. In nineteenth century English poetry, poppies often symbolised sleep or oblivion. After WWI, silk poppies were sold on Armistice Day with proceeds going to a charity for French children and to the Returned Soldiers League (RSL).

A sprig of rosemary

Many people wear a sprig of rosemary on Remembrance Day and on ANZAC Day. Since ancient times this aromatic herb has been recognised as a sign of remembrance and loyalty. For Australians, rosemary is even more significant as this plant grows wild on the Gallipoli peninsula, serving as another reminder of the ANZAC troops who lost their lives there.

A flag at half-mast

On Remembrance Day, flags are flown at half-mast from 10.30am to 11.03am as a sign of mourning and respect. It is said that this tradition stems from sailing ships that lowered their sails at sea to honour an important person or mark a death.

There are a number of rules associated with flying the Australian flag at half-mast. The flag can never be flown at half-mast at night. If in a group of flags, all flags should be lowered to half-mast, however, Australia's should be lowered last and raised first.



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The Unknown Soldier

Have you heard of the Unknown Soldier? The Unknown Soldier is intended to represent all men killed during war, especially those with no known resting place. The original Unknown Soldier was entombed at Westminster Abbey in London on Remembrance Day 1920. On the same day, France entombed an Unknown Soldier below the Arc de Triomphe.

It was not until Remembrance Day 1993 that Australia laid to rest an Unknown Soldier in the Hall of Memory at the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. At his side was a bayonet and a golden sprig of wattle. The soldier was buried in a coffin made from Tasmanian Blackwood which was scattered with soil from the French battlefield, Pozières.



Modern Pilgrimages

It is estimated that over 60,000 Australians died in the Great War, many of these have no known graves. This left the Western Front dotted with memorials and cemeteries commemorating the fallen. Many Australians travel to these locations, as well as others in Egypt and Turkey, to pay tribute to the events that occurred and to remember all who served and fell there.

In modern times, these pilgrimages have become increasingly popular around Remembrance Day and ANZAC Day. On these days, many locations, such as Gallipoli, Villers-Bretonneux and Bullecourt, hold special commemorative ceremonies. These ceremonies are made up of many traditional elements such as a parade, wreath laying, the Last Post (played on a bugle) and a minute of silence.



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Remembrance Day fast facts

- The word 'armistice' means a truce or peace arrangement. It comes from the Latin word 'arma', meaning arms and 'stitium', meaning 'a stopping', giving us the meaning: to put down your arms (weapons).
- The famous poem In Flanders Fields that made the red poppy such an iconic symbol, was written by Canadian Lieutenant Colonel John McRae. It is said that it only took him 20 minutes to write and that afterwards he threw it in the trash (from which it was thankfully saved by a fellow soldier).
- It was not just men who went to war. In World War I, many Australian women volunteered as cooks, drivers, interpreters and other skilled positions. Female nurses served in countries such as Egypt, France and Greece, often in dangerous conditions, close to the frontline where they were exposed to shelling.
- World War I was the first armed conflict where aircraft were used. There were around 3000 Australian airmen who served with the Australian Flying Corps.
- The conditions in WWI trenches were so horrifying that they gave their name to numerous ailments that occurred there. These include: 'Trench Foot' (a fungal foot infection), 'Trench Nephritis' (an inflammation of the kidneys) and 'Trench Fever' (a painful infection caused by lice).
- It is estimated that the WWI trench system on the Western Front measured approximately 475 miles (764km) in length.
- Rosemary is often worn on Remembrance Day. An old tale describes the Virgin Mary spreading her blue cloak over a flowering rosemary bush. The story says that the white flowers turned blue and from that day on the bush was called the 'Rose of Mary'.
- Many countries (such as Canada, the United Kingdom, France, Belgium and Poland) also observe Remembrance Day.

