

TREENET AVENUES OF HONOUR 2015 PROJECT

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Where are all the Avenues?

Dr Greg Moore posed this question in his opening address to the Inaugural Treenet Symposium in 2000. I'm sure that Greg wasn't pleading ignorance regarding the Avenues that we are focussing on, the Avenues of Honour that were established after 1915. His rhetorical question was typically meant to provoke serious contemplation. I recalled the only such avenue of trees I really knew, the one at Ballarat. On many occasions I had passed through it, often long after midnight, with the mesmerizing effect of pale trunks picked up at a distance in the dim glow of the Kombi's high beam, then in a gathering rush the spreading limbs and barely covered branches coming toward you on each side until they flashed by in the peripheral vision of bleary eyes struggling to stay open. This landmark was a welcome one as it signalled the final stage of the run to Melbourne and I knew that I could sneak through to the nurseries out in the Dandenong's before the morning peak hour would trap me in gridlock. However in the early 70's I used to regard these long lines of old trees with mixed feelings of sadness and contempt. This was a European landscape. Of course I was aware that each tree represented a young and very much cherished life snuffed out by conflict far from home and loved ones, but I far preferred the forest I'd passed through an hour earlier nearer the Grampians, where road signs warned of kangaroos, wombats and koalas lurking amongst the only foliage worth consideration, that of the Australian bush. I would be soon be returning through the Memorial Archway that marked the Melbourne side of the same avenue with a feeling of anticipation as I completed another "ammo run". The now dangerously overloaded van and trailer was transporting thousands of "Australian natives" in tubes back to the Adelaide "front". There was a guerrilla campaign on to ethnically cleanse the private gardens and public streets of the nation and I had patriotically enlisted in the South Australian brigade. It was an exciting and necessary adventure and it commanded a lot more community respect for a young man than a tour of duty in Vietnam, which I had avoided by being a weekend warrior in the CMF.

Thirteen years later in 1988 and I found myself in an old courtyard garden at the Daw Park Repatriation Hospital. A new wing was being built and Lawry's Landscapes were busy ripping out the old and planting the new, replacing exotic weeds with the plants our boys had fought for. As we launched into removing a low straggly formal hedge the resident gardener (I don't remember his name) muttered, "Do you know where that came from?" To be frank I'd hardly taken in what the species was, except that it smelt foreign. "That Rosemary came from Gallipoli in 1915 he continued" The story was that a wounded digger from Anzac Cove, who had been repatriated to Keswick Barracks on what is now Anzac Highway had dug up the plant that was then growing all over the Dardanelle's and snuck it back home in his pack. He must have had green fingers! We don't know who he was, but from that plant a hedge had been grown at Keswick and sometime in the 60's cuttings from that were turned into the hedge I was now removing. The Keswick rosemary had gone too. Believing that an important bit of history was about to be lost forever I took cuttings back to the nursery, and had them struck on the propagating bench. For the first time Lawry's Native Nursery was growing an introduced species. We did nothing with it except to keep potting it on, tripping over it and moving it around too many times. I regarded the idea of marketing the Anzac Rosemary for

profit as unthinkable. The story of its origin marked it as a significant part of our heritage. It belonged to all Australians and one day we'd figure out something worthwhile to do with it.

We now hope that it will become a promotional symbol and a significant source of funding for the Treenet 2015 project. In collaboration with the nursery industry, the public will be able to purchase their own piece of history. We will also be able to assist the voluntary efforts of David and Maxine Ennis in building and maintaining the important collection at the Daw Park Repat museum. This is their initiative and for 12 years they have been doing wonders with virtually no funding. In a few moments some of you will be taking part in the ceremonial planting of a hedge of the Anzac Rosemary and so I feel I would have replaced what I had removed long ago, and the old nursery stock will be finally laid to rest.

From the Daw Park landscape fast-forward to 2000 and Greg's question. "Where are all the Avenues?" Knowing that this long Avenue at Ballarat commemorated the lives of a relatively small number of locals, I wondered how many kilometres it would extend if there were a tree for every Australian who had been killed in action in the past century. The answer never ceases to stagger me. We all are aware when we pass those little black or red posts with the crosses on them that someone had been killed or injured in a road accident. Most of us instinctively become a little more conscious of speeding or feeling drowsy and react appropriately as we drive past them. We slow down a little and share a little of the tragedy with the family who sometimes add their own floral tribute to their lost loved ones. That's why the Road Traffic Authorities put them there. They are noticed and perhaps therefore they do save lives.

What would be the impact on us as a nation if we could really count the human cost of going to war? I'm aware that wars a century ago mostly killed serving personnel. Now because of so called smart weapons there are scores more civilians killed for every enlisted life lost. We call it collateral damage. It doesn't count and so we're not planning to plant trees for the millions of innocents killed after the "war to end all wars". We'd need to build more roads first.

However if we were to plant a tree for every life lost in service to the country (102,821), and we were to space them say 25 metres apart, as in the Elm avenue here in the Arboretum, the unbroken line of trees would stretch over 2600km. In New Zealand the avenue would extend for 360 km representing the 29,000 service men and women who made the supreme sacrifice.

An avenue with trees planted each side of the road would begin at the Adelaide GPO and continue right up to the Sydney GPO in George Street. If you drove non-stop at the speed limit you would pass 2 trees every second for the 14.5 hour journey. Think about it. Count them off in your head ... "two and four and six and...". Perhaps that's not the sort of exercise that the authorities would encourage. Too confronting. Governments no longer make public the human cost of decisions made in secret. The returning coffins and the body bags are hidden from view for fear of the political consequences.

When Australians are killed overseas as in Bali we all become involved with each family coming to grips with their loss, courtesy of the media. Our political leaders, aware of how tragedy in foreign places rallies the nation, react with appropriate outrage at the perpetrators and support the grieving with personal condolences and public memorials. Following the first war I'm sure that there was a public resolve to honour the dead in perpetuity. Granite monuments were erected and a relatively small number of trees were planted, mostly by community groups. For a while it all looked pretty good. Most of the monuments can still be found, but where are all the Avenues?

The TREENET 2015 Avenues of Honour Project is the response to that very question and it is that vision that we now share in its formal launch at the 5th National Street Tree Symposium.

It is the right time to do so as we start the countdown to the centenary decade of Anzac next April 25th.

There is no doubt that Anzac day 2015 will be a big day in the history of the nation, arguably more celebrated than any Australia Day, or Centenary of Federation. It will be just as celebrated in New Zealand.

Young Australians and New Zealanders have taken Anzac day to their hearts and come out to the various marches in numbers that haven't been seen for generations. They travel in their thousands to the dawn service at Anzac Cove. Even this year when travel alerts have been issued and Australians are considered to be at particular risk in some Islamic countries, hundreds of backpackers take the guided tour of the sacred sites of Gallipoli each week.

The project will be carried forward by this renewed awareness of our history and the respect which the diggers, particularly those who landed at Anzac Cove, command with the post Vietnam generation. By 2015 there will be no one left with first hand memories of the 14-18 war and sadly most of the survivors of the 39-45 conflict would have passed away. The Anzac march will be reduced to a few old men and women from WW2 being paraded in mini buses, there will be a few from the Korean, Suez and Malay conflicts marching with faltering steps and most of the cheering and flag waving will be for the Vietnam vets, the same brave souls the nation turned its back on just forty years earlier. There will be representatives in each capital city march from Timor, Afghanistan and Iraq. Hopefully no subsequent conflicts as yet unforeseen.

The commitment never to forget their fallen mates had been made by those returning, but by 2015 very few will remain to represent them in person. With the physical passing of these service men and women from our presence it is even more important that we commemorate the fallen in a tangible, visible way. It was considered most fitting in the past to do this by planting a tree and placing a plaque with the name of the individual perhaps with some service details alongside. The use of trees in this way has already been canvassed this morning but it is most appropriate to quote from the comment by an anonymous contributor to the public demonstration in the City of Caulfield in August 1918.

“The Tree is perhaps one of the truest emblems of memory to be found in nature. Give it an individuality, a place of its own, a tradition or tale of glory to revive, and it must represent the closest symbol of immortality that human resources can employ. For the seed and the sapling are ever forthcoming to replace the vain ravages of time and death. Thus it is fitting that the fallen heroes of the battlefield should be immortalized in avenues of trees. It is meet that each tree should have its particular personality, its own special share of tender and perennial care, so that it will live and grow from year to year in shadow and shine, the shrine of a noble soul who sacrificed his earthly habitation in the service of humanity and patriotic pride. No tree here named after a departed soldier should ever lack all that is needful to keep it flourishing, nor, should it perish, fail to be replaced to the end that the memory of Caulfield's noble sons may be kept evergreen in skyward soaring trees.”

“They are gone, they are dead,

But the trees will still remain”

Although the good intentions and commitment were there in the beginning on this site as elsewhere, the first Avenues of Honour have failed to live up to their potential. The reasons can be well understood by most of the tree literate people in this audience and I don't need to catalogue the many and varied abuses that all trees in the urban environment are subject to, but there are many outstanding examples of insensitivity bordering on sacrilege relating to the avenue trees in particular. How outraged we are when we see our monuments neglected or vandalised, how unthinkable the proposition that we should remove headstones or shut down war gravesites overseas. However if you want to remove trees to widen a road or cut a gully through a canopy to clear powerlines overhead or decimate root systems to install fibre optic cables go right ahead!

It is to be hoped that we can do it better next time and I'm very encouraged to believe it possible because of the renewed commitment of young Australians to the honouring of the fallen. I am also optimistic because those responsible for the implementation of the project, represented by most of you here this morning are working hard in your separate and diverse workplaces and contributing to the development of arboriculture in Australia through a variety of organisations. You show your willingness to share your knowledge across professional boundaries by participating in the activities of TREENET. Together we are drawing up battlelines in defence of the urban tree. The frontline is currently centred on the lovely coastal and hinterland towns of Shoalhaven. Through the gathering of intelligence information by a small but growing force of researchers we are able to launch informed counter attacks when challenged. Rebecca Ramsden's research on DNA evidence in plant tissues is just one case in point. In short we are more determined and professional than ever. In a very important way the past treatment of these significant trees should alert the community to the very common prevailing careless attitudes toward street trees in general. The implementation of the project, from the survey of the existing avenues to the establishment of the new, will showcase the knowledge and technical skills that we are rapidly acquiring as an industry. I also believe that we should take plenty of time and not rush to put trees into the ground. That will be the easy part, and as we know, without proper planning inevitable failure will result. If we accept the responsibility and can guide the project to success we would have honoured not only the fallen but also ourselves.

As an Australian born on the 33rd anniversary of the Gallipoli landing I have been blessed with a public holiday on my birthday and the gentle reminder of the occasion to my family in the immortal invocation "Lest we forget". Not a particularly honourable attitude! I hope that somehow my small contribution over the next decade will make amends for that. We have all been touched by war somehow at a personal level. I will never forget the grief and sadness of my mother as she would recall the knock on the door of the family home at 15 Gladstone Street Parkside, by the military police at the end of WW1. Her dear and only brother had died of wounds sustained after he had volunteered to stay back to train the Americans. He died in France on October 4th 1918, just 5 weeks before Armistice. As a 10 year old she suffered not only the immediate grief of the moment, but saw her parent's spirits crushed. Her father never recovered from the loss and was plunged into depression that lasted a lifetime. It is my fervent hope to see Walter Claude Sheldon 48th Bn. AIF honoured with a tree planted in one of the many Avenues, and I wish to dedicate my efforts to his memory.

Roles envisaged for participants in the Treenet Avenues on honour 1915-2015 project:

Organisation or group	Survey	Marketing	Education	Anzac Rosemary	Assessment of Existing	Restoration of Existing	Installation of New	Monitoring and Maint
Treenet	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Federal government	x			x		x	x	
State Government	x			x		x	x	
Local Government	x			x	x	x	x	x
RSL	x		x	x		x	x	x
Community groups	x		x	x		x	x	x
General Public	x			x		x	x	x
Schools			x	x		x	x	
Corporations				x		x	x	
Private Enterprise				x		x	x	
Arboricultural Industry				x	x	x	x	x
Nursery Industry				x		x	x	
Designers and Planners				x		x	x	