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THE VIGNACOURT PROJECT July 2014 YOUTH EMBASSY VISIT TO AUSTRALIA

We write to you today to update you with vital information about a very special and unique project occurring this July, in which you have kindly expressed interest and/or with which you have become involved.

Alison McCallum, as the Australian representative of the Vignacourt Maison des Australiens has been in contact with many of you over the last 2 years.

As you are aware people across Australia were moved by the incredible discovery of over 4000 WW1 photographic glass plates in the Thuillier attic in the small Somme village of Vignacourt in France. The dramatic discovery was brought to life in 2011-2012 through Seven Network's "**Sunday Night**" program. The Thuillier collection has engaged both national and family pride, as Digger descendants in every state and territory search hopefully for their own forbear amongst the individual and group portraits.

As part of World War 1 Centenary commemorations, the Australian War Memorial's exhibition of Thuillier photographs "**Remember Me: The Lost Diggers of Vignacourt**" is commencing its national tour in Brisbane on 5 April 2014 and will be on display there until 20 July 2014. It features a selection of the photographs as handmade traditional darkroom prints and draws on the Memorial's own collections to tell the story of these men in their own voices. The exhibition is only possible due to a gift to the nation by Kerry Stokes AC of more than 800 of the glass-plate negatives, which feature Australian soldiers. Mr Kerry Stokes purchased the plates and they are on loan to the Australian War Memorial.

Vignacourt during the period 1916-1918 was not on the battlefield nor was it the place of any great victory. The village provided instead an invaluable resting place for the Diggers on their way to and from the front lines. Some never returned and truly lie as "Lost Diggers", with the Thuilliers' haunting photographs now telling their story.

Today, Vignacourt is not yet on any trail of remembrance but a small group there has created the Maison des Australiens (House of Australians), in an exhibition space youth activity centre and community meeting space, the Vignacourt locals have brought the photographs to life to tell the story of the village and the villagers who befriended the Aussie Diggers.

A young woman by the name of Lucile Werkin, the President of Maison des Australiens - Vignacourt, has taken a group of young teens and created a community project that aims to keep alive the story of the diggers and their relationship with Vignacourt through a range of cultural and historical activities. This is the Vignacourt project.

Nearly 100 years ago, our Australian soldiers were taken in by the village, some billeted by French families in their own homes and made to feel “at home” in the midst of the horrors of war.

In April last year, while taking a group of Australians to the Western Front, we paid our first visit to Vignacourt. We were so impressed by this project, the teens and their inspirational mentor Lucile, that it has become our passion to support these young Vignacourt Ambassadors. We are bringing them to Australia this July so they can fulfil their dearest wish, which is to meet descendants of some of the Diggers who visited their village nearly 100 years ago.

By doing so they will complete a circle: during WW1 Australian mothers sent their young sons to war, and Vignacourt gave them a “home away from home”.

As a centennial commemoration, Vignacourt mothers will send their young people - who have grown up in peacetime in no small part won by the blood of Aussie Diggers - to continue the bond forged in war. In so doing they will make the “Great War” history and Diggers’ stories live again through the twenty-first century storytelling of the youth of Vignacourt.

It is hoped that the project will grow and Australian youth will visit Vignacourt for ANZAC week in 2015 and beyond.

This is a touching human story that goes to the heart of the effects of war on individual soldiers and their families. It also speaks most eloquently of how the terrors of war were balanced by the simple gestures of welcome and kindness the men felt in villages behind the front line.

The teens of Vignacourt are passionate about ensuring that their village’s indebtedness to the Diggers is never forgotten. In order to remember how the Diggers helped hold the Western Front so their village was kept safe the teens have created a “living history” project. They come to Australia as the Vignacourt Youth Embassy to produce a documentary. They will chronicle the “behind the scenes” story of selected Diggers whose portrait was captured so strikingly by Antoinette and Louis Thuillier.

They will do this by interviewing Digger descendants, Peter Burness and other specialist staff at the Australian War Memorial, as well as Kerry Stokes and Seven Network staff including Max Uechtritz and Ross Coulthart. During their travels they will post blogs and short videos online from Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.

Many people have worked collaboratively to arrange an engaging and worthwhile program for the teens when they come to Australia. Working together with the Maison des Australiens Association in Vignacourt, the Vignacourt Project Team in

Australia (Donna and Michael Fiechtner and Alison McCallum) have managed to bring many things together to make this visit happen.

We are writing to you today because you have already been contacted by Alison, Donna or Michael and are already on the journey. Now that the visit is a reality we want to bring all the pieces together to ensure that this opportunity will be a very special start to our centennial commemoration of World War 1.

We have many things organised and numerous groups are involved to provide a wonderful program of “cultural enrichment” once the 10 teens and 3 adults arrive. I am enclosing a tentative program for you to peruse. The group will visit Brisbane, Sydney, Canberra, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth before returning to France... A journey of a lifetime for those who will keep the Diggers’ memories alive and pass their stories on. This program will be updated with more details as arrangements are concluded, but until then it outlines the main features of the Australian tour. We are hoping that many of you may wish to suggest activities to add to, or further enrich, this program.

We are looking for support or partnerships for the teens while they are in Australia. Many of you have already generously offered assistance. Those providing homestay accommodation will shortly be contacted to further discuss the details. Those directly responsible for various activities will be contacted soon to fine-tune arrangements. For others this letter will be the first of many updates. We trust we have left no one off our lists. If you know of someone who would like to follow the story please let us know and we will add them to our distribution list and keep them informed.

Our three-person co-ordinating team want to make sure that everyone involved is “on the same page”. We also take this opportunity to thank each of you for your support and encouragement and look forward to further collaboration on the project.

The teens have already raised around \$15,000 Australian dollars by their own efforts and have tried hard to raise additional funds elsewhere. We would like to pay special tribute to Mr John Borghetti and the *Virgin Australia Airlines* team for their generous and fantastic support for interstate Australian airfares. We are about \$6,000 short of our total budget that includes bringing the youth to Australia and then hosting them here. We hope within the next few weeks to have achieved all our goals.

We are passionate about this ongoing story and the many collaborative opportunities it offers for many years to the youth of Australia and a small rural French village.

This small project will create a legacy lasting long beyond the World War 1 centennial, by providing an opportunity to creatively use new transmedia platforms to bring to life the lived reality of the “War to end all Wars” for the individuals who took part – both service personnel and civilians –and the important relationships which formed in this special village.

Our sincere thanks go to our various partners, both corporate and individual, who have made this dream come true for these young French Ambassadors.

Stay tuned and join us as the journey begins.

*In the next week or so a **website** www.memoriesofvignacourt.com will be launched to provide valuable resources for our collaborators and to keep you informed about the project. A blog will also document their stories.*

Please feel free to contact us to discuss any project details or the part you will play.

Our very best regards

Mr Michael Fiechtner

Mrs Donna Fiechtner

Ms Alison McCallum

Vignacourt Project Team (Australia)



Donna Fiechtner



Michael Fiechtner



Alison McCallum

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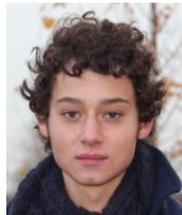
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