
Serving Faithfully

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Diggers serving in the front line today will be interested to know that there was once a Presbyterian padre who crawled forward through the wire and across the start line, minutes **before** 3.10 am when the Battle of Hamel commenced on 4 July 1918.

As I describe some aspects of my work as Australian Ambassador to the Holy See, including public diplomacy across the board and boosting Australia's profile, I begin with an extract from some of my previous writings relating to Anzac Day.

Padre Frank Rolland served in the Australian Imperial Force in World War I, most notably in the 14th Battalion, and performed with extreme and characteristically understated bravery. His initial foray was in and around Cairo, Egypt, in 1915 as a chaplain captain, one of two Presbyterian chaplains in the locality.

Rolland had enlisted after hearing news of the appalling casualties incurred at the landings at Gallipoli, resigning from his parish at Noorat in Victoria. Prior to this he had served in Beltana in South Australia, having been appointed by John Flynn ('Flynn of the Inland'), and had travelled as far afield as Broome and Thursday Island with his work.

Every bit of his undoubted bush skills came to the fore when he joined the 14th Battalion on the Western Front, particularly in the Battle of the Somme, through to Hamel and beyond. John Monash, of Jerilderie and Melbourne, knew Frank Rolland and later awarded him the Military Cross in the field, a rarity in any war at

any time for a non-combatant. His epic notes from the Battle of Hamel point to his courage, practical determination and absolute dedication to the diggers. General John Monash had fixed 3.10 am as zero hour for the Battle of Hamel, the planning allowing 90 minutes to capture the village and surrounding terrain. History records that it took 93 minutes and casualties were very light.

Padre Frank Rolland, with the doctor and his team of medics, pushed forward to reach the nominated place for the RAP (Regimental Aid Post) minutes before 3.10 am; as usual he was unarmed but carried stretchers, supplies and equipment to brew hot cocoa for the men. Halfway to the RAP post, the huge barrage planned by Monash commenced, with many retaliatory shells from the Germans falling nearby. Calmly and coolly, the medics, the doctor and the padre made their way to the RAP, reaching it by 3.18 am. Already the wounded had started coming in and the work commenced. Here is an extract from his written notes:

It was still almost dark but I noticed a few German shells dropping behind us and towards us, so I crept over to the doctor and advised him to push on further at once. He agreed and as we stood up and moved again, the scene was indescribably apocalyptic. The eye, and not the ear, was receptive, though I remember the machine gun crackle shrilling through the heavy roar. Every kind of gun was at work. It was cloud and fire, lead falling in colossal showers, the hill hidden with smoke, the smoke flashed with flame; all the force of the elements seemed concentrated and hurled.

Rolland was, of course, describing the holistic approach meticulously planned by John Monash, which became the template that turned the Western Front and showed one or two British generals how to do so. Rolland went on to become the Moderator General of the Presbyterian Church and, for 25 years, Head of Geelong College. His official MC citation reads: 'For conspicuous bravery and extremely good work'.

Clearly, he is an outstanding example, not only of a military padre on the battle front, but a leader in education and in the Presbyterian Church in Australia. Here in Rome, it happens that some of my work relates to the Anglican Centre and various Protestant faiths. More broadly, one key priority is interfaith dialogue and building links between Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and all branches of the Islamic faith.

It is a great privilege to have been appointed by the Australian government as first Rome-resident Ambassador to the Holy See, and the timing has worked out well. Australia's first Catholic saint, Mary MacKillop, will be canonised in Rome on Sunday 17 October. Please visit the Sisters of St Joseph website for more information.

Interestingly enough, around 1900, Mary MacKillop, then in her fifties, John Monash, then in his thirties, and Frank Rolland, then in his twenties, spent considerable time in Melbourne, Australia's first national capital. Who knows if they met in Collins Street, Melbourne, or Albert Street, East Melbourne, but all made enormous contributions to the fabric of Australia. Ironically, all made particularly vital contributions in relation to education.

As I continue my work here in Rome, I am conscious of the fact that these three Australians all worked in Europe, making huge efforts against incredible odds for the good of Australia. It puts the various irritants of Rome traffic jams, triple parking, weather extremes and moving to a second floor apartment into perspective.

It will amuse some to know that Padre Captain Frank Rolland, MC, who became the Very Reverend Major Sir Francis Rolland, CMG, OBE, MC, MA, was once described as 'the nearest that Protestants ever came to producing a Jesuit'. In completing this writing, I acknowledge material obtained from the biography written by B.R. Keith entitled 'The Lives of Frank Rolland' and I salute this giant of an Australian padre. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Extract from a lecture delivered by Tim Fischer on 1 March 2013 on the life of Padre Frank Rolland, MC.