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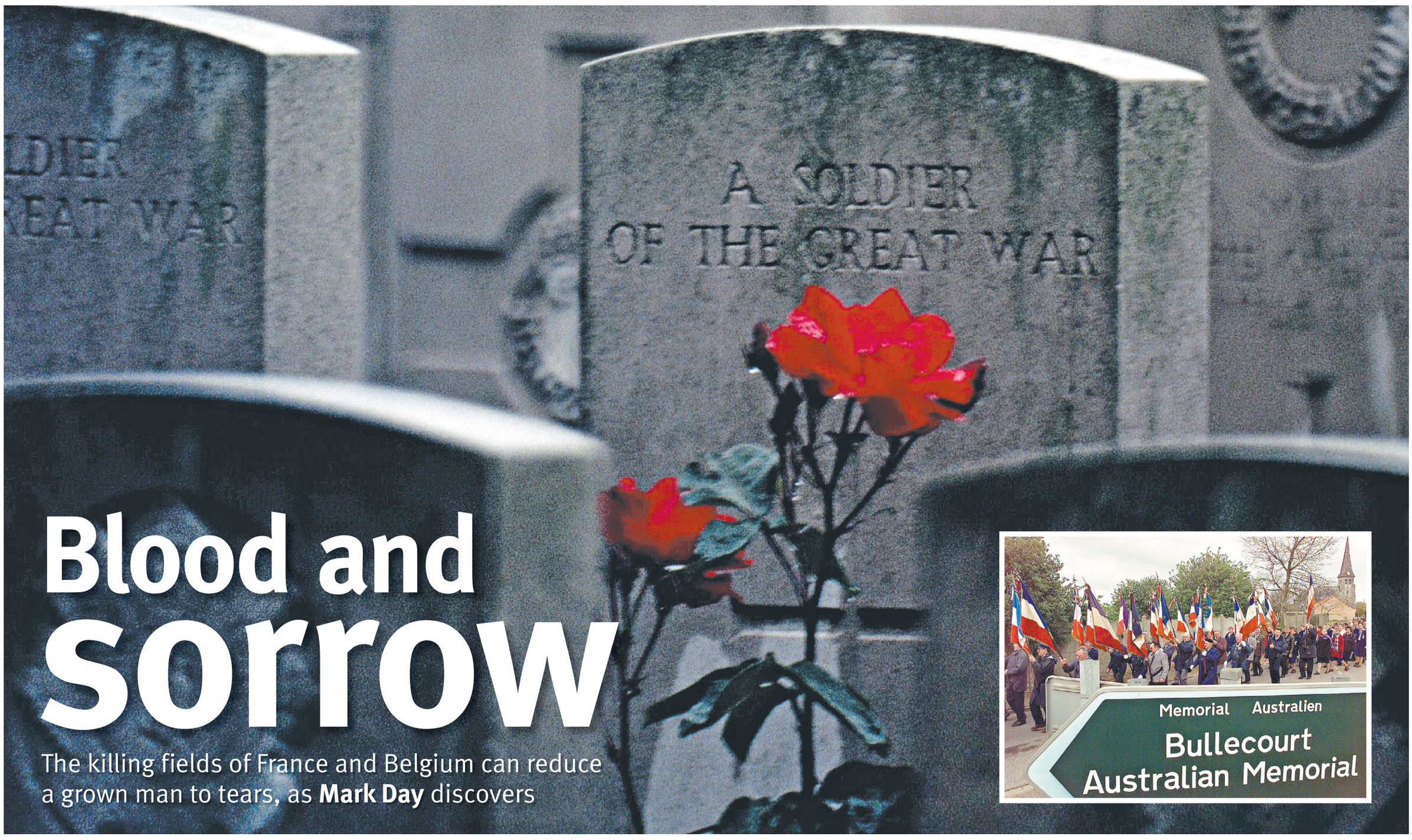

Blood and sorrow

The killing fields of France and Belgium can reduce a grown man to tears, as **Mark Day** discovers

Fields of remembrance: About 300,000 Australians volunteered to fight for king and country between 1914 and 1918. For many their final fate was an unmarked grave; inset, flying the flag at Bullecourt in northern France, scene of two great battles **Main picture: Getty Images**

SOME tours are arranged around visual delights; others are designed to stimulate the tastebuds or other senses. A tour of the Western Front battlefields of France and Belgium is a roller-coaster assault on the emotions. It grips you. It confronts and saddens you. And ultimately it made me angry.

Gallipoli is the springboard for the Anzac legend that sustains so much of our self-belief in the early years of the 21st century. But it in no way denigrates the heroics of that failed campaign to observe that it was a sideshow compared with the Western Front.

About 300,000 Australians volunteered to fight for king and country between 1914 and 1918, and most saw service in Belgium, on the muddy, bloody flats of Flanders, or in France, along the river Somme. About 52,000 died and are buried there. This, from a country of fewer than five million people.

The statistical framework of the Great War — the war to end all wars — supports the historical take on that era: that the newly federated states of Australia became a nation in that terrible time; that we lost the flower of our youth, a generation of young men never to show what they could achieve; and that the daring, skill and bravery of our men were matched only by their laconic ''she'll be right'' attitudes.

But when you are there, standing on the tilled farmland, looking across the plains over which our ancestors stormed into the face of endless machinegun fire; when you close your eyes and imagine feats of such reckless daring and heroics of those whose names live among the legends; when you walk among the headstones and read the ages of those who did not come home, the force of history sears your soul.

Earlier this year, I toured the Western Front in preparation for *The Australian*'s Our Other Anzac Day tour in April. My guides were Lieutenant-Colonel Paul Murphy (retired) and Colonel Graham Fleeton (retired), who between them have 74 years of military service.

''The first time I took a tour through here,'' says Murphy, a plain-speaking man, ''I got to the last cemetery on the list and excused myself from my tour party. I peeled off and sat on the cemetery wall and bawled my eyes out. I couldn't help it.''

Fleeton says it happens all the time. ''I've seen it often. Even hardened military men, generals, break down and cry. It gets you like that.''

I found myself at first confronted by the enormous scale of it.

Chiselled in stone at the Australian War Memorial in Villers-Bretonneux are words in memory of the 11,000 who have no known grave. Think about it. Then visit the British memorial at nearby Thiepval, where the number of missing on their walls reached 75,000. Then see the German cemetery at Maissemy, a single burial ground where 34,478 of their soldiers lie. The confrontation that grips you soon gives way to sadness: a deep lament at the futility of it all; how the leadership of both sides threw men away in a war of human attrition; how they lacked the wit to seek achievement without the death of so many; how stubborn kings and politicians sacrificed their people for their follies.

WHEN YOU WALK AMONG THE HEADSTONES, THE FORCE OF HISTORY SEARS YOUR SOUL

And then, the anger. It came to me most strongly at Montbrehain, where 430 Australians died in an action ordered to ''give the boys something to do'' while they waited to be withdrawn after months of front-line fighting. But it also had to do with the realisation that the gene within us that allowed such a horror to happen in the first place was not erased or tamed by this horrible war to end all wars.

It was not. It merely sowed the seeds of World War II and today lives in places such as Rwanda, Darfur, New York's twin towers or the mountains of Afghanistan.

I did not cry in the cemeteries or on the battlefields. I came home and sifted through my photographs, compiling a file of those best illustrating the tour. I sat my wife down to view them and began my commentary.

By the third picture I was a blubbering mess, unable to speak. I tried to pull myself together and had another go. Again, I choked and was unable to continue. It gets you like that.

A visit to the battlefields of Flanders and the Somme requires one element tragically missing from the Allies' early encounters with the enemy nine decades ago: planning. Readers of *The Australian* who have joined the Our Other Anzac Day tour in April will have their program mapped out by experts, former military men who are trained to solve intense logistical puzzles.

Our tour party will be bivouacked in 13 hotels within a 50km radius of Villers-Bretonneux, location of the Australian war memorial and the first Anzac dawn service next year. We will travel around the Somme in 18 buses visiting 16 locations. To avoid traffic jams and overcrowding, at no time will more than two buses be at one location together.

Moving more than 700 people around the area for five days requires developing a command post, a private radio network, a medical emergency plan, 36 route plans

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