CHINESE LABOUR CORPS

Statement

HON PIERRE YANG (North Metropolitan — Parliamentary Secretary) [6.34 pm]: This Saturday, 11 November, is Remembrance Day. Like many members, I will be attending a Remembrance Day commemoration at my local RSL monument to pay my respects to those Australians who served overseas 109 years ago. It was a war that was instrumental in fostering our national identity when it finally ended. At the time, the war was known as the Great War. It was also known as the war to end all wars, but, as a matter of fact, 30 years later we had the Second World War. In any event, it was a very brutal war. President, if I may, I will read from an article on the Australian War Memorial website —

> In July 1916 Australian troops were introduced to this type of combat —

It refers to trench warfare —

> at Fromelles, where they suffered 5,533 casualties in 24 hours. By the end of the year about 40,000 Australians had been killed or wounded on the Western Front. In 1917 a further 76,836 Australians became casualties in battles …

Articles reported that a lot of the young people expected to return home by Christmas 1914. That was not to be.

On the same note, I want to talk about another group that participated in the Western Front: the members of the Chinese Labour Corps. In 1916, Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig requested that 21 000 labourers be recruited to fill the manpower shortage caused by casualties during the First World War. China declared war against Germany on 14 August 1917. The Chinese labour department worked with the British government and organised the recruitment of Chinese labourers to officially serve in Europe. A contract or an agreement was later signed. Recruitment was launched by the war committee in London in 1916 to form a Chinese Labour Corps to serve in France. The journey to France from China took three months by sea and 140 000 Chinese labourers served on the Western Front during and after the war. Of those labourers, 100 000 served in the British Chinese Labour Corps and 40 000 served with the French forces.

After the war ended in May 1919, 80 000 members of the Chinese Labour Corps were still at work. During and after the war, they performed tasks in the rear echelon or helped to build munitions depots. They carried out essential work to support the frontline troops, such as unloading ships, building dugouts, repairing roads and railways, digging trenches and filling sandbags. Some worked in armaments factories and others in naval shipyards for a low wage of one to three francs a day. Some members also carried out skilled and semiskilled work for the tank corps and other work that supported the war effort. I think a total of five members were awarded medals for their service.

The casualties among the Chinese Labour Corps were pretty high. The official record stated that around 2 000 men from the Chinese Labour Corps died during the war, many from the 1918 flu pandemic, with some estimates calculating that the casualties could be as high as 20 000 victims from shelling, landmines, poor nutrition and other diseases. There are 40 cemeteries in northern France and one in Belgium dedicated to members of the Chinese Labour Corps from the First World War. Their history is not well known and the contribution they made was barely recognised at the end of the war. There is no tribute among Britain's 40 000 war memorials and their service record was pretty much erased. A painting was displayed in Paris three weeks before the end of the war. It was the largest painting in the world at the time in 1918. Originally, members of the Chinese Labour Corps were included in the painting. However, in 1917, the United States entered World War I and the artist had to find a space for the United States soldiers and their war effort. The painting was almost complete and a decision was made to paint over the members of the Chinese Labour Corps to make way for the United States soldiers. There has been some effort in Great Britain in the second decade of this century to recognise the service of the Chinese Labour Corps. In fact, there was some discussion in London about erecting a war memorial somewhere to commemorate the service of members of the Chinese Labour Corps. The following are the words of the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Communities, Mr Nick Bourne, who said that against the backdrop of escalating casualties and the fear that the allies could lose the war —

> "The Chinese came to Britain's assistance in her hour of greatest need".

> "I am delighted that the campaign for the long overdue memorial to the brave men who served in Chinese Labour Corps has had such a tremendous impact … "They formed the largest contingent of workers recruited for the war effort, but too little is known of the dangerous-yet-essential work they carried out on the Western Front, so it's right that we remember and honor their contribution."

To date, I think the memorial is still a work in progress for a number of reasons that I will not touch on today. In any event, it is important that the contribution of the Chinese Labour Corps, serving side by side with British and French soldiers and supporting their effort in close proximity, be recognised. Of course, on Saturday this week,

I will pay my respects to those soldiers from Australia who served in Egypt, in the western part of Asia, in Turkey and, of course, on the Western Front along with the members of the Chinese Labour Corps.