

Your Excellency

Friends and colleagues

I am delighted and extremely proud to have been honoured with the rank of Chevalier in the French National Order of Merit.

It is a great privilege to be recognised for any contribution that one may have made; however it is a particular privilege to be awarded in such a prestigious fashion by a country other than the country of one's birth. Your Excellency I am very proud and very grateful.

At this moment I feel much the same as Dustin Hoffmann when he was inducted into the French Order of Arts and Literature. He said "This medal will remain with me for the rest of my life – unfortunately it doesn't give the magical power to speak French", and for that I apologise.

I am sure my great grandfather, Pierre Epictician la Fontaine would be as proud as I am today. Pierre was a surveyor and artist who came to Australia from Lyon in the 1850's looking for gold. In fact he prospected on the Big River at Enochs Point in North East Victoria, which is near where Fran and I currently live, and was threatened by fires on 7th February.

Unfortunately Pierre did not find any gold.

Fortunately, however, he found my great grandmother.

I am delighted that my cousin Judith Fitzgerald, who is a great granddaughter of Pierre la Fontaine, her daughter Sarah and my daughter Gabrielle, both great great granddaughters of Pierre, and Judith's grandson James Banham a great, great, great grandson of Pierre are here this evening. It would appear that Pierre left his mark on Australia.

On 16th February 1955 at midday, I had the good fortune to commence working for a Francophile - Maxwell Arthur Glover.

Max was a partner in a firm of wool and sheepskin merchants – T. Dewez & Co. The original Toussaint Dewez, who founded the firm, was the first of the North of France and Flemish wool merchants to come to Australia when he arrived in 1878.

Max was the company's director in charge of the sheepskin division of the firm, and that was where, and when, I commenced my business career. At that time the capital city of the world, as far as the sheepskin business was concerned was Mazamet, a city that had a great empathy with this country, having first imported sheep skins from Australia in the 1860's. Mazamet is situated about 70 kilometres east of Toulouse and close to Albi, the birth place of La Perouse.

Max started out as my employer. He became my mentor, my business partner and in the best Australian tradition a very great friend. He had a profound and lasting impact on my life, and I am delighted that his daughter Angela has been able to join us this evening.

In 1952 Max was made a Chevalier de l'Ordre du Merite Commercial. This was one of the Orders of Chivalry that President Charles de Gaulle included in the National Order of Merit that he created in 1963.

I am sure Max would be as proud as I am, and pleased that we have both received the same prestigious award.

In 1959 Max sent me to Mazamet to learn about the textile and leather industries on the other side of the world, to meet our agents and customers and to broaden my horizons.

It was a successful venture on all accounts. I discovered a multitude of things.

I discovered a culture and lifestyle in France that was totally different to the one I had known.

I discovered some wonderful people who became lifelong friends, and I refer in particular to Jean Alaux and Pierre Nouvelle who worked in, and later owned, our agent's office in Mazamet and who became like family to me, and lifelong business associates.

I discovered a unique business ethic. Where a businessman's word was his bond and a contract written on a piece of paper was something attended to long after the commercial transaction had been completed. Although some years later I recall dining with a wonderful character, who was one of our customers, and we jointly signed a contract written on a tablecloth in a restaurant after an excellent meal.

I discovered the great joy of wonderful food and wine and the extraordinary importance of food, dining and family, and the combination of all three.

I discovered a country with a fantastic history.

I discovered the delight of French rugby watching Mazamet, captained by the local doctor Lucien Mias, who was also captain of the French national team, play the neighbouring city of Castres

To my great surprise I discovered a country that thoroughly understood the importance of agriculture.

and

I discovered Roquefort cheese.

Your Excellency I noted that amongst the many important things you did last December, as well as writing to me to advise me of the very great honour being granted to me, you completed the protocols to once again allow the importation of Roquefort cheese into Australia. For that I also thank you.

I can report that I learnt a lot about the business I was involved in, started friendships that have lasted a lifetime and started to understand the importance of international commerce.

On a visit to Mazamet, the capital city of the world, in 1966 I had the good fortune to meet Antoine Brenac and his family. Antoine was one of the industry leaders and I think we understood and respected each other immediately.

At a similar ceremony in France several years ago, when being inducted as Chevalier l'Ordre National du Merite, Antoine honoured me by referring to me as his brother in Australia, and I very sincerely reciprocate those emotions. Antoine and I have been friends and business partners, and completely involved in each other's families - just like brothers for a long time. I am indebted to Antoine for his friendship, trust, the opportunity to work together in our business partnership and on international industry matters. I know that Antoine has apologised for being unable to be here this evening; however I am honoured that a number of members of the Australian branch of the Brenac family are here. The story of the Brenac family in Australia since Andre and Georges Brenac established business here in 1927 reflects the story of French involvement in the Australian wool and sheepskin trades.

In 1970 Antoine's company Paul Brenac SA, Max Glover and I became business partners when we formed a company called Dewez Sheepskin Co to purchase the sheepskin assets from T.Dewez &Co. Paul Brenac SA's involvement in Dewez Sheepskin Co continued the French interest in the Australian wool and sheepskin industry, and represented an important French investment in Australia. During the time we operated the company we substantially increased its turnover and value in both France and Australia and successfully developed business into China to the benefit of both countries.

For many years I was a member of the executive of the industry trade organisation the Sheepskin Export Packers Association of Australia and was President of that body on two separate occasions during which time we successfully negotiated a number of innovative improvements to the terms of trade between the Australian Exporters and the fellmongers in Mazamet, for the mutual benefit of both sides.

In 1988 I was delighted to have been able to play a part in the city of Mazamet being recognised as a major contributor to Australia's economy for more than 100 years by the Australian Government as part of Australia's Bicentennial activities. I was very pleased to have been at the celebrations of this event when the then Australian Minister for Foreign Affairs the Hon. Bill Hayden unveiled an appropriate commemorative plaque at the Mazamet Town Hall.

During my period as President of the Victorian State Chamber of Commerce and Industry I was able to negotiate and sign a Sister Chamber Agreement between the Victorian Chamber and the Toulouse Chamber of Commerce that encouraged aerospace and other business investment between Toulouse and Victoria.

Your Excellency, during a long and rewarding career I have had the good fortune to be involved in a diverse range of activities, and in all those activities I have received great support from a large number of very good friends, many of whom are here this evening. I thank those friends for being here, but I particularly thank them all for their support and friendship.

I especially thank my family for their support. The award I have received this evening is as much theirs as mine.

My wife Fran, who has participated in many of the activities I have been involved with, and has been at home while I have been travelling pursuing various ventures - in fact she says that our marriage has lasted 49 years, so far, because I have spent most of that time away in France!!

Together with Fran, my son Andrew, who unfortunately cannot be here and my daughter Gabrielle, who fortunately is here this evening, have all been of great assistance to me, and I thank them most sincerely for their love, support and understanding.

I suspect that my mother and father, who was a notable engineer of his day, who both died when I was a teenager, would be quietly proud of the recognition being accorded me today.

Your Excellency, you have created a conflict of loyalty for me. From now on when the Wallabies play "Les Bleus" I will not know whether to wear a gold scarf or a tricolour; however I do know that on those occasions I will continue to have a lot of interesting dialogue with my friends in France and enjoy some champagne regardless of the outcome.

The President of the Republic, and your country have paid me a great honour. I will wear this insignia with pride. It will constantly remind me of my French heritage, and what an important part France has played in my life. Most importantly it will be a constant reminder of the wonderful and loyal friends I have in France who have included my family as part of their families.

Your Excellency, I thank you most sincerely and assure you that next Tuesday the Tricolour will be flying proudly from the masthead at our home.

Michael Pointer

9th July 2009