

Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize

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**Question 1: How closely does the
'ANZAC Legend' reflect the
experiences of individual
Australian soldiers who fought
during World War I?**

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Word Count: 450 (including title and question)

Since the end of World War I (WWI), the 'Anzac Legend' has grown immensely, and is still intricately linked to Australia's national identity. The Legend tells a tale of the heroic Australian and New Zealander Army Corps (ANZAC) fighting side by side – young men who were courageous, good-humoured, ingenious, impertinent to authority at times but always loyal to their mates – and these values that our armed forces displayed in WWI became known as the Anzac Spirit¹. But there remains much debate about the credibility of these claims, and how closely they reflect the experiences of individual soldiers. Was the stereotype based on reality, or is the Anzac Legend, that we hold so close to our hearts, just a highly glamorized version of our diggers' true behaviour? There are many sources that can attest to the fact that soldiers did display the characteristics they were alleged to possess, including courage, endurance, ingenuity, sacrifice and mateship, and that the 'Anzac Legend' does truthfully reflect the individual experiences of the first Anzacs.

During WWI, the Anzac troops attained a reputation for their unfaltering gallantry in battle. Even today, one of the first things that comes to mind for most Australians when the word 'ANZAC' is mentioned, is an image of nerveless soldiers coming to shore on the Gallipoli peninsula, wading through the shallows with a rifle and no fear in their mind. British war correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett first conveyed this heroic image, when he wrote of the Gallipoli landing, "*...they waited neither for orders nor for the boats to reach the beach, but, springing out into the sea, they waded ashore, and, forming some sort of rough line, rushed straight on the flashes of the enemy's rifles.*"² Many other first-hand accounts and reports also attest to the bravery at Gallipoli, including the diary of Pvt HV Reynolds, who said, "*The courage shown by the wounded will never be forgotten by those who witnessed it, it was brilliant, they were prepared for anything and gave a great deal more thought for how things were going in the line, than they seemed to do for their*

¹ AWM 2022. *Dawn of the Legend: The Anzac spirit | Australian War Memorial*. [online] Awm.gov.au. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/dawn/spirit>

² E. Ashmead-Bartlett (Dardanelles, 24, 26 and 27 April), 'Graphic story from the Dardanelles. Historic scenes. Army disembarked by moonlight. Dashing colonials. Capture of positions. Special cablegrams', *The Daily Telegraph*, 7 May 1915. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/ww1-archive/11587034/Daily-Telegraph-May-7-1915.html>

wounds.”³ But the landing on Gallipoli was by no means the only instance. There are countless other examples of this heroism, including Lt Commander Henry Stoker, who captained his submarine through a Dardanelles minefield, or Albert Jacka, who defeated seven Turks single-handedly and later killed 12-20 Germans in a single scuffle at Pozieres, or Sister Claire Trestrail, who weaved through shell-fire protecting her patients.⁴ The list goes on, and overall 64 Australians received the Victoria Cross, the highest British award for valour, in the war.⁵ It is evident that this aspect of the Anzac Legend has a strong basis in historical fact, and that individual soldiers were indeed courageous.

The ability to endure the long hardships of war was another trait commonly attributed to the Anzacs. During the four years of war, the troops persevered through freezing nights and scorching days, with meagre rations and water. Homesickness was common, and trenches were cramped and muddy. Soldiers were expected to continue fighting through the anguish of losing good mates. But despite all of this, our diggers persisted on. The most notable demonstration of this grit was by prisoner-of-wars, including bugler Frederick Ashton. During his 3-year period of captivity by the Turks, Fred was detained at many different camps, made several friendships and even attempted escape, only to be recaptured. At one camp at Izmit, he wrote of the conditions, “...we were put on the top floor of a large warehouse, which was devoid of all sanitary conditions. While we were here, 15 men, most of whom were prisoners from Kut-el-Amara, died as a result of continuous neglect.”⁶ After armistice was declared, Frederick travelled back to Australia, living to the ripe age of 89. Overall, about 4000 Australians were captured

³ Private Herbert Vincent Reynolds (25 April 1915), Diary entry regarding the Anzac Landing at Gallipoli, Available at <https://www.evernote.com/pub/jholloway127/diaryofananzac#st=p&x=courage&n=88acf1f8-0be1-468f-b5c9-4b67e1e6ff15>

⁴ Carlie Walker, *Audacity: Stories of heroic Australians in wartime* (2014) Online copy available at: <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/resources/audacity-stories-heroic-australians-wartime>

⁵ Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *Victoria Cross* [online] Available at: <https://www.pmc.gov.au/government/its-honour/victoria-cross>

⁶ Hutchinson, G., 2022. “Get to buggery! The Turks are coming on – thousands of them!”. [online] Remember Them. Available at: <https://garriehutchinson.com/2013/01/09/bugler-frederick-ashton-11th-battalion-25-april-1915/>

by Germans and Turks.⁷ These men and women were often subject to dire conditions, but nevertheless kept going in hope of better days. Their stories, many of which are similar to Fred Ashton's, show that Australian soldiers were indeed perseverant, as the Anzac Legend depicts them to be.

Another quality that the Anzacs were regarded to possess was a talent for fixing problems in inventive and often unusual ways. A well-known example was the 'jam tin grenade'. After Gallipoli experienced a shortage of ammo, soldiers began to make grenades by filling old food tins with explosives and shrapnel⁸. These proved quite effective. Ingenuity and bravery often went hand in hand, and one corporal, Leonard Keysor, received the Victoria Cross for his actions doing both in the Battle of Lone Pine. As Turkish grenades landed in the trenches, he "*would leap forward and smother the explosion by means of sandbags; even his own coat served for this purpose,*"⁹ Later he began to catch them and lob them back over before they exploded. The Gallipoli shortages also led to the invention of crude periscopes made of two mirrors attached to a piece of wood, and once paper had run out, desperate soldiers began to write letters on pieces of cardboard, on their rifle-cleaning cloths and even on pieces of ripped uniform!⁸ We can concur from this evidence that individual diggers were indeed ingenious, and that this aspect of the Legend was not a fabrication.

The quality of 'mateship' is often thought as central to the Australian national identity, and as a key principle of the Anzac spirit. The term "mate" blossomed during WWI, where it developed the deeper meaning of a bond of loyalty and compassion where you would risk and even sacrifice your life for a mate. Many of Australia's most

⁷ Australian War Memorial. 2022. *Australian prisoners of war - First World War* | Australian War Memorial. [online] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/pow/ww1>

⁸ Australian War Memorial. 2013. *ANZAC voices - Improvisation at Gallipoli*. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/anzac-voices-improvisation-gallipoli>

⁹ Australian Dictionary of Biography, 2006. *Keysor, Leonard Maurice (1885–1951)* Available at: <https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/keysor-leonard-maurice-6946>

cherished war heroes credited mateship as their motive. One such example was Air Vice Marshall Frank McNamara. While completing bombing raids over Gaza, Frank's fellow squadron member, Captain D.W Rutherford, was shot down. Despite having just suffered a serious leg wound, McNamara landed to rescue Rutherford, but the plane couldn't take off again and crashed. The men made it to Rutherford's plane, which they miraculously succeeded in starting up, and they took off just as enemy cavalry arrived.¹⁰ McNamara received a Victoria Cross for his display of valour and true mateship. John "Simpson" Kirkpatrick is another, perhaps more famous, example. Simpson saved countless lives carrying wounded soldiers, day and night, on his donkey at Gallipoli, but was eventually slain in the cross-fire at only 22 years of age.¹¹ Frankly, the plentiful evidence of countless acts of mateship and sacrifice made by the Anzacs of WWI shows that mateship is an integral part of the Anzac Legend and reflective of real diggers' behaviour.

Perhaps the best way to examine the experiences of individual Anzac soldiers would be to focus on just one of the 416,809 Australians who enlisted in WWI¹². Fortunately, the National Archive of Australia has made available an extensive collection of war records, including those of my great-great-uncle, Sgt Albert John Skowronnek. Albert moved from London to Australia at the beginning of WWI, and was keen to enlist, joining the 19th Infantry Battalion. He died 1st August 1916 at Etaples, after being badly injured by a shell during the attack on Pozieres in the infamous Battle of the Somme¹³. Despite the archival materials being limited, they suggest that Albert was an exemplary model for the Anzac legend. According to Red

¹⁰ Australian War Memorial, 2022. *Air Vice Marshal Francis Hubert (Frank) McNamara*. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P11043746>

¹¹ Australian War Memorial, 2022. *Simpson and his donkey*. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/forging/australians/simpson>

¹² Australian War Memorial, 2022. *Enlistment statistics, First World War*. Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/enlistment/ww1>

¹³ NAA, 2005. *SKOWRONNEK Albert John*. Available at: <https://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/SearchNRetrieve/Interface/DetailsReports/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=8085878&isAv=N>

Cross enquiry files¹⁴, he demonstrated the typical sense of sardonic humour, as he joked to the man who helped him after the shell, "*What did you do, Daddy, in the Great War?*", quoting the notorious guilt-inducing recruitment poster. The files include several of his comrades writing in that they knew him, and a superior sergeant even detailed, "*He was a good chap*", in which the principle of 'mateship' lies evident*. Another form states that Albert was "*reprimanded for conduct*" for not following an order, which could be construed as the Anzacs' notoriety for insubordination. Although it may seem like a small lens trying for a big picture, focusing on an individual soldier can give a good idea about the experiences and demeanour of most soldiers in the trenches of the Great War.

The experiences of individual Australian soldiers in the First World War are closely reflected in the Anzac Legend. A wide variety of sources provide evidence to compellingly argue that the Anzac Legend was not a fabrication and that the characteristics that the Anzacs were regarded as having – courage, endurance, ingenuity and mateship – were indeed displayed in the theatres of WWI. Although the war was a time of great suffering and should not glorified in any circumstance, Australians should try to live by and remember the exceptional values displayed by these servicemen and women, and commemorate them for their sacrifice.

¹⁴ Australian Red Cross Society Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau Files, 1916. 675 Sergeant Albert John Skowronnek. Available at: <https://s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/awm-media/collection/RCDIG1059252/document/5647032.PDF>

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