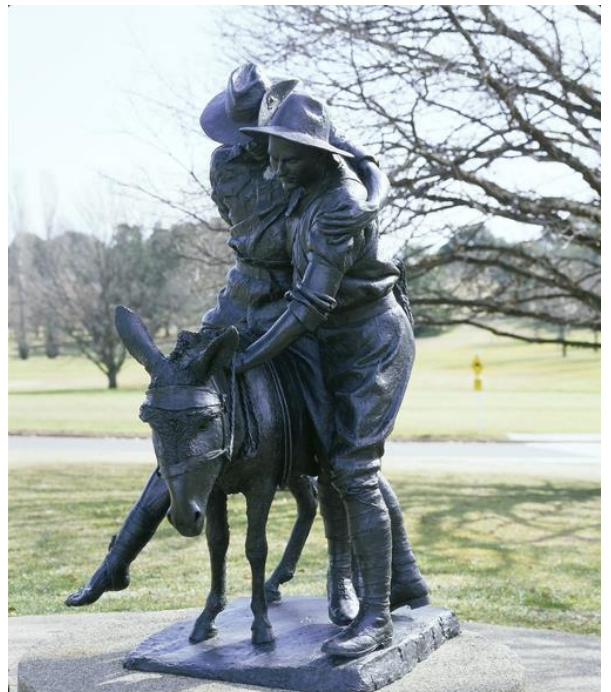


Frank Macdonald MM Memorial Prize

By Jacob Rittman, 2022

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



*Statue of Simpson's Donkey at the Australian War Memorial
– an important tale for the Anzac Legend (AWM, 2022)*

The Anzac Legend, also referred to as the Anzac Spirit, is the general belief and concept of shared characteristics and attributes between the ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) troops who fought on the Gallipoli Peninsula in WWI between 1915 and 1916 in the Gallipoli Campaign. The Legend suggests that the soldiers of the campaign shared traits of mateship, endurance, good humour, courage and initiative and that, despite the campaign not being victorious, the Anzac soldiers shared strong willpower and an admirable character.¹ Henry Reynolds and Marilyn Lake wrote in their account of the Anzac Legend, “What’s Wrong With ANZAC?”:

“In the myth of Anzac, military achievements are exalted above civilian ones; events overseas are given priority over Australian developments; slow and patient nation-building is eclipsed by the bloody drama of battle; action is exalted above contemplation. The key premise of the Anzac legend is that nations and men are made in war.”²

The two authors suggest that the Anzac Legend is an inaccurate and distorted account of the events that occurred during the Gallipoli Campaign. They argue that Australia’s nationalism, its great pride for its armed forces, has blurred the population’s perception of the brutality displayed in the war efforts and that the Anzac Legend misguides the population to believe that war is heroic and is of good heart. Works such as this were catalysts for the modern debate of the Anzac Legend, and whether Anzac troops were courageous and united, or if the spirit of Anzac has diluted the truth of war costing thousands of innocent men their lives.

Early 1916 was a period of great grief for Australians, as this was when the few surviving ANZACs of the Gallipoli campaign were withdrawn and brought home to Australia (from the evacuation points on the piers of North Beach and Anzac Cove).³ It was at this time that the deplorable scenes of the campaign became more widely known to Australians and the news of roughly 8000 Australian casualties broke.⁴ The families of the fallen soldiers took some comfort in the tales of the heroic exploits and self-sacrifice in Gallipoli. These tales laid the foundation for the Anzac Legend – that was expanded upon by news and media outlets soon after – and formed the consensus that the Australian and New Zealand troops in Gallipoli possessed a shared temperament of bravery and positivity. The Legend generally agrees that as the campaign drew to a close, and it became clear to troops that continued fighting was effectively a death sentence, soldiers displayed immense courage and tenacity – some using their last breaths to save as many young fighters as they could.⁵ Soldiers in Gallipoli were forced to continue fighting until the absolute bitter end, of the 8 month period, many dying needlessly as Allied Powers insisted the campaign continue until there was absolutely zero chance of an Allied victory.

¹Australian War Memorial (2019). “*Dawn of the Legend: The Anzac spirit*”. Australian War Memorial, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/dawn/spirit>.

²Reynolds, H.R., Lake, M.R. (2010, p.173). “*What’s Wrong With ANZAC?*”. ReadHowYouWant.

³Department of Veterans’ Affairs (2022). “*Gallipoli Campaign 1915*”. Australian Government, <https://libraryguides.vu.edu.au/apa-referencing/7Webpages>.

⁴Watt, D.W. (2017). “*Gallipoli: a quick guide to frequently asked questions and general information*”. Parliament of Australia, https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1617/Quick_Guides/GallipoliFAQ

⁵Mercer, P.M. (2015). “*Australia and New Zealand Remember Sacrifice at Gallipoli*”. VoA (Voice of America) News, <https://www.voanews.com/a/australia-and-new-zealand-remember-sacrifice-at-gallipoli/2734179.html>.

Conditions for troops in Gallipoli were exceedingly grim, with disease such as dysentery and typhoid running rampant – being spread by flies feasting upon the bodies of fallen friend and foe alike, temperatures soared and plummeted over the 8-month campaign, shortages of water and food made the men grow frail and death of close friends surrounded the peninsula.⁶ Despite these conditions, Anzac soldiers maintained a positive attitude, general mateship and an unwavering determination to keep going – even in the most unjust of circumstances. Private Tom Usher said in an ABC interview, regarding his experiences as a soldier on the battlefield of Plugge’s Plateau (a steep 100 metres above Anzac Cove):

*“The blokes were all falling, getting killed as soon as they hit the beach, getting killed in the boat, too, in the ... Blokes were falling left and right, too.”*⁷

Soldiers like Usher recalled the experiences of Gallipoli, describing the feeling of utter terror as they watched their friends get gunned down without any form of recompense. Death surrounded those who survived and some debate that survivors may not have been able to truly live after such events, being forced to struggle with the PTSD that comes with a war of such brutality.⁸ In face of such adversity, and despite overwhelming fear, the Anzac combatants were courageous and valiant, diving through Turkish fire to rescue those left behind. Courageous acts were everywhere on the battlefield, such as posthumous Victoria Cross winner New Zealander Alfred Shout, who charged into a Turkish Trench grasping three bombs, killing himself and saving the lives of his companions in the process.⁹ Such qualities of courage and loyalty are exactly those described as the Anzac Spirit. Simpson and his Donkey is another, more frequent tale, that formed the Anzac Legend and its status today. It describes John Simpson, a man who rescued wounded soldiers in the Monash Valley by diving through gunfire and placing them on the back of his donkey to take them to hospitality on the Anzac Cove beach. Now, it is popular among school children and continues to reaffirm the legacy of the Anzac Legend even over a century after the story was first told.¹⁰

While the Anzac Legend is important in Australian and New Zealand culture, some doubt the accuracy of the Legend, and whether it is morally right for a large part of our culture to be based around the act of war. It is important to note that at the time of WWI, Australia was in a very vulnerable position. Unemployment was high, and many families were struggling financially – with the Great Depression to follow in 1929. Australia was also still a new federal nation at this time, and some believed that Australia would not truly become a nation until it participated in war.¹¹ With these

⁶Ministry for Culture and Heritage (2014). “*The Gallipoli campaign*”. New Zealand Government, <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-gallipoli-campaign/conditions#:~:text=After%20a%20few%20months%20in,the%20men's%20resistance%20to%20disease>.

⁷Broadbent, H.B. (2015). “*PTE Tom Usher*”. ABC, <https://www.abc.net.au/ww1-anzac/gallipoli/eyewitness/200021698.html>

⁸Twomey, C.T. (2019). “*Returned soldiers and PTSD: when the war’s over but battles remain*”. Monash University, <https://lens.monash.edu/@politics-society/2019/04/24/1374433/returned-soldiers-and-ptsd>.

⁹Unknown (2017). “*ANZAC Values*”. Beersheba 100th Anniversary, <https://beersheba100.com.au/anzacs/anzac-values.html>.

¹⁰O’Brien, J.B. (2010). “*Private Simpson and his donkey at Gallipoli*”. NAA (National Archives of Australia), <https://www.naa.gov.au/learn/learning-resources/learning-resource-themes/war/world-war-i/private-simpson-and-his-donkey-gallipoli>.

factors in mind, it is plausible that some of the Anzac Legend is exaggerated. Families wanted to believe that their sons had sacrificed their lives honourably, and for a good cause. They hoped that, despite the loss of the campaign, they were heroic in their final moments. These families likely took solace in the Anzac Legend in the grief period of 1916. The young federated nation at the time, Australia's nationalism may also have exaggerated the truth of the Anzac Legend.¹² As Australia's first major international conflict, Australian citizens wanted to believe that their soldiers were fighting with honour and courageously – they wanted to believe that their nation was as powerful and influential as others. With these factors in mind, most historians still agree that what the Anzac troops accomplished at the Gallipoli Peninsula was truly extraordinary – even if it was somewhat exaggerated at the time. The Anzac troops weren't always courageous or cordial – particularly to their superiors and the British. Generally, the Anzac Legend is mostly accurate to the characters of soldiers in Gallipoli, despite sometimes being exaggerated by Australian families and, in some cases, the media.

The Anzac Legend has served as an important part of Australian culture for a long time, with some considering it the birth of Australia as a nation.¹³ While the morality of establishing national culture from vicious war is often questioned, it is agreeable that a culture based upon the values of the Anzac Legend has its merit. It was this moral question that caused a period from 1960 to 1980 where ANZAC ceremonies were less popular and milestone dates were commemorated less frequently, as the population began to think that war should not be commemorated.¹⁴ Before this time, Australia's pride and nationalism – which was effectively rooted in the Anzac Legend – continued to grow after Gallipoli as they participated in further wars such as WWII, the Korean War and the Malayan Emergency. After WWI, Australia's militarism and nationalism continued to grow, but so too did the nation's fear for the cost of war. Australians wanted to have a powerful military and safe nation, but an increasing awareness of the cost of war meant that fewer men were willing to enlist.¹⁵ Today, the pride and traits of the Anzac Legend continues to serve an important role in Australian culture and the identity of the country.¹⁶ Its principles stand as an inspiration for young generations to aspire to.

To conclude, for many years the Anzac Legend has stood as an important part of the identity of Australia. Its virtues stand as a reminder of the extraordinary things that ordinary people can do together and a reminder of the honourable sacrifice displayed by the ANZACs at Gallipoli in 1916. It

¹¹Payne, S.P. (2017). "How much of the Anzac legend is truth, and how much is myth?". SBS News, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/how-much-of-the-anzac-legend-is-truth-and-how-much-is-myth/5ydjou65n>.

¹²Holbrook, C.H. (2019). "The Anzac legend in Australian society: Recent historiographical debates". Informit, <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/ielapa.351926632970210>.

¹³Holbrook, C.H. (2017). "How Anzac Day came to occupy a sacred place in Australians' hearts". The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/how-anzac-day-came-to-occupy-a-sacred-place-in-australians-hearts-76323>.

¹⁴Digital Classroom (unknown). "A day that will live in our hearts". National Museum of Australia, <https://digital-classroom.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/first-anzac-day>.

¹⁵Buckley, I.B. (unknown). "Australia's Foreign Wars: Origins, Costs, Future?!". British Empire, <https://www.britishempire.co.uk/article/australiaswars4.htm>.

¹⁶Beaumont, J.B. (2015). "Is the Anzac legend still the core of Australia's national identity?". The Sydney Morning Herald, <https://www.smh.com.au/opinion/is-the-anzac-legend-still-the-core-of-australias-national-identity-20150420-1moxfc.html>.

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is generally agreed that, despite probable exaggeration from the families at home in Australia, the Anzac Legend is an accurate reflection of the experiences of soldiers in the Gallipoli campaign and its attributes continue to have weight even over a century after their birth. The Anzac Legend continues to have an important role in Australian culture today – still standing for courage, mateship, determination and initiative.

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