



How closely does the ANZAC Legend reflect the experiences of individual Australian soldiers who fought during WW1?

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# FRANK MACDONALD MEMORIAL ESSAY

In modern Australian society, the legacy of Australian soldiers is not often discussed. However, the Anzac Legend is arguably one of the most important parts of Australian society, how its culture is deeply tied to the acts of the Australian soldiers who fought during the First World War. During The Gallipoli Campaign, the British left inexperienced Australian and New Zealander soldiers fighting a foreign war on foreign soil. These soldiers gained the reputation for their bravery, humour, mateship, and endurance - spilling their own blood on the frontline. These commonly associated traits, which endure today, are used to describe the Anzac Legend, and became the building blocks for Australian national identity and self-determination.

The Australian New Zealand Army Corps, or Anzacs, as the soldiers became known, have become synonymous for their comradeship, bravery, endurance, humour, and mateship. All traits which were displayed by the Australian soldiers during the First World War. Although accurate, this is an assessment largely made from assumption. It is only when one goes looking for the voices of the soldiers themselves that the true view and meaning of the Anzac sacrifice can be understood. These texts such as letters, diary entries and accounts demonstrate the sheer scale of the Anzac legend and its impact on the Australian Imperial Force as a whole. Dene Fry, a member of the Hospital Transport Corps (Virtual War Memorial Australia, 2022) who had been recovering in England, wrote to his mother on October 17<sup>th</sup>, 1916, and spoke of the Anzacs:

*“If everyone would only come forward it would all be over and done with. Birdwood wants 40,000 Australians & he is going to take Lil[l]e. There are not soldiers like them, Anzacs, especially these lame and sad-faced lads all around us, are the pride of the empire. They have acquitted themselves magnificently and paid a cruel price”* (Campbell 2002, p.131).

This displays the Anzac spirit of resilience and sacrifice throughout the war, even in the most demoralising times. Given the difficult circumstances it is hard to imagine how the Australian soldiers managed to find a sense of humour, and yet seemingly in the darkest of days the remarkable individuals who were Anzacs kept themselves entertained. In this way humour was also a characteristic of Anzac spirit. Examples of this can be seen in the form of fake advertisements that were written on the walls and sandbags in the trenches. As Reid (2003, p.91) outlines, these advertisements can be found recorded in *The Anzac Book*, that was written in the trenches at Gallipoli and reflects the humour and self-deprecation of Australian troops. Edited by famous Australian war correspondent Charles Bean, it contains many examples of character and culture in the face of adversity. Even though the trenches, and gullies running behind them, must have been a place of fear, they were also the subject of the following: *“PUBLIC NOTICE – The Electric Elevator will not be working up the gullies for a while. Some cook stole the current to make a pudding”*. This humour also extended to the idea that in the midst of putrid surroundings that the soldiers: *“WANTED – The address of a good barber. One able to cut hair and shave preferred. Apply any platoon”* and that they also wished to: *“READ – Prof. Fire Trench’s book on the killing of insect pests with a shovel”*. However, possibly the best example of reality versus comic relief was in the advertisement: *“COMPLETE SPY OUTFIT FOR SALE – Including pair of blucher boots, sombrero hat, two cutlasses and a yashmak. Owner having failed to be discovered for two days is going out of business”* (Sergt. Francis William Noonan, 6<sup>th</sup> Battalion.) (Reid 2003,

p.91). These parody advertisements give an indication that the light-heartedness of the Anzacs, and the culture represented in the Anzac spirit. These characteristics of the Australian soldiers grew to become synonymous with the Anzac legend and it is these that modern Australians associate with Anzac.

Nothing illustrates the strength of Anzac spirit like an examination of the conditions affecting individual soldiers during WWI campaigns. These theatres of war, both Gallipoli and the Western front, were challenging environments. Before arriving at these fronts, however, Australian soldiers found themselves leaving the shores of Australia for the first time, arriving in strange and unfamiliar environments and it was easy for soldiers to feel alone and displaced. Training in Cairo, in the shade of the pyramids, Sergt Tom Shaw, a member of the 11<sup>th</sup> battalion 3<sup>rd</sup> infantry brigade, wrote.

*“I cannot help feeling that I am a small thing, indeed a speck in the great scheme of things, more infinite than the tiniest grain of sand that I crush beneath my feet as I march to and from the Parade ground”* (Campbell 2002, p.114).

This feeling can be explained by the inexperience that Australians had, not knowing the full scale of warfare up until the Great War (Australia and the Boer War, 1899- 1902, 2022). This might also give insight into why the Anzacs had such great mateship, being able to fight alongside their brothers in an ever-expanding, foreign war. The found unity in face of unfamiliarity was to forge the spirit of Anzac. During the battles that Australians would face, mateship and comradeship were common, and the emphasis became on collective effort and pride. Private Roy Denning, part of the 1<sup>st</sup> field company engineers, Australian Imperial Force, wrote about his experience overhearing the mutual comradeship of the Anzac troops:

*“In the early hours of the morning (26 April 1915) I heard the Officers going along amongst the men, saying “Stick to it lads, don’t go to sleep”, and the cheerful reply would be “No Sir, we won’t go to sleep”, and my heart swelled with admiration. I knew what the ordeal of the strenuous day before had been, and knew what pluck and determination was necessary to stay awake and alert through the long weary hours of the night, therefore I thought I was justified in being proud of being Australian...give me Australians as comrades and I will go anywhere duty calls, and I hope to be pardoned for saying so, being one myself”* (Reid 2003 p.33).

This recounting by Denning shows great loyalty, mateship and pride presented in the troops. This all became part of how the Anzac Legend reflects the experiences of being an Australian soldier during the First World War. When comparing loyalty and mateship with Australia to other countries during the First World War, difference between them is drastic. While Australian troops presented admiration and respect to one another, other Allied nations such as the French and the British would have mutinies, riots and rebellions within their own camps and armies (1917 French Army mutinies, 2022). Towards the end of the war, during September 1917, there was one mutiny started in the British camp of Étaples in France where English poet and soldier Wilfred E. Owen wrote about the appearance and conditions of the camp before the mutiny took place:

*"I thought of the very strange look on all the faces in that camp; an incomprehensible look, which a man will never see in England; nor can it be seen in any battle but only in Étapes. It was not despair, or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look and without expression, like a dead rabbit's." (Owen, 1985 p.306).*

Coincidentally, just over a year prior on August 28<sup>th</sup>, 1916, Private Alexander Little of the 10<sup>th</sup> Battalion in the Australian Imperial force was detained in Étapes for verbally abusing a British officer, but with help from New Zealand Expeditionary Force members and other members of the Australian Imperial Force, managed to release him (Baker, 2006, p.112). Another example of the newfound bond that was Anzac.

The national identity of Australia owes a lot to the Anzacs. According to the Anzac Legend, as mentioned previously, both Australian and New Zealander soldiers share very similar traits that differentiate them from the British or French common soldier. These properties were closely connected with the places these men came from and this newfound national identity and pride played a key psychological role for these soldiers during the great war.

*"The landing at Gallipoli was quickly interpreted as a nation-building event for the young Commonwealth of Australia. Australian soldiers had stepped on to the world stage and, over a long and testing campaign, had shown themselves capable of endurance and overcoming great loss" (Reid 2003, p.134)*

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, it was common thought that a nation was only a nation if it spilled its own blood on foreign soil. Australia only had very little experience with conflict outside its own territory, being only ever formally involved in the Second Boer War. Even though this was only a decade prior, Australian identity preceding Federation was much more closely connected to British identity. In these new theatres of World War One, Australia and New Zealand soldiers represented themselves differently as a collective which represented the interests of those two countries as separate from Empire. A collective which came to become Anzac. Famous Australian poet, A. B "Banjo" Patterson, wrote his poem *We're All Australians Now*:

*"The mettle that a race can show  
Is proved with shot and steel,  
And now we know what nations know  
And feel what nations feel." (Australian War Memorial, 2007)*

Like Reid's argument that the strength of the Australian character was only truly shown once put to the test, Patterson's sentiment reinforces that the experience of battle was the forging of the Anzac Legend. For as long as we remember the Anzac's sacrifice and their willingness to serve, then for the foreseeable future Australia and its people will know who to look back on when the next struggle arises.

*“What happened on Gallipoli mattered very much to those who had served there. For years they gathered in their units on Anzac Day.... What happened at Gallipoli still seems to matter, if the numbers now turning out for Anzac Day both in Australia and Gallipoli are any guide. But perhaps the visitors that the Anzacs themselves would be most pleased to see are the younger ones who now make their way to Gallipoli for the Dawn Service. ... for as long as they keep going Anzac Day will have a future. Their very presence on Gallipoli at such a time gives continuing life and purpose”.* (Reid 2003, p.135)

In considering the idea of the Anzac Legend and the experiences of Australian soldiers during World War One, it is evident that here have been examples of great endurance, humour, mateship, loyalty, inclusivity, and pride. With these characteristics being so prevalent in the Australian soldiers, it does not come as a surprise why these traits have been linked and reflected with the Australian and New Zealand army corps. It is the stories of these young men that display how the Anzac Legend, and its spirit is reflected in their lives, and how they were immortalised in Australian history for their actions and the founding of Australian identity.

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