

FRANK MACDONALD MM MEMORIAL PRIZE



Ross Macpherson Smith, Australian Airman, picture captured 1920

The ANZAC Legend

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QUESTION ONE

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

The 'ANZAC legend' is a phrase that has been popularised by many to describe qualities that Australian and New Zealand soldiers show in war. It describes how those men and women think, speak, and write during and of the intangible experience of conflict. The term, ANZAC legend was coined by Charles Bean during his documentation of the war.¹ Charles Bean is an Australian historian who was charged with documenting Australia's efforts in World War One as the country's first official war correspondent.² His work detailed experiences of ANZAC soldiers. Charles Bean's first published work of the war, titled the *Anzac Book*, became considered the origin of the ANZAC legend.³

The book contains stories, poems, and cartoons drawn by ANZACs while fighting in Gallipoli. The book, released in 1916, became a best-seller among Australians. It depicted a hopeful outlook on the bleak war. Because of the popularity of the *Anzac Book*, its depiction of ANZAC soldiers' attitudes became what is widely accepted among the public, even still to this day. It is considered that ANZAC soldiers tend to show courage, mateship, resilience, good humour, inventiveness and endurance during war.⁴ However, he seemed to be selective about the material included in his work. Australians at the time had a strong sense of nationalism.⁴ Charles Bean feared that sense of pride would bury his work if he were to be completely honest about the war, so he chose to omit certain behaviours of some ANZACs, and only include works from soldiers who followed his idea of a true 'Anzac.'⁴ In this essay, I will examine how truthful that is. Did the ANZAC soldiers show these qualities during war? Or were they exaggerated truths to bring hope to a disconsolate country? To answer these questions, two ANZAC soldiers' stories will be studied to understand their experiences.

Ross Macpherson Smith was an Australian airman who fought in the Australian 3rd Light Horse Regiment.⁵ After signing up for the 1st Light Horse brigade in August of 1914, Smith would go on to fight in Egypt in October of 1914, and Gallipoli in May of 1915.⁵ The Light Horse were regiments in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) which contained men who fought on foot yet rode horses to reach

¹ Awm.gov.au. 2022. *Anzac spirit* | Australian War Memorial. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/anzac/spirit>> [Accessed 24 August 2022].

² Awm.gov.au. 2022. *Charles Bean* | Australian War Memorial. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/about/organisation/history/charles-bean>>

³ Midford, S., 2022. *Bean's Anzac Book shaped how Australians think about Gallipoli*. [online] The Conversation. Available at: <<https://theconversation.com/beans-anzac-book-shaped-how-australians-think-about-gallipoli-38203#:~:text=We%20believe%20in%20the%20free%20flow%20of%20information&text=This%20was%20an%20anthology%20of,%2C%20laconic%20and%20duty%2Dbound.>>> [Accessed 25 August 2022].

⁴ Kent, ■, 2022. *Bean's 'Anzac' and the Making of the Anzac Legend*. [online] Research Online. Available at: <<https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol18/iss2/5/>> [Accessed 12 September 2022].

⁵ McCarthy, J., 2022. *Biography - Sir Ross Macpherson Smith - Australian Dictionary of Biography*. [online] Adb.anu.edu.au. Available at: <<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/smith-sir-ross-macpherson-8529>> [Accessed 28 August 2022].

destinations.⁶ This meant the Light Horse was an incredibly mobile force, as they were able to get through most terrain quickly and quietly. After fighting in Gallipoli for nearly a year, Smith would be transferred back to Egypt in March of 1916.⁵ Once arriving, he was reunited with his old regiment.⁵ For the next five months, the Light Horse brigade would assist the British and Egyptian Expeditionary Force in defending the Suez Canal from Turkish invasion.⁷ This would culminate during the Battle of Romani, which was fought from the 3rd to the 5th of August 1916.⁸ The Light Horse would engage Turkish forces on the 4th of August, as the outnumbered 1st regiment met the Turkish men.⁸ They were forced to fall back until the 2nd regiment was able to get there. The exhausted 1st and 2nd regiment fought the Turkish until 6:30 am on August 5th. At this point, the rejuvenated 3rd regiment had arrived. This was Smith's regiment.⁸

Once arriving at the Battle of Romani, the 3rd regiment was met with heavy fire. Smith described his experience during the attack in a letter to his mother as: "*They simply plastered us with lead... there was nothing to do but get as close to Mother sand as possible while their guns were firing.*"⁹ However, Smith and his fellow men did not seem to mind this. Smith even wrote that "*...It was exciting to say the least of it... I wish I could describe my feelings... pouring out 600 bullets to the minute into living targets. The savage satisfaction too as you seem them drop!*"¹⁰ Smith seemed to revel in war, and while not particularly admirable, it shows great resilience as an ANZAC. He tried to see the positives, even in the bleakest of situations. The rest of the Light Horse seemed no different.

After three charges from the Turkish forces, the Light Horse was forced to retreat. During their fall back, Smith found time to look around at his fellow men. He saw, "*horses half mad with excitement, riderless horses, dead horses, wounded horses just hobbling along, yelling men, dead men, men without horses, two men on some horses, other men carrying a wounded man across his saddle – all mixed up in a mad gallop.*"¹¹ Yet, he said that their retreat had, "*no hopeless confusion or panic..., far from it.*"¹¹ Even during a retreat, where Smith and his fellow ANZACs knew they were running from a much bigger

⁶ Anzac Portal. 2022. *Australian Light Horse in World War I*. [online] Available at: <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/military-organisation/australian-imperial-force/australian-light-horse>> [Accessed 28 August 2022].

⁷ Nam.ac.uk. 2022. *Egypt and Palestine campaign | National Army Museum*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nam.ac.uk/explore/egypt-and-palestine-campaign#:~:text=During%20Spring%201916%2C%20the%20EEF,a%20base%20for%20Turkish%20raids.>> [Accessed 28 August 2022].

⁸ A+wm.gov.au. 2022. *Battle of Romani*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/E84339>> [Accessed 28 August 2022].

⁹ Smith, R., 2022. *The Battle of Romani*. [online] State Library of South Australia. Available at: <<https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/6221#idx48349>> [Accessed 28 August 2022].

¹⁰ Smith, R., 2022. *The Battle of Romani*. [online] State Library of South Australia. Available at: <<https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/6221#idx48354>> [Accessed 28 August 2022].

¹¹ Smith, R., 2022. *The Battle of Romani*. [online] State Library of South Australia. Available at: <<https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/6221#idx48358>> [Accessed 28 August 2022].

Turkish force, they remained calm. They showed courage and endurance in a seemingly unwinnable battle. So much so, that “*once behind the ridge, every man formed up again, and was ready for more.*”¹¹

During the Battle of Romani, Smith and his fellow men of the Light Brigade showed the ANZAC legend at its purest. Throughout the battle, Smith kept his spirits high. During even the heat of battle, him and his men, “*took it all as a great joke.*”¹⁰ This outlook on the Battle of Romani led to an Allied victory. The Light Horse brigades’ General believed they had accounted for at least half of the 9,000 Turkish casualties and prisoners in the Battle of Romani.¹² Smith and his fellow ANZACs, despite being outnumbered, had done the impossible at the Battle of Romani, keeping their spirits high the entire time. Smith would go on to become a pilot in the Australian Flying Corps in 1917 and served until his death in 1922.⁵ A shining example of the ANZAC legend.

While Ross Macpherson Smith is a more intense example of the ANZAC legend, John Whitman reflects what most ANZACs’ attitudes were at the time. John Whitman was born on the 7th of October 1881 in Bengal, India.¹³ Whitman’s family moved to Hobart, Tasmania in 1886, where Whitman would spend most of his adolescence.¹³ After serving as a quartermaster sergeant in the South African War, or Second Boer War, Whitman would do part-time military jobs until 1910 in which he started his full-time military career.¹³ However, in 1914 the ‘Great War’ broke out, meaning Whitman was to go back to fighting.

Because of his large military background, Whitman was given command of C Company, 12th Battalion.¹³ This Battalion was tasked with landing on Gallipoli on the 25th of April 1915. The day would kickstart an eight-month-long campaign that tried to weaken Central Powers and gain British strength in the Middle East.¹⁴ The campaign failed; however, it has been said to be a defining moment in ANZAC history and its iconic characteristics of its soldiers.¹⁴

Whitman’s Battalion landing on the 25th meant it was amongst the first to land at Gallipoli.¹⁴ Due to a navigational error they landed in the wrong place about a mile north of the original landing spot.¹⁵ Where

¹² Smith, R., 2022. *The Battle of Romani*. [online] State Library of South Australia. Available at: <<https://digital.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/nodes/view/6221#idx:48379>> [Accessed 28 August 2022].

¹³ Bumess, P., 2022. *Biography - John Lawrence Whitman - Australian Dictionary of Biography*. [online] Adb.anu.edu.au. Available at: <<https://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/whitham-john-lawrence-9084>> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

¹⁴ Nzhistory.govt.nz. 2022. *The Gallipoli campaign*. [online] Available at: <<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/war/the-gallipoli-campaign/introduction#:~:text=For%20eight%20long%20months%2C%20New,figh%20to%20protect%20their%20homeland.>>> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

¹⁵ Watt, D., 2022. *Gallipoli: a quick guide to frequently asked questions and general information*. [online] Aph.gov.au. Available at: <https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1617/Quick_Guides/GallipoliFAQ#:~:text=Did%20they%20land%20on%20the,disorientated%20and%20simply%20veered%20left.>> [Accessed 11 September 2022].

they landed has come to be known as ‘Anzac Cove.’¹⁶ Here, Whitman would be met with heavy fire. In his writings, Whitman described his thoughts after being struck by a bullet. He believed the bullet was diverted from his web equipment’s shoulder strap into his arm.¹⁷ Though wounded, he continued to fight. He wrote: *“I was lying down using my glasses when hit - good job it didn't hit the glasses or I'd have had to get a new pair, and perhaps a new face also!”*¹⁷ Though nearly losing his life, Whitman took it light-heartedly. He showed great courage and endurance during the Gallipoli landing, like the many other ANZACs there.

At the Gallipoli landings, the ANZACs suffered great losses. By the evening of the first day, 2,000 ANZAC soldiers had been wounded or killed.¹⁶ Upon seeing the wounded, Whitman described how the *“badly wounded, horribly wounded, men would stick it all with hardly a murmur.”*¹⁷ It may have been shellshock that caused the silence. Though it would not be hard to believe it is also the attitude of ANZACs shining through. It is said the ANZACs showed resilience and endurance during tough times. This is something not only Whitman, but his fellow men showed in response to their pain.

Due to his wound, Whitman would be sent back to Egypt shortly after landing.¹⁷ In his letter to his parents, he noted how he was proud of *“the behaviour of the lads.”*¹⁷ He described how *“when their leaders were gone they kept well to the front, and despite their losses, never lost heart.”*¹⁷ It is actions such as these that defined the ANZAC legend. Despite grimness around them, ANZAC soldiers saw hope. They used their courage and continued fighting to the best of their abilities. Whitman, even with losses in his Battalion, shared the same attitude.

Not many of Whitman’s Battalion survived the Gallipoli landing without wounds. He shared the statistics of the landing as followed: *“●Out of 28 officers who landed on the 25th, only 8 were available for duty on Monday afternoon... 5 were killed outright and 15 wounded.”*¹⁷ However, he would go on to say they *“will soon be fit for the front again.”*¹⁷ While suffering unimaginable loss, Whitman seemed to console with the fact. He accepted it. He likely wanted to keep fighting, to prove that his comrades’ sacrifice was not in vain. He also explained how he was *“quite satisfied with my own little lot. I'm a very lucky pusson[person], for shore[sure]!”*¹⁷ Whitman had great mateship with the members of his Battalion. He

¹⁶ Nma.gov.au. 2022. *Gallipoli landing*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/gallipoli-landing#:~:text=On%2025%20April%201915%20Australian, had%20been%20killed%20or%20wounded.>> [Accessed 6 September 2022].

¹⁷ Anzac Portal. 2022. *April 25th was a day to remember*. [online] Available at: <<https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/stories-service/australians-war-stories/april-25th-was-day-remember>> [Accessed 1 September 2022].

seemed to have valued the comradeship above all. His letter to his parents details the people around him, and his appreciation for them.

Whitman is an example of many ANZAC attitudes at the time. They saw mateship above all else. They knew that along with resilience and courage, comradeship would be key to survival. While the Gallipoli campaign was a loss for the ANZACs, it defined who they were. Many believe the campaign defined Australia as a nation. The ANZAC legend was born on the 25th of April 1915. Whitman would go on to live through the Great war, serving in the military up until his retirement in 1941.¹⁷

The accounts of John Whitman and Ross Smith show the attitudes of the many ANZACs during the Great War. The ANZAC legend reflects how ANZAC soldiers acted. They showed courage, mateship, resilience, good humour, inventiveness and endurance during a war where those traits were hard to find. Though many accounts of the legend exaggerate the traits, a grounded outlook can be seen through Whitman and Smith's stories. However, the traits may have been a way to handle the atrocities around them. For many, it was hard to take in what was happening. The ANZAC traits could have been a nation's way to cope. Whatever the origin, the ANZAC legend was, and still is, strong in ANZACs, Australians, and New Zealanders' hearts. It will always be a way to define Australia and New Zealand in tough times.

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