

Eleanor Guinn
Runner-up for Tasmania
Clarence High School



Our Baptisim of Fire

By Eleanor Guinn.



What elements of the ANZAC tradition and spirit have remained consistent in Australian society?

The Anzac Spirit has become a tradition in Australia and it means something slightly different to everyone. The things that stay consistent in everyone's view are qualities like mateship, courage and pulling together to do what needs to be done. During World War One the Anzacs were also known for their ability to keep an optimistic view and for their fighting spirit. They never gave up. The Anzac Spirit is not contained within the bounds of war, though. It is part of us. The same spirit the Anzacs have shown is also seen in ordinary Australians in time of crisis, for example, during the 1967 bushfires in southern Tasmania.

During the early 1900s, many believed that World War One was a chance for Australia to prove herself. Men rejoiced at the chance to show their manhood, courage and resilience. The Sydney Morning Herald announced three days after the war was declared that: "It is our baptism of fire" and in many ways that is the spirit most of the Anzacs had as they set off to prove themselves and their country worthy. It was an adventure and an important moment in Australian history.

The Anzac Spirit was identified at Gallipoli. The Anzacs landed at dawn on a beach that was steep and heavily patrolled by the Turks. There was no navigational error. The Australians and New Zealanders had been sent there to die.

During the campaign that followed, the Anzacs fought in increasingly hard conditions. Many died from diseases such as dysentery, diarrhoea and paratyphoid. Water was scarce and sanitation poor. Bodies of dead men littered the ground, but the Anzacs didn't give up. They became famous for their courage and never-say-die attitude. A good example of this was at 'The Neck' on the 7th of August 1915 when perhaps one of the most hopeless attempts of the campaign was staged. Everyone was ready for the battle but just before the soldiers were going to charge, everything went wrong. Communications between the frontline and the brigade staff broke down. Watches were not synchronised and the artillery support ceased at 4:23 am. The men were set to charge at 4:30 am. In the few minutes that the artillery had stopped firing the Turks regained their composure and their battle positions.

The first line of men went over the top, over the open ground and were butchered:

“As they rose to charge, the Turkish machine guns just poured out lead and our fellows went down like corn before a scythe. The distance to the enemy from the trench was less than fifty yards, yet not one of those lines got anywhere near it.” ¹

Another line filed into the trench and waited for death. “Boys, you have ten minutes to live and I am going to lead you.” cried one of the officers. Men prayed, hurriedly scratched messages to loved ones, shook hands and then took their positions.

As well as their unbeatable courage, the Anzacs were also known for their casual out of battle manner. They took everything with a smile and often had jokes at the expense of both their enemies and their superior officers:

“Australia has a tradition of cutting down Tall Poppies, people who succeed, yet defending the underdog and making heroes of those who fall in noble causes despite great effort.” ²

In the same way they would not submit to the formidable Turks, they would not salute a British officer. During other parts of the War, the Anzacs were known to walk a few extra miles rather than salute an Englishman who demanded respect. So to be an Anzac meant to be courageous, to fight as a unified army rather than a collection of warriors, to be optimistic in times of crisis and never to surrender to anyone.

In the same way Australians pull together in wartime, they combine all their efforts and abilities during times of crisis. Perhaps some prime examples are the great bushfires in Australia such as Black Friday in Victoria 1939, the Blue Mountains, the Southern Tasmanian fires of 1967 and the coastal fires of Sydney in 1968.

1. Extract from *Australians At War* by Peter Cochrane

2. Extract from *The Anzac Spirit* on www.aussielang.com/features/anzac-spirit.asp

The 1967 Bushfires were a true disaster. At the time it caused the largest loss of life in one day in Australia. The fire itself had started near the Lime Kiln reservoir. At the time the authorities believed it was a fire that could be easily controlled and help only just arrived on time:

“The fire threatened houses from No. 606 and up. It was fought in the first instance from household tanks. A fireman twice phoned from my house for a brigade tanker. It arrived in the nick of time – when the fire was on the fences.” ³

Fires continued to blaze and gradually take over the bushland areas. It licked over hillsides and the strong winds blew embers onto houses, making it appear as if the houses were exploding far away from the fire itself:

“I didn’t think our house was in danger but you can never tell. There were houses in some suburbs that just exploded and burnt down when the fire was a kilometre away.” ⁴

Great courage was also shown at this time. Firemen and ordinary Australians alike died defending homes. Stories of great heroism sprung up everywhere:

“I remember this lady in a sports car. She came up to where the police had a roadblock and she wanted to get home to rescue her children in the house, which was locked up. When the police said she couldn’t go through, she said ‘No! My baby’s asleep in there!’ and she drove through with her car roof down in the smoke.” 5

3. Extract from *The Anzac Spirit* on www.aussielang.com/features/anzac-spirit.asp

4. Extract from *The Mercury Monday*, February 6th, 1967

5. Extract from interview with Mr David Wright

In the same way that the Anzacs had come together during the war, people fought along side one another to protect their homes: *“If there was a house that was endangered than another, your neighbours came after and helped you. There was a lot of neighbourly support because there just wasn’t enough emergency support.”* 6 After the fires, all Australians, even those that had never been personally affected by the fires did their bit to help. Nation wide appeals were organised and several mainland Australian tradesmen and engineers came down to rebuild Tasmania.

The Anzac spirit of courage, unity and mateship has not died. It is still within us all and will triumph in the most extreme and desolate of circumstances. It has become something to aspire to, and defines us as Australians.

6. Extract from interview with Mr. David Wright

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Interview with Mr David Wright. *(Useful for most of my quotations and information.)*

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