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THE ANZAC SPIRIT IN AUSTRALIA

By Jesse Murphy

Australia was a young nation at the outbreak of World War I in 1914, having been established as a British colony only one hundred and sixteen years earlier. By 1901, a national sentiment was growing and a federation of the states under a Commonwealth rule was created.

The spirit of Australians in the early 1900's is evident in the popular poetry of Banjo Patterson, C.J Dennis, Henry Lawson and Dorothea McKeller. There was a collective love of the land, their lifestyles and a pride in their identity as a nation. Australians, generally thought of as being larrikins, easy-going, perhaps lazy, and adverse to authority, still bore very strong allegiance to the British Empire. It took only ten days for 10,000 men to enlist for the military when Britain declared war against Germany and Austria on 5th August 1914.

The Gallipoli campaign, with the aim of taking control of the Dardanelles and removing Turkey from the war, was a military failure. In the early hours of the morning of 25th April 1915¹, three warships carrying the Anzac troops anchored off Gaba Tepe, but inaccurate maps and unexpected currents put their landing boats off course. The first 1,500 troops, expecting to land on the flat beach of Gaba Tepe, instead encountered the roughest terrain of the peninsula from large and steep rocky cliffs with sharp and foliated ridges to the deep and narrow gullies in between. Despite fierce Turkish resistance from the top of the cliffs, the Australians, accustomed to harsh conditions, relentlessly and courageously endeavoured to secure positions along the highest ridges. With huge losses and casualties on the first day, and with the obvious hopelessness of the situation, Commander Birdwood requested permission to retreat. General Hamilton replied by telegram

¹http://Users.skynet.be/Gallipoli/hist/his4_2.htm

“Your news is indeed serious. But there is nothing for it but to dig yourselves right in and stick it out..... Make a personal appeal to your men to make a supreme effort to hold their ground..... Dig, dig, dig until you are safe.”¹

Despite having never previously seen or heard any hostile military gunfire, the Anzacs, against all odds, were determined to remain steadfast and forged the spirit of not giving in. Although having inferior artillery - having left superior rifles in Australia, having no hand grenades and losing many of their weapons, ammunition and supplies on landing – the Anzacs remained motivated and energetic in battle. In true Australian tradition, the troops had the grit and determination to see the job through to the end. War and the threat of danger create a feeling of comradeship, which gives us a collective feeling of belonging. Comrades, to some extent, lose their identity of self in wartime for the good of the common purpose. In wartime, when soldier’s lives are threatened, they no longer face suffering and death alone, but as a group. Comradeship was innate in the hearts of the Australian troops. They were self - sacrificing because their fellow soldiers relied upon them to be firm, strong, supportive and enduring.

The Anzac legend created a new breed of hero. The Anzacs were bold, daring and self-sacrificing. John Simpson Kirkpatrick, an example of extreme courage and hailed as Gallipoli’s greatest hero, made 12-15 trips on the most dangerous paths per day to collect injured soldiers. There was a critical shortage of stretchers, so Simpson improvised by using bandages and blankets to saddle a donkey to carry the wounded. He single-handedly rescued over 300 wounded soldiers in twenty- four days before meeting his own death. Despite enduring eight months of horrendous conditions, the Anzacs never lost their compassion for each other nor their sense of humour.

Public opinion and perception define a hero. In stark contrast to the Gallipoli Anzacs, those fighting in the Vietnam War didn’t come home to a hero’s welcoming. 47,000 Australian troops were deployed to South Vietnam between 1962 and 1973; 500 were killed and 2,400 wounded. The war was unpopular mainly because conscription of young men had been used for the first time in Australia. It was seen as an unwinnable war that didn’t justify Australian involvement. The soldiers had all the same qualities as those in World War 1, but because of social and

political dissent, returned to Australia to be met with jeering, booing and condemnation. Although the spirit of Anzac was still very much alive in Australia, the anti-war sentiment dampened commemorative events for many years.

General Peter Cosgrove, Chief of Australian Defence Forces, in his 2004 Anzac Day address, says that

*“Anzac Day has moved from being a day commemorating an event. It is now a national occasion to celebrate our unique ‘Australianness’. It provides a focus for those qualities we admire in our fellow Australian – mateship, compassion, courage and good-humoured resilience.”*²

All these qualities, to some degree, manifest themselves on a day-to-day basis, but are so commonplace that they go unnoticed. Australia, fortunately, is a peaceful nation and our shores have not been attacked since World War 2. We do not have to be tested under enemy fire for our courage both individually and as a nation to become evident. The bravery of the individual hero who risks his life to save a drowning stranger, or the neighbour who risks his life to find the occupants of a burning house is solid testament to this. Our fire-fighters (many volunteers) risk their lives in incredibly dangerous situations to control raging bushfires in an attempt to save lives and property. Search and Rescue teams (again with many volunteers) risk their own lives to save those stranded in floods or other natural disasters. The tireless efforts of the rescuers, under immense pressure, at the time of the Thredbo disaster, and the compassion and humanity shown to the sole survivor only make one proud to be Australian. Compassion and mate-ship are seen in all walks of life. The vigilante campaign being run throughout Queensland to find the young boy Daniel Morcombe who went missing twelve months ago manifests the Anzac spirit that we, as a nation, have inherited. We also extend our ideals to include our environment, of which, many of us are fiercely protective. When the Iron Baron ran aground at George Town, Tasmania several years ago, volunteers worked day and night to save sea-birds and penguins that were slicked with oil. They co-operated together and cleared all the oil from the beaches and rocks. A daunting, but very worthwhile, task made attainable by community spirit.

² <http://www.catholicweekly.com.au/04/apr/25/01.html>

One of our Defence Force pilots in Iraq was recently hailed a hero for landing an aircraft after the pilot was wounded under fire. In response, he stated that he was just doing his job and found all the attention embarrassing. His actions and grace are a legacy to our Anzac tradition.

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