

Caitlin Foxwell
Winner for South Australia
Pembroke School

The Anzac Tradition Since 1915

The Anzac tradition grew out of the actions of the ANZAC troops who fought at Gallipoli in 1915. The qualities they displayed, which were reminiscent of Australia's bushmen from the past, have defined what makes a 'true Australian.' These specific qualities are bravery, loyalty, stamina, resourcefulness, independence, mateship, humour and an anti- authoritarian attitude. Every year in the celebrations of the anniversary of the troops landing at Anzac Cove, it is not the defeat at Gallipoli, or the later victories in war that are remembered, but the astounding courage, sacrifice and spirit of the ANZAC troops. In commemorating the 90th anniversary of the Anzac tradition, we recognise the actions of those in our past and present that have defined us as Australians.

At dawn on April 25th, 1915, the ANZAC troops landed on the beaches of Turkey's Gallipoli Peninsula in the hope of gaining control of the Dardanelles Strait, so that supplies could be sent more readily to Russia. However, due to no fault of their own, the troops landed at the wrong place where they were immediately faced by Turkish soldiers who were prepared for the attack. In the landing alone, two thousand three hundred Anzacs lost their lives and many more were to suffer, struggling to survive against the heat, food and water shortages, and disease. Eventually, British leaders realised that the campaign was failing and an evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula was ordered in December 1915. No military progress was made, despite almost a year of endless fighting. Overall, the campaign was an unnecessary loss of lives; however, from the troops' experiences, we have been left with the Anzac legend.

The actions of these men helped to define Australia as a nation in its own right. Their acts of bravery, their loyalty, resilience, independence and their ability at times to display humour despite the atrocities of war helped to characterize the Australian people. The Anzacs risked their lives for one another and were united in their

struggle. C. E. W Bean, who was a war correspondent, said, “Life was very dear but life was not worth living unless they could be true to the idea of Australian manhood.”¹

A well-recognised quality amongst Australians is mateship. It was largely talked about when men returned from Japanese prisoner of war camps after World War II. “... Australian prisoners spoke of what mateship really means. Fellow prisoners from other countries often left their colleagues to die alone. Not so for Australia. Every prisoner had a mate to share the end.”² Mateship is clearly depicted in the actions of John Simpson Kirkpatrick at Gallipoli, and “Weary” Dunlop- an actual prisoner of the Japanese in World War II. These men worked to save the lives of others, with little regard for the dangers to which they exposed themselves.

Simpson, a stretcher- bearer at Gallipoli, used abandoned donkeys to carry wounded soldiers to safety. He was constantly exposed to bullets and shrapnel but despite his low chances of survival, he laughed at the danger and was remembered as often being very cheerful.³ He rescued approximately three hundred wounded soldiers in the twenty-four days that he dedicated his life to saving others and is considered to be one of “the most respected and admired of all the heroes at Anzac.”⁴ He played a very important role in helping to create the Anzac legend and is still an inspiration to many Australians today.

In World War II Australians managed to maintain the image they had gained at Gallipoli. Sir Edward “Weary” Dunlop, a surgeon who was captured by the Japanese, was tortured and faced death by starvation and disease, yet his hope and determination despite cruel adversity, led him to devote his time to saving the lives of others. The Japanese sent him and other prisoners of war to Thailand to build a 421-kilometre railway. Refusing to be intimidated by his captors, Dunlop worked to preserve the lives of the men around him. He created his own medical instruments and without basic medicines and in primitive conditions, performed life- saving operations and comforted others as they died. Like Simpson, he disregarded the dangers, which he faced, and fought in true Australian style to help others to survive, displaying courage, mateship, resourcefulness, and bravery.

When thinking of the Anzac spirit, we tend to think of the male troops and the qualities, which defined them. However, it refers to the spirit of women as much as it does to men. Since World War I Australian nurses have risked their lives in war zones and many were killed in attacks, whilst many more died when captured by the enemy. Vivian Bullwinkel survived four years in a Japanese PoW camp in World War II after being the sole survivor of the Bangka Island massacre in which twenty-one nurses were killed by the Japanese⁵. Together with other Australian nurses, she cared for the ill and dying prisoners. Nurses were often not given the credit they deserved as their job was seen to be merely an extension of their femininity. However, it is important that the qualities that define the Anzac spirit are not seen as simply male characteristics, but rather those of women as well.

Although the spirit of the Anzacs still defines Australians today, it must be remembered that Australia is now a multi-cultural society, unlike the Australia of 1915. Today the traditions of other societies are integrated into our own culture. We are eager to be seen as accepting and friendly people as is shown in the film “They’re A Weird Mob,” which was made in 1965. The focus of the film is the tolerance and true mateship shown by a group of men towards an Italian immigrant and how they integrate him into Australian society. However, Australians are not always accepting of those of different ethnic and religious backgrounds or of our indigenous people. In recent years individuals such as Cathy Freeman, world-renowned Aboriginal athlete, have raised awareness of the issue of reconciliation between white and black Australians.

Freeman’s actions at the 1994 Commonwealth Games showed true Australian spirit. She displayed pride in her people and her heritage by running a victory lap with the Aboriginal flag before running with the Australian flag, which was highly controversial. This act showed her anti-authoritarian nature and as she told MP Bill Taylor, she found the strength to do this because she was “seeing those,” she “loved suffer.”⁶ Through her actions Freeman raised awareness of the official apology owed to the Aboriginal people for being mistreated in the past and brought the spirit of the Anzac tradition into modern society.

The qualities, which define the Anzac tradition and spirit, live on in our multi-cultural society today. Although one individual cannot necessarily have all these qualities, we have become known as Australians for the unique combination of these characteristics in our society. The actions of some notable Australians have maintained our image gained at Gallipoli and have defined Australia to the rest of the world. It is those around us, who display significant courage, humour despite adversity and true mateship that keep the Anzac tradition and spirit alive in Australian society today.

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