

## **The Birth of the Tradition and Spirit of ANZAC A Fiery Character against Cold Cynicism**

The ANZAC spirit is the mix of bravery, grit and the affable nature Australian soldiers showed through their actions at Gallipoli, highlighted against a backdrop of British ineptness, cynicism and world-weariness. The Australians brought with them a unique spirit forged in a harsh and unforgiving land, filled with dangers that toughened a man's will beyond those living a "soft" life. Against the cold cavalier nature of their British commanders and allies, these "untrained colonials" proved to be excellent, if unconventional soldiers when facing the hardest of odds.

The sheer bravery of the ANZAC troops is what is most often commented on within the Gallipoli Campaign. A few months earlier, they had all been civilians – clerks, cooks, painters or businessman – shipped off to Cairo with almost no military training or experience. Facing them at Gallipoli were over forty thousand well trained, well armed and well led Turks on their home soil, and yet the campaign was not lost through the quality or quantity of troops, but rather the incompetent actions of generals. In the Australians' very first action, they were required to charge a near vertical hill against hundreds of well-entrenched Turks armed with machine guns, a hill deemed "impossible" to capture. This was the first time an Australian man would fire in anger against another country since the Boer war, the first time Australia would put her foot down and fight for what *she* felt was right. As Albert Facey, one of the soldiers involved in the landings described, "*This was it. We were scared stiff – I know I was – but keyed up and eager to be on our way...*"<sup>1</sup> The landings were disastrous – over 2 000 men died in the first day of action, yet the Australians, not the British or the French, charged into the Turk's fire and established a foothold on the Gallipoli Peninsula. They had been charged with the impossible, and not found wanting.

The unique geography of Australia had bred a new kind of man than those who had sailed half way round the world to settle a new land. Fire, drought, famine and disease were all braved; dangers that toughened a man's sinews and strengthened his will against inevitable failure. Of all the qualities of bravery, courage and loyalty, the ANZACs were alone in their stubbornness and sheer determination to survive. After the troops had landed, the war degenerated into a long gruelling affair of trench warfare, not the swift and bloody advance British military planners had originally planned on. The Australian's sheer grit helped them cling on grimly to their meagre gains, even when forty thousand Turks advanced suddenly a few days into the campaign to "*push the 12 500 Australian and New Zealanders into the sea.*"<sup>2</sup> Combined with the endless heat, scanty rations and buzzing flies, only those of the strongest constitution beared up under the horrific conditions of war and basic needs denied. In this, their first large scale action of war, a war dependant on their capability, the ANZACs were determined never to fail in their duty, to fail as men in their own eyes. For pride and patriotism, they were determined not to give an inch, whether it be against the Turks, or the weather and conditions they fought in.

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<sup>1, 2</sup> *Gallipoli and the Anzac Legend*, CGS Year 9 Textbook, p.14 + 18

Humour was an important part of an ANZACs day to day life. Laughter was a denial of oblivion; a reaffirmer that life still existed even when surrounded by death. At first, war was seen as a “great adventure” by the Australians, a lark to go and be there or else not be a man, an ominous echo of the “it’ll be over by Christmas” attitude the British held. As the war progressed and that daydream was shattered, their humour became bitterer, a façade they could hide behind to deny their inevitable end. Yet this humour never became cruel, as it so often does in war, and was often shared with their enemy, whom they respected above their inept British officers. As a Lieutenant fighting the Turks described, “... *there must have been a German officer approaching, for all of a sudden the Turks began signalling to our chaps to get down in their trenches... then a machine gun began to play along the parapet end to end...*”<sup>3</sup> From the innocent laughter of the naïve colonialist, the natural humour of the ANZACs deepened to a mutual respect of their enemy and a denial of surrounding death.

It was to be the incredible inept, pessimistic and cynical backdrop of the British commanders that would make the ANZAC spirit a legend. Australian soldiers were regarded as expendables, cannon fodder for the Turks while the British tried high strategy. The whole planning and execution of the campaign was interrupted by logistic and strategic problems, blind stubbornness and a disparaging attitude held by the British against their allies. As B.H Liddell Hart comments, “*No heed was given to the wider aspects of the plan – its immediate and potential needs in men, guns, ammunition and supplies...*”<sup>4</sup> The British still saw the Australians as convicts; untrained colonialists fit only for suicide attacks and landings. The terrible attitude the British took towards their Australian allies is described by historian Bill Gammage, “*All the tragic waste of the Great War was contracted into their [Australian Light Horseman] passing, for as they died the English troops at Sulva, plainly visible from the Nek, were making tea.*”<sup>5</sup>

In today’s conflicts, the ANZAC spirit has changed from being the bravery, determination and humour in the face of terrible odds to the compassion and integrity in the modern theatre of war. No longer facing hard but tangible foes, Australian soldiers now deal with the tough issue of giving humanitarian aid to victims of their profession, perhaps a more demanding task than that faced at Gallipoli. Australians are now deployed on primarily humanitarian missions, such as those to East Timor, the Solomon Islands and countries affected by the Boxing Day tsunami. There, instead of fighting, Australian soldiers are keeping the peace with the help of the UN. This has bred a new spirit of compassion for the victims of war and disasters, support for their shattered lives and a protection against their oppressors. Also deployed in Iraq, the Australian’s soldiers’ efforts are more directed to giving aid than fighting insurgents, such as rebuilding the shattered capital of Baghdad and giving support to those in need.<sup>6</sup> Though only a few hundred Australians have been deployed world-wide, they have been recognised for their exceptional empathy and help for the victims of war, rather than creating new ones.

The ANZAC spirit of bravery, grit, determination and mateship, silhouetted against a background of British cynicism, incompetence and high-handed attitude to life still exists in today’s conflicts. Some would argue the ANZAC legend has been sensationalised by the media; that it’s true meaning is dead in our globalised world that needs no heroes. Still, the ANZAC legend of humanity in war still exists in humanity’s

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<sup>3</sup> Gallipoli: Attitude to the Turks, *The Gallipoli Campaign [Simmelhaig, Spencely]*

<sup>4</sup> *Gallipoli and the Anzac Legend*, CGS Year 9 Textbook, p.17

<sup>5</sup> The Attack at the Nek, *The Broken Years [Bill Gammage]*

<sup>6</sup> Red Kangaroo Leaves Its Mark in Iraq, *Media Release from the office of the Minister for Defence Robert Hill*. Available: <http://www.minister.defence.gov.au/HillTpl.cfm?CurrentId=5204>

wars, and Australian soldiers still show that rare mix of compassion for their enemies, a willingness to go beyond patriotism and a resolve to hold till the end wherever they fight.

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