

The ANZAC Tradition and Spirit

The Anzac spirit is a complex amalgamation of qualities, qualities that earned the Anzac soldiers the respect of other nations and their title of “Diggers” on the battlefields of the First World War and the wars that followed. Soldiers reflect the society and the people they come from and this is especially the case in the Anzac soldiers, from the Gallipoli beaches to the Vietnam jungles, they were citizen soldiers drawn from the Australian populace in time of need. As such, the Digger, and the Anzac spirit, is a complex part and the essence of the everyday Australian. The Anzac spirit is characterised by the battle proven qualities, embodied countless times by heroic Diggers, that include the qualities of mateship, courage, compassion, endurance, selflessness, loyalty, resourcefulness, devotion, independence, initiative, larrikinism and humour. These qualities exist in the Australian community and therefore are deeply etched into the makeup of the Anzac soldier, the Digger, the citizen soldiers of Australia.

Mateship is the binding force that has held and holds the Anzac soldiers together, from the battlefields of Gallipoli and the Western Front to now, in Australia’s roles as a peacekeeper, it extends beyond being committed to each other and extends beyond the ties of comradeship. It forms the team whose strength is far greater than the sum of its parts. Courage, both physical and moral, is an important part of the Anzac values. It provided the Anzac soldiers with the will to fight on against enormous odds in all the wars that Australia took part. Compassion allowed the Anzacs to make the change from warrior to peacekeeper, rescuer and re-builder. The Anzac’s reserves of endurance aided the Diggers to prevail through all odds and problems that would have defeated lesser men as demonstrated most remarkably in the trenches of Gallipoli and the Somme and especially the Prisoners of War who endured years of cruelty and despair. Selflessness is especially personified by the example of Simpson and his donkey.

The Anzac spirit and reputation was born in the horrific battlefields of World War One, those of Gallipoli and the Western Front. Over 60 000 of Australia’s finest would never see home again but their courage and endurance enabled the Anzac Diggers to fight and hold on for eight or so months on the battlefields of Gallipoli and then later through the hell that was the Battle of the Somme. All the while, mateship made the carnage they had witnessed all the more bearable. The attribute of selflessness in the Anzac is best personified by Simpson and his donkey, who risked themselves time and time again to rescue the wounded from the battlefield. This trait was also shown in the Western Front, when Major A.W Murdoch, against orders, fashioned a red-cross flag and arranged a truce with the Germans so that the wounded could be collected. While the truce was ended prematurely by General McCay, Anzac soldiers continued to go out into no-man’s land and brought back the wounded. This demonstration of courage and selflessness saved over 300 lives from an almost certain death.

Again in the Second World War, the Anzac traits were evident in the soldiers who fought at Tobruk and the Kokoda Trail. Under the immense pressure from Lieutenant General Erwin Rommel's Afrika Korps assault into Africa, the Commonwealth forces were forced to fall back. General Morshead, the Australian commander, announced "There'll be no Dunkirk here. If we have to get out, we shall fight our way out. There is to be no surrender and no retreat." Taking heart from their commander's words the Anzacs dug in to make their last stand at Tobruk. Taking the name "Rats of Tobruk" as a badge of honour, the endurance and courage of the Anzacs helped them to weather the storm of the attacks from the German tanks, artillery and superior numbers. The Kokoda campaign also saw the Anzac spirit at its finest when Australia was in its direst hour. August 1942 saw a contingent of 400 militia Diggers stand as Australia's last line of defence against the advance of the enemy that had not yet known defeat and outnumbered them over ten to one. In one example, Lieutenant Harold Bisset and 29 men withstood the most furious assault by the Japanese, repelling 40 charges of between 100 and 200 men in a single day. The Kokoda Trail was one of the most gruelling campaigns in Australian military history, but was a resounding success with the eventual annihilation of the Japanese South Sea Force.

The Anzac spirit did not exist only on the battlefield. The bonds of mateship and the reserves of endurance and resilience of the Anzac Prisoners of War were put to the ultimate test, especially those in Japanese hands. The most infamous of the Anzac POW experiences was the Burma-Thailand Railway. Starved, continually beaten and disease stricken, over 13 000 Anzacs worked on the railway in appalling conditions. The courage, endurance and resilience shown by Weary Dunlop, Drs Bruce Hunt, Albert Coates and Roy Mills is not widely recognised, as they tended to the desperate needs of POWs working on the railway. Ultimately, the Railway cost over 100 000 lives, but the Anzac qualities of courage, endurance and determination to survive in those conditions was phenomenal.

The qualities shown in the World Wars were upheld by the Diggers who fought in both the Korean and Vietnam Wars. It was demonstrated most notably in Vietnam on the 18th of August 1966. On this day an Australian company of 108 men was totally surrounded by a force of 2 500 Viet Cong at the rubber plantations of Long Tan. While the situation was desperate, the Anzacs unbreakable spirit gave them the courage, endurance and determination to hold on until reinforcements could break through the enemy and reach them. Their courage, mateship and initiative helped them to hold on and prevented a massacre.

There are also similar examples in more recent times, whilst in a different context to previous conflicts. Australia took a leading role performing peacekeeping duties in Rwanda in 1994 and East Timor in 1999, providing protection and medical aid for the desperate people. Australian troops also played a major role in humanitarian relief, helping victims of the recent Indian Ocean Tsunamis in Indonesia by providing medical aid and purifying water for the affected regions. This epitomised the Anzac qualities of compassion, endurance and great courage to keep doing their job, despite seeing many nauseating and repulsive things as a result of previous carnage in addition to comrades making the ultimate sacrifice.

The Anzac spirit represents our national characteristics honed by our forefathers in a harsh and unforgiving environment, which shaped the spirit needed to survive in the climate and terrain of Australia. The Diggers are an embodiment of this spirit, which has allowed them to prevail against all odds, in all climates and in all situations. Demonstrated by the Diggers in all the conflicts and missions that they have taken part in, from the two World Wars to Vietnam and Indonesia the Diggers represent the very spirit of Australia that is a part of all Australians, being the citizen soldiers of Australia.

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