

**WINNER — AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

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SIMPSON PRIZE ESSAY ENTRY

*Words used (excluding quotes and references): 1198*

‘Consider what values and characteristics demonstrated by the ANZACs at Gallipoli and later reinforced at the Western Front, continue to influence Australians today.’

The actions of the ANZACs at Gallipoli have evolved from simply another campaign in another war into an indisputable and essential part of the Australian identity. The men of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps have come to symbolise everything that is the Australian identity from heroism to mateship, and have “stirred us to aim higher and encouraged the finest qualities - service, courage, sacrifice, shared responsibility and overcoming adversity no matter what the odds.” (Hill, 2004) The Australian troops have become not only national heroes and icons, but also “the idealised image... of the Australian spirit” (Australian Identity – Despatches from Gallipoli) and a symbol of everything constituting the Australian identity. The characteristics of bravery, comradeship, and a sense of humour continue to influence Australia today.

“Gallipoli... is a tale of all that is fine and all that is foolish in the human condition” (Carr, 2003). It seems the battle fought there provided as many negative experiences and outlooks as it did beneficial ones, and doesn't appear a worthy basis for the identity of a nation. However, Gallipoli “lingers in the imagination after larger and more important wars have been forgotten” (Carr, 2003), remembered by its continuing influence on Australian society. The significance of the ANZAC legend in contemporary Australia is due to three factors: the era in which the war took place, the media coverage that was provided and the way history has been reflected on and recounted since the war.

Australia at the time of the First World War was a fledgling nation, still largely dependant on its colonial ties to Britain. This attachment was so strong that “Australians saw themselves as transplanted Britons” (Carlyon, 2002), an attitude proven by the popularity of enlistment prior to the war. However it was clear from the nation's

federation just 14 years earlier that Australia was keen for a unique identity, one that would differentiate the nation somehow from being merely a part of the commonwealth. World War One was the birth of this identity and sparked the beginning of significant change in Australia's perception of its own place in the world.

Possibly the most notable difference between the Australian troops and their English counterparts lay in the Australians' sense of humour and laid-back approach to army life. This contrasted sharply with the rigidity of the English army and the strict formality amongst its ranks. As this difference became more apparent to both Australian troops and the public back home, the spirit of the Australian larrikin emerged as a distinct part of the Australian identity. This was because of two distinct traits- a cheeky disrespect for those with higher ranks, and a constant sense of humour. This attitude is exemplified by General Monash's statement concerning the evacuation of the ANZACs: "a most brilliant conception... and will, I am sure, rank as the greatest joke in the whole range of military history." (Brigadier General Monash's Account of the Evacuation From Gallipoli)

Adding to the pride of their home nation, the Australians "behaved with that splendid courage, that splendid fearlessness, that at a jump placed them alongside the flower of the British army" (Phillip Schuler, cited on Praise For the Anzacs- Despatches from Gallipoli). Australians back home took pride in the almost instant recognition their troops received for their skill and bravery in battle, and considered themselves to have earned a special and distinguished place within the commonwealth as a nation who embodied the characteristics of bravery, comradeship and a sense of humour.

Although Australians retained their loyalty to Britain, a separate sense of identity

developed. This identity was based in the differences Australians discovered between themselves and the English, and the pride Australians had for the courage and heroism that earned 'their' troops distinguished praise and adulation amongst their fellow soldiers. This new identity did not so much replace the old one, but more add to it- Australia was still very much a part of the British Empire. Early ANZAC day celebrations are described as "unashamedly imperialist" (Williams, 1999). This reflects that although Australians were celebrating their own troops, they were doing so whilst honouring and remembering their mother nation. Australians came to see themselves as holding a special place within the British Empire, whilst Gallipoli "came to be seen as the affirmation of [Australia's] nationhood" (Australian Identity – Despatches from Gallipoli).

Whilst Australia's need for identity can be attributed to the era in which the First World War took place, the role the media played in covering war is largely responsible for the adoption of the ANZAC legend as the core of this identity. This is demonstrated by the status of Charles Bean- the Australian historian and war journalist who today has a profile at least as high as the wartime heroes he wrote of. Back home, the views of Australians were dictated by the work of wartime correspondents, whose words were the only information the general public received concerning the war. "News reports... and war literature shaped the redefinition of what it meant to be Australian." (Australian Identity – Despatches from Gallipoli). Consequently, it was the work of these writers that first brought to the public eye the ANZAC characteristics that continue to influence Australian society today. Their reports, although varying widely in content and writing style, all had one aspect in common: their patriotic commendation of the Australian troops. Through the work of journalists such as Bean, the image of the bronzed ANZAC

and his unfaltering bravery and comradeship was born.

Although the ANZAC legacy was established during the war and in the years shortly after it, the way the legend influences our society has undergone significant change since then. This can be attributed to the prominent anti-war attitude and philosophy adopted by many of Australian's citizens. The origins of this attitude are debatable, although it is likely they stem from Australia's isolated geographical location, multicultural society and national history. Whatever the cause, this societal hostility to the notion of war has led to a change in which values are emphasized within our culture. "By 1960... elementary schooling had ensured that Simpson's epic deeds were as widely known as they had been during the Great War" (Cochrane, 1992). Today, Simpson's name is instantly recognised in households throughout Australia and his picture is used as the background on which the government chooses to display its designated 'Values for Australian Schooling' (Values Education). This list serves as a clear indication of which values and characteristics continue to influence, and be taught to, Australians today. Included amongst these nine values are 'care and compassion', 'responsibility', and 'doing your best' or 'seeking to accomplish something worthy and admirable', all of which are easily linked to the famous tale of Simpson and his Donkey.

Yet the distinction of Simpson in today's society stands in stark contrast to that of other soldiers of the Great War. As one non-soldier on a battlefield, Simpson is commemorated more than the tens of thousands of Australian soldiers who carried guns. "In 1930, the date 19 May 1915 was more widely recognised as the day Albert Jacka [the first Australian to be awarded a Victoria's Cross] won the VC than the day of Simpson's

death. By 1960, Jacka and many other heroes were all but forgotten” (Cochrane, 1992). The diminishing popularity of Jacka and other such heroes over time can be explained by Australia’s disagreement with war. Jacka was described by Charles Bean as the man to have performed ‘the most dramatic and effective act of individual audacity in the history of the AIF’ (Forging The Nation – Albert Jacka), and his VC was awarded for true ‘soldiering’. Simpson’s was awarded for his unyielding sense of comradeship and ultimately sacrifice, as he repeatedly risked his life in order to save the lives of others. Although both deeds show incredible courage and determination, and are both well worthy of the coveted VC, Simpson’s actions are unaffected by society’s condemnation of war, making appreciation of his story longer lasting to Australians. The attitude of Australia as a nation has caused a shift in the ANZAC characteristics that our society celebrates, placing a greater emphasis on those values that can more easily be applied to situations far removed from combat. Surviving this change are the three core values of bravery, comradeship and a sense of humour. The Australian community’s approach to the lessons of the Great War is not to be condemned. However it is a great loss that through this adaptation of the Gallipoli story into a moral tale the memory of so many who fought or died valiantly for their country has been suppressed or forgotten.

Of the values and characteristics demonstrated by the ANZACs in the First World War, those which continue to be celebrated in and to influence Australian society today are those which all Australians, not just those in the military, aspire to possess.

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