



The

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Simpson

year 9 and 10 students

Prize

**2009 runner-up
Tasmania**

**Emily Gayton
St Michael's Collegiate**

World War I had a devastating effect on Australian society. Why should we commemorate our participation in this conflict?

by Emily Gayton, St Michael's Collegiate

The impact of World War One on Australian society was both immense and devastating, but there were also many aspects of this conflict that were, strangely, quite positive. It is my belief that there are indeed many reasons why we should commemorate this conflict.

When Great Britain declared war on Germany in 1914, Australia was a very young nation in its own right, but the links with the Mother Country were strong. As the ALP leader, Andrew Fisher, proclaimed, “ ... should the worst happen after everything has been done that honour will permit, Australians will stand beside our own to help and defend her to our last man and shilling.”¹

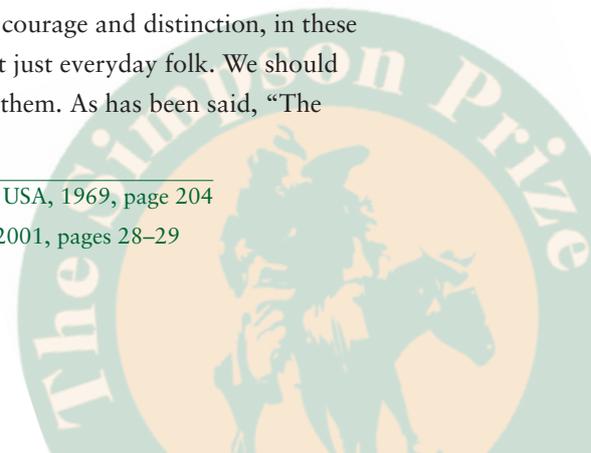
Not only was the Australian response swift and heartfelt, but the common view was that the turmoil would be shortlived; thousands of young men enlisted to fight, viewing this both as a duty and an adventure, a chance to go abroad and to show their manliness all in one. In terms of our total population of just under five million, the scale of Australia's contribution was disproportionately high. In fact, we suffered the highest percentage of casualties of any nation involved. Of the 416,809 who fought from Australia, approximately sixty thousand died and more than 150,000 were wounded and scarred for life, their entire sense of the world turned upside down. ²

We should commemorate our participation in World War One primarily to honour this raw human sacrifice. Living how and where we do today, we can only begin to imagine what it must have been like for these young people. Filled as they were with enthusiasm and hope for the future, these servicemen and women were willing to leave safe homes and travel across the world, only to encounter the most dreadful and widespread carnage on the battlefields. The brutality and savagery of their experiences would have been very far removed from their romantic ideals of warfare.

In addition, individuals were called upon to behave with courage and distinction, in these awful settings, as if they were experienced heroes and not just everyday folk. We should never forget the dreadful enormity of what was asked of them. As has been said, “The

¹ Manning Clark, *A Short History of Australia*, Mentor Books, USA, 1969, page 204

² Robert Hillman, *World War One*, Echidna Books, Australia, 2001, pages 28–29



heroes were ordinary men who had done extraordinary things.”³ The sacrifice of individuals is so inspiring that it should be commemorated. The figure of Simpson represents a group of heroic men who risked their own lives to save the lives of others. He became a symbol of the heroic behaviour of many.

Indeed, the impact of our participation has been deeply felt, both then and now. Many of these young servicemen could have looked forward to full lives; war changed this forever. As well, those who were left to mourn these losses suffered too, something that haunted them throughout their lives. How many families lost their brightest and best, or young women were left heartbroken and lonely? The heroism of the troops was valued, “but they would never forget what a ghastly business war was. It had destroyed a generation of Australians and had shaken Australian society.”⁴ How can we measure this cost, in human or financial terms? We have an obligation to commemorate all these people, rather than to forget what they endured as if it were nothing special or of no lasting consequence.

Looking beyond this, however, the impact of our participation in World War One was often quite positive; it is worth commemorating these outcomes as well.

War was a new horror for the young nation; when peace came in 1918, it was celebrated as something not to be taken for granted. Australians at last felt they were being taken seriously on the world stage. Our role in working for world stability has become well recognised. “The young Australian nation...(saw this) as the sign that it had redeemed its beginnings and had come of age.”⁵ As a test, it was clear; Australians emerged as true international players. Since 1947, Australia has had an active role as part of many United Nations peace keeping forces around the world, its authority to do so being appreciated and respected around the globe.

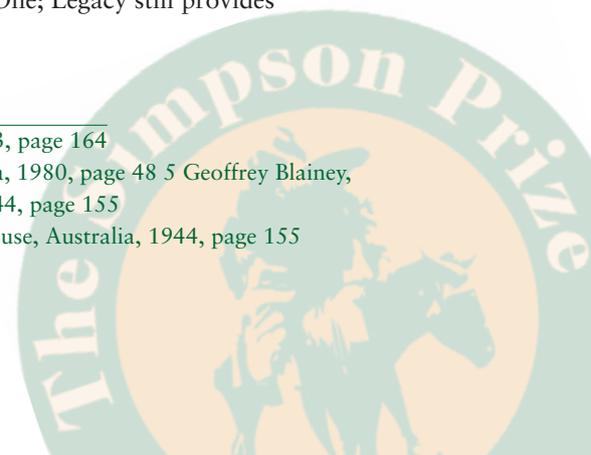
Indirectly, there have been other positive consequences of Australia’s participation in World War One. With so many men being called upon to fight, a new era was heralded. Opportunities arose for women to join the workplace and fill the empty positions. They were allowed to branch out from their more traditional roles as mothers and wives. Women brought to the workforce a new and unique style of operation and this was a healthy change. New industries were promoted and links with other countries were fostered. Similarly, the experience of war helped to break down barriers between people and create friendships. Since 1915, the mateship bonds that were formed in battle have been celebrated and cemented. People have been drawn together which is also worthy of commemoration.

On a personal level, Legacy is an organisation which was founded in Tasmania by Sir John Gëllibrand in 1923. The contribution Legacy makes, helping the widows and children of all soldiers involved in warfare and who have since died, is invaluable. This is a positive inheritance from Australia’s participation in World War One; Legacy still provides

³ Patrick Carlyon, *The Gallipoli Story*, Penguin, Australia, 2003, page 164

⁴ Michael Mckernan, *Australians in Wartime*, Nelson, Australia, 1980, page 48 ⁵ Geoffrey Blainey, *A Shorter History of Australia*, Random House, Australia, 1944, page 155

⁵ Geoffrey Blainey, *A Shorter History of Australia*, Random House, Australia, 1944, page 155



outstanding service. “The priority is in providing a ‘safety net’ of advice, counselling and welfare for families of deceased ex-servicemen.”⁶ We need to commemorate this effort as our society is enriched.

Another important aspect to consider is that the sacrifice of the soldiers was not for themselves, rather they aimed to serve future generations. At the Defence 2020 Summit in Canberra recently, the Chief of the Australian Defence Force illustrated this idea, when he explained our commitment to contemporary conflicts; “It’s for future generations that we are doing this.” During World War One, when bodies were being returned in bags, or in some cases not brought home at all, it would have been easy for people to question the authenticity of the war. **Looking back, if we try imagining what life would have been like for my generation if Australia had not gone to war from 1914, it helps us appreciate the sacrifice of those who did.** The course of our history may have been quite different, most probably in a negative way. If we value the freedom we enjoy today, then we should commemorate the participation of those soldiers in World War One, who ensured that we are so privileged.

“All of the original Anzacs are dead now, yet the number of Australians who stand solemnly on Gallipoli’s shores continues to swell each year.”⁷ There is a growing sense that it is more important than ever that the impact of their experiences remains positive and that the sacrifices of those men and women are not diminished by time. The challenge to commemorate them now rests with my generation.

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Chief of the Australian Defence Force, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, at the Defence 2020 Challenge in Canberra 4/12/08.

⁶ <http://www.legacy.com.au/pages/tasmania.php>, viewed 17/10/2008

⁷ Patrick Carlyon, *The Gallipoli Story*, Penguin, Australia, 2003, page vii

