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

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Although World War I had a disastrous outcome on Australian society, it is still an event that should regularly be commemorated. World War I had a shocking effect on Australian society, not only emotionally, through the loss of life, to many Australian citizens but also through the large economic impact made by the war. World War I was about Australia coming together as a community and rising to be recognised as a nation internationally for the first time. World War I was also the start of the well known 'ANZAC legend' which is the face of Australia and also celebrates outstanding ANZAC qualities such as bravery, courage, mateship and spirit. Most importantly, commemorating World War I is about celebrating these great qualities and honouring those who died while fighting for Australia's freedom.

World War I had a great emotional impact on the Australian public as they soon learned that their brothers, sons, husbands and fathers may never return home again. Most Australians suffered the effects from losing friends and relatives throughout the course of the four year long war. According to an ABC news article, "61,000 [Australians] were killed [during World War I]¹." This statistic hit hard on the home front as it was the first time Australia as a nation had ever seen a war this great. As the Australian War Memorial website states: "News of the landing at Gallipoli made a profound impact on Australians at home²," many Australians found it hard to cope with hearing news from the war when they were so far from where the fighting was and they were powerless to help. World War I not only had great emotional impacts on Australia, but also large economic impacts.

Australia suffered a grave economic downturn due to World War I, "[due to the disruption of shipping and large amount of materials being put towards the war effort] many imports to Australia were reduced or no longer available³." As a result of the war, it soon became increasingly hard for those who were not rich or not profiting from the war to get by. This is supported by a statement made by Robert Lewis' Australian WWI website: "the economic

1 '90 years from the war to end all wars.' www.abc.net.au/news/stories/2008/11/11/2415891.htm

2 www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac/anzac_tradition.asp

3 dl.screenaustralia.gov.au/module/293/



costs of the war continued to hurt many⁴,” with “one of the earliest impacts of the war was the government’s cancellation of existing trade with Germany and Austria-Hungary⁵.” Again, the war hit hard on the Australian economy and resulted in many people on the home front suffering greatly due to little foreign trade and consequently few imports were readily available to consumers. Although the war caused great devastation to Australian society, there are still many reasons to commemorate this event.

World War I was one of the first chances Australia got to prove its power as a nation internationally and this in its self should be commemorated. The Australian War Memorial website notes that: “The new national government was eager to establish its reputation among the nations of the world⁶.” The Australian government saw the war as an opportunity to prove itself and to be recognised on an international scale: “many people in Australia saw Gallipoli as proof that Australians had passed the test of nationhood⁷.” Not only was the war important to the government as a way of getting recognised, it was also important to the people of Australia. It was one of the first times that Australians realised that Australia could work well together as a nation. As Australia was only a young, developing nation at the time of World War I many Australians did not know what to expect: “The Australians, who were about to go into action for the first time in trying circumstances, were cheerful, quiet and confident⁸.” World War I was also an opportunity for individual Australian soldiers to shine; displaying qualities of bravery, courage and mateship towards other soldiers.

During World War I, Australian soldiers displayed extraordinary qualities and the ‘ANZAC legend’ was born. The Australian War Memorial website states: “The creation of what became known as the ‘ANZAC legend’ became an important part of the national identity of both nations [Australia and New Zealand]⁹.” The tremendous qualities displayed as part of the ‘ANZAC legend’ was one of the most important things in the development of the new nation of Australia. The legend also became the face of Australian bravery, courage, mateship and spirit. Mateship was one of the most important qualities of the ‘ANZAC legend’ and this is clear from a quote featured in an ABC News article from Peter Pederson, a senior historian at the Australian War Memorial: “A man [an ANZAC] really lives for his mates, for his section, for his platoon, for his company.” Part of the ‘ANZAC legend’ was putting mateship first. The ‘ANZAC legend’ was one of the greatest things to come out of World War I and is one of the reasons why Australia’s participation in World War I should be commemorated. However, one of the greatest reasons to commemorate World War is to honour also those who died.

4 www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww1/homefront/homefront.html

5 www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww1/homefront/homefront.html

6 www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac/anzac_tradition.asp

7 dl.screenaustralia.gov.au/module/293/

8 Extract from Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett’s article from Argus, 8 May 1915. Found in Jacaranda Essentials: History 2 p.97.

9 www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac/anzac_tradition.asp



World War I should be commemorated to honour and respect those who died fighting for the freedom of Australia. In an ABC News article, the Australian War Memorial's Katherine McMahon quotes, "Remembrance Day is an opportunity to reflect on the servicemen and women that have given their life for Australia." Commemorating World War I through Remembrance Day is one of the few chances each year Australians get to think about how thankful they are to Australian servicemen and women. According to the Australian War Memorial website: "The moment when hostilities ceased on the Western Front became universally associated with the remembrance of those who had died in the war¹⁰." On Remembrance Day each year and at other commemorations of World War I (such as ANZAC Day), people in Australia get the opportunity to think about the great sacrifice made by soldiers fighting for the freedom of Australia. Australians owe everything to the Australian service men and women who died in battle in World War I because they gave the greatest sacrifice of all for the freedom of Australia and for future generations.

Australians should always continue to commemorate Australia's participation in World War I. Commemorating World War I is not about celebrating the death and destruction caused all over the world but rather about remembering and honouring those who died while fighting for freedom and remembering the birth of the 'ANZAC legend'. Remembrance Day and ANZAC Day are not celebrations of war, but of sacrifice and national identity, and commemoration at these events is done tactfully and respectfully. Australia achieved something great after World War I, and that was coming together as a nation. The multiple positive outcomes of World War I is why this event should continue to be commemorated.

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¹⁰ <http://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/remembrance/tradition.asp>

