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

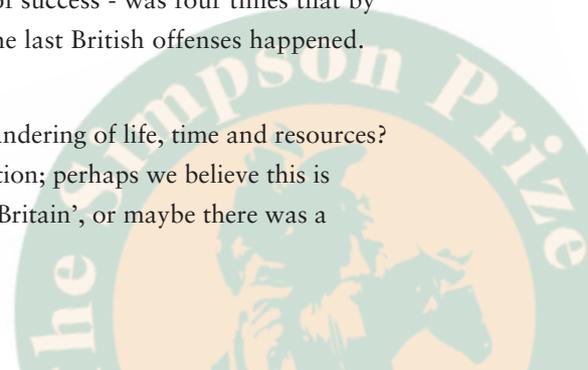
by Varun Sundar, Marist College

The nature of humans is to brood over heavy defeats, but perhaps it is the positive attitude and exemplary resilience exhibited by the Australian and New Zealand nations which have forged the illustrious ANZAC legend during World War I. This is perhaps the main reason why the story has been made into legend and the legend immortalized. The ANZAC story, like the Illiad, has risen to great heights and is sure to succeed in the test of time. The purpose behind our commemoration of the tremendous losses suffered during the First World War does not honour the pain endured by the troops at the Gallipoli and the Western Front. It is regarded as celebratory because we emerged through the hardships a nation united. Federation was only a small step towards unification. The larrikin sense of humour displayed during the perilous endeavours undertaken by Australian soldiers has radiated beyond the confines of time and distance and has become an eternal bond amongst Australians past and present. This resilience has been passed down the generations and as it continues through the ages the next generation will grow ever fonder of the ANZAC ideal. The pilgrims journeying to Gallipoli for dawn services are the best means of celebrating our 'Baptism of Fire'. Remembering the events of World War I is a tradition that has become part of our heritage and culture and to overlook this milestone in Australian history would be a great shame.

Australians were met with fierce resistance all throughout World War I. Gallipoli was a strategically weak battle with both the allied forces and the axis opting for extensive defensive measures. The total number of casualties was as high as 483,000, of which more than 100,000 were deaths (ANZAC). However, we still recognize these battles more so than the offensive on Hamel, directed by General Monash, which produced extremely few casualties and was engineered to near perfection, in relation to previous battles.

The battle of Hamel, on which Monash had staked so much, was over in just ninety-three minutes...Territory gained – another measure of success - was four times that by any other force of a division or less in 1917, when the last British offenses happened. (Perry 2005, pg 355)

Why do Australians pay homage to such a wretched squandering of life, time and resources? Is it because this was our first military endeavour as a nation; perhaps we believe this is when we first displayed our independence from 'Mother Britain', or maybe there was a



moment when we realized that we were a country not merely six different states occupying one vast land mass. We celebrate this moment because we truly believe that this was when we became a nation. The constitution gained significance through the hardships we endured, not through the formal signing of a document.

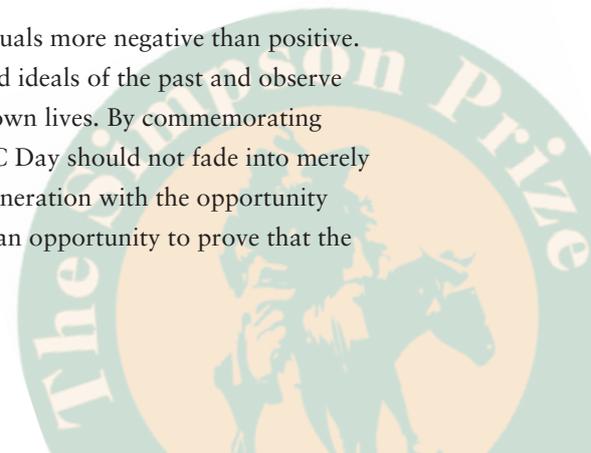
What was common amongst Australian ranks in World War I was a strong disregard for discipline and British authority. Australia was separate from Great Britain and the concept of being subject to their command was not favourable for our men. Private James Farley, a boy of fifteen who enlisted into the military forces of the Commonwealth of Australia is a perfect example. He was not one for rules and committed twenty-one crimes in almost two years of service. Most of these crimes were concerned with his absence at parades or not answering roll call. However, some of the crimes were quite serious, these involved trespassing, fighting a sailor and resisting arrest (National Archives of Australia). Our sense of humour and passionate hatred of discipline bred a strong sense of mateship amongst the Australian soldiers. It was this mateship which transformed our soldiers into courageous warriors.

“The Germans feared the Australian Army more than any other. There is ample evidence of this in the responses of German POWs in records of interrogation.” (Herald Sun, 2007)

Ours were not men who had forgotten the reason for why they had embarked on a perilous journey. They were men who remembered that beside them was a mate who they were willing to die for. The emotional and mental resilience of our troops was impressive.

The resilience shown between the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on 28 June 1914 and the signing of the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 has inspired Australian soldiers in subsequent wars to take upon themselves the duties and the mateship that their fathers once held fast to. Australian sons earned further merit in World War II, achieving names such as ‘The Rats of Tobruk’ and proving they had not a sliver of chocolate about them in Kokoda. Bravery seems to be an inherited trait amongst Australian soldiers and one could not deny that the efforts of Australians in World War I did set down the challenge and ideal for future generations to aspire towards. These qualities of bravery and ingenuity radiated from the war back to the home front and changes were taking place in Australian Society. Australian firms were now pioneering into new industries. An example of this is the rise of BHP in the steel industry. The Australian economy was not ‘riding on the sheep’s back’ so much anymore. Also, women were having a more active role in society: their contribution to the workforce rose from twenty-four per cent to thirty-seven. Politically, the Liberals lost to their rivals Labor and later regained power with the aid of the new Nationalist party. The conscription debate divided the nation and the government gained powers, in breach of the constitution, under the War Precautions Act (Lewis 2001). World War I created many changes in our society the effects of which are still being felt.

World War I affected Australia in many ways, for individuals more negative than positive. However, as a nation we should reflect on our actions and ideals of the past and observe whether we can incorporate the ANZAC spirit into our own lives. By commemorating World War I we should look to change our lives. ANZAC Day should not fade into merely a ritual on the 25th of April. It should provide the next generation with the opportunity to encounter a challenge that their ancestors once faced, an opportunity to prove that the



ANZAC spirit still thrives amongst the youth of Australia. World War I bestows upon us a chance to make positive changes for Australia's future but also presents the question of self-sacrifice. It is a crucible which continues to present the same ordeal that it put forward ninety-four years ago, the test of resilience.

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