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Lauren Tang
Sydney Girls' High School

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

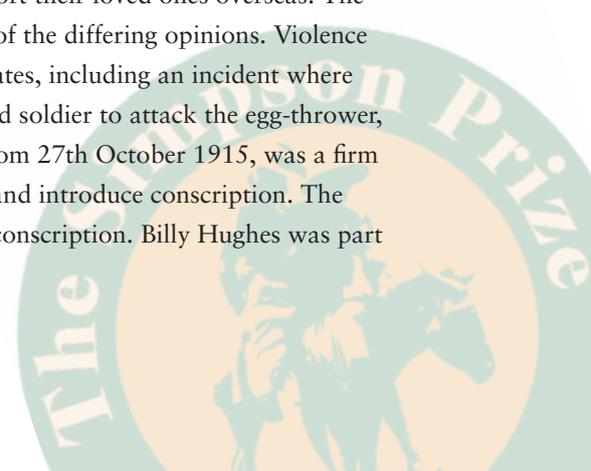
by Lauren Tang, Sydney Girls' High School

When Britain declared war on Germany, Australia, tied tightly to its mother country, was honour bound to follow. Wanting to prove her loyalty to Britain and to take a stand on the world stage, Australia as a newly federated nation, joined World War 1.

As soon as the war started, the Australian home front was affected. Nearly 20 000 Australian men enlisted in the Australian Infantry Force (the AIF) at the beginning of September 1914 (Scott, *Australia During the War*, p. 873), and over the period of the war, 330770 men were sent overseas (Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914–1918*, Vol. III, p. 890). To a nation whose population was only about 5 million, it was a significant commitment to have so many men sent overseas.

The opinions within society also changed after the start of the war. People developed strong opinions about the war, and new social standards were introduced. For one, there was great pressure on able young men to enlist. Men who did not enlist were seen as shameful, and some companies refused to employ them, while society generally scorned them. To those who could enlist but chose not to, sometimes white feathers were sent, a symbol of cowardice. Even though some had religious reasons and it was their own choice of whether or not to join the war, society's newly formed opinions were imposed on them.

Another major issue in Australia during the war was the conscription debate. The debate, over whether Australia should introduce compulsory military service, divided society and sparked bitter quarrels. Different groups of people had different opinions, and the conscription debate caused great divisions and bitterness in society. The Irish Catholics did not want to further support the British in their war due to the previous Irish/British conflicts in England. Mothers did not want to send their sons to die, but families of those already at war wanted to introduce conscription to support their loved ones overseas. The lines of division were thickened, and hate arose because of the differing opinions. Violence and disruption were also caused by the conscription debates, including an incident where Billy Hughes was hit with a rotten egg, causing a returned soldier to attack the egg-thrower, which started a fight. Billy Hughes, the prime minister from 27th October 1915, was a firm believer in conscription and ran two referendums to try and introduce conscription. The first was held on 28th October 1916, and voted against conscription. Billy Hughes was part



of the Australian Labor Party, but conscription was against the Labor Party's policy. Hughes and his followers left the Labor Party after the failure of the first referendum, and joined with the Liberals to form the National Party, who won the next election with Hughes as its leader. The second referendum, held on 20th December 1917, also failed.

Also, many prejudices were formed against those with German backgrounds. Some lost their job, had to report regularly to police stations and were sent to concentration or internment camps, because of the suspicion that they were enemy spies. German place and object names were also changed and German people suffered, being prejudiced against by society.

So why should we commemorate?

World War 1, though causing a ripple of disturbance in Australian society at the time, also was a breeding ground for unforgettable Australian history; things people would remember and would change Australia for the better.

World War 1 was Australia's first war as a nation, and a baptism of fire for Australia. It was Australia's chance to prove herself and her loyalty to Britain, and she did so brilliantly with the emergence of the ANZAC legend from the Gallipoli campaign.

Gallipoli, the ANZACs first campaign, was the start of the ANZAC legend. A report of the miscalculated landing at what would later become ANZAC cove, 'The ANZACs rose to the occasion ... Their magazines were not charged, so they just went in with cold steel. It was over in a minute. The Turks in the first trench were either bayoneted or ran away ... Then this race of athletes proceeded to scale the cliffs, without responding to the enemy's fire' (Ashmead-Bartlett, *Argus*, 8 May 1915, p. 19). The ANZAC legend portrays the Australian soldier as the best soldiers out there, as the heroes that Australians back home could look up to. The men from Australia were said to be practical, with a dry sense of humour, braver and more sensible than their British counterparts, determined no matter how hopeless things get, great mates and willing to die for their country. It gave Australia as a whole, only federated a little more than a decade ago, its first taste of national pride. 'They made a distinctive tradition – brave and tough in battle, excelling at any task to which they set their hands, careless of authority, hostile to most convention, proud of their distinctiveness and their country. For them the real Australian was the ANZAC, the bushman on the stage of the world' (Gammage, *Intruders in the Bush*, pp. 62–63). The ANZACs fought bravely at Gallipoli, and as their first campaign, achieved successes worthy of commemoration. We should also commemorate the beginning of the ANZAC legend because it has become part of Australia's national identity – something all Australians can be proud of, and an important first for Australia's history.

Back in Australia, many of the jobs left open by the men who went off to war were taken up by women. The war provided an opportunity for women to take a step forward many careers due to the decreased amounts of men. Some women took on clerical jobs, usually 'men's jobs', and the first policewomen emerged during World War 1. The opening of so many new jobs, with not as many men to fill them, offered a wider range of careers for women, widened people's views of women's jobs and gave Australia the opportunity to get closer to gender equality. This was another step forward that Australia took during the war.



But commemoration of a war is not just a celebration of the steps forward we make, but a time to remember.

As these men died for our freedom and our country, it really is only fitting that we make a point to remember them, for their sacrifices to be known to others. The men that had to endure months of fighting, who were injured or died for Australia, should be remembered for what they did. Maybe we will never know what they went through, but commemoration is like giving them a well-deserved thank you. Also, in reminding ourselves of their sacrifices, we remember how horrible war is. Commemorating can help a nation take one more step towards peace, to make sure that never again will 18-year-old boys with lives ahead of them and great potential be killed over a patch of land.

Commemoration is a time to show that those who were our enemies do not have to remain so. Turkish and Australian, German and British; they all march alongside one another now, as friends. During the war, the enemy is often regarded as the “bad guy”, labelled, prejudiced against and reduced to the image of a snarling monster with no mercy. But in commemoration, they stand equal to us, side by side, and as our friends. It’s a time of reconciliation, of restoration, of pushing the bitter feelings of war away and taking a step towards peace.

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