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2010 Winner
New South Wales

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Are There Voices Missing From the Anzac Legend?

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The resonant word Gallipoli, like the Greek ‘Thermopylae’ is a phenomenon so entrenched in the mind of the public that many unconsciously consider it to be the sole paragon of Australian heroism and the ANZAC legend. In the collective memory of a nation, Gallipoli exists triumphantly as a symbol of the Australian identity and its nascence from the distant battlefields of World War I. Nevertheless, the ANZAC legend is as all legends inevitably are; highly selective in what it propagates (Fewster 2003). Stories of heroism diametrically opposite to the legend or distant from the famed trenches of Gallipoli have been overshadowed by a ‘homogeneous, nationalist story of Australians at war.’ (Thomson 1994) As a result two great contributors to the nation’s adulthood: the diggers of the Western Front and the German ‘Fritzes’ and ‘Johnny Turks’ who lived on the receiving end of Australian gunfire, have been largely eclipsed by the valiant deeds first forged on the steep cliffs of ANZAC Cove. The successes and sacrifices of those Western Front diggers and the inexplicable relationship between man and his enemy jointly reveal a stark reality of war; as a force pulling together men from different worlds in a common struggle, thus provoking within them exceptional acts of ‘enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship, and endurance.’ (Bean 1946)

The human urge to endure and triumph is the foundation of all struggles between man and man during times of war. It is the fuel that enkindles acts of herculean courage and sacrifice from soldiers cast in the crucible of war. The ANZACs’ symbiotic relationship with the enemy, referred by Foster as the ‘bond between antagonists’ has unbeknownst to many, indelibly contributed to the ANZAC brand of reckless valour and inexorable endurance displayed at such legendary places as the Nek, Lone Pine, Pozières and Mount St. Quentin. The place of the enemy within the ANZAC legend is still under-written and ‘the armies that opposed [the Anzacs] receive relatively scant attention; like support actors in a play, their appearance is essential for the show to go on, but rarely are they allowed to move on to centre stage.’ (Fewster 2003) Yet without the heavy Turkish gunfire bearing down on ANZAC troops upon their arrival at Gallipoli, without the hardships imposed upon them by the relentless German advance on the Western Front, many of the glorious stories of selflessness and mad courage that have made up the ANZAC legend would no sooner exist within our memory. Thus, the actions of Germans and Turks may be seen as instigators of the ‘daunting odds’ (Foster 2009) and ‘noble failures’ (Australian Government, 2009) that have become part of the ANZAC vocabulary. It is this tragic reality of war; this nature of courage

and endurance stemming from adversity that supports the image of the enemy pushing men like Albert Jacka and Harry Murray to their limit and consequently bringing out the best qualities inherent within the Australian digger – qualities of endurance, courage, mateship that have been recorded by the ANZAC legend.

A unique Australian-Turkish ‘mateship’ still extant today was forged at Gallipoli out of mutual respect and recognition of the candour and tenacity of the ‘Johnny Turks of Gallipoli. The Turkish perspective of the battles at ‘Gelibolu’ has been largely discounted by Australians as ‘the overwhelming majority of children learn at school only the ANZAC side of the Gallipoli story.’ (Fewster 2003) A result of this is an inadvertent ignorance of the Ottoman soldiers’ contribution to our cherished ANZAC folklore. As the ANZAC legend develops increasingly into ‘a celebration of our virtues as a nation’ (Smith 2009) it is the values shared by both the Australian and Ottoman soldiers on and off the battlefield that have nurtured the ANZAC spirit to even greater heights, highlighting its peerless ability to unite enemies in ‘a strong friendship born out of war’. (Fewster 2003) While ANZAC troops at the beginning of the Gallipoli campaign were given the fodder of war-time propaganda, believing in the ‘stereotypical enemy soldier as Godless, cruel and bloodthirsty’ (Fewster 2003), all such preconceptions were soon dispelled and the Turk was found to be ‘untrue to all the ordinary ideas of him.’ (Bean 1915) This transition in sentiments is best articulated by C.E.W Bean who writes in his diary that the Australians ‘were very savage to them on the first day’ but later became increasingly ‘friendly with the Turks.’ Anecdotes paint such fraternizing activities as the throwing of bully beef and biscuits over trenches, the friendly exchange of coins and the arrangement of armistices to bury their respective dead. It has been written that ‘nowhere else have enemies embraced one another so warmly’ (Fewster 2003) and this embracement, at once a corroboration of the decent and open-minded nature of the ANZAC digger, has afforded posterity a clear example of the ‘triumph of the Australian character’ (Thompson 1994) in war. The profound feeling that our ‘sons and daughters’ have as Atatürk wrote become their ‘sons and daughters’ has shifted the ANZAC story towards a more tolerant and less homogeneous attitude, thus creating in our multicultural society today, a renewed interest in the ANZAC legend as a way to engage with other nations.

Whilst Gallipoli is seen as the genesis of our nationhood the Western Front has been interpreted as an inevitable trial of our nation’s adulthood, and yet despite the superior successes and sacrifices enacted on this front, the heroes of the Western Front have long lived under the hegemonic shadow of Gallipoli, the ‘bright light in our military shine.’ (Carlyon 2008) Unlike the eight-month campaign of Gallipoli which saw 50,000 Australians go into battle, 250,000 Australians were sent in total to fight at a forgotten front that would last three years and sustain ‘more casualties than in all of the conflicts [Australia] has fought since put together.’ (Pederson 2007) The enormity of the figures alone is indicative of the great sacrifice and contribution to the Allied cause. Yet stories of extraordinary bravery also paint Australia as a nation emerging from the ordeal of war in triumph, significantly ‘influencing the destiny of the world for the first time in the nation’s history’ and ‘helping to clear the way for a final Allied victory.’ (Pederson 2007) However, the dilemma faced today is that the Western Front victories ‘have for 90 years refused to lodge in the public imagination.’ As Veterans Affairs Minister Allan Griffin stated at the first dawn service on the Western Front held in 2008, eighty-five years after the first Gallipoli dawn service, ‘our strong connection with the Anzacs at Gallipoli has over the years overshadowed our commemoration of the Australians who gave so much on the Western Front.’ When one is to consider that such feats as the capturing of Mount St. Quentin, ‘the finest single feat of the war’ (Bean 1946) have been disenfranchised from folklore and largely overlooked, the tragedy of our disregard, of the ‘wrong amount of weight on Gallipoli’ (Carlyon 2006) has caused our ignorance of the Western Front’s chapter in the ANZAC legend. A clear example of the front’s inferiority in the public eye lies in the decoration of the ANZAC legend’s greatest hero. Albert Jacka’s contribution at Gallipoli was lauded with a prestigious Victoria Cross but

the incident at Pozieres in which Jacka daringly led an attack on a group of Germans holding prisoners, thus killing 20 Germans single-handedly and turning the tide of the battle, earned him the kudos of a significantly inferior Military Cross. Despite such an act of reckless valour for which he was shot 7 times and was described by C.E.W Bean as 'the most dramatic and effective act of individual audacity in the history of the AIF'. In April 1918, another one of the legend's great heroes, John Monash became the first Australian in command of the Australian Corps. The Western Front, as the 'main theatre of war' (King 2006) saw accordingly a sense of unprecedented freedom being given to the Australians in the management of their troops; an action which was not only met with great military success but one that would also allow ANZAC idiosyncrasies to grow and develop side by side with the courageous actions of ANZAC soldiers.

The homogeneity and nationalist patriotism of the ANZAC legend has rendered it inevitably a legend with voices missing and imperceptible to the Australian public. As the ANZAC legend today suffers increasingly from simplification and popularisation by a posterity that has grown evermore eager to venerate the ANZAC virtues what jeopardises the legend above all is the inability of a nation to look past the pedestal of Gallipoli and commemorate the other protagonists of the ANZAC tale. The enemies tied inextricably with the growth of the legend contributed undeniably to the staging of the war and the smaller battles that it consisted of. This staging would become the perfect ambience for the birth of an inspiring legend whose growth continued during the Western Front campaign of 1918. It is our duty as Australian citizens bequeathed with such a legacy by our forefathers to remember the stories of those missing from the ANZAC legend. For the individual sacrifices of those men, regardless of race and place has transcended the confines of war, contributing to a legend enshrined within our identity.

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