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What does an investigation of primary sources reveal about the Gallipoli experience and to what extent does this explain the origins of the ANZAC Legend?

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Almost everyone has a story to tell about the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) and Gallipoli, whether it is about family legends, from school lessons or memories of an ANZAC day parade:

Anzac stood, and still stands, for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship, and endurance that will never own defeat. The ANZACs, and the qualities they possessed when fighting in Gallipoli, are now a national standard our country hopes to live up to; it epitomises the Australian character.

Australians still look to that period of time as one that signifies the independence of a nation. For me, the ANZACs were my ancestors, ‘ordinary’ people who felt such pride in their country that they were willing to risk everything for it.

War historians devote their lives, in the example of the ANZACs who devoted their lives to their country, to uncovering more truths about the ANZACs, their leaders, the terrain of Gallipoli and the people at home during World War One. By analysing letters, diaries, poems and newspaper reports from the time, we can gain a greater understanding of the leaders’, soldiers’ and public’s different points of view and of the information they received about the enormity of the situation. By reading these, we come to understand the reasoning behind ideas, arguments and decisions. By distinguishing between the pomp of the leaders and the assurances of the journalists, we find the facts of the situation. These include unsanitary living conditions, a doomed campaign, the attitude of leaders and soldiers towards each other and the spirit of the families, soldiers and leaders through this.

People at home were informed of military campaigns by journalists. The reports contained censored facts, mixed with praise and pride for the soldiers, which reassured the public that their soldiers’ sacrifice was necessary. Today, we recognise this same praise and pride echoed through the diaries and journals of both leaders and soldiers:

One thing is sure. Whatever happens to us here we are bound to win glory. There are no other soldiers quite of the calibre of our chaps in the world...²
The journalists’ reassuring attitude contributed to the public’s confusion about the actual events of Gallipoli. By mid-1915, the journalists had adopted a more defeatist attitude toward the Gallipoli campaign and the leaders in charge of it compared to the one they were allowed to tell to the public.

In the Gallipoli Letter, Keith Murdoch wrote to the then Prime Minister of Australia, Andrew Fisher, detailing the organisation, tactical errors, living conditions and the ANZAC’s steadfast sense of duty:

...this unfortunate expedition has never been given a chance. It required large bodies of seasoned troops. It required a great leader. It required self-sacrifice on the part of the staff as well as sacrifice so wonderfully and liberally made on the part of the soldiers. It has had none of these things.\(^3\)

The letter, aided by Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett and C.E.W. Bean, was referred to by the Dardanelles Committee and was a stepping stone in the campaign’s end.

Reports such as these contributed to the ANZAC legend by giving the men hero status and telling of their spirit. However, the reports home often did not tell of the actual events and conditions which are regarded today as the one of the most important parts of the ANZAC legend.

In Gallipoli Diary, Sir Hamilton maintains a faith in the campaign which could possibly have been his downfall. Hamilton had engineered the Gallipoli campaign and he wanted to nurture it until its end. This nurturing cost many lives:

The War Office urge me to throw my brave troops yet once more against machine guns in redoubts; to do it on the cheap; to do it without asking for the shell that gives the attack a sporting chance. I don’t say they are wrong in so saying; there may be no other way out of it; but I do say the War Office stand convicted of having gone hopelessly wrong in their estimates and preparations.\(^4\) His requests for reinforcements and equipment were often denied by the decision makers back in London who put their priorities on the Western Front:

Were we in France we’d get the men to-morrow.\(^5\)

This breakdown in communication cost many battles and lives through the duration of the campaign.

These resources show the inner workings of the campaign, without focussing on the men as singles, but as a mass group. They were ordered to complete tasks, losing their control over the situation and handing it to their leaders. Sometimes these leaders did not have control either, leaving their troops with little reinforcements and poor equipment:

The average Australian will stand up to his job and see it through or go down in the attempt and it is humanly impossible to do more.\(^6\)

This caused a disregard for authority among the forces, another part of the ANZAC character.

The campaign affected every man and women in different ways and had lasting effects on all. The letters and diaries of the soldiers contributed to the legend by telling of the actual conditions and mateship which emerged at Gallipoli. The soldiers’ letters tell different stories depending on who would be receiving them and their relationship with the person. These letters, also subjected to censors, tell us more about the soldiers’ emotions than the campaign itself. However, the soldiers’ journals possessed more accurate, factual information as well as personal thoughts:

The hardest fighting done there was by the water and rations fatigue.\(^7\)
These thoughts were often guarded due to fear of upsetting family members.

The frenzied days of the Gallipoli landing produced a shock for most of the soldiers whose training left them unprepared for the rugged hills of Gallipoli. The soldiers, living in the trenches and dugouts in the cliffs, went with little water and lived on a staple diet of bully beef and biscuits. They were debilitated by diseases such as diarrhoea, dysentery, paratyphoid, jaundice and malaria, which was carried around the cliffs by lice and rats.

On most days the number of evacuees due to disease outranked that of the wounded by 3-4 times. Some men were so weighed down by constant fighting, no rest stations, (like on the Western Front), death and disease that they suffered from what were called ‘nerve sicknesses’ at the time. Others were suited to the order of the battlefield and the comradeship it produced. Men would go on swimming expeditions, out of Turkish range, gamble and maintain the typical Australian larrikinism.

When looking at the words of ‘the enemy’, we gain a different perspective to the fighting at Gallipoli. The Turkish men were on their own soil, fighting to defend their homeland. Although they hated that their homeland was being invaded, most didn’t hate the invaders themselves, who were just men like themselves dedicated to their job and country. On Armistice days, the two sides would converge, bury their dead and swap cigarettes:

*The whole operation was a strange experience - here we were, mixing with our enemies, exchanging smiles and cigarettes, when the day before we had been tearing each other to pieces.*

In 1934 Atatürk wrote a touching tribute, which lies at the Gallipoli Memorial:

*Those heroes that shed their blood and lost their lives; You are now lying in the soil of a friendly country. Therefore rest in peace. There is no difference between the Johnnies and the Mehemets to us where they lie side by side here in this country of ours. You, the mothers, who sent their sons from far away countries, wipe away your tears; your sons are now lying in our bosom and are at peace. After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.*

In another show of remembrance the Turkish named the beach, near Gaba Tepe, where the ANZACs landed on the 25th of April 1915, ‘Anzac Cove.’ The lasting relationship between the Turkish and Australians provides a link to the past.

The ANZAC legend rose out of the ashes of the Gallipoli campaign, its effects resonating through the following decades. I believe that although censors and propaganda cloud the facts of the Gallipoli campaign the legend has evolved, with new technologies and sources, to become one which highlighted the good qualities of the fighting men.

The ANZAC story isn’t one of military victories or strict training, although it encompasses both. It is one of men and women who did their best and remained loyal to their country and mates.
their story happened in the past, Australians can continue to remember them and their sacrifices in the present and the future. Their spirit is commemorated in ANZAC Day ceremonies, museums and memorials all over the world, in the school curriculum and on the sporting field. Their spirit affected the whole nation then, as it continues to now, in times of war and peace.

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