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The ANZAC legend was born during the Great War as combined forces from two virtually untested nations, Australia and New Zealand, were tried in conflict. The result was a reputation for our Australian soldiers' bravery, mateship, ingenuity and larrikinism, and recognition for being among the best soldiers in the world. This ideal continues to contribute greatly to our national pride. Yet as we approach the one hundredth anniversary of the Gallipoli landings it is an opportune time to examine the legend and discern whether it is an exaggerated stereotype or a realistic representation of those who went overseas to fight in one of the worst conflicts in world history.

Much of the ANZAC legend was created during the war as letters and stories filtered home documenting the ANZACs' performance in battle. Many of the soldiers at Gallipoli were clearly aware that they were part of something significant, as reflected in the prophetic writings of Sapper Hubert Anthony[a].

These letters were often censored, however, and large parts of them were sometimes simply crossed out. As a consequence, the vast majority of the information received by the public came from newspapers. Some of these articles were written by journalists who accompanied the troops; including correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, who witnessed the Gallipoli landings. While his article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on the 8th May 1915 tells of the Australians' brilliance in battle and of the bravery of the soldiers involved, his version is somewhat different to the accounts of soldiers who participated in the landings. Albert Facey in his book, *A Fortunate Life*, says of the landings,

> *"Suddenly all hell broke loose; heavy shelling and shrapnel fire commenced. ... Bullets were thumping into us in the rowing-boat. Men were being hit and killed all around me."*[2]

This highlights a discrepancy with the article by Ashmead-Bartlett, as he makes no mention of this heavy artillery fire and overall his description of the landings sounds significantly less dangerous. Ashmead-Bartlett instead mentions a single machine-gun being used by the Turks with the added reassurance that *"...most of the bullets went high."*[3] Which source is correct? *A Fortunate Life* was published for the first time in 1981, although Facey made notes of his experiences in life (presumably including the war) soon after the end of World War 1[4]. Accordingly, we can be fairly confident that his account is realistic and has not been distorted or exaggerated over time. The likely reason for these differing accounts is that because of the censorship at the time, Ashmead-Bartlett was compelled to write a fairly understated account to ensure its publication.

The question worthy of consideration is; because there are discrepancies and errors in sources that helped to formulate this legend, can any of the premises be trusted? Furthermore, is it simply a fanciful notion created by a country in a bleak period of its history? Although there are these aforesaid problems

[a] *"Our troops are doing splendidly and making martial traditions for our country that future generations of Australians will have to fight hard to uphold."*[1]

with some sources written at this time, there are many that were written by people who were there which detail their actions and experiences and support the ideals of the ANZAC spirit. As well as these personal accounts, there are also official records of their actions. This documentation provides us with a very personal view, allowing us to discover the individual.

One of the main characteristics that we attribute to the ANZACs is bravery and it is relatively easy to find records of their valour. In the First World War more Victoria Crosses were awarded to Australians than in any other conflict[5], and many families have stories that have been passed down of their ancestors' deeds in combat. For my family the obvious example is my Great-Grandfather, Eric William Johnson, who won the Military Medal and Bar for his actions on the Western Front. On one occasion he was in the leading wave of an attack when his Platoon Commander was hit, but Johnson took command of the platoon and led them to a flank to improve their position. With scant regard for exposing himself to heavy machine-gun fire he endeavoured to keep his men safe whilst also leading them forward.

> *"He personally reconnoitoed* [*sic*] *trenches in the area in the face of heavy machien* [*sic*] *gunfire and succeeded in getting his men into them with a minimum of loss. His conduct throughout was splendid."*[6]

As well as these individual acts of bravery that were rewarded with medals, there were many more accomplishments that went unrecognised simply because almost every soldier on the front exhibited this same gallantry. This is reflected in the writings of Lieutenant John Alexander Raws;

> *"My battalion has been in it for eight days, and one-third of it is left – all shattered at that. And they're sticking it still, incomparable heroes all."*[7]

These men had been through an incomprehensible experience that appeared to have no end in sight. Despite having seen friends and comrades fall around them, they continued to fight on for an ideal. For me, that is the epitome of bravery; to persevere when almost all hope is lost.

The ANZACs also gained a reputation for their ingenuity and initiative, and a prime example of their ability is the periscopic rifle. This device was created in Gallipoli by Lance Corporal William Beech. The prototype consisted of scrap wood and wire that encased the mirrors[8], and allowed the soldiers to attack the Turkish trenches without exposing their bodies to returning fire. This was particularly useful where Beech was stationed at the time (Quinn's Post), as the opposing side was only fifty metres away from the Australians. Beech started producing these weapons for the army and by the 26th of May 1915 he had started up a factory on the beaches[9].

There are many other examples of Australians displaying these attributes throughout the war, and often they thought of and executed a less orthodox but brilliant approach to situations. As Keith Murdoch stated it in his Gallipoli Letter;

> *"They cannot drive us from Anzac* [Anzac Cove]*. Of that I am sure. Australian ingenuity and endurance have made the place a fortress...,"*[10]

and that is an achievement indeed.

In my opinion, the most important part of the ANZAC legend is the mateship that these soldiers showed to one another, and one of the most recognisable figures who personified this in the First World War was John Simpson Kirkpatrick. Leading his donkey through Shrapnel Gully without making any attempt to protect himself from the fire around him, daily he put his life at risk to try and save his fallen comrades[11]. This display of mateship captured the hearts of Australians to such an extent that Simpson is arguably the most famous Australian soldier, if not from the entire war, certainly from the Gallipoli campaign.

These soldiers were not only mates to their comrades in life; they also tried to look after the loved ones their mates left behind and ease the sorrow of their passing. Not uncommonly, soldiers would write home to their dead mate's relatives, telling them how he had died, and offering what comfort they could. In one of numerous examples, Private Benjamin Walker writes home to the parents of Corporal John Inglis Smith, talking of his death. Endeavouring to make the family proud of their son and relieve the bitterness of his death, his letter is full of assurances that John was brave[12]. Even though his friend was dead, he continued to be a mate to him and strove to look out for those he left behind.

Despite the trauma of the war, the Australians gained a reputation of being larrikins. Both their irreverence and capacity to view with humour the absurdity of situations would annoy English soldiers who were given the task of teaching these men drill. On occasions, their natural tendency to laugh at the commands given to them landed them in trouble[13]. It was possibly this trait that allowed them to survive the horrors of the war for which most of them were unprepared.

It could be said, however, that we have a tendency to idolise the ANZACs. It must be remembered that these men were human, and certainly had their faults, especially prior to entering battle. Albert Facey describes his experiences in the Egyptian town of Zagazig, where, despite the army's efforts, the troops still managed to get alcohol, and disgustedly describes the conduct of the drunken soldiers[b].

These young Australians went into the conflict as larrikins and rascals, and whilst the vast majority of them seem to have retained this trait, they also learnt to be serious and disciplined when required.

Because the ANZAC legend stereotypes our soldiers' actions in the Great War, there are always going to be individuals who do not fit this mould. Nevertheless, I consider it reasonable to say that, to a marked

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[b] *"We finally got on our way to Cairo and during this part of our journey there was some terrible conduct and carrying on. There were drunk soldiers vomiting all over the seats and out the windows; some were trying to fight, and the language they shouted at each other was terrible."*[14]

degree, the legend does give us a realistic representation of individual Australian soldiers in this war. Although the soldiers' lives are not quite as glamorous as the legend portrays, in many respects they do display the qualities we attribute to the ANZACs. Therefore, I concur that the legend is well founded, providing us with a fair description of most individuals' personalities and actions during World War 1.

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