



THE Simpson PRIZE

A COMPETITION FOR
YEAR 9 AND 10 STUDENTS

2014 Winner
Queensland

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The ANZAC legend, said to have been forged by the actions of brave Australian Imperial Force (AIF) soldiers during World War I (WWI), was actually constructed in the ensuing years through the selection of varying morsels from the smorgasbord of alleged bravery as reported in the censored accounts of the Australian and British War correspondents. The legend built upon stereotypes formed in the pre-federation era, replacing the 'Aussie drover' and 'bush battler' with modern soldiers fighting for their newly found freedom, providing the nation with a war hero to rally behind, justifying in the eyes of many the horrific bloodshed of an unsuccessful and controversial military campaign. On ANZAC Day a romanticised draft of the actions of the AIF soldiers is celebrated, depriving those held on the pedestal of their right to be remembered for their actual contributions and omitting the actions of others. This distorts our perception of war and denies future generations the honest account of the events that formed the basis of their national identity. The legend fails to do justice to the stories of individual AIF soldiers through the dogmatic stereotyping of soldiers as unconditionally positive and recklessly courageous and by excluding social minorities.

Central to the ANZAC legend is the concept of Australian optimism and resilience, a pre-war stereotype that was expanded upon by the official reports of the Australian and British war correspondents, Ellis Ashmead Bartlett and Charles E. W. Bean. These reports appeared in newspaper such as the *Argus* during the war years, casting soldiers as unconditionally positive, often not reflecting their real reaction to one of the most horrific examples of modern warfare. Prior to WWI, Australian bush poets, such as Banjo Patterson and Henry Lawson, heavily influenced national identity. *Waltzing Matilda*, arguably one of Patterson's most renowned ballads, tells the story of a drover who, rather than losing his freedom, sends himself to his own watery grave. The idea of fighting for your ideals, in conjunction with the concept of humour, found throughout some of his other work, such as *The Bush Christening*, was central to forming the Australian identity. Ashmead-Bartlett's initial dispatch as the British war correspondent contributed to the stereotyping of soldiers as unconditionally positive. His report into the landing at Gallipoli, written on May 7th 1915 and subsequently published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on May 8th 1915, describes the hours before the first conflict stating that the men preparing for battle were 'cheerful, quiet, and confident, showing no sign of nerves or excitement' (Bartlett 1915). As one of the earliest sources of news of the campaigns, this contributed to the public formulating the opinion that ANZAC soldiers were, in the face of adversity, still positive. The notion of optimism and unconditional cheerfulness as a main aspect of the ANZAC legend is supported by the Australian War Memorial, which lists 'good humour' (Stanley 2002) as closely associated with the legend. However, a majority of AIF soldiers' stories are not adequately reflected in this legend. Three days after this account was published, Signaler Ellis Silas (AIF) noted in his diary 'I don't think I shall ever be able to forget this; it's horrible' (Silas 1915) and continues to describe that whilst some soldiers still maintained a cheerful disposition, an equal number were ruined or delirious.

Supporting this is Private Norman Bales' (AIF) diary entry, 26th of July, 1916, in which he grimly describes the negative effects of the war on soldiers' mental state in his diary by stating 'Several of my

friends are raving mad... three officers out in no man's Land the other night, all rambling and mad' (Bayles 1916). He also stated, 'We are lousy, stinking, ragged, unshaven and sleepless... It is horrible'. This primary source tells part of the story of a soldier who, at the time, did not share in the 'cheerful, quiet, and confident' (Bartlett 1915) spirit described in the ANZAC legend. These primary sources corroborate to form a side of the ANZAC's story not expressed in the legend. Like all people, a majority of soldiers were not unconditionally positive, however, the legend does not adequately represent the experiences of these service people, favouring stories, regardless of whether they were true, in which soldiers emulated these unrealistic ideals.

The ANZAC legend's retelling of events was sensationalised and based on censored accounts, portraying some soldiers as recklessly valiant whilst ignoring the stories of soldiers who applied themselves with ordinary, but equal, courage. The story of John Simpson Kirkpatrick's work as stretcher Bearer to the 3rd Field Ambulance, later described by The Australian War Memorial as 'the most prominent symbol of Australian courage and tenacity on Gallipoli' which made a 'vital contribution to the story of ANZAC' (AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL 2012) has arguably become one of the best known stories of WWI. However, the censored version of Simpson's story has been embellished over the years. Charles Woodrow Bean, the Official Australian War Correspondent, stated in his personal diary on June 20th, 1915 that 'this is the point to which censorship was reduced us- that the German accounts are truer than our own' (Page 162, Bean's Gallipoli,) In his experience as a correspondent, all reports and personal correspondence were subject to censorship on the basis of 'not giving information to the enemy (and) not needlessly distressing their (the soldier's) families at home' (Page 9, Bean's Gallipoli). This censorship is likely to have contributed to the accounts of Simpson's alleged heroics and also renders official accounts unreliable. This, in combination with the lack of eyewitnesses of Simpson's actions, causes considerable grounds for reservation in regards to whether some of Simpson's sensational feats, for example rescuing 300 soldiers in his 24 days at Gallipoli, ever actually occurred. A tribunal convened to assess Simpson's alleged bravery for a posthumous nomination for the Victoria Cross found that '(his) bravery were representative of all other stretcher-bearers of 3rd Field Ambulance' (AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT DEFENCE FORCE TRIBUNAL 2013), and therefore not worthy of additional singular recognition. Despite this acknowledgment that Simpson's actions were indeed nothing atypical of his role in the war, he alone, is recognised by the Australian public. In 2005 Brendan Nelson, the Federal education minister, went as far to say that "He (Simpson) represents everything at the heart of what it means to be an Australian" (Bantick 2010), arguing that his actions are to be aspired to by current generations. However, the singular ANZAC legend does not do justice to the effort and sacrifices made by thousands of other AIF soldiers in WWI. As a consequence of the ANZAC legend creating only one hero, other soldier's stories are forgotten and our perception of their unique experience incomplete. Despite the legend's aims of ensuring the AIF soldiers of WWI remained immortalised, as well as instilling a sense of nationalism and pride, it skews the public's perceptions of a

campaign gone wrong and denies a majority of soldiers the opportunity for their story to be heard and remembered.

Whilst the ANZAC legend incorporates the values of egalitarianism and equality amongst all combatants, it fails to sufficiently embrace the diverse backgrounds and by extension, stories of some soldiers, notably Indigenous Australians. As the basis for our modern multi-cultural nation, equity is imperative and the failure of the legend to tell the stories of those marginalised by society at the time brings the historical integrity of the legend into question. According to the Australian Defence Act of 1909, 'those who (were) not substantially of European origin or descent' were banned from enlisting (GOVERNMENT OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA 1909); despite this, out of the total 416,809 soldiers that enlisted, at least five hundred were Indigenous, an estimated two-thirds of which were killed in action (Moremon 2013). Private William Joseph Punch, an Aboriginal serviceperson from Goulburn, New South Wales, circumvented these regulations in order to gain enlistment. His service is well documented, including a portrait taken in uniform prior to his departure (Appendix 1), a group photograph of the Goulburn Valley enlistees (Appendix 2), a letter to one of his neighbours (Appendix 4) and numerous newspaper articles. An article in the Goulburn Evening Penny Post, published on the 5th of October 1916 (Appendix 3), conveys news of the soldier, affectionately known as 'Punch', and his recent injury; describing him in the context of his battalion as 'a favourite... looked upon as a mascot' (GOULBURN EVENING PENNY POST 1916). Despite the evidence that Private Punch was a lively and valuable member of the AIF, his story is overlooked by the ANZAC legend, which makes no mention of the contributions of Indigenous Australians. Punch's story was one of many omitted by the legend. A letter received by another Indigenous soldier, Albert Edmund Leane (Appendix 5), from his comrade Dave Wright supports this and exemplifies the indiscriminate nature of mateship. The letter written to Leane opens with, 'Dear Darkie, Just a line to let you know I have just drunk (to) your health' (Wright 1931), a quintessential expression of enduring Australian mateship and the egalitarianism promoted through the legend. Despite the legend promoting these values, the Anzac legend fails to provide the account of these principles in practice through the bonds shared amongst soldiers, denying Indigenous soldiers the acknowledgment that their brothers in the conflict received. A formal group portrait of seven of the members of the 3rd Tunneling Company, AIF (Appendix 6) shows a group of young Australians who were referred to by the sender of the post card, Sapper Herbert Mason, as 'ear wiggers'. In front row centre there is a young soldier denoted as 'the unidentified Aboriginal' and this, because of the Anzac legend, is how he and other like soldiers will be remembered, or rather not remembered, contrary to the ANZAC motto of 'Lest We Forget'. The legend's failure to acknowledge the contributions and even presence of Indigenous soldiers and their stories diminishes the integrity of the ANZAC legend.

The Anzac legend heavily influenced the Australian identity and is still considered by some to define what is to be Australian. However, the legend fails to do justice to the stories of the thousands of Australians who served as soldiers in WWI, often stereotyping them based on censored accounts of

events, such as the assumption that AIF soldiers were unconditionally positive and courageous, and omitting the contributions of many.

Appendix:

Appendix 1



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P01625.003

Portrait of Private William Joseph Punch, 1st Battalion, courtesy of the Australian War Memorial, 1916.

<http://www.awm.gov.au/collection/P01625.003>

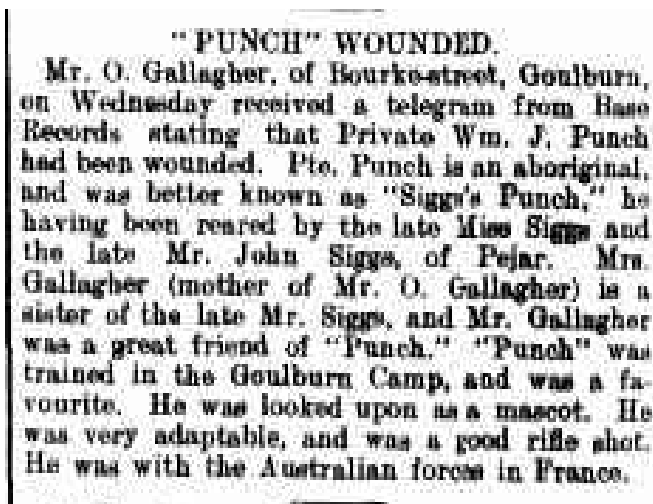
Appendix 2:



Private Punch is in the centre of the middle row of the photograph of the recruits from his area of enlistment, Goulburn. Image courtesy of Albert Speer.

Appendix 3:

Scanned copy of original article of the Goulburn Evening Penny Post, 5th October 1916, describing Private Punch's Injury. Digital transcript:



"PUNCH" WOUNDED./ Mr. O. Gallagher, of Bourke-street, Goulburn, on Wednesday received a telegram from Base Reords stating that Privats Wim. J. Punch had been wounded. Punch is an aboriginal, and was better known as "Siggs's Punch," he having been reared by the late Miss Siggo and the late Mr. John Siggs, of Pejar. Mrs. Gallagher (mother of Mr. O. Gallaghor) is a sister of the late Mr. Siggs, and Mr. Gallagher was a great friend of "Punch." "Punch" was trained in the Goulburn Camp,

and was a favourite. ie was looked upon as a mascot. He was very adaptable, and was a good rifle shot. He was with the Australian forces in France.

Image and digital transcript courtesy of Goulburn Evening Penny Post, Trove Digitalised Newspapers

Appendix 4:

Scanned copy of original postcard sent from Private Punch to Mrs E McLachlan (a woman he knew through association with her children in Goulburn), dated 18th January 1917, from hospital in France.

Courtesy of Albert Speer.

Digital Transcript:



France 18 January 1917

Dear Mrs McLachlan

Just these lines hoping they will find you enjoying the best of health. I have been in the hospital but I am in a convalescent camp now & am better again. Remember me to the boys and girls. I have had no letters for quite along time but I hope to get some shortly. I will close now with best wishes from

Your sincere friend Punch

Appendix 5: Formal portrait of Albert Edmund Leane, courtesy of Judy Joyce, Indigenous Histories (<http://indigenoushistories.com/2013/08/30/petitioner-soldier-writer-poet-nurse-the-multifaceted-indigenous-leane-family-2/>)



Appendix 6: Group portrait of the 3rd Tunnelling Company, AIF, 1917, France. Reverse of postcard identifies the group as 'ear wiggers'. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.



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