



# THE Simpson PRIZE

A COMPETITION FOR  
YEAR 9 AND 10 STUDENTS

2015 Winner  
Western Australia

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Four days after the declaration of war, Australian Governor General Ronald Munro Ferguson noted that; 'There is indescribable enthusiasm and entire unanimity throughout Australia in support of...war.'<sup>i</sup> In the months following the declaration, this enthusiasm grew as 'men of all ages and levels of physical fitness crowded to the recruiting centres to enlist.'<sup>ii</sup> By the end of 1914, over 52 000 men had enlisted in the Australian Expeditionary Force, supplying the allies with troops for both the Western Front and the ill-fated Dardanelles campaign of 1915. Although the young men of Australia who enlisted to fight in 1914 were undoubtedly influenced by the wish to protect the 'Mother Country,' many of them enlisted for other reasons, either financial, moral or the pursuit of adventure.

At the beginning of 1914, Australia was a nation in it's infancy, and had thus far remained untested, having 'achieved nothing great from the national standpoint.'<sup>iii</sup> The threat of war in Europe was therefore an enticing thought to a population that had only previously been peripherally involved in the Boer War. This time, Australia's links with Britain afforded them a much closer link to the conflict and an opportunity to join Britain in arms. The link between the two nations was representative of Australia's population, of whom 90% had a British background.<sup>iv</sup> Although Australia had become it's own separate country in 1901, there were still political, legal and historical ties binding the two nations together. As a dominion of the British Empire, Australia lacked the power to 'stay neutral if Britain went to war,'<sup>v</sup> but was able to 'decide the extent of it's involvement.'<sup>vi</sup> In any case, the desire to stay neutral or even to limit involvement was one that did not enter the Australian mindset. Instead, the announcement of Britain's declaration of war when Germany invaded neutral Belgium prompted public displays of 'unanimous excitement,'<sup>vii</sup> and the *Sydney Morning Herald* wrote that Australia must get ready for her 'baptism of fire.'<sup>viii</sup> Both Australian politicians and public had been readying themselves for war for quite some time, and the reactions to this announcement reflected Australia's hunger for involvement.

Following the federation of Australia, the nation's first Prime Minister Edmund Barton had been questioned as to Australia's future contribution to the defence of the British Empire. His response had been that 'Australia could be depended upon if the Empire was imperilled, but it's contribution had to stem from the spontaneous response of it's people.'<sup>ix</sup> Twelve years on from this announcement, the 'spontaneous response' of the Australians indicated that they had 'all got the war fever.'<sup>x</sup> Though the initial pledge from the Australian government had been for 20 000 troops, within the first few days, recruiting stations had filled their ranks and were turning people away.<sup>xi</sup> The men that comprised that first contingent of Anzacs had varied reasons for enlisting, many citing duty to the 'Mother Country,' as their primary motivation. Lance Corporal FC Mulvey wrote that 'I have sworn to "obey the King's commands and fight his enemies wherever I am required."<sup>xii</sup> while 'Charles Foster wanted to uphold the traditions of the British race.'<sup>xiii</sup> These ideas were heavily promoted in the media of the day. Just one day prior to Britain's declaration of war, *The Sydney Morning Herald* told it's readers that 'The

whole of the people of this continent are united in their determination to support to the utmost limit of their resources the Empire within they have grown and prospered for so many years.<sup>'xiv</sup> It seems clear that loyalty to Britain, and to Australia's British heritage was the reason for enlistment most strongly recognised by politicians and papers, however it was far from the only reason that recruiting stations were besieged by thousands of young men desperate to join the newly formed Australian Imperial Force.

While patriotism and British heritage was certainly an influential factor, some men were driven to join the AIF by more practical considerations. Throughout the winter months of 1914, the Australian wheat belt had been experiencing a severe drought, which affected not only farmers but seasonal workers as well.<sup>'xv</sup> Men who had previously been employed would have seen the six shillings a day paid by the army as a very attractive offer. Robert Edmund Anthill had been employed on a rural property, but wrote that 'things are so bad out here for there is a drought on. We haven't had any rain for months so I thought I would join the army.'<sup>'xvi</sup> This practical approach to enlistment was echoed by accountant Murray Aitkin who spoke of 'men who've never...earned so much money before in their life.'<sup>'xvii</sup> The money offered by the AIF made Australian soldiers the best paid of the war,<sup>'xviii</sup> however some men were so eager to enlist that money was not a consideration. Many Australians saw participation in the war as the right thing to do. Lieutenant DG Armstrong enlisted because 'it is the greatest opportunity for a chap to make a man of himself, those that come back from this war will be the right sort that anybody would be proud of,'<sup>'xix</sup> while others 'could not bear the abuse of elderly women (in Belgium.)'<sup>'xx</sup> These moral reasons reflected the popular view that 'the British Empire stands for the progress of civilisation, and for the welfare of humanity,'<sup>'xxi</sup> and that it was 'every young fellow's duty,'<sup>'xxii</sup> to volunteer.

Though Australia was a nation that placed high value on her duty to the 'Mother Country,' the youth of the country and its inexperience of warfare meant that many of the young men who volunteered were inclined to view war as an adventure. C.E.W Bean wrote in his Official History that the first contingent included 'all the adventurous roving natures that could not stay away..all those who plunged heads down into war, reckless of anything else, because it was a game to be played, and they were players by nature.'<sup>'xxiii</sup> This very Australian approach to war meant that Australians were sure of their value to the war effort, and enthusiastic in their aspiration to 'get to grips with those inhuman brutes (the Germans.)'<sup>'xxiv</sup> Lance Corporal Mulvey wrote of his 'spirit of adventure,'<sup>'xxv</sup> and John Simpson Kirkpatrick recalled that back in Australia 'men were just simple going mad...to go to the war.'<sup>'xxvi</sup> For these early adventurers, the war held the prospect of seeing foreign places and engaging in combat, with no less a prize than 'the salvation of the world.'<sup>'xxvii</sup> Of course, Australia's fleeting experience in the Boer War fifteen years previously had not informed these men of the true nature of

war, and it they would find themselves facing hardships that might have met the definition of 'adventure,' but also meant that many of them would never see Australia again.

Whilst duty to the 'Mother Country,' was an important factor in the enlistment of Australian soldiers in 1914, factors such as financial considerations, moral obligations and the 'spirit of adventure,'<sup>xxviii</sup> also greatly influenced the decisions of Australian men. Whatever their reasons for enlisting, that first contingent of ANZACs defined the image of the Australian soldier that was to persist throughout the war and beyond. The idea of the brave and confident Australian soldier stems from those first 50 000 men who departed Australia so enthusiastically, many of whom remain buried in the other countries they wanted so badly to see. Whether they went for duty, for money or for adventure, they have played a crucial role in Australia's history, and as C.E.W Bean wrote at the end of his *Official History*, 'What these men did, nothing can alter now: The good and the bad, the greatness and the smallness of their story will stand...and (be) for their nation a possession for ever.'<sup>xxix</sup>

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