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# SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

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2020 Winner

Australian Capital Territory

Kara Thompson

Canberra High School



# Simpson Prize 2020

**Kara Thompson - Canberra High School**

H.R.H. Prince of Wales taking the salute from Australian troops marching through London in the Victory Parade, 3rd May 1919. (available via <http://blogs.slq.qld.gov.au/ww1/2016/12/12/private-reginald-walter-barrett-postcard-albums-digitisedslq/>)



# Did the Allied Victory Really Bring the End of Suffering?

By Kara Thompson

World War One was one of the most costly wars in history, and the beginning was met with a sense of nationalistic optimism for Australia as a newly united country. However, it ended with a short-lived sense of normality before the harsh reality set in. The statement that “Allied victory brought an end to war, suffering, and challenges for Australia and its people” is not supported by the experiences of 1919 at an individual, national or international level. While the challenges may have changed, they did not disappear for the people of Australia. The various battles in which Australia has been involved in since 1919 and the difficult return of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZACs) demonstrated that war brings suffering, suffering that takes time to move beyond and time to recover. The war caused health concerns for the returning soldiers. For both women, despite suffrage, and the first people's, they still had decades of fighting for their rights ahead of them. Struggles which are affecting the people of the 21st century are not new, they have been affecting people for hundreds of years, and the people of 1919 felt these struggles too.

World War One soldiers returned with disabilities, mental health issues, and had been exposed to new diseases due to the nature of trench warfare. Towns and cities of 1919 had a sudden influx of veterans with mental health conditions and disabilities. Nobody was able to care for the former soldiers, as there had been little medical research into these conditions, and to have a disability was still seen as shameful. In 1919, disabilities became a part of daily life for many, which in regional Australia, was particularly difficult. “And the hook instead of a hand, the ‘stumpy’ in a wheelchair, one man even skating on a little trolley, his hands taking the place of his absent legs; the man who shook and trembled from ‘shell shock’ and regularly had to be ‘put away’” (Patsy Adam Smith, 1978). According to Bill Gammage’s *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War*, “Yet before the last veterans reached home the cheers were already dying away, and it soon became clear that the soldiers’ rewards would be less than had been promised during the war. Worse, ‘when I got home in 1919 Ex Diggers were singing for a living in the streets. Men without arms and legs, some in wheelchairs’ [H. Brewer reminiscing in 1967].” (Gammage, 2010, pg. 275). The veterans did not receive the prolonged praise and benefits they were promised. The Australian government rewarded the returning soldiers with farms, however, the farms came with terrible loans, preventing the soldiers from making any money off the land (State Library of Victoria, n.d.). The government was unaware of how to support these people with their trauma, thus resulting in a large percentage of the ex-military resorting to unhealthy coping mechanisms, mainly, unhealthy drinking patterns. With the Australian government in debt \$100 million to Britain, having unproductive farms and traumatised workers who were often drunk, made the ability to pay off this debt impossible (Bongiorno, 2018). By 1938, one-fifth of the budget was assigned to the veteran's benefits, which prevented Australia from developing further as a country (State Library of Victoria, n.d.). With little medical help in regional Australia, the veterans suffered, and with the lack of medical knowledge and tools, such as antibiotics, wounds did not heal without pain.

After the war, the Australian economy declined and the relationship with the United Kingdom was suffering, due not only to the debt but also the interactions during the war. The Australian government saw the issues presented by 200,000 men joining the workforce,

hence Prime Minister Billy Hughes implemented the retraining policies. These men had to fight for what jobs were available, unemployment rates were at a record high. This created yet another challenge for the Australian government at the time. How do the returned soldiers all get their jobs back? John Monash, in his address to brigade commanders in November 1918 stated there were already measures in place which were “Preparing men for academic careers. University Courses. Professional or vocational training. Then Industrial employment comprising: Commercial employment ... Scientific employment. New apprenticeship” (Australian War Memorial, 1918). Retraining opportunities allowed for the veterans to move into a higher-paying field, or to change into a less dangerous job if that was what they wished. When the soldiers returned, they aimed to make decent money, as they had been promised a good future in return for their service. Veterans joined the labour force, which was controlled by the unions, and workers joined together in protest. The unions had started a practice of conscription strikes during the war, and this culture of striking continued. These strikes were often violent and caused further damage to a crippled economy. When the workforce took time off, nothing was being produced, and with less to sell GDP took a further hit (Armstrong, n.d.). The strikes were inconvenient to employers and the government, creating a class divide and class struggle. The negative effect of this divide was seen in 1919, at the Fremantle Wharf riot. 26 police officers sustained injuries, and a worker by the name of Tom Edwards lost his life. Lumpers, who unloaded cargo from the docks, threw items overboard in protest, and it was not met kindly by the police (The Northern Times, 1919). In 1919, the Australian government had a deficit of 123% of the gross domestic product, or \$100 million, to be paid off to Great Britain for over 36 years (Bongiorno, 2018). When wool prices dropped, Australia was losing its ability to repay this debt and attempted to renegotiate with Great Britain, however, the United Kingdom would not negotiate new terms for the loan (Bongiorno, 2018). This was all in the lead up to the great depression, which brought with it a 32% unemployment rate, and too many workers for too few jobs. Australia had traditionally survived by exporting crops and sheep, or wool. However when Wall Street crashed other countries reverted to making money from agriculture, leading to global oversupply. Rampant inflation was harmful to many, as the cost of living went up, but wages did not, which affected the medical status of most, as they could not afford to eat well. Although Australia already had a large deficit, the government continued to pour money into the great depression (National Museum of Australia, Undated).

The allied victories supposed end to suffering did not include all its people. In Australia in 1919, disadvantaged groups such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and women saw their role in society take a step backwards. While women had gained the right to vote at a federal level in 1902, many states did not let women vote in the state election, Victoria not allowing it until 1908. It took until 1923 for all the states to allow women to stand for election (National Library of Australia, 2016). During the war, 3000 women enlisted as nurses. There were 55,000 women in the paid workforce in 1918 (Frances, 2014). In 1919, the men took their jobs back. In four years society had adjusted gradually, and yet in 1919 there was an influx of men back into the workforce, and women returned to their traditional household roles. Women had proven themselves in the war, and yet they were expected to go back to life as a housewife, and for many with the additional role as a carer for their returned husbands. *A Wedding Portrait of James Reginald Mathews and Caroline Janetta Mathews* depicts a young couple, Mr Mathews in his military uniform, at their wedding (‘Wedding Portrait’ 1918). This demonstrates how there were limited options for women during this time, and there was societal pressure to be married young. (Australian War Memorial, n.d.).

Furthermore, while the women of 1919 were fighting for improved rights, the indigenous people were suffering from oppression and the loss of rights altogether. There were an estimated 1,000 Indigenous soldiers, however, they were not treated well, not only did the indigenous soldiers receive less pay than their white counterparts, they were repeatedly given the worst jobs during the war. This was compounded by the fact that they were denied the praise of the white soldiers (Australian War Memorial, n.d.). Upon returning, Indigenous soldiers, despite having fought alongside white soldiers, were not acknowledged at ANZAC Day services for decades. "I know of at least one Aboriginal veteran of World War One who was not only denied his pay packet and his pension, but upon his return was given the very same rags he had been wearing the day he volunteered, and sent back to work on a station, as if the trenches and mud and the fighting had never happened" (Gracelyn Smallwood, 2008).

The statement that allied victory brought an end to war, suffering, and challenges for Australia and its people is simply not true, 1919 did not in any way reflect this. The suffering continued long after the guns fell silent. The soldiers carried the physical and psychological scars of war, which were not well understood and thus often unsupported despite the best efforts of their loved ones. The Australian economy in 1919 was in a terrible condition which was only made worse by the particularly devastating effect of the great depression. The global economy was not helping Australia's recovery, as international trade was down due to oversupply. Social groups were still being oppressed. Women and soldiers were not treated as fairly as they anticipated given the wartime rhetoric espoused by politicians. Aboriginals, without the right to vote and given little to no respect for their service, were sent back to harsh working conditions where they were vastly underpaid. Women who had only recently secured the right to vote and had proven themselves as workers during the war, returned to household chores when they often caring for their emotionally and physically scarred husbands and sons. When the armistice was signed, Australia's official role in the war had finished. Whilst the suffering on the battlefields ended, the suffering on the homefront had only begun.



## Appendix

### Source 1: Artwork



Vida Lahey, *Rejoicing and remembrance*, Armistice Day, London, 1918, 1924.  
<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C186262>

The painting depicts groups of women mourning and rejoicing at St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, London, on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918.

### Source 2: The John Monash address, 26 November 1918

“We are faced with the problem of returning to Australia something like 200,000 individuals – comprising fighting men, munitions workers, and dependants (wives and children). The problem is not only how to return these people home to Australia in the most expeditious way, but also how to send them home in a condition – physically, mentally and morally – to take up their duties of citizenship with a minimum of delay, a minimum of difficulty and a minimum of hardship on the community and on the individual ... To do that we have to begin creating a morale throughout the AIF – a morale which, for want of a better word, I will call the “reconstruction morale” ...

[A]t what rate shall we be able to send the men home? That depends on the shipping available, and there will be a very heavy demand by all nations, and for all purposes, on all available tonnage. That is an Imperial question; in fact, it is an international question. Great Britain must be prepared to take her share of tonnage, and the Shipping Control will allot certain proportions to Australia. Our position is likely to be relieved by the necessity ... of bringing from Australia to England a great amount of wool, wheat and meat ...

We have also to consider the capacity of Australia to absorb the men, for it would be a great disaster to have dumped in Australia 200,000 men who were either without employment themselves, or who would displace from employment those now employed ...

What employment can be made available? We have Education, which will become part of the Demobilization Department, and will embrace:

- Commercial training.
- Preparing men for academic careers.
- University Courses.
- Professional or vocational training.

Then Industrial employment comprising:

- Commercial employment ...
- Scientific employment.
- New apprenticeship ...
- Men who have broken their apprenticeship, or whose term of apprenticeship has been arrested, and who wish to continue in their trade.
- Wage-earning in a man's present trade.
- Learning of new trades: this is of special importance to Australia, who in future intends to open up new industries, such as tin-plate making, ship building ...
- Agricultural and rural industries of many kinds ...
- Commonwealth workshops. The Commonwealth proposes to establish workshops, stores, etc. ...

In conclusion, I ask for the utmost co-operation on the part of every officer and man; for what I am setting out to do is to be attempted in the common interests of ourselves, our men and our country."

Address on *Repatriation and demobilization* by John Monash to divisional and brigade commanders on 26 November 1918, pp. 19–20, 24–25, 30.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1341638>

Source 4: Quote

"I know of at least one Aboriginal veteran of World War I who was not only denied his pay packet and his pension, but upon his return was given the very same rags he had been wearing the day he volunteered, and sent back to work on a station, as if the trenches and mud and the fighting had never happened."

Gracelyn Smallwood, "The injustices of Queensland stolen wages", in "Your say", Koori Mail, Issue 424, 23 April 2008, p. 25.

Source 5: Quote

"Yet before the last veterans reached home the cheers were already dying away, and it soon became clear that the soldiers' rewards would be less than had been promised during the war. Worse, 'when I got home in 1919 Ex Diggers were singing for a living in the streets. Men without arms and legs, some in wheelchairs' [H. Brewer reminiscing in 1967]. Probably that was not common in 1919, but it became more so with time, as stay-at-home Australians, weary of war, recoiling from its horror, and sickened by the number of victims, tried to forget those tragic years as quickly as possible. They could continue in ways and occupations they had not quit, and they easily resumed pleasures and relaxations the war had caused them to abandon. They were unable or unwilling to comprehend either the magnitude of the soldiers' ordeal, or the force of the memories, good and bad, which separated returned men from

others. They wanted a return to normalcy, and they expected returned men to show a similar desire.”

Bill Gammage, *The broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War*, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria, 2010, p. 275.

Source 6: Photograph

Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses M.M. Brooks and “Smithy” with a recovering soldier outside the flu ward at the Randwick Military Hospital, 1919.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P02789.002

Voluntary Aid Detachment nurses M.M. Brooks and “Smithy” with a recovering soldier outside the flu ward at the Randwick Military Hospital, 1919.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C362415?image=1>

Source 8: Photograph



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

P04219.001

Sergeant James Matthews, 7th Battalion, and his British bride, Caroline Janetta (nee Huggett), on their wedding day in London, 13 April 1918. Matthews later returned to Australia with his wife on 25 February 1919.

<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C1028878>



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