



The  
Simpson  
Prize

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# SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 students

2020 Winner

New South Wales

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**“Allied victory brought an end to war, suffering, and challenges for Australia and its people.”**

**To what extent do experiences of 1919 support this view?**

The experiences of 1919 on the whole do not support the view that Allied victory brought an end to war, suffering, and challenges for Australia and its people. The experiences of disabled and poverty-stricken veterans strongly refutes this statement, and this is magnified by the challenges which the families of these veterans also experienced. Furthermore, the government was tasked with the monumental challenge of bringing hundreds of thousands of wounded men, both physically and mentally, back into the economy. This, in places, did not work out, and lead to veterans experiencing a number of hardships. However, the end of the war also brought home a new ANZAC spirit and the virtues it aspired to. 1919 was the first stage of the spirit of ANZAC and of the digger myth that became embedded in the foundations of Australian history.

The experiences of disabled and poverty-stricken veterans in 1919 do not support the view that suffering came to an end along with the war. These traumatised veterans also had an impact on their families and the wider community, which resulted in long lasting generational damage. Veteran H. Brewer (as cited in Gammage 2010, p.275) noted that the suffering was only really beginning for the veterans. He wrote that: *“when I got home in 1919 Ex Diggers were singing for a living in the streets”*<sup>1</sup>, and this suffering was only amplified by the physical impairments many of the veterans suffered. Brewer noted that there were a number of *“Men without arms and legs, some in wheelchairs”*<sup>2</sup>. These disabled veterans were afforded little help, due to the lack of funds, and they soon found out that *“the soldiers’ rewards would be less than had been promised during the war.”*<sup>3</sup> The Australian people’s reaction to the returned veterans also didn’t ease any suffering. They didn’t understand the mental consequence of the war: the esteemed Australian War historian Bill Gammage in *The Broken Years*, writes that many *“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”*<sup>4</sup>. Gammage illustrates that this response, rather than alleviating the suffering caused by the Great War, only sought to heighten it.

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<sup>1</sup> Gammage, B 2010, ‘The broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War’, Melbourne University Publishing, Victoria.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

Furthermore, Dr. Marina Larsson notes in *Restoring the Spirit* that the disabilities suffered by veterans were “multiple, dynamic and prone to degeneration as the years passed”<sup>5</sup>. This hindered the working life of these returned veterans and challenged their masculinity. The end of the war, rather than alleviating any suffering, only heralded the start of a new struggle for all the veterans left with disability after the War. Historian Jennifer Roberts notes this in *The Front Comes Home*, when she talks of veterans who found themselves unable to readjust to civilian life. Roberts discusses the case of Sergeant Arthur B. Soon after getting a new job, this veteran began losing more and more sleep and would “walk ‘about during the night trying to induce sleep’, complaining to his mother that he ‘had not had sufficient sleep ... and suffered with noises’.”<sup>6</sup> This is just one of many cases which illustrate the spectre of psychological trauma that would shadow these men for the rest of their lives. This spectre also followed the families of veterans. After one Sinclair D.’s return from the war, doctors noted that along with his wife, his “children also were scared of their father”<sup>7</sup>. Experiences like this mark the beginning of long-lasting generational trauma caused by these men, whom, by no fault of their own, had been left broken after the war. Hence, it can be concluded that the end of the war did not end suffering for the returned veterans or their families.

The logistical trials presented to the Australian Government in 1919 brought only more challenges which perpetuated suffering. Indeed, the Government’s failure to fully reintegrate the thousands of returned soldiers led to a number of acute impacts over the interwar period. It also led to a massive loss of pride for these men, as the regular trappings of civil society was not, as it once was, open to them. Throughout 1919, the Australian Government found themselves struggling to support the large number of veterans who had returned, often deeply affected by the war. General John Monash noted this at the time in an address to army commanders when he said: “We are faced with the problem of returning to Australia something like 200,000 individuals... in a condition – physically, mentally and morally – to take up their duties of citizenship with a minimum of delay”<sup>8</sup>. The challenge of coordinating soldiers overseas suddenly became a lot more immediate as these soldiers returned to Australia. A prominent example of this is the soldier settlement scheme. Under this

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<sup>5</sup> Larsson, M 2004, ‘Restoring the Spirit: The Rehabilitation of Disabled Soldiers in Australia after the Great War’, *Health and History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, p. 47

<sup>6</sup> Roberts, J. 2015, ‘The front comes home: returned soldiers and psychological trauma in Australia during and after the First World War’, *Health and History*, Vol. 17, No. 2, p. 24

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 26

<sup>8</sup> Monash, J. 1918, ‘Repatriation and demobilization’, speech, presented to divisional and brigade commanders, 26 November.

scheme, returned soldiers were granted parcels of land to live off. However, the scheme faced a number of difficulties, and by 1929 only 3500 of the 5000 soldiers granted land under the scheme remained on their properties<sup>9</sup>. Returned serviceman Richard Commins Hammond, on an inspection in November 1919, found that there was no water on the property<sup>10</sup>. In April 1920, Hammond wrote that he believed there was no hope of living and working on the property, due to a lack of water and feed. Hammond's struggle was replicated across the country: many of the veterans found themselves with insufficient money, resources, and skills to start living off the land. This provided a significant challenge to the government, who, as Monash said, did not have the capacity to support "200,000 men who were either without employment themselves, or who would displace from employment those now employed"<sup>11</sup>. Burdened by war debts and an obligation to help the Australian veterans, the national economy fell into depression in the 1920s. Thus, it can again be noted that rather than bringing an end to challenges to the Australian government, 1919 only brought about the beginning of new challenges.

On the other hand, the returned veterans also brought home a new spirit to Australia, which acknowledges that 1919 also brought with it positive experiences, as well as an end to some challenges. The young nation had been given a chance to prove itself on the world stage and had done so with honour and courage. In her painting *Rejoicing and remembrance*<sup>12</sup>, Australian artist Vida Lahey depicts a group of women mourning, whilst armistice celebrations occur behind them. This shows from whence the Australian spirit came: out of hardship. Emerging from the challenges and suffering which the war posed came the ANZAC legend and the myth surrounding the Aussie battler. British War Correspondent Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett (as cited by the Australian War Memorial) wrote of the ANZACs at Gallipoli: "*They waited neither for orders nor for the boats to reach the beach, but, springing out into the sea, they waded ashore, and, forming some sort of rough line, rushed straight on the flashes of the enemy's rifles.*"<sup>13</sup> It was quotes like this that inspired the

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<sup>9</sup> National Museum of Australia 2018, *Soldier settlement*, National Museum of Australia, viewed 25 October 2019, <<https://www.nma.gov.au/defining-moments/resources/soldier-settlement>>

<sup>10</sup> NSW State Archives 2011, *A Land Fit for Heroes?*, NSW State Archives, viewed 25 October 2019, <<https://soldiersettlement.records.nsw.gov.au/case-studies/hammond-richard-commins/>>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Lahey, V 1924, *Rejoicing and remembrance, Armistice Day, London, 1918*, online copy of painting available from Australian War Memorial, Canberra, viewed 25 October 2019, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C186262>>

<sup>13</sup> Australian War Memorial 2017, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, viewed 30 October 2019, <<https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/exhibitions/dawn/legend/ashmead>>

Australian populace and formed the beginning of the ANZAC legend. In *The Anzac Legend and the Battle of Bardia*, military historian Craig Stockings writes that “Prior to 1919, Australians saw themselves as part of the mighty British Empire”<sup>14</sup>. Yet, the ANZACs brought home a legend, and this “legend grew into an inescapable social force increasingly tied to the core of national identity.”<sup>15</sup> This is mirrored in articles from 1919; the Reverend R.E Davies gave an address which was later reprinted in the Gundagai Times, in which he says that “The word Anzac has come to stay. The name and all its past associations are worthy of sacred lodgment in our memory. May it forever be securely fenced by loyal patriotism of the highest type”<sup>16</sup>. It was in this way that the return of soldiers brought home more than just the trauma and suffering: they also brought home a national identity and hope for the future of this young nation. Therefore, it can be argued that the returned veterans did not only bring home challenges and suffering, but also brought home the dreams of a new nation. This dream was able to support a positive attitude in the immediate post-war years.

Ultimately, the experiences of the majority of returned soldiers and their families reject the statement that 1919 brought the end of war, suffering, and challenges for Australia. The widespread physical and mental trauma affected not only the veterans themselves, but also their families and communities. Furthermore, the Australian government found itself challenged with a substantial war debt as well as hundreds of thousands of the aforementioned wounded veterans, whom the Government were obligated to support. However, the end of the war and the coming of 1919 saw the formation of a new national identity and the ANZAC legend which would carry Australia forward for the coming years. Yet, the emergence of a national identity still does not outweigh the significant suffering and challenges that were brought by 1919.

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<sup>14</sup> Stockings, C 2010, 'The Anzac Legend and the Battle of Bardia', *War in History*, vol. 17, no. 1, p. 87.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Davies, E 1919, 'ANZAC', *The Gundagai Times and Tumut, Adelong and Murrumbidgee District Advertiser*, 6 May, Viewed 30 October 2019, <<https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/130753597>>

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