



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



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The Anzac Spirit and Exclusion

A Response to:

'To what extent have the Gallipoli campaign and the Western Front overshadowed other significant aspects of Australians' experience of the First World War?'

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For the young Commonwealth of Australia, the outbreak of the First World War presented an opportunity for a demonstration of loyalty to the British Empire. In spite of the emerging differences between British and Australian national identities, many Australians believed that it was their duty to serve the Empire - regardless of what service may cost (Carlyon 2002, p. 106). Australia's contribution to the First World War is not, however, remembered as proof of allegiance; our annual day of remembrance marks the colossal loss of life during the Gallipoli campaign, and reference to the Western Front evokes imagery of death on an unprecedented scale. In many ways, the majority of Australia's efforts during the First World War have been greatly overshadowed by the Gallipoli campaign and the Western Front. In order to convey a more accurate and balanced judgement, aspects of the Middle Eastern theatre and the Home Front will be used for comparison.

Official publications describing Gallipoli had a profound impact on the Australian public's understanding of the campaign. Charles Bean's *The Anzac Book* is widely regarded as being the literary foundation for the Anzac spirit; having transitioned from a 'trench paper' to a 'commemorative souvenir', the book sought to redefine the essence of a campaign that risked being deemed a total failure - a disastrous outcome for a nation hoping to prove itself in battle. The book contains stories of soldiers who are 'everyday Australians' men who defied the nation's geography to enlist, would do anything to protect their mates, and were willing to die for their country. Thus, the reputation of Gallipoli was transformed.

Among the most important of Australia's contributions to the war is the Middle Eastern campaign - a demonstration of capability that is rarely discussed. Australians are not entirely at fault for neglecting to consider the importance of the Middle East. Anzac soldiers in Egypt were considered a 'strategic reserve' by the War Office (Gullet 1941, p. 42), and the majority of Gallipoli veterans in Egypt were quickly sent to the Western Front. Although the War Office was preoccupied with the challenges of the Western Front, the Middle East was home to a facility of great wartime importance: the Suez Canal. Dominion over the canal ensured that soldiers could be quickly transported to Europe and the Mediterranean, and an Ottoman seizure would result in the severing of vital communication lines to Asia and Africa. The Sinai and Palestine campaign commenced with a failed Ottoman attempt to capture the Suez, which prompted the Egyptian Expeditionary Force (EEF)¹ to force the Ottoman forces out of the Sinai Peninsula.

In order to push into Palestine, the EEF faced an arduous traversal across harsh desert. To assist with this, a pipeline and railway were constructed as the Allied forces advanced; Egyptian, Indian and Anzac men contributed to the ambitious project, which required constant protection from Turkish incursions. The extent of the cooperation between Imperial forces is evident in James Francis Hurley's² *With the Forces on the Palestine Front*, which documents the efforts of the EEF during its advance through Palestine. During the early scenes of the documentary, British (including ANZAC), Egyptian and Indian men can be seen laying sleepers

¹ The British Imperial formation that fought in the Middle East, which comprised British, Egyptian and ANZAC soldiers. Formed in 1916, and led by Lieutenant-General Sir Archibald Murray until 1917.

² A renowned Australian war photographer and filmmaker, who produced well-known works from both the First and Second World Wars.

and tracks in the desert; the title card for this section of the documentary states that the railway was 140 miles³ long (*With the Forces on the Palestine Front*, 1917). This footage demonstrates almost all aspects of the Anzac spirit - the men work together in the face of immense adversity, in order to accelerate the effort against the Ottoman Empire. Despite such demonstrations of comradeship and endurance, Sinai and Palestine remain eclipsed by the hardship and sorrow of Gallipoli.

The Battle of Semakh is a prime example of the Anzac spirit in practice. During the final months of the Sinai and Palestine campaign, it was crucial that the EEF had total control of Palestinian railways, and in order to capture Damascus, the German-Ottoman presence that fortified Semakh had to be defeated.

On the 25th of September, 1918, in the darkness before dawn, the 4th, 11th and 12th Light Horse Regiments were ordered to charge the village under heavy machine gun fire. Until they dismounted, the soldiers fought with nothing but their swords; bayonets were employed once the infantrymen had entered the village. By 5:30, Semakh had been captured - having seized a crucial railway stronghold, alongside 364 German and Ottoman prisoners, the Light Horse Regiments sustained 43 casualties (Australian War Memorial, 2021). Additionally, one must consider two facts: Semakh (and the area around the village) had not been reconnoitred prior to the battle (Paget 1994, p.312), and that the Australians fought at close-range after charging into gunfire. Whilst a close-range reconnaissance was impossible due to heavy fire, the 19th Lancers of the British Indian Army were able to provide observations from a previous effort to infiltrate the village - which was prematurely ended by an artillery bombardment (Falls 1930, p. 543). The aforementioned factors serve not only as a testament to the performance of Australian soldiers, but as a reminder of the fact that Gallipoli should not define the nation's contribution to the war effort. It should also be noted that Aboriginal soldiers comprised much of the 11th Light Horse Brigade - a fact that has perhaps contributed to the lack of recognition that this victory received, especially during the White Australia era.

After enduring almost four years of hardship in the desert, the Anzacs of Sinai and Palestine⁴ faced far fewer casualties than those of Gallipoli (Butler 1943, pp. 896-897) [see appendix B for data]. It is important to consider that Gallipoli, whilst a component of the Middle Eastern theatre, occupies a space of its own - the area's deaths in battle are comparable only to those of the Western Front.

Yet, the consecutively successful Allied efforts in the rest of the Middle East are greatly overshadowed by the tragedy of Gallipoli. Although Australia's Light Horse Brigades have subsequently become renowned for their role in the desert, it is indubitable that their home nation overlooks their valiant contributions to the Anzac spirit.

³ 225.3km.

⁴ And of the Middle Eastern theatre, generally.

Australia's official depictions of the war did not end with fables from overseas. When Australians think of their nation during wartime, the home front is seldom considered due to the corrosive effects that Gallipoli and the Western Front had on our national conscience (Monteath 2018, p. 99). Consequently, several aspects of the home front are alien to members of postwar generations - ignorance becomes a curtain behind which values that are inherently contradictory to the emerging 'Australian identity' may hide.

Although pre-war Australia supported the arrival of white immigrants from Europe (as a means of sustaining a 'White Australia'), anti-German sentiment during the First World War saw national preference return to people of British descent. Australia's Teutophobic action did not end with immigration restrictions - for the duration of the War, approximately 7000 'enemy aliens' were interned in work camps, and were quickly deported after the War had ended. At the time, numerous people were aware of their existence; common knowledge of such matters had a deliberate life span that ended as Australia entered the realm of peacetime (Monteath 2018, p.99).

This internment of innocent men is sweetly ironic, as it represents a systemic abandonment of the Anzac spirit - the potency of this renunciation is exacerbated by the fact that many of the interned men were British nationals of German descent. Just as the efforts of the Light Horse Brigades, which contained a large number of Aboriginal soldiers, continue to be ignored, the mass incarceration of suspected 'alien enemies' is an important aspect of Australia's wartime narrative.

From a brief examination of one campaign and two events, a common theme emerges: exclusion. Exclusion continues to occur on both a personal and national level; the victorious endeavours of the Light Horses in the Middle East and the surge of anti-German sentiment in Australia are both significant demonstrations of an emerging national identity's character. Without such events, Australia's wartime identity would consist solely of an idyllic fabrication, for even the weary Anzacs of Gallipoli were replaced with unrealistically heroic stories and poems. This does not, however, argue against the existence of the Anzac Spirit; those who died on the Gallipoli peninsula possess as much of this mysterious ethos as the Aboriginal Australians who received no praise for their monumental efforts. In a similar manner, the unjustly detained and deported families of German descent were forced to find strength in the face of adversity - a concept that has prevailed amongst those whom our nation disenfranchises.

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Appendix A

Figure 1: a diorama of the village of Semakh during the 25th of September, 1918.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

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Appendix B

The number of Australian deaths per listed location during the First World War.⁵

Location	Battle Deaths (killed in action or died of wounds, including as prisoners of war)	Non-Battle Deaths (died of illness or other causes, including as prisoners of war)
Gallipoli	7,818	600
Western Front	44,766	1,872
Prisoners of War: Germany	267	70
Middle East	973	590
Prisoners of War: Turkey	21	39
United Kingdom	4	1,249
Australia	34	1,431
New Guinea	6	64 (includes 35 on submarine HMAS AEI)
HMAS Sydney	4 (during battle with SMS Emden)	
At sea		412

⁵ Data taken from Australian War Memorial, First World War Official Histories, *Volume III – Special problems and services* (1st edition, 1943), Section V, pp. 896-897; re-formatted by the Australian War Memorial.

