



THE SIMPSON PRIZE



SIMPSON PRIZE COMPETITION

for Year 9 and 10 Students

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Eliza Bell

MERICI COLLEGE

Commemoration of the ANZAC tradition has widespread support despite different historical interpretations and debates about the nature and significance of the ANZAC legend.

To what extent does your own research support this view?

Faced with declining attendance at ANZAC day marches (Fathi, 2021), a cynic could observe that commemoration of the ANZAC tradition has widespread support only if measured by the enthusiastic embrace of a public holiday in place since 1922. However, this cynicism would be crude, and obscure a genuine, deep affection for ANZAC day held by many Australians from all demographics (Klepova, 2020). In an era of truth telling and uncensored perspectives about war and military and defence force culture, ANZAC day has evolved to take on multiple perspectives and meanings for all Australians. Commemoration of the ANZAC tradition will evolve as modern Australia faces increasing challenges; we will look to a history that inspires resilience, independence and inclusion. In an increasingly fragmented society, history offers more than nostalgia; it offers a blueprint for collective action and resilience in the face of conflict, pandemics, drought and economic uncertainty. It also offers insights around building national identity, a question still challenging contemporary Australia.

Criticisms that ANZAC day celebrates only the identity of a white Australia, and the bravery of white Australian soldiers, are now outdated. ANZAC day has already evolved considerably over the past century towards inclusion, representation, and empathy for sacrifice of all combatants. The Victorian RSL has allowed descendants of Turkish World War 1 (WW1) veterans to march since 2006 (Klepova, 2020). Importantly, this inclusive history also acknowledges the regressive behaviour of Australian policy makers following the war. The fact that Indigenous Australians and first-generation migrants enlisted to fight speaks in part

to economic pressures, but also to a sense of loyalty and mateship, extending a hand of friendship that was accepted during the war but repaid with increased repression and discrimination after the war (Australian War Memorial, 2021). The achievements of Chinese-Australian ANZAC Billy Sing, a highly decorated sniper at Gallipoli, are celebrated at the Australian War Memorial (Australian War Memorial, n.d). Sikh migrants to Australia also enlisted, such as Sailani Singh, who at the age of 43 was killed in action on the Western Front (Adams, 2020). As these stories are more widely shared, many migrants, particularly those from conflict zones, consider ANAZC day an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and the nature of bravery and sacrifice (Chemali, 2018). Whilst in the early-to-mid 20th century ANZAC commemorations were inextricably linked to an identity aligned with colonial nationalism, (Pickles, 2023) this rapidly fell away as the magnitude of British commander's incompetence became widely acknowledged as a primary cause of Australian casualties at Gallipoli. This began to cause increasing resentment and accelerated the role of ANZAC becoming a uniquely Australian, non-British identity (Beaumont, 2018). Beyond an evolving national or collective identity, the ANZACs and their period in history inspire personal reflection on individual identity.

“Anzac is not merely about loss. It is about courage, and endurance, and duty, and love of country, and mateship, and good humour and the survival of a sense of self-worth and decency in the face of dreadful odds.”

– Sir William Deane, Governor-General of Australia on ANZAC Day 1999 (SHRINE, 2022)

The ANZACs have come to represent the positive qualities Australia values, including courage, giving all a 'fair go', good humour and mateship (FECCA, 2019). Reflecting on these qualities

and how prevalent they are in modern society is particularly relevant, because Australia is experiencing an epidemic of loneliness and a lack of social capital (Swinburne, 2018). Social capital in a newly federated Australia is acknowledged to have been significantly higher, despite an entrenched class system and inequality for indigenous and non-UK origin migrants. A sense of belonging and mateship has declined significantly across the past 100 years (Berry and Shipley 2009). Much data demonstrates that Australians are no longer as socially connected as they once were. In the 1950's, more than 35% of adults attended religious services weekly, compared to 2004, with just 18%. In addition, the number of organised community gatherings for every 10,000 Australians dropped from 7 in the late 1970's to less than 3 (Leigh, 2010). Contributions to charity has also slightly fallen, and Australians are less politically engaged. The qualities represented by the ANZACs are now aspirational, and an important subtext of ongoing ANZAC commemorations.

As the Australian collective and individual identity continues to evolve with and in response to ANZAC history, a final benefit from fresh takes on commemoration is emerging. That is, the ANZACs ability to inspire resilience in difficult times such as pandemic and drought. The ANZACs were first acknowledged in 1916 (National Museum of Australia, n.d) during the Spanish flu outbreak. The commemoration was also known as the Patriotic Procession and Carnival, and was observed by many to be more of a fete or celebration than a solemn commemoration, celebrating the bravery displayed by the ANZACs admired by Australians. Returned soldiers believed their fallen fellow soldiers would have wanted this outcome (National Museum of Australia, n.d). The droughts between 1939 – 1945 (Australian Science and Technology Heritage Centre) were also some of the worst in recorded history; the lead into WW1 in particular was marked by economic and environmental turmoil. The outbreak of

war crippled export markets and supply chains (Beaumont, 2018). Australia was quick to rebound and recover from these challenges, particularly in the period after WW1, with many taking inspiration from the ANZAC legend, however the post war period lingered. Injured soldiers still relying on pensions from the Government added more stress to an already struggling economy. The Repatriation Department was formed to address the range of legal, social and economic challenges returned servicemen and women were facing (Payton 2018) and in doing so became Australia's first coordinated attempt at disaster recovery and resilience. Increasingly, stories of incredible resilience and endurance were told and shared with the public. Private Herbert Horner (made a prisoner of war by Germany in 2017) and Bugler Frederick Ashton (a prisoner of war of the Ottoman Empire in 2015) and their stories of endurance, recovery and post war resilience crafting complex and rewarding lives were invaluable in showing Australian's that fellow citizens were capable of rebuilding bodies and minds following war, incarceration and torture (Huckstepp and Taplin 2021). These types of stories can be found in all of Australia's conflicts and will continue to inspire all Australian's that they are capable and resilient in the face of extreme difficulty.

Allowing ANZAC commemorations to evolve towards a more encompassing and inclusive national day of reflection does not diminish its place in Australian and New Zealand history. In the modern context, ANZAC day is destined to become a broader commemoration of sacrifice and resilience. Paul Keating described the WW1 as being "devoid of any virtue" (Keating, 1993), but the commemoration of the ANZACs endures because of modern Australia's somewhat paradoxical yearning for virtue. Keating also noted that these sacrifices were made by ordinary people (Keating, 1993). ANZAC commemorations in today's Australia are more complex than a reflection on those who sacrificed their lives. Through the prism of

history, commemoration can inspire Australian's potential to be brave and extraordinary. It can confirm our capacity for resilience and to bounce back from disaster. ANZAC commemorations will continue to thrive if they are able to evolve towards a more encompassing National Day of Reflection and what lies at the heart of our national identity.

'Australia's great heart is throbbing today as it has never throbbed before. For April 25 – 'Anzac Day' – is a day that will live in our hearts and in our history as long as Australia lasts.'

(Sydney Morning Herald, 25 April 1916).

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