“Why the Centenary of ANZAC is important for Modern Australia”

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On the 25th of April, 2015, Australia shall mark the centenary of ANZAC, a legend born of the strength of the human spirit arising from immense hardship imposed upon a newborn nation. As poetically expressed by A.B “Banjo” Patterson: “We have, through what you boys have done, / A history of our own.” The pioneering military endeavours and ultimate sacrifice of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps servicemen during World War One have profoundly shaped Australia’s sense of national identity, the values derived from the ANZAC spirit underpinning modern Australia’s unification. As a nation identifying with the ideals of courage, endurance, resourcefulness, initiative and mateship, the ANZAC legacy continues to inspire modern Australia in present times of adversity.

The multi-faceted nature of the ANZAC legend defies the superficial image often presented of the traditional Australian soldier. Encompassing both the heralded Gallipoli landing of 1915 and the extended efforts of the Australian Imperial Force on the Western Front, the ANZAC story is composed of the thousands of individual stories amongst the Australian troops of World War One. ‘The Great War’ initiated Australia’s definitive emergence within the global arena, with recent federation in 1901 establishing a context for cultural growth. A growing nation-wide search for a sense of identity to unify the legally enshrined federation of the Australian states was transposed to the battlefield. Whilst Australia of the early 20th century was increasing in independence, British ties remained and rose to the fore upon the declaration of war on the 4th of August, 1914. The prime minister of the time, Andrew Fisher, declared support for Britain, and enormous rates of volunteer enlistments in the Australian Imperial Force followed.

Yet the doomed Gallipoli landing of the 25th of April, 1915, propounded the fundamental, devastating reality of war and shaped Australian ethos through courage and camaraderie rather than military success. The error of landing north of the calculated Brighton Beach preceded eight
months of futile entrenchment upon the harsh scrub slopes above the beach, wherein 8141 servicemen lost their lives. The universally renowned Australian concept of mateship was re-energised amongst the ANZAC troops who held these foothills for many months underneath steady Turkish fire, consolidating within unexpectedly rough terrain and harsh conditions. The existing Australian self-image, grounded in the unique outback and bush environment of the continent, resurged through the Australian soldiers, and the qualities of mateship, courage and endurance were given direct expression upon the international stage. Though the events of Gallipoli proved fruitless, with little progression achieved across the Gallipoli Peninsula and thousands of lives lost, ongoing remembrance ensures their brave spirit endures as they did.

Additionally, the ANZAC story encompasses the legacy of the Australian Imperial Forces who served Australia along the Western Front in France and Belgium from 1916-1918. Active in Fromelles, the Somme, Bullecourt, Messines, Passchendaele, Ypres and Villers-Bretonneux, Australian forces were once more unified by spirit. During the battle at Fromelles on the 19th of July 1916, 5533 soldiers were killed, and yet Australian officers defied the British High Command order against the rescue of wounded men on open terrain and risked their lives to aid and save the lives of wounded counterparts. The hundreds of dedications along the Western Front, in addition to the memorial 'Australian Remembrance Trail' extending over 200 kilometres, are evidential of the legacy of the ANZAC story and the importance of preserving collective national memory. Hence, the continuing commemoration of ANZAC Day testifies to the transcendent, trans-generational effects of wartime spirit within modern Australia.

The Australian spirit extended beyond the nationalistic bounds of Australia in ANZAC defence of the villages across the Western Front, with ANZAC Day of 1918 witnessing the historic preservation of the French town of Villers-Bretonneux by Australian forces. In March 1918, German troops began a westward assault aimed at the taking of strategic town Amiens and captured Villers-Bretonneux on the 23rd of April. Yet the degree of military advantage which the capturing of Amiens would ascribe to the German forces led to the conscription of two Australian brigades to liberate Villers-Bretonneux in an effort to prevent the devastating progression of German troops. On the 24th of April, the ANZAC troops, who had now earned the colloquialism "diggers", launched a surprise 10pm attack, and by dawn of the following morning had launched French and Australian flags over the village once more. The sacrifice of 1200 Australian soldiers for the liberation of the French people is remembered to the present day; the Australian flag still flies over the village, and engraved above each blackboard of the Australian-
funded Victoria School is proclaimed "Do Not Forget Australia". Thus, the Centenary of Anzac is vital for modern Australia as ongoing recognition of the selfless efforts of our past servicemen.

The ANZAC story holds personal relevance for all Australian servicemen and women, who throughout history have undertaken the model of the ANZAC spirit and who are included in modern commemorations. 100 years on from World War One, Australia faces different challenges and international conflicts. The ANZAC story testifies to the ongoing reality of history, with appropriation in both current conflicts such as war in the Middle East, and future hardship. In an increasingly digitalised, commercialised and globalised age, the ANZAC legacy continues to evoke the age-old qualities of bravery, loyalty and camaraderie and reasserts our national identity, unifying modern Australia with the past. Through commemoration of the Centenary of ANZAC, we once more empower those individuals whose sacrifice has shaped modern Australia, and demonstrate our commitment to upholding the values at the core of our national ethos.

Hence, the centenary of ANZAC is of crucial importance in modern Australia. The 2015 centenary of the ANZAC legend is an invitation for Australia, both on the individual level and as a nation, to honour the spirit which has shaped our society. Banjo Patterson likewise foresaw the portent of the ANZAC legacy, proclaiming “For never shall their glory fade / In minds Australian.”.

Bibliography:


