

Simon Moss

ANZAC Day

What are we remembering?



As I flicked through media coverage of ANZAC Day from recent years, I felt proud to think of myself as an Australian. The pages and airwaves were filled with inspiring stories of bravery and courage from those who had offered themselves up for a greater cause, some paying the ultimate price. April 25, the anniversary of the ANZAC landing at Gallipoli, has come to be a day of commemoration and remembrance for those who fought and died for Australia. This year, ANZAC Day stood to take on even more significance, with active troops stationed in Iraq, and the dawn of a new era following the passing away last year of the last ANZAC veteran.

And so, early on a cool autumn morning, twenty thousand Melburnians gathered at the Shrine of Remembrance for the Dawn Service, myself amongst them. Scanning faces in the dim predawn light, I was taken aback to see how many young people, our age, who were at the service. And listening to the simple yet profound words of the service, I wondered, "Why is ANZAC day important? What are we remembering?"

A simple answer came to mind - remembering those who died for their country. But that seemed too simple, these wars are long past. There had to be something more, something greater than the memory of single people, an idea that would span generations and bring people together. The ANZAC spirit.

In context, the Anzac spirit emerges from a disastrous military campaign that started in a hail of bullets from above, as the troops were landed at the base of the cliffs of Ari Burnu, instead of the beaches to the south. In a campaign that lasted eight months and cost more than 7300 Australian lives, not a single military objective was achieved.

Yet, back home in Australia, the news was reported as a meritorious baptism of fire for the Australians. Writing the first reports from Gallipoli, Argus reporter Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett noted that "the Australians rose to the occasion, they went in with cold steel. This race of athletes proceeded to scale the cliffs without even responding to the enemy's fire." Later, of the wounded, he reported that "The courage displayed by these wounded Australians will never be forgotten."

Reports from the front, and those by official war historian C.E.W. Bean glorified the ANZAC's and ignored the gruesome realities, etching a new national identity into the minds of Australians. The myth that was started by Bean and Bartlett on the cliffs of Anzac Cove has been perpetuated for 88 years, remaining largely unchallenged.

The ANZACs, contrary to many reports today, were not fighting for Australia or its defence, for democracy or for freedom. They were fighting as colonials, for the glory of King and Empire, set against the backdrop of European power struggles. They were invading the Ottoman Empire, playing a bit part role in securing the Dardanelles as a supply line between the Mediterranean and Russia.

The challenge we face today is to come to terms with truth of our history, looking beyond the shallow nationalistic rhetoric that we see once a year on ANZAC Day. As our memories of the diggers fade, the ANZAC spirit and the conception of being Australian are becoming ever more entwined. As we pin our 'Australianness' on the name of ANZAC we must remain vigilant to know the truth, and question how history and ideas are used for political ends.



Tell us what you think about the ANZAC tradition;

<http://ipisimag.grokspot.com/anzac>

What does it mean to be Australian?

What does ANZAC Day mean to you?

Does it matter if we base our identity on myth?

Why does nationality matter?

How do the media manipulate identity?

ABC online forum

<http://www2b.abc.net.au/news/forum/newsonline9/>

John Howard's Anzac Day Speech

<http://www.pm.gov.au/news/speeches/2003/speech2257.htm>

Australian War Memorial

<http://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac/>

Patrick Carlyle, The Gallipoli Story (2003)