

Our Federation Journey

1901 - 2001

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Topic six - The Anzac Legends

Whatever happens, Australia is a part of the Empire to the full. Remember that when the Empire is at war, so is Australia at war.

Joseph Cook, Prime Minister, 31 July 1914

In 1915, fourteen years after Federation, Australia sent troops overseas to World War I. Australia had previously been involved in the Boer War of 1899-1902, the Boxer Uprising in China in 1900-1901 and the Anglo-Maori wars of the 1840s and 1860s. However, it was World War I that came to be seen as a defining moment in Australian history and identity.

The beginning of World War I

When the war began in 1914, most Australians supported sending troops overseas to fight, and relished an opportunity to prove the strength of the new Commonwealth of Australia. Australians felt that they were an important part of the British Empire and many felt a dual loyalty to Britain and Australia. Most believed that it was the duty of Australia to go to war for the Empire. Thousands of men volunteered to join the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), and there was great public enthusiasm and support for the volunteers. They believed that victory would come quickly. No one expected the number of casualties to be so high.

Gallipoli

The majority of the men that joined the AIF in August 1914 were sent to Egypt, to prepare for battle against the Ottoman Empire (part of which is now Turkey). The plan was to send Australian and New Zealand troops to the Gallipoli peninsula. They would distract the Turkish army from a landing of British troops further down the peninsula and clear the way to the capital, Constantinople (now Istanbul).



Anzacs at Gallipoli, 1915.



Soldiers landing in Anzac Cove on 26 April 1915

Anzacs at Gallipoli

A group of Australian soldiers landed on the shore just before dawn on 25 April 1915. Steep cliffs surrounded the bay, since called Anzac Cove. The soldiers rushed up the steep slopes, using their bayonets rather than their rifles. The surprise nature of the attack meant that the Turkish soldiers initially retreated, and the allies gained some ground. But by the end of the day the Turkish army had strengthened and held the vantage points on the cliffs. The allied troops were ordered to stay where they were and dig trenches.

For the rest of the six month campaign neither side made much progress. On 19 May the Turkish lost over 3000 soldiers. On 6 August 1915 at Lone Pine 2200 Australians died, and another 375 died on 7 August. Little ground was gained or lost. Sometimes the dead would lie for days between the trenches until a brief truce was called to bury them. Poor sanitation, flies, lice and monotonous food added to the misery.

- ◆ The word Anzac was invented as a telegraphic code for the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps, while troops were training in Egypt in 1915.
- ◆ AIF stands for the Australian Imperial Force, the Australian army that was formed at the outbreak of World War I. The AIF first fought in Gallipoli, then in North Africa, France and Belgium. Originally, it was the AIF men who had fought at Gallipoli who were known as Anzacs, but this term soon came to include all members of the Australian and New Zealand forces.

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Eventually, after almost six months, the British commanders realised that the campaign had been a failure. They orchestrated a well-planned retreat, in which few lives were lost. However, the overall toll of the campaign had been enormous. From 25 April to 20 December 1915, 8 700 Australian lives had been lost and more than 18 000 AIF men had been wounded. The total allied dead numbered over 97 000. The Turkish army had lost 87 000 men, and 200 000 men had fallen sick or been wounded. Many more lives were to be lost before the war was over.

The Anzac Legend

Almost immediately after the initial landing at Gallipoli, the legend of the Anzacs began. Newspaper reports were sent by C.E.W Bean (later the official war historian and founder of the Australian War Memorial) and by the English journalist Ellis Ashmead-Bartlett, telling the Australian public of the great feats and bravery of the AIF. The Anzacs were characterised as brave larrikins with an egalitarian temperament.

It soon became apparent, though, that a huge sacrifice had been made by the young nation. Just one year after the landing, in 1916, the first Anzac Day commemorated the loss of so many lives. The Prime Minister, Billy Hughes addressed troops in London at an Anzac Day gathering. He explained the sacrifice of the men by portraying them as sacred martyrs for the Australian Nation.

It was a feat of arms almost unparalleled in the history of war; yet it was but the beginning of a campaign in which such feats were daily done... Since it has evoked this pure and noble spirit, who shall say that this dreadful war is wholly an evil?... Soldiers, your deeds have won you a place in the Temple of Immortals. The world has hailed you as heroes. Your comrades of the British Army have claimed you as brothers in arms, and the citizens of the Empire are proud to call you kinsmen.

Gallipoli began to be seen by Australians as a rite of passage and the sacrifice made by the men as a national initiation. Although they had been fighting under the command of the British Empire, Australians had defined themselves in the Anzac legend as separate and different from the British. They regarded the Anzacs as better soldiers than the British, and particularly as a more equal and less hierarchical army. Bean and other writers felt that the Australian nation and the toughness of life in the bush had fostered these characteristics in the soldiers.

After the war

It was almost another three years after Gallipoli before the war ended. The majority of Australian troops went to France, to fight on the Western Front. By the end of the war in November 1918, 59 342 Australian men had died and 152 171 had been wounded. One in 10 of all Australian men aged between 18 and 45 had died. The men who returned to Australia were often emotionally and psychologically wounded. Communities were devastated by their loss. War memorials were erected in towns and cities around Australia. By 1927 Anzac Day had become a public holiday in every state and was celebrated as a day of national significance.



Unveiling Briagolong War Memorial, 9 February 1929

The Anzac legend continues to evolve in contemporary Australia. Although its meaning and history are debated, it remains central to the story of Australian nationhood and the development of national identity. On Anzac Day, thousands of Australians come to dawn services and veterans' parades, which commemorate the sacrifice of all Australian servicemen and women who have died in war.

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