

## The Dark Legacy of ANZAC Day

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I'm new to conferences – in fact, this is my very first one – so I thought I'd briefly introduce myself before beginning my presentation.

I'm Juliana, and there I am in 2018 on a very cold, wet day at Villers-Bretonneux Military Cemetery in France, which is one of the larger Australian cemeteries from the first world war, although plenty of our allies are buried there as well. Visiting Villers-Bretonneux, and several other sites associated with the first world war, was very significant for me, because it was seeing these places which inspired me to go back to university and study history, which ultimately led to standing up here on this stage today. I received my Bachelor of Arts from Victoria University in 2023 and jumped straight into doing a Master of Research, and while my current project on military masculinity at the Eureka Stockade may seem very far removed from ANZAC Day, these two conflicts are actually closer than you might think, as I hope to demonstrate.

Because, in fact, I don't *really* want to talk about ANZAC Day today, I want to talk about memory – or, more specifically, *remembering*. In my abstract, I asked whether ANZAC Day was a day of remembering the soldiers, sailors and aviators who have gone to war – both those who have died, and living veterans – or whether it was a day of *forgetting*. War has a cost, after all, and while the number of Australians killed in action or who died of wounds has steeply declined since the days of the first world war, it is an inevitable fact that if combat personnel are deployed in a war zone, some of them are going to die. ANZAC Day (and Remembrance Day, to a slightly lesser degree in Australia) give us a chance to remember and reflect on this sacrifice, and its patriotic meaning ebbs and flows depending on the cultural norms of the day, and the political climate. For example, as the number of Gallipoli veterans began to decline in the 1980s and 90s, so too did community interest in ANZAC Day, but it saw a massive surge in popularity during the Howard years, when Australians went to war, and supported peacekeeping in East Timor, Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, even in the years when ANZAC was interchangeable with Australia, the focus was still generally on one group of soldiers: the men of the AIF, especially those at Gallipoli, and to a slightly lesser extent, other first world war conflicts. This narrow focus reached its zenith in 2015 with a veritable ANZAC explosion – countless books, journals, podcasts, documentaries and other media were produced to recognise the centenary. While the publish frenzy has died down somewhat, come the 25<sup>th</sup> of April each year, there is a revived interest in all things ANZAC, especially in popular media.

But what is it about the ANZACs, or, perhaps more accurately, our cultural perception of the ANZACs, that makes them so special? The last Gallipoli veteran, Alec Campbell, died in 2002 and, on his death bed, begged people not to venerate Gallipoli. He felt it was best forgotten, and while I agree that Gallipoli has become outsized in our remembrance culture, I don't think it should be forgotten. Rather, I think it needs to be shrunk back to a more reasonable size, and the men at Gallipoli need to stand alongside their comrades – past and

present – rather than cast them in shadow. We’ve seen attempts to cut Gallipoli down to size, such as Paul Keating attempting to position the Kokoda Track campaign at the forefront of our national remembrance culture. Kokoda also received some interest this year, when Anthony Albanese walked part of the track, demonstrating again that there is appetite for a shift away from Gallipoli. Kokoda was a battle much closer to Australia, and it was a victory in a tactical sense, albeit an extremely costly one. But even Kokoda has its myths: popular history likes to suggest that, had that Japanese succeeded at Kokoda, they would have used Papua New Guinea as a jumping off point for an Australian invasion. As Peter Stanley (among others) has pointed out, this idea is preposterous. The Japanese never had any serious, tactical plans to invade Australia, even at the height of their success, and by 1942, did not have the capacity to do so, even if they’d wanted to.

The ANZAC myths are well known, so I won’t repeat them here, but both these conflicts illustrate nicely the point I am trying to make about remembering and remembrance culture. It is often not the historical event that is of interest in national or cultural memory, but the perceptions and the myths which are built around it. This leads to the creation of stories which often do not align with an event, and create a hierarchy of memory: a good story and its participants are worth remembering, and they can be a stand-in for other stories which are neither so exciting or well-known; those events which do not lend themselves to story-telling or national myth-making, tend to be overlooked. I’m hardly the first person to consider memory and remembering in the context of ANZAC and other Australian conflicts, and I could not talk about this subject without mentioning the work of Joan Beaumont in this area. ANZAC in general, of course, is well-researched ground, and other historians have touched on everything from the identity of individual ANZACs, their behaviour in uniform, how they were remembered, who remembered them, and the many and varied ideologies attached to ANZAC and the wider 1914 – 1918 conflict.

Where I want to go today, down the long, winding, and sometimes dark path of military memory and myth-making, is to ask how this remembering translates to remembering soldiers who fought in and for this country *before* boots hit the ground at Gallipoli. As Joan Beaumont herself has noted, Australia did not have a recognisably professional army until 1947, and since then our peacetime forces have generally remained small. Despite this, Australia has a long association with soldiers and soldiering, but the question of which historical soldiers are worth remembering seems to hang not, as modern conflicts do, on whether there is a good story, but whether the soldiers can be considered ‘Australian’ or not. I use the term ‘soldier’ in the European sense, as a man (and, in this context, it was always a man) who was a member of a professional army, but I absolutely acknowledge that the Indigenous people of this country were excellent warriors in their own right, with ways of engaging in war which were extremely effective and clearly demonstrated their tactical prowess, even if they did not organise militarily in a way that the Europeans who arrived here understood. I don’t have enough in-depth knowledge on this subject to say more, but I do want to recognise them as not only our first combatants, but also the first people to fight for this country, and defend it against an invading force.

Returning now to the question of how to define an Australian soldier in the period before Gallipoli – or, perhaps to be more accurate, before Federation, given Australia was not ‘Australia’ in the modern sense until 1901. The colonies had their own little armies, and many had some form of compulsory military training, and several were involved in overseas

conflicts. New South Wales sent a contingent of men to Sudan in 1885, and another to the Boxer Rebellion in 1900, although the latter group never actually saw combat. All the colonies sent contingents to the Boer War in 1899, and while each 'army' was from an individual colony, many of the British officers referred to them not as New South Welshmen, Victorians South Australians or Queenslanders, but as 'Australians.' The terms Australia and Australian had been in use since the early nineteenth century, although the colonists themselves still tended to hold onto their individual colonial identities, or think of themselves as being from the places where their parents or grandparents had been born. But are these Australian soldiers or not? While they were not officially Australians yet, few today would argue with the idea that these were 'our' soldiers. They were from Australia, and they fought in Australian contingents, even though they were not a single army. They were not fighting *for* Australia as we understand it today, but rather for Britain and as part of the British Empire, but they put their lives on the line for the Australia *they* understood: they were loyal children of the mother country and would go to her aid whenever she needed them. Many of the ANZACs had a similar sense of Australia, and much closer ties to Britain than their modern reinterpretations suggest.

But what about if we go back a little further, to the point before the British army withdrew and the colonies formed their own little militaries? Between 1778, when the First Fleet landed, and 1870, every soldier in Australia was a British army man, one of much maligned 'redcoats.' Popular history portrays them as violent, sadistic, and often drunken thugs, and while they were certainly not the cream of society, they weren't the mindless beasts of mythology either. The regular men, for the most part, joined not out of a desire to serve, but because they wanted access to steady wages, and guaranteed shelter, food and medical care. The regimental histories of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Regiments of Foot, for example, suggest that neither unit was particularly happy to be sent to Australia (the 12<sup>th</sup> arrived in 1854, while the 40<sup>th</sup> came twice, first in 1823, then again in 1852), but the diaries of some soldiers seem to be at odds with this official depiction. Those who could write were not all universally thrilled to be here, but many (especially those from the 40<sup>th</sup> who had served in India and Afghanistan) felt it was preferable to a long deployment on the sub-continent.

But were these men (and, again, it was always men) *Australian* soldiers? They were the first professional army to serve here, although they certainly didn't think of Australia as we would in a modern context, and the lines between the colonies were much more rigid than they are between the states today, but they were still *here*. They fought for this country as they understood it, and some of them died in these fights, such as the seven soldiers killed during the Eureka stockade. These seven men form the backbone of my current research, and I cannot help but wonder if they would have been so ready to storm the barricade at Eureka, had they known they'd end up buried far from home and everything they knew. Of course, this is a counter-factual, but in my work uncovering these seven soldiers as men, and stripping back the pejorative title of 'redcoat,' I've found myself re-evaluating the historical status they have been given of 'British soldiers.' Almost certainly, they thought of themselves this way, but can we honestly say they were fighting for Britain, rather than a developing Anglo-Australia?

Using Eureka once more as my example, simply because it is a conflict I am very familiar with, the soldiers who stormed the stockade in the early hours of the morning of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of December 1854 have, almost invariably, been portrayed as 'the bad guys' – as if history was

as simple as a superhero comic. There have been some wonderful shifts in this area, most notably by Gregory Blake in 2009, who wrote a military history of Eureka, but there's still a lingering sense that the soldiers were fighting for the wrong side. This is in comparison the stockaders, and I use that term deliberately to distinguish them from the civilian population of Ballarat in 1854, the majority of whom did not take up arms and were not pleased to see a whacking-great barricade built in the middle of their goldfield, much less those people who found themselves trapped inside it! These men, led by radical Irish firebrand Peter Lalor, are often presented in popular history as a kind of proto-Australian army, and certainly behaved like soldiers, although were an insurgent, rather than a professional force. They collected weapons, arranged themselves into companies, appointed officers, practiced and drilled with their arms, and even built a fortified position from which they could either launch an attack or defend themselves. They even swore an oath to fight and created a symbol to differentiate themselves from the *Government forces* on the other side of the diggings. They then started behaving like the very worst armies of their day and looted stores in Ballarat, assaulted shopkeepers, stole horses, abducted at least one official, press-ganged able-bodied men to their cause, and refused to let civilians trapped within their barricade leave without a password, which was only known by the stockaders.

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising the British army stepped in (and the stockaders really shouldn't have been surprised, they could see government camp and knew the military was being steadily reinforced). I think it is of interest to the question under consideration that both sides at Eureka were fighting for the same thing: to uphold British law in the colony of Victoria. So why do the insurgents get to be Australian soldiers, and the professional army doesn't? Unlike the stockaders, who got carried away with politics, the soldiers went into the fight to protect the citizens of the colony from a band of increasingly violent men who were actively subverting the law and shouting loudly to anyone who would listen that they would start a revolution if they could! With this in mind, I think the men of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> Regiments have a much more robust claim than the stockaders to the title of 'Australian soldiers' but I'll leave that with you to consider.

To conclude, perhaps I was a little melodramatic when I called this presentation "The Dark Legacy of ANZAC Day." ANZAC Day invites us to remember and reflect on our post-1915 conflicts, but has also given us a 'get out of jail free' card when it comes to soldiers who took up arms in this country before boots hit the beach at Gallipoli. Our remembrance culture needs to go back from 1915, as well as forwards, and if we can do that, I think ANZAC Day will be much better for it.