

Using a case study of a fallen soldier on the Western front, what lessons can be learnt from studying the Great War of 1914-18?

*"Far away from those who loved him,
Comrades laid him down to rest;
A noble hero, true and brave,
Now sleeps he in a soldier's grave.
We'll catch the broken threads again
And finish what we here began;
The mysteries heaven will explain,
And then, ah then, we'll understand." ¹*

Author Unknown

The Great War of 1914-18 was a significant era in Australian history. The ANZACs (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) were the efforts of Australia and New Zealand on part of the Allied Forces in the Commonwealth. The ANZACs were and still are known best for their courage, valour, might, and above all their unity and comradeship.

Harold Watts was young. He was vibrant. And there were high hopes for him and many other young men just like him. He was only twenty seven when he enlisted to fight for Australia. How noble and brave did his small farming family think of him. Only in Milang, a small country town in SA, did everyone know Harold Watts and his fellow comrades. In a town where everyone knows everyone else's business, Harold was respected for his decision. So in the middle of September, 1916, he kissed his wife and children goodbye, and picked up his small suitcase. Then he walked out the door and into his new fate - the loud bangs, shouts, and constant gunfire of war.

The Australian Imperial Force was full of young men ready to make their mark on the world, to fight with strength and valour. The soldiers were ready beyond any doubt to fight the Turks, even though they weren't told of the dire consequences. The lesson in this is how so many of these young Australians were dedicated and loyal to the cause. The soldiers were obedient, following orders even as they faced their death. Their bravery is the reason for the amount of respect we have for the passed ANZACs, and why they should be honoured beyond any doubt. They stared in the face of death, following every instruction from their superior. *"The profoundest truth of war is that the issue of battle is usually decided in the minds of the opposing commanders, not in the bodies of their men."* Basil Liddell Hart ²

¹ Taken from H.A. Watts' funeral card

² Taken from *ANZAC Memories: Images From The Great War*

Harold Watts was in the 32nd Battalion, in the Battle of the Somme in France, where he developed a very close camaraderie with his fellow soldiers. I believe that these friendships are the model of how Australians should interact, a characteristic which we as Australians should cherish. This strong bond between comrades was and still is what the ANZACs were known for. They had an invincible unity and steadfastness; something we should respect and stress much importance on. Do we not want our children, our grandchildren to exhibit traits such as these? I believe this potency of concern for their fellow soldiers is a significant lesson to be learned from studying the Great War. How much more absolute was their care for one another, than in our society today where the vast majority of people do not even speak to their neighbours. The soldier's common sufferings and mutual service of wartime were preserved in mutual brotherhood and goodwill. This is something we should consider important now and into the future.

Harold was a strong soldier, proud to write to his wife as a Lance Corporal. He had been injured once, but he was back on duty in France in late 1918. Many of his comrades were gone, and he was beginning to forget the names of new young men who he tried to become close to. Their faces were blurred and their names became more and more jumbled up as Lance Corporal Watts gave them their orders. But it was hard, knowing as they marched over the trench line, that he would be responsible for their last fight. To God, he prayed, as they clambered forward, that they would be rewarded with the Lord's kingdom and their families would admire their sacrifice. And then he was gone. Lance Corporal Watts was missing in action, presumed dead.

The ANZACs taught us so many very important lessons, but their sacrifice is such a strong lesson in itself. To willingly surrender one's own life for another, or for many others, has to be the most powerful act that we can offer this world. So many men, with lives ahead of them, would give up their whole world for our country. To me, that is so important in the recognition and continuation of the ANZAC spirit. To have such strength of character is exposed in those who fought for Australia and New Zealand. They set the standard for the soldiers and wars to come, by embracing the unknown and giving so much to the cause.

*"... we thank Thee for the brave and faithful dead, who have willingly laid down their lives on the battlefields in this War or succumbed to the perils of the deep or the air ... Grant us so to follow their good example in faithfulness and endurance, even unto death."*³

But the lesson resounding so clearly in the Great War does not involve Harold Watts, or any other ANZAC on any of the fronts in Europe. It is a lesson I believe that is especially relevant in our society and our generation, as more technology is being created. To bend an enemy's will through military force is and always will be an unnecessary way to cease problems between nations. This lesson, although seemingly so obvious, is also seemingly so important for our children to be educated in. *"Soldiers usually win the battles and generals get the credit for them."* Napoleon Bonaparte⁴. Fighting has always been so

³ Taken from Commonwealth Peace Celebrations Order of Service

⁴ Taken from *ANZAC Memories: Images from the Great War*

negative and unconstructive; we see first hand the effects it has on our people, as they are never the same when they return from a war.

Harold Watts was in the 32nd Battalion, reported to be missing in action, presumed dead on September the 29th, 1918. This was just 43 days before the Armistice was announced. His family never completely recovered from the dark cloud of anxiety that hung when he never returned from the war.

"Anyone who has looked into the eyes of a soldier dying on the battlefield will think hard before starting a war." Otto von Bismark⁵

I could finish with something monotonous and repetitive about world peace, but I won't. I don't think there will ever be world peace; war is unfortunately unavoidable in our society. It is the way in which we apply ourselves and mature that makes us Australians. Harold Watts was one who conformed and fought for his country. The ANZACs were brave and strong, they went to combat in a united front. They were the accepted heroes of their time, and I believe they still should be. How will we react? Like those ANZACs, who gave it all? Because in the world we live in today, I can't emphasise how strongly we as Australians should revere and respect the ANZACs and their efforts.

999 words

⁵ Taken from *ANZAC Memories: Images from the Great War*

What does the ANZAC spirit mean to you?

The ANZAC spirit represents to me all that is Australian; having intrepid respect, comradeship, conformity, persistence, patriotism, and most importantly courage. It is the dauntless courage of the sailors and soldiers of our nation who have fallen for the cause of conflict. It portrays persistence and bravery in the face of dire situations and deals with issues of strength and allegiance between soldiers. It is not the absence of faltering, but the ability to assist others in trying circumstances. The ANZAC spirit is not easily diminished; it will remain forever a characteristic which we as Australians desire to possess. The central attitudes and values belonging with the soldiers are honour, duty, bravery, sacrifice, and salvation.

The ANZAC spirit is embodied in those brave men who maintained the dedication to lay down their lives on the battlefields in the war. They did not surrender to the threats of the front line, and went about their difficult tasks whole-heartedly. They left their homes and lives in Australia to fight for their homeland overseas. Many soldiers found it hard to leave their wives or sweethearts. *"Absence from whom we love is worse than death."* William Cowper.⁶ The Australian soldiers were said to talk about their lives at home, trying to distract themselves from the hardships ahead.

The ANZAC spirit signifies in brief what Australians are about; companionship, endurance, respect and an unending loyalty towards their superiors and their nation. They took their hard working outback knowledge, and applied it where necessary. They took their reliability, diligence, and thoroughness and were the face of strength in the Allied Forces. The ANZACs promoted liberty, humanity and brotherhood among the nations even though they suffered the profound and cruel wounds of warfare. The soldiers left their family, their country, and their lives and were sent misinformed to fight in the Great War.

The ANZACs were put through much pain, taught to kill people they had not met, for the sake of their country's victory. This put great importance on their spirit in the war. Australians of all people were known for their generosity and goodwill, and to be given a gun and taught to shoot went against many of their morals. I can understand how this would be a challenging situation for the ANZACs, when many Australians around that time were strongly religious. They had much courage to go against their prior beliefs and cloud the line between their instinct of right and wrong. *"Courage is doing what you're afraid to do. There can be no courage unless you're scared."* Eddie Rickenbacker⁷

The ANZAC spirit is not just on the front line, but at home in the form of the soldiers' wives and children, who took over their farms and businesses. The ANZACs' families struggled in the time when most young Australian men were far away in a foreign land.

⁶ Taken from *ANZAC Memories: Images From The Great War*

⁷ Taken from *ANZAC Memories: Images From The Great War*

Many gender equality issues were addressed during the time the soldiers were away, and Australian women were empowered during the war.

Another form of the ANZAC spirit was the recipe for the ANZAC biscuit. The women at home were worried about their husbands or brothers not getting enough nutrition in their rations, so they made a biscuit full of nutrition that wouldn't go stale. The recipe uses oats for nutrition and does ^{not} use eggs, so they don't stale as easily. This is a biscuit still used today in many families, but we remember the significance of it as its name reminds us. All Australians respect the significance of the ANZAC biscuit, and the ANZAC spirit.

From only a population of about 5 million at the time of the Great War, some 416,000 Australians enlisted for service. Of that, around 330,000 soldiers were deployed overseas to fight in Gallipoli, France, the Middle East, in the air and on the seas. Around 61,000 of these service men were killed in action. Approximately 40% of men between the ages of 18 and 45 had enlisted in the AIF in the period of 1914-18. So many families were distraught at the news of their husband, brother, father, or son not returning home. The ANZAC spirit is illustrated through the honourable thing the soldiers achieved when they gave their life for country.

This is relevant in our generation because we as young people should be more like them, willing to help others who are having difficulties. I think society can be taught so much more from the ANZAC spirit, and that it is important to be remembered in Australian history. Our generation should follow their example of endurance and loyalty, showing great concern for others even above ourselves.

To conclude, I believe that every area of the ANZACs involvement in the Great War shows their tremendous spirit. I admire their every effort, their unity and their ability to prevail. Their readiness to put in all of their efforts is moving, and their might, vigour and love for their country is so important. *"If there be trouble let it be in my day, that my child may have peace."* Thomas Paine⁸ They gave their today for our tomorrow.

799 words

⁸ Taken from *ANZAC Memories: Images From The Great War*

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