

ECHOES OF ANZAC

by

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In 1915 tens of thousands of Australians and New Zealanders were brought together into the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps - ANZAC. The name has been with us ever since, becoming an iconic, even sacred, word that generations of Australians have related to and whose use is even controlled by Commonwealth legislation.

It is not widely known that there is a strong tradition of song, story, verse and other expressions of Australian men and women at war. As well as providing authentic insights into what everyday Australians thought, felt and said about their wartime experiences, these expressions also relate closely to the development of Anzac and Australia's sense of national identity.

The tradition began on the morning of April 25, 1915, when Australian troops went to battle for the first time in the nation's history. The landing craft of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps beached almost two kilometres too far north of their designated landing place near Gaba Tepe on Turkey's Cannakale Peninsula. Almost immediately the apparent isolation of this sombre cove on the narrow Dardanelles passage between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean was flayed with gunfire from the Turks waiting in the dark cliffs overhanging the beach.

First to land were the Queenslanders, who sprinted to sparse cover across the narrow sand strip. Those still waiting in the landing boats were badly exposed and many were hit. The troops who made it to the chaos of the beach joined an uncoordinated scramble up the slopes, straight into the waiting Turkish guns. The Anzacs gained the heights as dawn broke over the battlefield.

As they fought, they sang. According to some accounts, as they struggled up the cliffs of what was to become 'Gallipoli', the Anzacs were singing the popular wartime song 'This Little Bit of the World Belongs to Us':

We're hanging out the sign to our friends along the line,
This little bit of the world belongs to us

But it never did. This was the furthest point into Turkish territory reached during the ensuing eight-month campaign. The fighting rapidly settled into a rag-tag network of 'possies', caves and trenches. The Anzacs improvised shelter, fighting techniques and a large body of song and verse that reflected their situation and expressed their feelings about it.

One of the earliest of these was a parody of a popular pre-war hit, 'My Little Grey Home in the West', known on Gallipoli as 'My Little Wet Home in the Trench':

I've a little wet home in the trench,
Which the rainstorms continually drench;
There's a dead Turk close by

With his feet to the sky,
And he gives off a beautiful stench.

Underneath in the place of a floor
Is a mass of wet mud and some straw,
And the Jack Johnston's tear
Through the rain-sodden air,
O'er my little wet home in the trench.

There are snipers who keep on the go,
So you must keep your nappers down low,
And the star shells at night
Make a deuce of a light,
Which causes the language to flow.

Then bully and biscuits we chew,
For it's days since we tasted a stew;
But with shells dropping there,
There's no place to compare
With my little wet home in the trench.

Jack Johnston's - shells that burst with a great amount of black smoke,
prompting the diggers to call them after the famous Negro boxer of the time.
Nappers - heads.
Bully - bully beef; canned meat.

Most of the men who made up the First AIF were civilians whose traditions reached back to the pioneering days and bush experiences of the nineteenth century. Even though most came from the cities, their consciousness was thick with the bush ballad and the yarn. When the need came to compose songs, poems or stories about their experiences as soldiers, they drew on those traditions and expressed themselves in the everyday speech of the time. Lance-Corporal A. Saxon of 21 Battalion put one of the most common soldier complaints into 'A Dug-Out Lament':

It ain't the work and it ain't the Turk
That causes us to swear,
But it's having to fight at dark midnight
With the things in our underwear.
Today there's a score – tomorrow lots more
Of these rotters – it ain't too nice
To sit skin-bare in keen morning air
Lookin' for bloomin' lice...

The Anzacs quickly began production of handmade publications, or trench newspapers. The earliest of these publications was *The Bran Mash*, a product of the 4th Light Horse, fighting at Gallipoli as infantry. *The Bran Mash* was written in pencil on two leaves of Commonwealth typing paper, apparently duplicated by sheets of carbon.

With a dateline of 'Anzac Cove', Gallipoli June 15, 1915' *The Bran Mash* began its first - and last - editorial with 'Whirr-Whiz-z-BANG! (a reference to the sound of falling shells, soon to be universally known as 'whizz-

bangs`) and apologised for the 'lack of conveniences necessary for its completely satisfactory production'. The anonymous editor asked for contributions from its readership, provided a selection of rumours or 'furphys', some basic 'art' (a black oblong titled 'Night' by O. Keapit-Darke) and 'Original verse titled 'The Trooper's Lament', an early example of what was to become a standard form of digger literature - the complaint in verse:

The Trooper's Lament

(Note. Where dashes are encountered in the following verses readers may substitute such words as 'blooming', 'bally', etc., or any suitable adjective of two syllables according to taste. Author)

I come from good old Weup-Weup and me monicker's Gus Headers
An I joined the 4th Light ----- 'orse out at Broad ---- Meadows.
I brings along me own old prad, and shoves the claim in 'ot
But th' ---- vet 'e crools me pitch, an 'arf was all I got
I gathers in th' ---- cash and gets off on the spree,
And th' CO ups and passes me a week's C ---- B.

GORSTRUTH!!

Then off we goes to Egypt, and in th' ---- sand,
I does a fortnight's doublin' with a rifle in me 'and
And then we took our ---- prads an' stuffed 'em well with tibbin
(Which sorter calms them down a lot and stops their ---- jibbin)
'An' round about the pyramids, the desert an' the Sphinx

We does a five months stunt amongst the flies an' ---- stinks
But when we all gets pretty 'ot an' fit to take the track,
They hikes me off me 'orse an' makes me 'ump a ---- pack.

CRISE!!

Next thing I finds meself a dodgin' shrapnel in th' trenches
Where a bloke can 'ardly turn around for periscopes an' stenches.
'Owever, its all in th' game a soldier's got to play,
An' I'd rather be out 'ere than ---- Egypt any day
But let me feel just once again me old prad shy an' reef,
An' you can 'ave me biscuit an' me tin of bully beef.

MY ---- OATH!!

In August the British arrived in strength at Suvla Bay. To the tune of
'Moonlight Bay' they made light of their situation:

We were creeping along 'round Suvla Bay,
You could hear the shrapnel whining, it seemed to say:
'We will invalide you home, don't run away',
As we crept along the sands 'round Suvla Bay.

Meanwhile, the Anzacs were existing largely in tents and dug-outs, small
caves scooped in the sides of the cliffs above the beach. Corporal George
Smith of the 24th Sanitary Section described his dug-out home in verse,

adding the note that: 'The roof of a dug-out, as usually designed, is a device for keeping the shrapnel out and letting the water in':

Come and see my little dug-out – way up on the hill it stands,
Where I can get a lovely view of Anzac's golden sands;
When 'Beachy Bill' is shelling, I can see just where he lands,
From my cosy little dug-out on the hill.

It isn't quite as roomy as the mansions of the Tsar,
From sitting-room to bedroom is not so very far,
For the dining- and the smoking-room you stay just where you are,
In my cosy little dug-out on the hill.

The fleas they wander nightly, as soon as I've undressed,
And after many weary hunts I've had to give them best.
As the ants have also found it, there is very little rest
In my cosy little dug-out on the hill.

I've a natty little cupboard, and it looks so very nice,
'Twas made to keep my bread and jam, my bacon and my rice;
But now it's nothing other than a home for orphan'd mice,
In my cosy little dug-out on the hill.

There is no electric lighting in this blighted land of war,
So I use some fat in syrup tins, and stand it on the floor-
And when it's working overtime I sweat from every pore,
In my cosy little dug-out on the hill.

When the nights are clear and starry- then the scene is beautified
By the silvery gleams and shadows that across the mountain glide;
But as it's wet and stormy- well, I go to sleep outside
Of my cosy little dug-out on the hill.

When the times comes round for parting from my little eight by four,
And I can get a good night's rest without a back that's sore,
Well – perhaps some day I'll miss you, and will long to live once more
In the little cosy dug-out on the hill.

At Christmas 1915 the Anzacs finally quit Gallipoli. The sometimes dark
humour they had developed there would also serve them well in the even
worse experience of the Western Front.

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