



Some Thoughts on Anzac Day 2004

John Lee

Listening to the news on 25th April is always a painful experience for military historians. Both print and television journalists compete to display levels of ignorance that are deeply depressing. They always sound so ‘expert’ and compassionate as they mangle the facts to make a good piece. (There was one notable exception in 2000 – a piece to camera at the Imperial War Museum for BBC TV’s London News – some bloke called Lee clutching a recently published biography of Sir Ian Hamilton!)

This year was especially gross. Several times during the day ‘Sky News’ ran a piece about how “on this day in 1915 Australian and New Zealand troops landed at Gallipoli blah de blah de blah”. (I suppose the ‘Kiwis’ should be glad of their inclusion, imposed by the ‘Anzac’ acronym, no doubt.) The piece ended with the revelation that “335,000 Australian, New Zealand and Turkish troops died in this blah de blah de blah”. At least they are accepting a realistic figure for Turkish fatalities but I bet they couldn’t say how many of each nation’s manhood is included in the figure. Never mind that a good chunk of the film footage was of British troops, neither they nor the French and Indians/Gurkhas got a single mention.

This sloppy reporting goes to feed a darker manifestation of the problem. It has been reported for some years now that British visitors to the huge dawn service of remembrance at Anzac Cove are being openly abused by some of the large numbers of young Australian backpackers who make a thing of being there each year.

Last November, when Australia was opening its new war memorial in London, Carl Bridge of the Menzies Centre organised at short notice a conference at Australia House on the theme of Britain and Australia in the two world wars. I gave a paper and, surprisingly, the topic was ‘Ian Hamilton and the Anzacs’. An extract follows:

One serious problem facing Birdwood from late 1917 onwards was the entirely reasonable idea that the “Originals” – the men of 1914 – might be due for a bit of home leave. There were just 5,000 of them left in the ranks but Birdwood had to say that, because the absence of conscription meant that Australian units were relentlessly shrinking in size, he couldn’t possibly let them all go without disbanding an entire Australian division. What he did want to do for them, and he thought this would cheer them up enough to keep them in France, was get a campaign medal for Gallipoli. Hamilton had been working on this for some time anyway but was up against the old Army Council ruling that we didn’t issue medals for defeats. Hamilton was quick to remark that, since we left the Dardanelles at a time entirely of our own choosing and unmolested by the enemy (on two separate occasions!), he couldn’t see where the defeat came into it. (That’s a debate that would keep us here for a week, so we can’t go there!) At some stage in 1918 the idea was floated that the Australian government would issue its own medal for Gallipoli to its own troops.

Now I am very happy to report that the Australian soldiers, from generals to Other Ranks, thought this was a perfectly dreadful idea. If they were to wear a Gallipoli medal



The author of this article retains the copyright of the material. No part of this article may be reproduced or distributed in any form other than for private use without the express permission of the author. Permission may be sought via the [BCMh Newsletter Editor](#)

Page 2 / 2

they would make sure that it went to the 29th British Division, the Royal Naval Division and the men of the Indian Mountain Batteries. They all agreed that they didn't care that much about what they called, a little unkindly but understandably, 'the Suvla lot'. One Australian soldier wrote to Hamilton and Birdwood asking, 'How could I look a soldier of the 29th Division in the eye if I was wearing a medal to which the other man was not entitled?'

I have to say I feel this is the finest moment in the fine history of the AIF. Nothing speaks so much to the noble character of the Australian soldier as his subscribing to this sort of self-denying ordinance over the question of a campaign medal. The true spirit of Anzac is there in this basic idea that we were all mates, mockers, coppers – call it what you will - together trying our best to get a very difficult job done. It is my hope and prayer that this true spirit of Anzac will one day return to the hearts of all Britons and Australians.

I meant that then and I mean it now.

Mischievous Footnote

If we allow that 'England' is a thousand years old, and Australia dates itself from 1900, then the latter stands to the Mother Country in the same sort of relationship as a naughty schoolchild about to become a spotty and rebellious teenager does to its parents! In another hundred years or so we will go through the vigorous twenty something phase when it will all be done differently in 'my new way, not your old way'. Another hundred years or so after that and maturity will finally arrive and a new and better understanding will prevail. Now that's what I call the historical approach to problem-solving!

*John's reference to ignorance of media professionals was touched upon again at the Spring Conference "War and Television". The abuse is not all one-sided, however. I recall a piece written by a sports personality who was having a massage at his Istanbul hotel. When the masseur discovered that the man's grandfather had fought at Gallipoli the workout became very painful! **Editor.***

From Newsletter 10, Spring 2004