

## PLOD ESSAY: They Went With Songs

The word Anzac entered into general usage when the New Zealand and Australian forces disembarked in Egypt at the end of 1914 to help the British repel the Turkish Army from its advance on the Suez. The term Anzac came to mean “citizen soldiers with the distinctive qualities of the settler societies from which they sprang”. In Egypt the British officers were impressed with the “raw turbulence” of their charges. “The reluctance to salute was an affront, the roughneck treatment of the Egyptian hosts a scandal.” These uncouth colonials were needed, however, to “force the straits of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean that opened to the Turkish capital”, firstly to secure the Gallipoli peninsula. In early morning 25 April 1915, the Anzacs “scrambled ashore at what became known thereafter as Anzac Cove and stormed the precipitous slopes before them. Checked in their advance, they dug in and defied all attempts to dislodge them, but were unable to capture the heights despite repeated attempts to do so. With the onset of winter, they abandoned Gallipoli and left behind 8000 dead. The withdrawal, five days before Christmas 1915, was the most impressive operation in the eight-month campaign.” [Stuart Macintyre, *A Concise History of Australia*]

Four months later, the Anzacs at Gallipoli had already become legend and the Day entered Australian culture.

On 25 April 1916, the Tuesday after Easter and one year to the day after the Anzacs made their first assault on Gallipoli

in an attempt to “knock Turkey out of the War”, all business in Wonthaggi was suspended from 12 noon to 2 pm as a tribute to the memory of the “fallen heroes”. This was the first Anzac Day and was commemorated in similar ways all over Australia. It wasn’t until the 1930s that all the rituals we now associate with the day – dawn vigils, marches, memorial services, reunions, two-up games – were firmly established as part of Anzac Day culture.

By the sixteenth anniversary of the fateful landing on Gallipoli, 25 April 1931, Anzac Day had become not only a day of mourning, but a day to celebrate the birth of a nation, the day when “Australia was christened in a welter of

blood.” Mr. A Dungey, President of the Wonthaggi branch of the RSL (then called the RS:S.I.L.A.), said, “The colossal sacrifice made was for the honour and integrity of Australia. The 60,000 Australians and 9000 New Zealanders who paid the supreme sacrifice [throughout the entire war] had brought Australia before the world in such a way as would never be effaced.” He urged that the “sentiment of nationhood be instilled in the minds of the children” and that “the meaning of the Australian flag, combining as it does the crosses of St George, St Andrew and St Patrick, with the added glory of the Southern Cross should be impressed so that the honour of the nation would not be forgotten.”

During the ceremony, and the parade preceding it, music was an integral part of proceedings. A parade of returned men – in

*Every soldier was someone's child*



diminished numbers - and Boy Scouts followed by War veterans – some of whom displayed medals won both in South Africa and The Great War – all fell in behind the Boys’ Band under Bandmaster Philpott with Scout Master Mr Ness acting as Drum Major. They marched down McBride Avenue and turned into the Union Theatre through a guard of honour of Girl Guides. The band accompanied the singing of the hymn, “All People that on Earth Do Dwell”, and the reading of Rudyard Kipling’s “Recessional”. Later they played “Nearer My God to Thee” before Bugler Fowkes sounded “Reveille”, and then, after a moment’s silence, “The Last Post” concluding a solemn and patriotic ceremony. [Powlett Express May 1931]

Since then, the meaning of Anzac Day has changed with the times. During the Vietnam war people were less inclined to talk about heroism and supreme sacrifice and doubted the idea that the battle at Gallipoli showed the world a “virile nationhood”. Vietnam changed the idea of war as an expression of patriotism, and focused on the reality, the horror and futility of war. Kids in school read out the “Dulce et Decorum Est” by Wilfred Owen rather than Rudyard Kipling.

Now, with the ongoing commitment in two wars, and the centenary of the Gallipoli campaign upon us, we are re-thinking it again. We are interested in the whole story, working hard to take out any jingoism or false nationalistic fervour. For instance, we are now willing to acknowledge that for Turkish soldiers it was as much a disaster as it was for us, in that they lost twice as many men as we did. We are moved when we read the words of Ataturk engraved on the Turkish Memorial at ANZAC Cove, directed at the mothers of fallen ANZACs: “After having lost their lives on this land they have become our sons as well.”

Larry Hills, in his composition to be performed on Anzac Weekend, has chosen to commemorate the Anzac Centenary though the words of local soldiers that came home from WWI in diaries and letters. In his research, he was interested to discover that the Australians were known

for their singing as much as for their bravado and courage. They sang on the boats as they landed at Gallipoli; they sang in the trenches; they and the Turks sang across no man’s land to each other. At one point, in August 1915, during a particularly heavy barrage of gunfire, a private from the 16<sup>th</sup> Battalion began to play Ethelbert Nevin’s song, “The Rosary”, on his cornet. And by the third verse, all guns had gone silent. As the song finished “There was a tremendous burst of applause from all listeners, including those in the trenches above us.” Hills has included this moment in his cantata. [Holden, Robert. *And the Band Played On*, pp 128-30]

Here are some comments about music at the Front found in the diary of Pte H. Ivan Walker, Uncle of Dorothy Warren, rehearsal pianist who has worked with Larry Hills for many years. Pte Walker was killed in 1916 in France:

“Ship’s crew gave a concert tonight. Band was dressed up. Conductor had black dress coat filled out. 2 were dressed as women. Instruments – big barrel for large drum, 2 biscuit-tin drums, a bar of steel clarionette and megaphone. I took part in the singing. You would be surprised to hear the men sing. There are some very good voices and it’s really stirring to hear the great volume of sound and watch the faces of the men as they sing the old well-known hymns – ‘Nearer My God to thee’, ‘Stand up, Stand Up’, ‘Light of the World’ etc.

“Every night the buglers play retreat in honour of those who fell at Gallipoli. It is an impressive piece of music, which starts high and goes down, then makes an attempt to get up again and so the cadence goes on and ends in a triumphant medium key. The drums then beat three times. I can’t help comparing the music to the way our men died. They got shot but others went on. The spirit in them fresh as ever and though thousands are in their graves we can still take up the triumphant spirit and hope to continue on the same way.”

[See **PLOD Newsletter** for concert dates, venues and times over Anzac Weekend. Tickets are selling quickly.]