

PLOD ESSAY: **First Anzac Day 1916**

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 celebrated 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.

On that first Tuesday, memorial services “of quiet observances and speeches of appreciation” were held in the Baptist (at 7:30 am) and Anglican (at noon) churches. They were much more personal events then than now since the war was still ongoing and Wonthaggi boys were still dying. In the evening a united service was held at the Methodist Church where a large crowd gathered and representatives of the Borough Council attended officially.

On the last day of term, five days before the first Anzac Day, Wonthaggi State School “worthily commemorated” the day with “The scholars acquitting themselves in their parts and inspiring addresses delivered by the chairman of the School Committee, Mr Abbott, and Messrs Brunt, Conant, Hamilton and Thorne. The school Roll of Honor was unveiled by the Mayor, M.J. McMahan. The work of inscribing on the roll was most tastefully done by Mr Beckerleg, one of the teachers at the school.” Four teachers and eleven old pupils were named on that board, all having given their lives in the past year. Everyone knew them.

For the last two years, the war had been on the minds of everyone. The Melbourne newspapers carried detailed descriptions of battles and tactics everyday, but our local papers carried more human interest stories about the boys going off to war, the letters from the front, the wounded boys who were slowly returning from Europe, the awful telegrams and official letters being received by distraught families.

Here are some of the stories:

from the Sentinel 28 April 1916: The following is a copy of a note found in a bottle on Kilcunda beach on the 17th instant by Mr F.J. Ward: ‘March 10th 1916. From two of the boys bound for the front on Star of England. Having a good trip. A lot of the boys had a bad time the first night out, so would the finder kindly drop Mrs Brown, Alice Street Newtown, Sydney, a line, just for the novelty and also my mother... wishing you good luck and good bye from your soldier boys...’

from the Powlett Express, April 1915: Australian Expeditionary Forces. Recruits wanted, every man physically fit is wanted. Conditions of enlistment: Age – 18 to 45 years; chest measurement – 33 inches; minimum height – 5 feet 2 inches. Rates of pay per day: Lieutenant – 21s, Sergeant – 10s6d, Corporal – 10s, Private – 6s.

from the Sentinel March 1916: Corporal Hugh McNidder, who lost an eye and received other injuries in an engagement at the Dardanelles, wishes to thank all those who met him at the railway station last week and gave him such a hearty reception... He was also instructed by the men in Egypt to express their thanks to the kind friends who have sent gifts. Many of the gifts had no names attached to them but were much appreciated by the soldiers.

from the Sentinel March 1916: Lance Corporal Widdows of Wonthaggi writes from Gallipoli to Mr Les Lake under the date 6/12/15 [*leant to the paper in honour of the pending Anzac day*]: We have been in the thick of it for 13 weeks now and we are becoming old soldiers, although our burial ground is getting bigger every day. I have had two or three narrow squeaks and I hope to have no closer shaves those I have had during the last month. While in an officer's dugout one night a bomb burst through the roof and killed the sergeant-major and wounded the sergeant, and your humble escaped with a bruised hand, which has now healed up. I can tell you I said my prayers earnestly that night and have done so ever since...

from the Sentinel, February 1916: Mrs Oliver, mother of the late Private R. J. Oliver of Wonthaggi, has received the following letter from Private F. I. Bastow from Gallipoli:

Dear Friend; I have just received your letter asking for an account of your son's death. It must have been a great shock to you when you received word of poor Bob's death, but how proud you must feel to know that he died a hero's death while fighting against fearful odds at Quinn's Post – a place that must live in history forever... I will try to tell you all about that fateful day, 27th April 1915. Our company was ordered to take a section of Quinn's Post known as 'No Man's Ridge'. We started to dig ourselves in and it was about four o'clock in the afternoon when your son was shot through the left breast. I carried him out of the firing zone and laid him down. He seemed quite happy and said, 'Never mind me, I'm done, go and keep them back,' but I stayed with him until the last. About five minutes later, the last words he spoke were, 'If ever you get back go and see my people.' He was buried on the following day with one of his tent mates by the late Rev. Captain Andrew Gillison. The last time I saw the grave a cross had been erected and their names on it. Concerning the trinkets he carried I cannot say what became of them, but if the burial party got them you will receive them later on. Of course, there was no time to do anything during those awful days. If I am spared to go through this, when I get back I will go and see you.

[Mrs Oliver did receive the trinkets to which Private Bastow referred; it is not known if he was 'spared' and ever went to see Mrs Oliver.]

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,



Section of trench at Quinn's Post

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.

At the end of that first school Anzac day service, "the sounding of the Last Post by the buglers closed the proceedings and the children were dismissed for their Easter Holidays." Mr Gannon wrote, in the 26 April 1916 edition of the *Powlett Express*, "Particularly is Eastertide a fitting season to celebrate Anzac day; Easter is the great festival of the resurrection. From bereaved Australian homes to the heroes' graves in the flower-strewn valleys of Gallipoli, echo the enduring words, 'I am the Resurrection and the Life.' They comforted the hero as he breathed his last mortal breath after duty faithfully and nobly done, and they were comforting to the bereaved relatives in Australian homes; assuaging the first paroxysm of grief and softening and subduing the poignancy of memory."



A postcard was received from 'Wally' Tibballs and Mat Mitchell, the former on his way to Egypt, the latter 'in good nick' somewhere near the Nile. Sentinel 20/4/16

