The Anzac legend and the Western Front

Rivalry between the nations of Europe, fuelled by nationalism, led to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. Australia, as a former British colony, still had close ties to Britain. When Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914, there was no doubt that Australia would immediately support “the mother country”. Many young Australian men joined the army to support the Gallipoli campaign in Turkey from 1915. Although the Gallipoli Campaign was deemed a disaster in terms of loss of life and the failure to achieve a military victory, the Anzacs created a legend. However, the experience of the Australian soldiers on the Western Front in Europe was equally heroic, yet seems to receive less attention. While the events of Gallipoli should continue to be commemorated, there needs to be more focus on the significant events of Australia’s involvement on the Western Front.

The growing sense of new national identity was further developed through the experience of Australian soldiers during the progress of the war. The first major battle for Australian soldiers took place on the Gallipoli Peninsula in Turkey. The battle was a challenge and included difficult weather conditions, a lack of drinking water and health issues such as trench foot and dysentery. Lieutenant Frank Boyes writes of this hardship in a letter to his mother. “We got only sufficient fresh water, in fact, on some days barely enough to drink … there were parasites which caused an abominable itch, they lived and bred mainly in the seams of the inner garments”.

The battle challenged the Australian soldiers and the campaign was ambitious in many ways.

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The overall aim of the campaign to knock Turkey out of the war and open up a supply line for Britain and France to support Russia failed. More than 600 Australians were killed on the first day and 8709 by the end of the campaigns. An effect of this was to create a sense of solidarity on the home front where families came to terms with the news of significant Australian casualties. Ironically, the withdrawal ordered in December 1915, has come to be recognised as one of the most successful parts of the campaign. Unfortunately, one effect of this “success” was to provide survivors to fight in a different theatre, the Western Front. “In a military sense, the Western Front, which stretched 750 kilometres from the Belgian coast, through France to the Swiss border, was a baptism of fire for the new nation of Australia, who for the first time “engaged the main army of the main enemy in the main theatre of war” 2 There was a terrible loss of life on the Western Front where the war was bogged down in trenches and mud.

The battles at Fromelles and at Bullecourt in France were the most significant in terms of loss of Australian lives. Life on the front line was extremely difficult. In proportion to forces fielded, Australia’s casualty rate was almost 65 per cent — the highest in the British Empire. One of the reasons for this was that Australians were exposed to the front line in massive numbers. During the course of the war, almost 60 000 Australians (nearly all men) died after sustaining injuries or illness. Most of these deaths (45 000) were on the Western Front. A further 124 000 were wounded (sometimes multiple times) and as a result, these men endured years of ill health, disfigurement or disability. Millions of rats that fed on the remains of dead soldiers spread disease and terrible weather turned trenches into canals. The savagery of conditions on the Western Front are perhaps best summed up where an Australian soldier writes to his family complaining that “… we are lousy, stinking, ragged, unshaven, sleepless ... my tunic is rotten with other men’s blood ... “ 3 Clearly then, conditions on the Western Front could be said to be equal to those at Gallipoli and as such were equally important in the development of the Anzac legend.


In conclusion, Australia's experiences in World War I have had a major influence in forming the Anzac legend and more broadly as a sense of Australian identity. Given that experiences on the Western Front were equally heroic and destructive for Australian soldiers, it seems fair that it should be commemorated as much as Gallipoli is. Gallipoli may always symbolise the Anzac legend but that does not mean that experiences on the Western Front should be commemorated any less.

References


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