



# CLASS MATE



Series 17  
with TROY LENNON

# Anzac Day



## in 1917



**T**wo years after our first troops went into action at Gallipoli, Australia commemorated the landing and those who died there. Australia had changed from the country it was before the war. There was a national pride in our troops who proved they could hold their own in a major global conflict. But the country had become divided over the issue of conscription in what seemed, to many, like someone else's war.

### THE WAR IN EUROPE IN APRIL 1917

In March 1917, worn down by the epic battles of Verdun and the Somme, the Germans withdrew from their winding bulging front line to straighten it, giving them fewer miles of trenches to defend allowing them to concentrate forces. They pulled back to a heavily fortified trench system known as the Siegfried Position (called the Hindenburg line by the Allies).

In April 1917 the Allied armies were also battle weary. Although

recruitment drives and (in most nations) conscription had ensured there were always fresh troops, it was often not enough to relieve front line men.

At the beginning of April the Allies were relieved to hear they would be reinforced by American troops after the US declared war on Germany. They were also buoyed by the arrival of warmer weather after one of the coldest winters on record.

The Allies launched an offensive at Arras in April, supported by an Anzac attack on Bullecourt.

The accompanying air battle would become known as the Bloody Month for the number of pilots killed. But worse battles awaited soldiers in Europe throughout the rest of the year.

### MIDDLE EAST

British and Commonwealth troops had captured Baghdad in March 1917, and in April made two failed attempts to capture Gaza. There would be more attempts through the rest of the year.

### THE WORLD IN APRIL 1917

On April 2, the US declared war on Germany, provoked by unrestricted submarine warfare and the release of the intercepted Zimmerman telegram — a German communique to its embassy in Mexico — which revealed Germany's plan to ask Mexico to join them to fight the US.

In Russia the Tsar had been overthrown and revolutionary Vladimir Lenin, who had returned from exile in Germany, was urging the Soviets (the political groups formed by workers) to seize power from the provisional government.

Meanwhile, France, Britain and Italy met at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne in France to discuss how to divide up the Ottoman



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Empire after the war. Their ally Russia was not told about the agreement, which was signed on April 26.

## AUSTRALIAN POLITICS IN APRIL 1917

Australia in 1917 had just been through some political turmoil after Prime Minister Billy Hughes was ejected from the Labor Party, his own party, in September 1916 for his support of conscription.

Hughes and several other Labor politicians formed the National Labor Party, keeping power by forging an alliance with the Commonwealth Liberal Party.

In April 1917 Hughes ran an election campaign, hoping to win on the strength of his handling of the war, with plans to hold a second referendum on conscription.

He declined to give a speech on Anzac Day; instead repeating a speech he had given on Anzac Day the previous year at a hotel in London, which praised the actions of the Anzacs at Gallipoli saying they had taken Australia and New Zealand into a new era, and the virtue of self sacrifice and its necessity for freedom.

The speech was a not so subtle way of campaigning for a new referendum on conscription if he was re-elected.

## COMMEMORATIONS: WESTERN FRONT

The Anzac troops in Europe were battle weary. They had been involved in some of the worst fighting of World War I – the Battle of the Somme – and, despite the German withdrawal to the Hindenburg line in March and April, there was no end in sight.

Throughout April, Anzacs were involved in actions at Boursies and Bullecourt. So when the second anniversary of the Gallipoli Landings came around, even then known as Anzac Day, the troops had more comrades to mourn.

While some Anzac Day ceremonies were low key and solemn, focusing on recent losses of comrades, others involved concerts, sports matches and, where possible, veterans of Gallipoli were given an extra ration of rum.

## COMMEMORATIONS: HOME FRONT

Across Australia there were patriotic speeches and memorial services in town halls or school halls, and sermons in churches, as well as special fund-raising stalls set up in the streets.

Memorial services around the country took different forms. In some towns there were solemn wreath-laying ceremonies for local men

who had died in the conflict, while in others there were sports carnivals and parades.

Those who marched in the parades included veterans of Gallipoli and new troops heading for the

war. Anzacs gave lectures at schools. But for most people,

Anzac Day was a normal working day; it didn't become a public holiday until 1927.

There were complaints that some shops were using the day as a promotional tool, and people were gambling or holding raffles on such a solemn occasion.

## AUSTRALIA IN 1917

Australia's population in 1917 was about 4.9 million.

The population had dropped by about 50,000 since 1915, partly because immigration had all but halted but also because of the tens of thousands of men being sent overseas to fight and thousands who had lost their lives.

The majority of people at this time lived in cities, although the rural areas were still thought to be where true Australians came from, idealised in poetry and stories.

However, the Gallipoli legend was already taking shape, replacing the bushman as a figure representing values such as mateship, courage, resourcefulness, hard work and loyalty.

But not everyone was a supporter of the war.

The referendum on conscription in 1916 had divided the nation and when Billy Hughes was returned as Prime Minister in 1917, he announced his intention to hold another.

The rest of the year was marked by bitter pro and anti campaigns as well as industrial strife.

Anzac Day in 1917 was one brief respite as the country mourned those lost in the war. But while some extolled them as heroes, others saw them as martyrs in someone else's war.

## SOURCES AND FURTHER STUDY

- **Australia and New Zealand Voices of the First World War** (Reader's Digest)
- **Digger Smith** by Peter Stanley (Murdoch Books)
- **The Honest History Book** edited by D Stephens & A. Broinowski (NewSouth)
- **The Battles of Bullecourt 1917** by David Coombes (Big Sky Publishing)
- **Trove Newspapers** <http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper>
- **The Great War Diary** <http://www.anzacs.net/Diary2.htm>
- **The War That Changed Us** (ABC DVD)
- **Encyclopedia Britannica**

# CLASS MATE

EVERY TUESDAY

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## ANZAC DAY 1917

WE HAVE DONE WITH  
PETTY STRIVING,  
WE ARE JOINED TODAY INSTEAD