

## Five arguments for downsizing Anzac

David Stephens

*David Stephens has an MA and PhD in political science. He was a public servant for twenty years and a consultant and lobbyist for ten years. He then led a successful campaign against the building of additional war memorials in Canberra to rival the Australian War Memorial. Since 2013 he has been secretary of Honest History ([honesthistory.net.au](http://honesthistory.net.au)), a coalition of historians and others supporting the balanced and honest presentation and use of Australian history during the centenary of World War I.<sup>1</sup>*

We need to make Anzac less important than it is now and as it looks like being in the four years of its centenary. I am not talking about Anzac Day (provided it is done with dignity) but about the Anzac tradition, or myth, or legend, that ever-widening khaki thread that runs through our Australian national tapestry.

### **The vainglory argument**

‘Vainglory’ means ‘excessive elation or pride in one’s achievements’. The way we commemorate and celebrate our military history is boastful and way out of proportion to the impact of our arms and to our direct losses in war. There are some battles and campaigns where a case can be made that Australian forces were decisive – Beersheba 1917, France in the summer of 1918, El Alamein 1942, for example – but generally we have been bit-part players in overseas wars. In the Dardanelles campaign, birthplace of the Anzac legend, Australians made up just 5 per cent of the forces involved and 7 per cent of the casualties on both sides.<sup>2</sup>

Our war commemoration is also insensitive, because it takes very little account of the broader human impact of war. The 100,000 or so Australian war deaths in the twentieth century are just 0.04 per cent of total deaths in wars around the world in that century – 231 million, including civilians as well as soldiers.<sup>3</sup> (Almost all the Australian civilians killed in war died in the Frontier Wars from 1788 to the 1930s.)

We are citizens of the world. Wars are not just noisy and colourful highlights in a single nation’s history or occasions for commemorative exercises wrapped in patriotism and clouded with nostalgia, ‘remembering’ men and women most of whom most of us never knew. Every soldier killed in war is a tragedy but our common humanity demands that we broaden our perspective to recognise the impacts of war beyond our own kith and kin.

Then we insist that we do not glorify war. Yet these denials often come as add-ons to moving, patriotic, feel-good – or at least bitter-sweet – ceremonies and marches with lots of flags, eloquent speeches, references to heroism, sonorous hymns, wide-eyed children and, now, sound and light shows. Rather than routinely repeating, as an afterthought to sentimental commemoration, that mantra about not glorifying war, would it not be a more effective argument against war to highlight the impacts of war on civilian populations, the great bulk of that 231 million dead?

Our attitude to war also devalues the men and women who fought it. The type of commemoration exercise we engage in nowadays is less about them – the Diggers – and more about us – about Australians today. Michael McGirr, writing in 2004, noted how ‘the remembrance of war is moving from the personal to the public sphere’. Quiet and dignified remembrance of others had become noisy – ‘an unrestrained endorsement of ourselves’ which devalued the forebears we claimed to revere.

People now seem to believe that in looking at the Anzacs they are looking at themselves. They aren’t. The dead deserve more respect than to be used to make ourselves feel larger.<sup>4</sup>

I believe the tendencies McGirr saw in 2004 are worse today, encouraged by governments and official urgers and reinforced by an awareness of soldiers as victims. The last has, in Christina Twomey’s view, heightened our emotional responses to trauma without increasing our understanding of causes and consequences.<sup>5</sup>

### **The strangulation argument**

We do military history very well in Australia. Indeed, we do so much, through the Department of Veterans’ Affairs, the Australian War Memorial<sup>6</sup> and the state memorials, through school curricula, through the endless flood of military history books, through military tourism for all ages, through movies and mini-series,

through commercial hucksters flogging everything from Gallipoli champagne cruises entertained by Bert Newton<sup>7</sup> or hosted by a retired General<sup>8</sup>, to a Gallipoli memorial swag<sup>9</sup>, as well as lots of commemoration, new memorials, travelling exhibitions, re-enactments, performance art, symphonies, and so on, that some Australians might well think there is nothing in our history worth noticing except what occurs on battlefields.

Yet there is so much more to Australian history that we could be researching, presenting and celebrating. We are a much more interesting country than we will seem if that khaki thread strangles all of the others. Our history is made by women, men, families, artists, philosophers, scientists, unionists, business people, public servants, soldiers and politicians. We carry the imprint of the First Australians, the builders of the CSIRO, the Sydney Opera House and the Snowy scheme, the pioneers of the bush frontier and the urban frontier, and waves of ‘boat people’ from convicts to asylum seekers. Australian history is to the credit – and the fault – of all of us, not just our Diggers.

### The bellicosity argument

‘Bellicosity’ means ‘an inclination to fight or quarrel’. Hugh White says that ‘soft’ wars over the last thirty years – that is, wars with relatively few casualties – have allowed Australians to become more bellicose.<sup>10</sup> Further, we regard the Australian-American alliance as vital to our national security, so we are always susceptible to phone calls from the White House seeking our involvement somewhere overseas. Thirdly, Australians traditionally have not focused sharply on the purposes of war, either beforehand or in retrospect. We tend to go off to fight without much analysis of why we are doing it or whether and how fighting serves our national interest. (Iraq III is the latest example.)

Added to these factors is the Anzac tradition. While we steer away from *why* we fight, we focus sharply on *how* we fight, on the details of battles and the experiences of soldiers. White believes that our failure to go into the purpose and cost of war is partly due to ‘the potent idea of war in Australian society, focused on the Anzac legend’. He blames ‘the way Australians’ intense focus on military history, centred

on the Gallipoli campaign, has shaped, and in some ways distorted, both our understanding of Australia’s history and our image of ourselves’.

### The ideology argument

Geoffrey Serle years ago coined the term ‘Anzackery’ to apply to the inflation, by excessive and bombastic commemoration, of a part of our history into a noisy myth.<sup>11</sup> There are plenty of recent examples, many of them in Anzac speeches by prime ministers on both sides of politics.<sup>12</sup> There is a risk, though, that this Anzackery will develop into ‘Anzacism’, a state ideology, loud-mouthed, built on a narrow base, justifying aggressive defence and security policies and punishing dissent.<sup>13</sup> Anzacism might have characteristics comparable with earlier state ideologies, including:

“Geoffrey Serle years ago coined the term ‘Anzackery’ to apply to the inflation, by excessive and bombastic commemoration, of a part of our history into a noisy myth.”

- A linkage with traditional national symbols: thousands of national flags as the main feature of party rallies in totalitarian regimes; in Australia, national flags as a dominant feature in Anzac Day marches.
- A requirement for ritual observance: historians of the old Soviet Union refer to the ‘reverential’ attitude towards Leninism<sup>14</sup>; here, Angus Houston, chair of the then Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, said: ‘The Board is determined to ensure that the Anzac Centenary is marked in a way that captures the spirit and *reverence* it so deserves’ (emphasis added).<sup>15</sup>
- Moving mass ceremonies affirming loyalty to the ideology: Nuremberg torchlight rallies; May Day marches; here, Dawn Services.
- Adoration of mythologised ordinary people: Stakhanov, the Soviet super-worker<sup>16</sup>; the German *ubermensch* or superman; here, John Simpson Kirkpatrick and the lean, laconic, bronzed Anzac.
- Loyalty tests: pledging loyalty to a state ideology as a feature of communist regimes; the German mantra of *ein volk, ein reich, ein fuehrer* (one people, one empire, one leader); here, the prominence of Anzac in the citizenship literature of the Department of Immigration and Border Protection.<sup>17</sup>

### The child protection argument

Anzac, as it is presented currently, threatens the psychic health of our younger generations and may well be a danger to their future physical well-being

also. Much of our obsession with military history and commemoration impacts on children, the people least able to resist it. A lot of that commemoration can be characterised as Anzackery, as overblown, windy, jingoistic rhetoric, masquerading as patriotism. Anzac has been co-opted to support a sentimental, misleading portrayal of war.<sup>18</sup>

Senator Michael Ronaldson, the Minister Assisting the Prime Minister for the Centenary of Anzac, has often talked about the ‘obligations’ on the next generation to carry forward the torch of remembrance.<sup>19</sup> Julia Gillard as prime minister applauded the number of enthusiastic children attending Anzac Day services.<sup>20</sup> There are drayloads of war-related material directed at children; that torch motif – the torch of remembrance – features prominently in it.<sup>21</sup>

The torch is fanned by various state government bodies, by commercial interests cashing in on the Anzac centenary<sup>22</sup>, and by the Australian War Memorial, which encourages primary school children to write messages to dead soldiers on little plywood crosses which are then placed on graves in France and Belgium<sup>23</sup>, which recruits primary school age children to record for broadcast in the Roll of Honour cloisters the names and age at death of dead World War I soldiers<sup>24</sup>, and which hosts school children in the Memorial’s Discovery Zone<sup>25</sup>, including simulated rides in a Vietnam-era Iroquois helicopter or dodging snipers – that’s how the Memorial advertises it<sup>26</sup> – in the imitation World War I trench.

All of this cannot fail to affect impressionable minds. Then there are the commemorative ceremonies that we encourage children to attend. Not glorifying war perhaps but certainly sentimentalising it, *normalising* it, and doing so very movingly. Hard to avoid, too, if there is teacher or peer pressure on pupils and Returned and Services League (RSL) or other community pressure on schools.

How far are these early impressions permanently affecting the way children look at war?<sup>27</sup> When you question teachers or resource providers about the ethics of teaching children about war, the answer is often ‘we give the children something that is appropriate to their age’ or ‘they get a nuanced view when they are younger and then more details later’. The crucial message that war requires soldiers to kill or be killed can be lost in puffery about ‘connecting’ or ‘emotional understanding’ or smothered by war memorabilia and dress-ups.

More importantly, while obsessing about the details of battles (particularly kill-counts), poring over new caches of photographs<sup>28</sup> or newly-discovered mass graves, and relentlessly and repetitively memorialising the dead (if in more high-tech ways<sup>29</sup>) we are skirting the stories of the families who waited at home, the wives and children who dealt with shell-shocked returning husbands and fathers, and the 208,000 wounded and hospitalised from World War I alone<sup>30</sup>, some of whom never left those hospital wards. We agonise over whether Australia was born amid death and suffering at Gallipoli; we pay far, far less attention to studying the fearful, grieving society we became in the 1920s.

We are left with the torch of remembrance. What does that phrase really mean? Minister Ronaldson gave a hint last year when he spoke to Sydney Legacy.<sup>31</sup> The Minister wanted by the end of 2018 to have ‘the next generation of young Australians ... carrying the torch’.

And when they hop on a school bus, or they walk home, or they go shopping, or they go out at night with relative freedom – that they realise in many instances that freedom has been paid for in blood. *And they must understand that* (emphasis added).

The language of obligation again. The implication is that freedom, ‘paid for in blood’, may have to be redeemed in similar fashion in the future. That is our legacy to future generations: the expectation that honouring the war dead of the past – carrying the torch – requires the preparedness to become the war dead of the future.

### Endnotes

1. The opinions are the author’s own. Honest History is a broad coalition of historians and others, committed to frank debate and expressing a diversity of opinions. Earlier versions of the article have appeared on the Australian Independent Media Network website and been presented as a speech to the Balmain Institute.
  2. ‘The Gallipoli campaign (2010)’, Department of Veterans’ Affairs, *Web Archive*, [http://web.archive.org/web/20130313050857/http://www.dva.gov.au/news\\_archive/Documents/The%20Gallipoli%20Campaign.pdf](http://web.archive.org/web/20130313050857/http://www.dva.gov.au/news_archive/Documents/The%20Gallipoli%20Campaign.pdf), accessed 7 February 2015. Other sources have comparable figures.
  3. Milton Leitenberg, *Deaths in Wars and Conflicts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: Cornell University Peace Studies Program, Occasional Paper #29*, Centre for International Security Studies at Maryland, School of Public Policy, University of Maryland, College Park MD, 3rd edition, 2006, p. 14, [http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20060800\\_cdsp\\_occ\\_leitenberg.pdf](http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20060800_cdsp_occ_leitenberg.pdf), accessed 7 February 2015.
-

4. Michael McGirr, *Bypass: the Story of a Road*, Picador, Sydney, 2004, p. 246.
5. Christina Twomey, 'Trauma and the reinvigoration of Anzac: an argument', *History Australia*, 10, 3, 2013, pp. 85-108, <http://journals.publishing.monash.edu/ojs/index.php/ha/article/view/988/1520>, accessed 7 February 2015.
6. David Stephens, 'Two views of World War I: sight-bites and Keepsakes', *Honest History*, 3 February 2015, <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/two-views-of-world-war-i-war-memorial-and-national-library/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
7. '100<sup>th</sup> anniversary cruise', *Gallipoli Cruise 2015*, <https://www.gallipolicruise2015.com.au/entertainment/14-bert-newton>, accessed 7 February 2015.
8. 'Opulent sea cruises: Gallipoli 2015', *Captain's Choice*, <http://www.captainschoice.com.au/Tours/Gallipoli-2015>, accessed 7 February 2015.
9. 'Camp Gallipoli swags', *Camp Gallipoli*, <https://www.campgallipoli.com.au/swag/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
10. David Stephens, 'Hugh White on Australians and war', *Honest History*, 5 February 2014, updated, <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/stephens-david-hugh-white-on-australians-and-war/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
11. Geoffrey Serle, 'Godzone: 6) Austerica unlimited?' *Meanjin Quarterly*, 26, 3, September 1967, pp. 237-50; full text at <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/serle-geoffrey-austerica/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
12. Search [honesthistory.net.au](http://honesthistory.net.au) under names of prime ministers since Hawke.
13. See also: David Stephens, "'Team Australia" threatens the majority, too', *Australian Independent Media Network*, 17 November 2014, <http://theaimn.com/team-australia-threatens-majority/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
14. Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, 1997, p. 122.
15. 'Anzac Centenary Advisory Board: message from the Chair of the Anzac Centenary Advisory Board, Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, AC, AFC (Ret'd)', Department of Veterans' Affairs, *100 Years of ANZAC: the Spirit Lives 2014-2018*, [http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/anzac\\_centenary/advisory\\_board.htm](http://www.anzaccentenary.gov.au/anzac_centenary/advisory_board.htm), accessed 7 February 2015.
16. 'Alexey Stakhanov', *Wikipedia*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexey\\_Stakhanov](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexey_Stakhanov), accessed 7 February 2015.
17. 'Welcome to the Australian citizenship test Practice Test', Department of Immigration and Border Protection, *Australian Citizenship: Our Common Bond*, [http://www.citizenship.gov.au/learn/cit\\_test/practice\\_test\\_1/Practice\\_Test\\_1.swf](http://www.citizenship.gov.au/learn/cit_test/practice_test_1/Practice_Test_1.swf), accessed 7 February 2015.
18. David Stephens, 'Two views of World War I', including the articles by Alan Stephens and James Rose linked from it.
19. For example: 'Remarks at the 2014 New South Wales RSL State Congress (27 May 2014)', Senator the Hon. Michael Ronaldson, *Media Releases*, [http://minister.dva.gov.au/media\\_releases/2014/may/minva036.htm](http://minister.dva.gov.au/media_releases/2014/may/minva036.htm), accessed 7 February 2015.
20. The Hon Julia Gillard, MP, 'Transcript of interview with Karina Carvalho (25 April 2013)', Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, *PM Transcripts: Transcripts of the Prime Ministers of Australia*, <http://pmtranscripts.dpmc.gov.au/browse.php?did=19271>, accessed 7 February 2015.
21. For example: Arthur Burke, 'The spirit of ANZAC', Anzac Day Commemoration Committee of Queensland, *ANZAC Day*, <http://www.anzacday.org.au/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
22. Carolyn Holbrook, 'Speech to History Teachers' Summer School, National Press Club, Canberra, 22 January 2015, *Honest History*, 3 February 2015, <http://honesthistory.net.au/wp/holbrook-carolyn-speech-to-adfa-history-teachers-summer-school/>, accessed 8 February 2015.
23. 'The messages – Commemorative Crosses Project', *Australian War Memorial*, <http://www.awm.gov.au/blog/2014/08/06/messages-commemorative-crosses-project/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
24. 'Roll of Honour soundscape', *Australian War Memorial*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/1914-1918/roll-honour-soundscape/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
25. 'Discovery Zone', *Australian War Memorial*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/education/schools/discovery-zone/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
26. 'The Discovery Zone', *Australian War Memorial*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/visit/discovery-zone/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
27. David Turnoy, 'At what age can we introduce children to honest history?' *The Advocate*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.theedadvocate.org/at-what-age-can-we-introduce-children-to-honest-history/#comment-259>, accessed 8 February 2015; Michael Shaughnessy, 'David Turnoy: American Tales', *Education News*, 22 October 2014, <http://www.educationviews.org/david-turnoy-american-tales/>, accessed 8 February 2015.
28. 'Remember me: the lost Diggers of Vignacourt', *Australian War Memorial*, <https://www.awm.gov.au/exhibitions/remember-me/>, accessed 7 February 2015.
29. 'Roll of Honour name projections', *Australian War Memorial*, <http://www.awm.gov.au/1914-1918/roll-honour-name-projections/>, accessed 8 February 2015.
30. David Noonan, 'Why the numbers of our WWI dead are wrong', *The Age*, 30 April 2014, <http://www.theage.com.au/comment/why-the-numbers-of-our-wwi-dead-are-wrong-20140430-zr0v5.html>, accessed 7 February 2015.
31. 'Remarks at the Legacy President's Changeover luncheon – New South Wales Parliament House, Sydney [11 July 2014]', Senator the Hon. Michael Ronaldson, *Media Releases*, [http://minister.dva.gov.au/media\\_releases/2014/jul/minva041.htm](http://minister.dva.gov.au/media_releases/2014/jul/minva041.htm), accessed 7 February 2015.