

Anzac Day at Wallendbeen

Genevieve Jacobs

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning. I want to begin by saying what an immense honour it is to be asked to speak here at Wallendbeen, in front of the war memorial built by my husband's great uncle, Donald Mackay. Some of the names on the memorial behind me are almost lost to memory – the station hands and rabbiters and railway workers who signed up from here a hundred years ago – but some of their lives are treasured still in dusty photographs and folded letters, bundles tied with fading ribbons.



*Wallendbeen War Memorial, 2014
(source: Flickr Commons; photo:
Mark)*

And it is a good thing that we do make connections with the names on this memorial and those other names up at the Wallendbeen Hall on the board, beneath the German machine gun, because what I want to talk to you about today, in the year that we mark a full century since the First World War broke out, is whether we are in danger of forgetting.

Now, surely not, you'll say. Surely there will be absolutely no chance this year of forgetting what happened and even less chance next year, when we commemorate a century since that first grey dawn on the shores of Gallipoli. There will be a thousand events. There will be everything from the most deeply serious ceremonies at Anzac Cove itself to football matches, complete with VC winners, smoke machines and the good of Legacy collections, mixed with the sure knowledge that money and marketing are also at play.

There will be a flood of books; there already is. When I first started broadcasting on the radio seven years ago, we'd always have a bit of a rush of books being sent in for reviews around Anzac Day. Now there's an absolute flood that takes place all year long. There will be films and television programs and tours and events of all kinds – because this is such an important part of our history – and there will also be lots of money spent and lots of money made out of the entire exercise.

But what I am beginning to wonder is whether the further we get from that war and others like it, the further we are getting, too, from the men and women who actually fought these wars, why they went and what really happened to them there. I wonder whether, as a listener said to me not long ago, that we run a risk of Anzac Day turning into an opportunity for stuffed shirts and politicians to strut upon a stage.

So, perhaps a good place to begin is the Anzac Day of years gone by, the Anzac Days when veterans from the First World War marched alongside those from the Second and when the men who had come back from Vietnam were still young and very raw, too, from their own wars. Many people didn't march of course, because war was something they didn't really

want to remember, at least publicly. They didn't want the memories of what happened on the Kokoda Track or in Burma or Tobruk to come flooding back. They preferred to keep those memories somewhere very private.

Those were the days when plenty of people had an Uncle Jack or a Cousin Bill who was never quite right again afterwards, someone who lived in the sleep-out at home, and was gently protected by the people who loved him because, although he came back, he had paid a price that would last a lifetime. Maybe it was the loss of a leg or a hand, maybe it was the health that would never be good again. Maybe the scars were deeper and less visible than that.

Those World Wars touched almost everyone in some way and, in another sense, so did Vietnam, because there was always the chance then that your number could come up. Vietnam was also a war that taught this nation a lot about the damage done and the price paid, although it took a long time to do so.

Just a few weeks ago, I had wonderful news from a bloke called Graham Walker whom I've interviewed several times. He was an officer in Vietnam and he's been campaigning for years to get the Australian War Memorial to change part of its official history of the Vietnam War.

It's the part that says Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange and developed cancers, rashes, depression, and ongoing mental and physical illness that has dogged them all their lives, and who sought compensation for that damage incurred in the course of the war, were – and I quote – part of the compensation culture of the eighties, representing the worst of it in their greediness. It's taken years and years to fix that, years of those men being treated as if they were just whingers instead of people who had been damaged.

The Memorial is now commissioning another look at the post-war history of Vietnam veterans. They will take into account everything we have learned in the past few decades about how the effects of war last for many long years and can take many years to emerge, too.

What we learned from Vietnam (although we were really slow learners) is that, even if we don't agree with the reasons for a war, we need to honour and respect those who go to fight. But the wars in which our troops have fought more recently have taken place a long way away. The reasons for those wars haven't always been easy to understand and the



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H11586

Near Wallendbeen, NSW. c. 1915. The Kangaroos recruiting march in progress along a country road. One method of stimulating recruiting was for a small body of volunteers to start from a country town with the party growing in size like a snowball as it marched to one of the cities. This group started marching from Wagga Wagga, NSW, in December 1915 with 88 men. By the time they had [walked the 350 miles to Sydney](#) the group had grown to 230. (source: Australian War Memorial H11586).

defence forces themselves have been quite secretive about what's happened over there. Can you think of a single engagement in Afghanistan that you know anything about?

So it's hard to feel connected with these men and women when they come back. They don't walk down the street in towns like this, or Cootamundra or Harden or Young, or anywhere else in Australia, knowing that lots of other people went to the same war. In contrast, these younger veterans report that they often feel that they are set apart; and so they keep their experiences to themselves. They also bear their wounds privately although these wounds are as deep as any sustained in the battles we all know by name.

These younger veterans might have seen mates blown up by improvised explosive devices. They might have been dug into a hill somewhere in the vast, stony emptiness of the Afghan countryside, uncertain whether the target in front of them is the Taliban or a kid tending his goats. They might have patrolled an almond orchard that was also a field of land mines or simply coped with the howling sand and wind, the blisteringly hot days, the freezing nights, the endless stress and fear.

This week, we heard reports that suicide rates among young veterans are now three times higher than the casualty rates in Afghanistan. It's believed that many more deaths may be unreported and unrecognised – in the same way that deaths among farmers and rural communities often go unreported and unattributed to the stress of the situation.

Post-traumatic stress disorder rates are climbing and they'll only go higher as the consequences of these far away wars begin to unfold over many years to come. The newly founded charity Soldier On, which works with veterans on rehabilitation, employment, education and awareness raising says that these men and women often feel that people neither notice nor care about what they as veterans have been through.



[Donald Mackay \(1870-1958\)](#) who built the Wallendbeen war memorial (source: Mackay family collection)

The Department of Veterans Affairs currently spends \$166 million per annum on mental health services through its current ten year mental health framework. In February, the ABC reported that claims for mental and physical injuries can take well over six months to resolve despite many veterans in that position being unable to work or have access to any other support. It is inconceivable that these costs will not rise in the years to come.

And that brings me back to the commemoration of the first landings at Gallipoli, because what our government is spending on this event is around \$325 million. According to the Lowy Institute's James Brown, that is 200 per cent more than the British are spending. It is 20 times what the New Zealanders are spending. Individual electorates have \$125 000 each

to give away – so much money that some of them are struggling to get applications for projects to which they can give the money. A Victorian event management company has a \$27 million contract for their work on the centenary. I read a few days ago that another company has requested a licensing deal for Anzac ice creams. There will be overseas trips for hundreds, maybe thousands of politicians and bureaucrats and important people of every kind.

Many of these are, no doubt, justified costs: we are spending \$70 million on a travelling Anzac expedition, \$22.5 million on renovating the shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, \$18.5 million for the memorial in Hyde Park. And it's important to note that the government isn't intending to raise it all themselves: they're hoping that corporate donors will stump up around \$170 million for all these projects.

But I don't think it is unpatriotic to ask how this looks to the young fellow who has seen some terrible things in Afghanistan and can't hold down a job now that he's back and out of the Army – who walks sleeplessly through the night. Or the older bloke whose never got over seeing the fire rain down on Vietnamese villages, or the even older digger whose best mate was killed beside him on a track somewhere in Bougainville – men in their eighties and nineties who have been living that war over and over and over again in their heads for 60 years or more.

I think, in fact, the greatest act of patriotism we can undertake is to keep watch on where we are going as a nation, not to betray ourselves and the memory of our fallen soldiers with cheap jingoism and easy commercialisation.

There is so much that is decent and honourable and proud and good about this great Anzac tradition of ours. It is knitted into all our hearts as we stand here in Wallendbeen, as people are standing at war memorials in communities big and small all round Australia without fanfare, without drama, many of us with our private memories and our private grief. And perhaps we need to pause sometimes for less fanfare – and more silence. For less noise and more space. For the small and quiet moments of reflection about the price we all pay and what it is for.

Australian poet Katherine Gallagher wrote this poem in memory of her uncle, Robert Phelan. It's called *The Meaning of War*:

I remember you, soldier uncle, on your first leave...

1942.

Your homecoming had turned the house upside down,

Just arrived from Milne Bay

No garlanded Hector arguing loud

against the waste, though we made you

our own hero for your lucky escapes

At that stage, peace seemed further away than forever.

Behind your eyes was the pain of going back

You tried jokes, wagered your nine lives...

Drew the mad, mad terror...

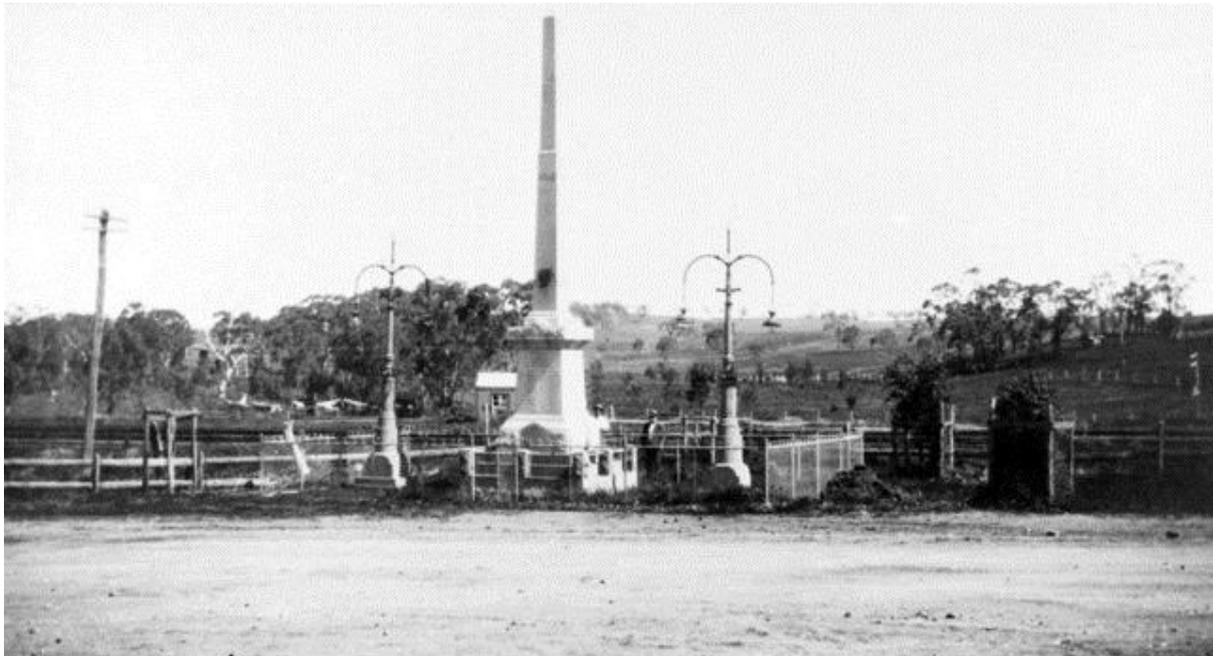
"in the beginning, half the time we bloody fought with axes"

Fought with axes.

You were the first to teach me

The real meaning of war.

So let us remember with dignity, with love, with understanding and with deep respect for our serving men and women. Let's do them the quiet steady honour of acknowledging what they've really been through. Let's tend to their wounds as neighbours and friends do for each other, with ongoing love. Let's watch out for this new generation of the wounded who are walking among us even now and let's not stint the costs on healing them. That is the greatest honour we can pay them. Lest we forget.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

H17884

Wallendbeen, New South Wales. A WW1 War Memorial Obelisk erected at the junction of Hoskins and King Streets. Its own lighting has been constructed beside it. [c. 1920s] (source: Australian War Memorial H17884)

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