

Australian War Memorial must better educate kids on seriousness of war

By Sue Wareham

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In May the Australian War Memorial unveiled an exhibit on the 1943 Dambuster raids over Germany, outlining the engineering and other aspects of this challenging feat.

The memorial says it will feature in the replacement Anzac Hall when it opens. The huge civilian toll from these bombings is, of course, not part of the narrative. Unfortunately, the memorial's history of glossing over the human and other costs of our wars is extensive, and extends even to inciting children to regard such raids as an adventure.

Around a decade ago, the memorial's online "KidsHQ - Armaments" activities included a dam-busting feature, under the heading "Great Stories". The preliminary information stated: "The story of the Dambusters is a true life adventure. On the night of May 16-17, 1943 they destroyed two dams and damaged one with their 'bouncing bombs'. The raid created chaos, killing about 2000 people, and flooding hundreds of square kilometres. Fifty-three airmen died that night, almost half of the attacking force." The activity challenged young readers with "see if you can bust the dam", and so it proceeded to engage them.

What do we make of our own national war memorial not so long ago inviting children to have a go at planning attacks on civilian infrastructure which amount to war crimes (at least from today's perspective)? Was this a brief lapse of judgement on the part of a junior official that somehow escaped scrutiny? Have the AWM Council and director taken action since then to affirm war is not actually a game and should never be presented as such?

One would like to think so, but the signs are not encouraging.

Before it closed due to COVID, and then the AWM redevelopment, the children's Discovery Zone at the memorial was little better. It contained various action stations, where children could "prepare for take-off" in a helicopter in Vietnam (but "please limit your time to two minutes per turn", the sign said), or "play a game of cat-and-mouse" in a Cold War era submarine.

Children could also play in a First World War trench - absolutely authentic except for the absence of blown-off body parts, the terror that sent men mad, the constant shriek of shells overhead, the lice, the mud in which men drowned and just about everything else that characterised trench warfare. To be fair, there was a panel (just one) about a health hazard from trench warfare - the fungal infection of trench foot ("Place your foot inside the box to see what it was like").

In April and May this year, the AWM responded to questions in Parliament from senator David Shoebridge, on its children's activities. The memorial justified its approach by stating: "Play activities are recognised by educators as vital for supporting learning and the healthy development of physical, social and cognitive skills." It cited article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC): "States parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts."

"States parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, and recreational and leisure activity."

Of course children have a right to rest, leisure, play and the rest of it, and education about war must be age-appropriate. But children should also be protected from propaganda about what war is really like. UNCROC refers to "the ideals proclaimed in the Charter of the United Nations", whose very first words are, "We, the peoples of the United Nations, determined to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war".

Peace is a fundamental right of childhood. For the AWM to abuse the intent of the UNCROC like this is scurrilous.

Indeed, the memorial is not only misleading children about the nature of warfare, it is encouraging them to regard military service as a responsibility. In November 2020, AWM director Matt Anderson gave evidence to the inquiry of the Senate legal and constitutional affairs committee into "nationhood, national identity and democracy". He stated: "We develop in young learners a deeper understanding of the connection between civic responsibility and military service by exploring the stories of Australians who have served."

Setting aside the fact such a purpose for the memorial is not stated anywhere in the *AWM Act*, the memorial's approach is almost indistinguishable from it being a recruiting tool for the ADF. There follows then a need to greatly sanitise and - yes - glorify war, so that potential recruits are not scared off.

So, what will the redeveloped AWM hold in terms of children's education? Judging by past performance, and the overall plans for the huge new space with plenty of gee-whiz weaponry on display, our children will be none the wiser about why wars occur, why they must be prevented and the steps that would help achieve this.

A half-billion-dollar expansion that feeds a narrative of endless wars would be not only a national travesty, but a wasted opportunity to teach our children about peace. The Medical Association for Prevention of War has asked the memorial about the process by which the community - all of us - can have input into the new children's galleries. We await their response.

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