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Why is the Centenary of Anzac important for Modern Australia?

I was five when I asked my Grandmother about the white and purple medal in the display cabinet in her living room. She explained that my Great Uncle was an Anzac and won it for bravery at a French town called Villers-Bretonneux. The word Anzac meant little to me at the time, but the medal held my attention. Each visit I would study it, and wonder who my Great Uncle was and what brave deed earned him this medal. Little did I know this early contact with military history would become my passion and lead me on a path to creating my own museum. A museum made up of artifacts bought with my hard-earned money and my Great Uncle's military cross at its centre. I have learned more about my Great Uncle, where he served and what he did, and I have also learned more about Anzac, the term I first heard my Grandmother use. I learned that it means so much more than just what the letters stand for. I learned that Anzac was symbolic of the spirit of mateship and community and integral to the Australian identity.

This year marks the centenary of the conclusion to the Great War, a war that wreaked havoc across the globe and claimed over 16 million civilian and soldiers lives. It was the deadliest conflict to date, and saw major technological advances in areas such as weaponry, medicine, and science. So what is its significance to our lives as Australians living in the 21st century? There is no denying World War One saw much senseless bloodshed. However, we must also consider what this conflict gave us, what we can learn from it and thus why it is still important today.

A centenary is 100 years on from a moment in time. 100 years is longer than the average human lifespan, but short enough that many of those alive a century later will have had direct connection with those who experienced the event. In the case of the Great War, it is hard to find any Australian family that was not in some way affected. The centenary of Anzac, which has been observed over the past four years, is an important time for all Australians to come together to remember the First World War and honour those who served. A century on from the conflict, none of the original diggers are with us, but their spirit lives on.

The Great War came at an important time in our history. It had only been thirteen years since federation when the global conflict broke out. As the European superpowers took sides during the summer of 1914, Australia, Britain's ally, also prepared for war. Australians and their counterparts from New Zealand formed the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. From their first disastrous action at the Dardanelles, across the deserts of the Middle East, to the trenches of France and Belgium, Australian soldiers earned the admiration of both allies and enemies. When the fighting was done, 60,000 Australian lives had been lost. Australian soldiers have gone on to serve in the Second World War, Korea, Vietnam and the Middle Eastern insurgencies. In every instance they have distinguished themselves as brave, capable soldiers, every bit as worthy as those first Anzacs.

This year in particular is a significant milestone as it marks the centenary of the end of the war that was to end all wars. It began a time of cautious peace, but left behind a shattered world, littered with the remnants of fallen empires and broken memories of a golden age. World War One ushered in an age of rapid technological advances, from the first blood banks and early forms of plastic surgery to hydrophones and synthetic rubber. The Napoleonic age of gallant cavalry charges was replaced by the machine gun, tank, submarine and aircraft. Living in the 21st century we have all benefited from these technological advances but equally important are the political and social lessons of the Great War. How tensions in small, isolated states in the Balkans led to conflict between the superpowers of the world, how underestimation of military technology led to wasted life, and how harsh peace terms and failed management policies set the stage perfectly for a second global conflict. We see potential for yet another global conflict with the threats of terrorism and nuclear destruction. A global trade war and refugee crisis could also threaten stability and peace amongst nations. It is crucial that we as a society learn from the past. We owe it to those 60,000 Australians who perished fighting for the cause of freedom.

If you asked an Australian what they associated with the term Anzac, they would probably answer Gallipoli. The Gallipoli campaign may not seem like the best way to remember the Anzacs. In terms of battles Beersheba, Villers-Bretonneux and Hamel spring to mind as suitable candidates, each one an Australian led victory worthy of remembrance. So why is Gallipoli still at the forefront of Australia's conscious? Why over a century later do we remember one of Australia's greatest military disasters? Perhaps because Gallipoli was the first major campaign since the Anzac had been formed. Although the campaign was a complete disaster, the Anzacs proved themselves through and through. Or maybe it is because the Anzac spirit was born when those men first stepped onto the beach at Anzac Cove. When we gather on the 25th of April each year we are not solely remembering the terrific loss of life and needless bloodshed, we are also celebrating the birth of the Anzac spirit. The spirit and camaraderie that brought those brave men through one of the darkest periods in recent history. It is the spirit of mateship, of supporting one another when times are tough and a collective identity that we as Australians now share. In a country filled with diversity it is crucial to remember the Anzac spirit that unites us all as Australians.

The First World War was a gateway to the modern world and played a crucial role in defining the Twentieth Century. With history as our guide it is possible to understand the past and use that knowledge to shape the future. This centenary is the time when we as Australians can come together and remember the brave soldiers like my Great Uncle, Major George Stewart Smith, who sacrificed everything for our freedom and security. Now and in the years to come we must continue to honour them along with the Anzac spirit, born on the beaches of Anzac Cove in the early morning hours of the 25th of April, 1915.

Lest we forget