A different kind of Anzac Day

By Romain Fathi | 24 April 2020, 12:00pm | 15 comments
Due to restrictions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, Anzac Day will be a very different experience for most (Image via Pixabay)

This year's change in Anzac Day memorials won't be the first time in history that events have been carried out against tradition, writes Dr Romain Fathi.

As the current coronavirus crisis prevents Australians from gathering at Anzac Day services across the nation, veterans' organisations have urged Australian to ‘light up the dawn’ with a candle on their driveways.

This year, instead of having patriotic speeches read to them at a Dawn Service, many Australians will perhaps rather be able to think about the meaning of Anzac in their own terms, about the effects of war and those who did not return from it. They will be able to commemorate Anzac Day in their own way. Some may even choose not to think about it.

But we need to remember that Anzac Day has never been a static tradition; it has evolved through time and
generations of Australians. Since the Gallipoli landing of April 1915, Anzac Day has been celebrated and commemorated in many different ways, including the years when it was mostly ignored by Australians in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

ANZAC Day this Saturday is going to be unlike any other before, with no dawn gatherings, parades or events due to COVID-19. Former commando Damien Thomlinson shares what we can do to show our appreciation of the Australian Defence Force and all veterans and their families. pic.twitter.com/Gj3JdKWkNp
— Studio 10 (@Studio10au) April 21, 2020

It is interesting to look at the commemoration of Anzac Day through time as it can tell us about Australians’ lives in relation to Anzac Day.

On Anzac Day 1919, for example, the Australian Graves Detachment – a group of about 1,100 Australian soldiers whose role was to find, exhume and properly reinter dead soldiers in Northern France – was given the day off. There were no solemn or sombre commemorations.

Instead, the diary of the unit reads:

‘Anzac Day. Observed as a whole holiday. Battalion held a Sports Meeting commencing at 10 a.m. ...Anzac Concert was held in the Y.M.C.A.’
Over the preceding few weeks, the men of the Australian Graves Detachment had far too much to do with the dead and their remains to spend more time commemorating them on Anzac Day. In fact, living, carrying on and having fun was for many men in the Detachment an important coping mechanism for the gruesome task they had to perform.

The Detachment started its gravedigging work on 14 April 1919 and disbanded in August later that year. In just over four months, it provided fitting burials to 5,469 men who had died during the First World War. This number was a drop in the ocean of death in a conflict where more than 10 million soldiers had died.

During the war, contrary to what State propaganda wanted people to believe, soldiers were rarely given a proper burial. On the Western Front, cadavers would often end up in a mass grave or a shell hole. Corpses
were dismembered and, at times, even disappeared when blown to pieces by artillery or swallowed by the terrain.

Corpses of friends and foes alike thus littered the battlefield and posed a grave sanitary risk. To prevent the spread of disease, these human remains were hastily buried anywhere, but usually inadequately, resurfacing after a few weeks or following heavy rain. The dead remained in plain sight, despite the efforts of the First World War armies to dispose of them in an expeditious manner.

A corpse in the mud, the battlefield of Third Ypres 1917 (Image courtesy of Imperial War Museums)

After the war, French and Belgian authorities, helped by British and colonial troops but also German prisoners of war, cleaned up the battlefields of unexploded ordinance and human remains. Land had to be returned to farming, so the mass graves were re-opened and hundreds of thousands of men who
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had been buried provisionally were exhumed, transported and reinterred in the proper military cemeteries we know today.

So, for four months, in the vicinity of Villers-Bretonneux, the men of the Australian Graves Detachment searched for these human remains, dug them out and reburied them.

The fighting in this area of the Somme had taken place a year earlier, from March to August 1918. This meant that depending on where the body had been left to decompose, the nature of the ground there, the depth of the provisional burial and the weather conditions, the corpses that were found were in varying stages of decay. In other words, not all of them had yet turned to bones.

Private Henry Whiting, an Australian soldier turned gravedigger, reported having felt sick “dozens of times”. And he wasn’t the only one. The sight and the smell of decomposing cadavers made this work a very difficult task.

It comes as no surprise, then, that this group of men forming the Australian Graves Detachment became very difficult to command. They looted French properties nearby, spent time in brothels, did not report for duty and even played with unexploded ordinance. The diary of the unit had to warn soldiers ‘not to treat shells, bombs, detonation, etc. as play things’. The French local population complained vigorously, although some engaged in black market trading of food and alcohol for army stores’ material.
When work began at the Graves Detachment, the Anzacs started with two strikes, as many of them were not pleased with the task that had been assigned to them: too difficult, too sickening and potentially risky as corpses in decomposition can transmit diseases.

Private W.F. McBeath recorded ‘we refused to work until we had better means for handling the bodies’. These strikes were successful as the soldiers were provided with better food, better pay and better equipment such as shovels, rubber gloves and disinfectant.

Additionally, to control the Detachment, commanding officer Major John Mott progressively set up all sorts of activities to entertain the men. They would carry out grave digging work one day and play sport the next, or stage theatre performances, organise dances, be provided with books.

Members of the 'Kangaroo' concert party of the Australian War Graves Detachment (Image courtesy Australian War Memorial)
It is no wonder, then, that Anzac Day 1919 was marked with a day off and some sport for the Australian Graves Detachment. The gruesomeness of its daily work meant that the men could not maintain a sombre commemorative mood; rather than remember the fallen, they needed to take their minds off them.

This war had left young men decomposing in the mud, being eaten by rats, flies and insects and now more men were employed at hiding this slaughter. While military cemeteries provided fitting burial for the dead, they also came to camouflage these physical realities of war and became another instrument of state propaganda.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, that many ex-soldiers in Europe and in Australia became staunch pacifists in the interwar. Sadly, but unsurprisingly, the First World War never turned out to be the “war to end all wars” many had hoped it would be.

For Australia, the war resulted in over 60,000 dead Australian soldiers, an increase in domestic violence when the troops returned and tens of thousands of crippled and traumatised men. It also resulted in the Anzac Legend — a legend built to help people cope and also to stop them from questioning why so many had gone to war and never returned.

The mateship, the medals and the wreaths of the Anzac Legend hid away the horrors of the conflict, just like the beautiful and peaceful military cemeteries built after the war disguised the suffering of those who had died.
So, if the men of the Australian Graves Detachment distracted and entertained themselves on Anzac Day 1919 rather than engaging in commemorative practices and rhetoric about freedom, sacrifice and mateship, it is perhaps because they knew too well of the horrors and futility of the First World War. The old lie *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* ("it is sweet and fitting to die for the homeland") was unacceptable to them, given the type of wounds they observed on the corpses of their fellow brothers in arms; their deaths had been anything but sweet.

The Anzac Day legend — and myth
~ @BKampmark https://t.co/16u1UzWsCj
— IndependentAustralia (@independentaus)
April 26, 2018

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With Anzac Day services cancelled due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic the @RSLNSW is calling on people to #LightUpTheDawn by standing at the end of their driveways or on their verandas at 6am on Saturday to commemorate Anzac Day 2020. 1/2
pic.twitter.com/UFqj40upz4
— Marine Rescue NSW (@MarineRescueNSW)
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