ANZAC Spirit

‘Lest we forget.’

These words are used to pay respect every April 25th. But who are we really remembering?

Rarely mentioned are the successes of the 9th Division, better known as the Rats of Tobruk. The Rats founded their attacks on Ingenuity and inventiveness, rather than the brute force used in other battles. Having captured the Libyan harbour of Tobruk, the Australian troops intended to overcome the Axis forces. When more Australian troops came to relieve the 9th Division, Tobruk and the surrounds were in the hands of the Allies, thanks to the outstanding efforts of our Rats. This is recognised as one of Australia’s great military achievements.

When the 4th Light Horse Brigade came into strife, they showed great courage to help their beloved horses. The Australian horsemen were of the belief there was water in the Turkish village of Asluj, 50 km south of Beersheba. The troops planned to stop at Asluj to collect water, and then proceed to attack Beersheba, which was guarded by few, unsuspecting Turkish forces. Unfortunately, water was not to be found. The closest water supply was at Beersheba, which left the men with a 50 km ride across a barren desert to find water. When they got near Beersheba, the Australians made an audacious decision: instead of dismounting and fighting the Turks hand-to-hand in the trenches, they would simply gallop and jump the trenches. Many a horse and man died in their attempt, but those who succeeded were rewarded with multiple wells which contained a massive supply of water. The courage the 4th Light Horse Brigade showed cannot be topped.

Tasmania’s Teddy Sheean was the essence of loyalty in World War II. At eighteen years of age, Sheean was in the Arafura Sea on a resupply and evacuation mission, when his ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft. When the Japanese took a devastating toll, Sheean’s ship, Armidale, began to sink. The Australian seamen were ordered to abandon ship, but Teddy refused. He strapped himself to a gun post, so as not to be swept overboard, and kept shooting Japanese planes, even after his ship disappeared beneath the water. Teddy Sheean gave his life, to save those of his friends; by continuing to shoot, many Australian lives were spared.

Seldom recognised is the extreme sense of duty exemplified by our troops in Vietnam. Many Australians in Vietnam were drafted - it was not their choice to be there. Despite this, they gave the fight their all. Throughout the thirteen year war, hundreds of Australians died fighting, and thousands returned to live with catastrophic memories and diseases. On their return, they were the target of scorn and derision for many years, for simply doing their duty.

During war, many things are lost: life, sanity, innocence. Luckily for the soldiers on the Kokoda Trail, they had something that couldn’t be taken away - mateship. Whether they were socialising with their fellow troops, or with the Papuan natives, the Australians always had friends at hand. The natives, known affectionately as the ‘fuzzy-wuzzy angels’, were unofficial allies. They helped the Australians with their supplies, they helped find food while on the trail, but most of all, they helped keep the troops’ spirits up. The Australians returned that mateship.

Ingenuity, courage, loyalty, duty, mateship: these are qualities we associate with the ANZAC spirit. These values are well represented by the soldiers who landed at Gallipoli on the 25th of April, 1915. However, we must also recognise that these characteristics have been evident in personnel in all of Australia’s military engagements.

Lest we forget.