

# **FRANK MACDONALD MEMORIAL PRIZE**

Question 3:

After the 1918 Military Armistice, an early slogan for the Legacy Club was 'After the War comes the Battle'. Outline what this slogan may mean in an Australian Context.

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11:00AM. The 11<sup>th</sup> of November 1918. Germany, brought down and pushed into a corner, had no other choice than to sign the final Armistice. 'The War to End All Wars' had come to a supposed conclusion. The worst was thought to be over and the Allied world rejoiced in harmony. Yet the months and years to follow would be filled with battles, both personal and public, that the young country of Australia was yet to have experienced. From the physical and mental health of the returned soldiers, to how the Aboriginals were involved in the war. Little did anyone know what form of a toll this world war would take on the Nation, teaching a lifelong lesson, even to this day, that the greatest battles do not always occur on the battlefield.

According to the Australian War Memorial, approximately 416,809 Australian men enrolled for 'The Great War'. The nation's population between 1914-1918 was around 4.9 million, meaning that 38.7 per cent of Australian men, aged 18-44 had signed up for the war. Of these men, upwards of 60,000 were killed in action and more than 160,000 were wounded, gassed or taken prisoner. (1) Many more lives were lost, including young men, under the age of 18, due to injury or suicide. The end of World War 1 meant that the cruel physical cost on the battlefield was at an end, but the immediate struggle of returning the remaining soldiers arose. The following quote by ANZAC Percy Sampson (2) explains the disbelief that many of the men shared after the realisation that it was all over:

*"No fuss was made by the boys. Everybody went on working as usual. 'The war is over,' someone said, but no more notice was taken than if someone said, 'There is no parade today'. Not that there was not joy in everyone's heart, the glint in the eye showed that [...] Perhaps it was hard to realise that nobody sought another's life, that the beautiful moonlight did not mean horror and death poured from the sky, that men could now live naturally."*

The substantial number of men involved would mean that most ANZACs wouldn't get home until 1919 or later. In the meantime, camps and factories were set up for many of the soldiers to work and learn a trade. Over this long and excruciating wait, many died due to sickness and injuries. The Spanish Flu epidemic was born, resulting in more lives taken globally, than the Great War itself. The Influenza Pandemic is estimated to have killed possibly 50,000,000 people. (3) If you weren't claimed victim by the flu, you were left in mental, emotional and physical pain for months.

(1) Australian War Memorial: Enlistment statistics; casualty statistics

(2) Percy Samson, Samson, P G 1918, Manuscript held by the State Library of Victoria

(3) John Matthews. 2018. World War One's role in the worst ever flu pandemic

With the return of the soldiers, so too came welfare and medical costs, which quickly rose to a scale that Australia had never before encountered. It wasn't just the immediate cost of care. By 1938, there were 77,000 incapacitated soldiers and at least 180,000 dependants still on pensions. These war pensions had cost the country what is around \$260,000,000 today. (4) In 1918, the Repatriation Department was created to manage pensions for war veterans, incapacitated or unable to support themselves. This brought about free medical care and housing for the completely incapacitated, and artificial limbs for amputees.

Physical injury wasn't the only medical diagnosis that most of the soldiers returned with. Mentally, men were scarred for life. Hence the 'shell shock' diagnosis was born. Oxford Dictionary defines the term as "a psychological disturbance caused by prolonged exposure to active warfare." (5) It is only in recent times that these 'crazy men' would be revealed to have actually had schizophrenia, depression or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Many of the men alive would rather have died courageously, on the battlefield than to return home with such debilitating conditions.

Regardless of whether you returned wounded, incapacitated, mentally ill or on the brink of death, one burden was shared upon every soldier – the emotional battle. The men were torn by the conflict between the blend of two different worlds – that of the men that they had left behind and the people they had become whilst making the ultimate sacrifice; the torment of leaving behind former comrades, who unknowingly created and shared a new Australian legacy. The fear of returning to civil life and the new Australia that had emerged in their absence. The scarred men were so accustomed to war, that peace was abnormal. The feeling of uselessness, as they felt that the skills that had been essential over the past four years of their lives played no role in society. To quote Professor Bill Gammage (6) on the changes faced: *"One had settled down to the life, [of war] that [upon return] one would feel more or less like a duck out of water."*

Australia and the world were experiencing the upheaval from war to peace, a greater upheaval than from peace to war. The returned ANZACs were expected to fit back into the life as normal. The comradeship of war was lost in peace. For many of the returned soldiers, the idea of peace was harder than war itself. It was a battle that society was unable to comprehend.

(4) Shell-shocked: Australia after Armistice – National Archives of Australia, Australian Government. 2018

(5) The Oxford Dictionary; Clarendon Press, 1989. Term – shell shock

(6) Prof. Gammage – The Broken Years, 1970 – pp. 468

Another hidden battle is that of the struggle for the Australian Aboriginals in WW1. Throughout history, people fought for their country and for their freedom. A successful battle entitled them of those fundamental rights. In 1914 and the years that followed, despite laws preventing them, Aboriginal men found ways to enlist and fight in the Great War. (7) Their motivation, although similar, was not totally aligned with that of their white Australian comrades. They were literally fighting for the freedom of their country, not the Empire.

As soldiers they were treated relatively equally. They earned the same money, were given the same provisions and were increasingly accepted, valued and respected by their fellow soldiers during the war. However great the losses, both white and Indigenous, the soldiers returned home having achieved success in overthrowing the oppressors and safeguarding the country's freedom. They fought side by side with one objective – to keep Australia and Australians safe.

Why then for decades after did Australia use the term 'Lest we Forget?' (8) Upon returning home, injured and scarred, Aboriginal Soldiers were not met with the respect that had been afforded to them in the trenches. No Aboriginal soldier was permitted to march or enter an RSL Club to connect with other returned soldiers – a vital part of wellbeing and emotional recovery. They were not permitted to vote, to obtain welfare or healthcare, to move freely around the country they fought so bravely for. Not only did The Returned Soldiers Settlement Act exclude Aboriginal Soldiers from entitlements, the land used for such by the Government was often Aboriginal Reserve, therefore virtually 'taking' twice. As Mick Dobson (ABC Untold Stories) said: "They returned home not only to be denied a soldier-settler block, but sometimes to find their own lands – Aboriginal lands – taken and parcelled out to their former comrades."

Only in 1949 was the Commonwealth Electoral Act changed to include those 'Aboriginal natives of Australia... has been a member of the Defence Force'. (9) Only then did that section of the Aboriginal community have the right to freedom of the vote, thirty years after the Armistice was announced.

War and conflict are integral parts of human nature and history. Whether it is desired or feared, the outcome is determined by how we deal with the battle at hand and the resolution that we find to resolve the conflict. Sometimes the solution remains lost. Fighting a battle to the end denotes an assumption of winning or losing. War is often reflected upon in this way, through analysing territory control, advancements, casualties and political movement. Post war battles are far harder to determine, measure and account for in terms of success and failure. It is with the passage of time that these battles are more powerfully understood and acknowledged, but it is only through experience, acceptance and understanding can some of these battles be won.

(7) Australian War Memorial: Aboriginal Service during the First World War

(8) Phillipa Scarlett Aboriginal men at Gallipoli: Their Significance to ANZAC Posted on April 25, 2018 by Indigenous Histories

(9) 1949 Commonwealth Electoral Act, Australian Government

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- (2) Percy Samson, Samson, P G 1918, Manuscript held by the State Library of Victoria MS 11838
- (3) John Mathews. 2018. *World War One's role in the worst ever flu pandemic*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://theconversation.com/world-war-ones-role-in-the-worst-ever-flu-pandemic-29849>. [Accessed 22 August 2018].
- (4) Shell-shocked: Australia after Armistice – National Archives of Australia, Australian Government. 2018. *Shell-shocked: Australia after Armistice – National Archives of Australia, Australian Government*. [ONLINE] Available at: <http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/snapshots/shell-shocked/index.aspx>. [Accessed 21 August 2018].
- (5) Publishing, O., 1989. *The Oxford English dictionary*. Oxford : Clarendon Press ; 1989 - Term: shell shock
- (6) Professor Bill Gammage – The Broken Years – A study of the diaries and letters of Australian soldiers in the Great War, 1913-1918, Thesis, 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1970, pp. 455 – 472
- (7) Aboriginal service during the First World War | The Australian War Memorial. 2018. *Aboriginal service during the First World War | The Australian War Memorial*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/projects/indigenous-service>. [Accessed 22 August 2018].
- (8) Phillipa Scarlett Aboriginal men at Gallipoli: Their Significance to ANZAC Posted on April 25, 2018 by Indigenous Histories
- (9) 1949 Commonwealth Electoral Act, Australian Government

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