

ANZAC - A MATTER OF NATIONAL IDENTITY

In the first few years of the 1900s, both Australia and New Zealand became new nations<sup>1</sup>. Each faced the same questions: “What will define us?” “What will be our unique national identity?”

Their popular literature had already defined their ideals: characters like *Clancy of the Overflow* or *The Man from Snowy River*<sup>2</sup>. Strong men and women. Able. Fit. Resourceful. Used to hard work. Loyal, yet with a healthy disrespect for idiots in far places. Friendly, yet intolerant of un-necessary regulation. Accepting of leadership but not of privilege. Co-operative, but you had to earn it. A sardonic sense of humour. A touch of the larrikin. And, of course, loads of *nous*.

But these were, after all, only fictional heroes. The two new nations were still searching for their separate unique identities when the Great War intervened.

They were no strangers to war. Their Dads may have fought against the Boers or the Zulu. Their Granddads may have fought in Crimea or in the Afghan Wars. Their Great Granddads may have been at Waterloo or Trafalgar. They weren't born warriors, but they weren't born pacifists either.

So, the Great War came. The national identity discussions were postponed. Young men came in from the bush and the farms and the towns and joined the AIF and the Light Horse or, in NZ, the Expeditionary Force and the Mounted Rifles. And in due course, they were sent overseas.

On arrival over there, in order to preserve their identity, they were formed into a single unit - the Australian & New Zealand Army Corps - abbreviated to A-N-Z-A-C.

Their first campaign was Gallipoli. It proved to be as tough and challenging as their separate colonial backgrounds had prepared them for. Their similar national traits quickly came to the fore and soon showed through to friend and foe alike. The war correspondents were quick to pick this up and spread the word back to the homelands.

Virtually overnight, Australia and New Zealand had a brand new word. It was unique, easy to say. “ANZAC”. The word not only identified the shared characteristics of each nation - it defined, unique in the world, the close unity of the two new but separate nations. The two were one in Spirit: “We were the ANZACs”. Later, ANZAC actions on the Western Front only confirmed and embellished the ANZAC legend.

This unique ANZAC relationship has remained strong ever since - through World War Two, Korea, Malaya & Borneo, Viet Nam, Iraq, Afghanistan and a dozen or more major Peacekeeping roles.

I was privileged to be at one of the very best examples of ANZAC co-operation - the Battle of Long Tan, Viet Nam, 1966. Three Kiwis – Morrie Stanley and his two radio men - directed 24 artillery pieces for the final hour of the battle to prevent the bulk of the enemy from getting too close to the Aussies. And for that same final hour, the Aussies, down from 105 to a mere 65 able men, used their 65 rifles to prevent the forward elements of the enemy from getting too close to the Kiwis.

Now, THAT's co-operation. THAT's the ANZAC Spirit.

1 - Australian Federation 1901; NZ Dominion 1907 2 - Both of these were Banjo Paterson characters. After Gallipoli, Paterson wrote: “The mettle that a race can show / Is proved with shot and steel, / And now we know what nations know / And feel what nations feel.”