

Frank MacDonald MM Memorial Prize 2021

Question 1:

Many viewed that the Allied, victory which ended World War 1, would also end the misery and challenges for the nation of Australia and its people. To what extent do experiences in the immediate years after the war support this view?



Source: <https://www.education.tas.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/STUDENT-INFO-Frank-MacDonald-2018.pdf>

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World War One (WW1), was predestined to be the 'war to end all wars.' Today we know it did not end wars, in fact WW1 was the lead up to the Second World War. WW1 lasted from 1914-1918 and brought many challenges and misery to Australia. "416,809 Australians enlisted which represented 38.7% of the male population aged 18 to 44" (Australian War Memorial, 2019). "Over 60,000 died on active service, while 155,133 were wounded in action" (Veterans SA, 2021). In the immediate years after the war the worldwide economy took a downfall which adversely influenced Australian exports. The impact it left around the nation destroyed individuals and their families for generations. The Spanish flu left the whole world vulnerable at a time when they were already weak. The ANZAC legend allowed Australia to gain courage and to emerge as a nation. WW1 was tragedy, destruction, and devastation.

After WW1, Australia was in a weak economic situation as our trade was dependent on Britain. When Britain's economy declined, Australia's economy followed. The strenuous financial situation in Britain and Australia affected much of the population. The closing of markets reduced export industries, foreign investment was minimal, and shipping vanished (Yan, 2018). A letter written by the wife of soldier, Percival Hollyoak, from Catani, Victoria, provides context on the hardship that her family experienced during the war. Hollyoak repatriated from WW1 wounded and their family applied for a soldier settlement block. Like countless other families of the returned soldiers, they were in debt. They were unable to raise funds to pay rent or meet essential expenses for their household, instead they prioritised money towards their children's education. Percival Hollyoak continually had to return to hospital due to war wounds. They lived like this for many years, surviving with barely enough until in 1932 they left with nowhere else to go (Van Teeseling, 2020). Their family should have been rewarded because of Percival's bravery in WW1 but instead they received a life of despair. Unfortunately, this was the case for so many Australians.

WW1 was a worldwide phenomenon, through which Australia emerged a wounded nation, with its people shattered with life-long physical, emotional, and mental scars. When the Armistice was signed on the 11th of November 1918, 93,000 Australian personnel had already returned to the

country (DVA, 2020). Out of the 93,000 who had returned, approximately 75,000 had been considered 'unfit for service'. These service men were dealing with PTSD, so much so that it was named "shell shock" by British psychologist Charles Samuel Myers (BBC, 2004). In 1916, one soldier returned from the front with such major psychological damage that, for 12 years, he could not tell anyone who he was. The doctor named him George Brown. After George's state deteriorated and much research was conducted, George was diagnosed with an illness that would today be called schizophrenia. This is but one of countless examples of tragedy, and they were tragedies for the whole nation. These men might have survived through war but now they could not live, they were solely surviving.

The Spanish flu was a major pandemic post WW1 infecting around 500 million people worldwide (History.com, 2021). The Spanish flu was first noticed in spring of 1918 and was mild as many of the symptoms were identical to regular flu symptoms. Many people who caught the Spanish flu would recover in a few days and the reported death toll was low. In the autumn of the same year, the influenza appeared more contagious and deadly. People were dying after catching the flu in a matter of hours or days and infected 40% of Australia's population. In the one year of the Spanish flu, it was suspected to have killed 20 million to 50 million people (History.com, 2021). Approximately 15,000 of these people were Australian and some Aboriginal communities had a mortality rate of 50% (NMA, 2021). This tragedy brought more misery than the whole war itself. There were more fatalities caused by the Spanish flu than the four years of global war. The Spanish flu brought misery worldwide and was arguably one of the hardest challenges the world had to face in that generation.

The experience of WW1 resulted in the emergence of Australia as a nation. Before the war Australia was a 'teenage nation' and was anxious to gain its independence from Britain. Through history, independence and freedom have been associated with battle and bloodshed. After the war, Europe had lost 16 million lives, the destruction woke up a "democratic, nationalist, and revolutionary" spirit (Schultz, 2021). Australia's grief for Europe did not slow the increasing movement for independence conversely it became a catalyst for nationhood. For Australia the war

“was the truest test of nationhood and that Australia’s official status would not be ratified psychologically until her men had been blooded in war” (Schultz, 2021). Historian Carolyn Holbrook (2015) says this is evidence of: “muscular nationalism [that] was given legitimacy by Social Darwinism.” The misery and challenges of WW1 allowed Australia to have a voice in international meetings and affairs. The Treaty of Versailles, League of Nations, and the United Nations are some of the examples that reflect this ideal. Therefore, the war allowed Australia to gain acceptance and leadership with the remaining world.

One experience that influenced making Australia a nation is Gallipoli and the ANZAC legend. In WW1, a huge turning point for Australia’s emerging sense of identity would be the pride for the Australian soldiers. “Gallipoli freed Australia from the self-doubt about whether it had the mettle to be a proper nation” (Hirst, 2010). For many countries, including Australia, WW1 brought destruction and devastation but for Australia it also brought glory. WW1 will always be known as an important milestone in Australian history. The ANZAC legend was formed, and admiration earned as it theoretically turned the ruination of war into a celebration of newfound nationhood. The legend skips over many historical realities and glorifies the war without consequence. The ANZAC legend creates a myth portraying Australia as a hero when it is not. Gallipoli “was a terrible fiasco, a total failure,” and it should not be glorified (Campbell, 2002). Prior to the war Australia and Turkey had no reason to fight although Australia became aggressors and invaded Turkey to fight a war that was not their own. Therefore, Australia took upon a challenge that otherwise they would not have had to fight.

There is no doubt that WW1 brought misery and challenges and it did not bring upon the end of Australia’s suffering. WW1 allowed Australia to gain independence and cement it as a nation. While that is significant the war also presented a negative impact on the population and the economy. Therefore, the experiences faced after the war present the view that WW1 did not bring the end of all the challenges and misery the whole nation faced. It is for the individual to decide whether the newfound glory of Australia was worth the generations of trauma. Australia was united even so “No one wins a war ... there are degrees of loss, but no one wins” (Brock Chisholm).

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