

Frank MacDonald Memorial Prize

Question 1

Many viewed that the Allied victory, which ended World War I, 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?

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Image: Douglas Grant, WWI Indigenous soldier

Source:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Douglas_Grant#/media/File:Douglas_Grant_seen_in_The_Herald_9_September_1916.jpg

'...We're not citizens, yet we're willing to die for this place, we're willing to die for non-Indigenous Australians, have a think about that'¹ – Gary Oakley, Indigenous Liaison Officer

The extent of Australia's misery as a nation, in the years after the war, can be characterised by the phrase 'The Lost Australians' and their broken, grieving families. Thousands were lost to the mud of the Western Front, thousands were lost in the turmoil of their own minds upon return and thousands more were lost to heartless government policies. The holistic picture of our nation's loss during this time isn't as white as the dominant narrative would have you believe and in our study of history no single Australian's suffering should be valued above any others. Many saw the signing of the armistice as an end to the suffering for the Australian people. The soldiers believed they would be heroes. This belief was encouraged by the government's promise of land, money and glory. However, an old enemy had re-emerged from the ashes of WWI: segregation. Our popular history has masked the intense misery and segregation of our returned soldiers, including Indigenous soldiers. The extent to which the Allied victory in WWI ended the suffering of the Australian people is challenged by factors including the negative impact that shell shock had on the soldiers after the war; soldiers were excluded and given insufficient resources. Indigenous soldiers were also segregated after the war, and many were excluded from the benefits of being an ex-serviceman. This further compounded the challenges faced by returned Indigenous soldiers.

Our battle at Gallipoli and our triumph in WWI has become part of Australia's identity. The collective elation and relief felt at the end of such a long conflict was keenly felt by Australia as a young nation. Yet, sadly much misery goes unnoticed during the years after the war. Shell shock was the chief medical illness diagnosed in WWI. Unfortunately doctors and other medical practitioners had very little information concerning the profound impacts of shell shock². The illness played an enormous role in changing the social environment surrounding returning war heroes. Bertram Steward, a British private from the 1/6th London battalion recounts his friend suffering from shell shock:

*'One of my friends who went out there, when he came back after the war he was accustomed to shut himself up in his home or his garden and he wouldn't come out at all and nobody could get him to. He finished up – he was a great athlete, a good boy at school – he finished up in a lunatic asylum and died within a year or two of the finish of the war.'*³

The effect shell shock had on individuals was truly horrendous. The government had pledged to help their returned soldiers but instead they seemed to toss them aside because they "were not heroes"⁴. Mismanagement of shell shock would cause many soldiers to cut themselves off from family, resign from their job and ultimately end up in a state of poverty. This was mostly due to the ignorance of shell shock, and insufficient or ill-fitting support from the government.

¹) Gary Oakley Indigenous Liaison Officer Serving their country [online]. (no date). *AiATSIS*. [Viewed 11 August 2021]. Available from: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/serving-their-country#:~:text=Aboriginal%20soldiers%20were%20among%20those,nurse%20with%20the%20British%20Army>.

²) Edgar, J., (no date). Shell shocked [online]. <https://www.apa.org>. [Viewed 12 August 2021]. Available from: <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2012/06/shell-shocked>

³) Bertram Steward, British WW1 Veteran, Voices of the First World War: Shell Shock [online]. (no date). *Imperial War Museums*. [Viewed 11 August 2021]. Available from: <https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/voices-of-the-first-world-war-shell-shock>

⁴) Les, C., (2014). *The Great War*. Pan Macmillan Australia. P.752

Ultimately, the government gave up its responsibility for the welfare the nations returned soldiers, and left the job to common folk. In 1916, the Returned and Services League of Australia (RSL) was founded, “to meet the needs of each generation of servicemen and women”⁵. The RSL organisation has done tremendous work for ex-servicemen and women. The RSL was a place for soldiers to ruminate “there at least they could talk to like minds; they didn’t have to try to explain the unexplainable”⁶. The acceptance of Indigenous soldiers by the RSL, however, varied throughout Australia⁷. More often than not they were denied access to help.

The suffering of our nation’s Indigenous soldiers has been largely left out of the Australian narrative WWI. Indigenous people signed up for the war just as other Australians. High pay and adventure were big incentives. To Indigenous soldiers’ surprise, conscription was an opportunity of complete equality⁸. But when Indigenous soldiers returned home, a story much more familiar had resumed. Many Indigenous soldiers were denied access to public support that any serving member would’ve normally been allowed. Indigenous soldiers were excluded from ceremonies such as ANZAC day memorials.

‘When you did step into the defence force, into the military, and put that uniform on, you were an equal, and that would be the first time. Once you stepped off that ship in Australia, you became a second-rate citizen again. Once that uniform came off, you ceased to exist as a full Australian citizen.’⁹

Indigenous soldiers were not completely disregarded. Some had been awarded medals for their bravery in WWI¹⁰. But Indigenous soldiers were denied entrance to ceremonies despite fighting the same war and suffering the same difficulties upon returning home. Indigenous ex-servicemen experienced many issues that white Australians faced, such as alcohol addiction, shell shock and abandonment of family. Discrimination was exclusive to Indigenous people. Not all agreed or were complicit in the discrimination. James Bennett, a former member of the 15th AIF battalion, was outraged when he heard that the Returned Sailor’s and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia in Cairns wanted the removal of Indigenous children from a local school¹¹. Bennett wrote in a letter in January 1933 concerning the matter. *The Cairns Post* quoted Bennett as saying:

‘I consider as a returned soldier and a white man that they have as much right to be in that school as the white children. The schools are there for all Australian children whether black, white or brindle...’

⁵) RSL Tasmania [online]. (no date). *RSL Tasmania*. [Viewed 12 August 2021]. Available from: <http://www.rsltas.org.au/>

⁶) Les, C., (2014). *The Great War*. Pan Macmillan Australia. P.753

⁷) Aboriginal soldiers [online]. (no date-a). *Libraries Tasmania Home*. [Viewed 11 August 2021]. Available from: <https://libraries.tas.gov.au/ww1/Pages/Aboriginal-soldiers.aspx>

⁸) ‘We thought we’d be treated differently’: Indigenous soldiers still fighting for recognition [online]. (no date). *ABC News*. [Viewed 12 August 2021]. Available from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-25/anzac-day-indigenous-soldiers-shunned-by-society/8468364?nw=0>

⁹) Gary Oakley [online]. (no date). *Gallipoli*. [Viewed 11 August 2021]. Available from: <https://www.abc.net.au/ww1-anzac/gallipoli/commentaries/200021804.html>

¹⁰) Aboriginal service during the First World War | Australian War Memorial [online]. (no date). *Home | Australian War Memorial*. [Viewed 11 August 2021]. Available from: <https://www.awm.gov.au/about/our-work/projects/indigenous-service>

¹¹) Maynard, J., Murphy, S., Beaumont, J., Cadzow, A., McDonnell, S. and Dodson, M., (2018). *Serving Our Country*. Edited by Joan Beaumont and Allison Cadzow. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing. P. 125

...I have stood shoulder to shoulder with half-castes in Hell's Pit, on Quinn's Post and seen them die like the grandest of white men'¹²

James Bennett is just one of many accounts of soldiers advocating Indigenous equality during and after the war.

The *Aborigines Act* has caused some of the greatest suffering in our nations' history. This act was introduced in all states at various times, but all served the same purpose. We look back at this period of our history as "The Stolen Generation". New South Wales was the first major state to legislate the *Aborigines Act*, in 1915 the New South Wales state government was legally allowed to control custody of any Indigenous child without the approval of the courts¹³. Due to the new policy many Indigenous soldiers had their children forcibly removed from them without their knowing during WWI. The government policies caused great suffering to the Indigenous soldiers and their families while they were fighting for their country. Despite having a sense of equality overseas, on the home front Indigenous people were experiencing intense segregation. Garth O'Connell, Secretary of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veteran and Services Association explains what Indigenous soldiers would have experienced after the war:

'Having had a taste of equality ... you've got to go back to what you were before the war, minus a couple of kids.'¹⁴

This was the reality for most Indigenous soldiers in WWI. Stolen children were not a rare occurrence, about one in three Indigenous children is the estimate¹⁵. Most stolen children experienced sexual, physical and psychological harassment, and malnutrition and overworking was also common¹⁶.

'They used to lock us up in a little room like a cell and keep us on bread and water for a week if you played up too much. Stand us on a cement block outside in the rain with rain coats on if you got into trouble – for a month, after school, during playtime'

Abducted Indigenous Australians were forced to embrace white culture. Forced culture conversion was brutal, most were forced to change their names, and they were also forbidden to speak their native languages. Depression, anxiety and suicide fell upon the surviving members and their families as they searched for their 'lost' loved ones.

Australia had suffered terribly during WWI. The misery of the Western Front is enshrined in the memory of Australia as being a time of great brutality. WWI cannot be measured in only the dead and injured, or any other forms of mistreatment, this is compounded further by the treatment of Australians by their own government during the early 20th century.

¹²) Maynard, J., Murphy, S., Beaumont, J., Cadzow, A., McDonnell, S. and Dodson, M., (2018). *Serving Our Country*. Edited by Joan Beaumont and Allison Cadzow. Sydney: NewSouth Publishing. P. 125

¹³) Track the History Timeline: The Stolen Generations | Australian Human Rights Commission [online]. (no date). *Home | Australian Human Rights Commission*. [Viewed 15 August 2021]. Available from: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/track-history-timeline-stolen-generations>

¹⁴) 'We thought we'd be treated differently': Indigenous soldiers still fighting for recognition [online]. (no date). *ABC News*. [Viewed 12 August 2021]. Available from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-04-25/anzac-day-indigenous-soldiers-shunned-by-society/8468364?nw=0>

¹⁵) The Stolen Generation | Australians Together [online]. (no date). *Australians Together*. [Viewed 17 August 2021]. Available from: <https://australianstogether.org.au/discover/australian-history/stolen-generations>

¹⁶) Bringing them Home - Chapter 10 | Australian Human Rights Commission [online]. (no date). *Home | Australian Human Rights Commission*. [Viewed 15 August 2021]. Available from: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/bringing-them-home-chapter-10#Heading72>

However, to suggest that the misery would end with the Allied victory is to dismiss the broken families and their loved ones during this time. WWI was labelled 'The War to end all Wars', and many thought it was the war to end all misery, however, the misery of Australians, especially Indigenous Australians just continued.

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