

To Honour the Silence: Why the Evacuation of Gallipoli Defined the Anzac Spirit

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Question: “Every April, Australians and New Zealanders pause to remember the Anzacs’ landing at Gallipoli. Is there another event from the Gallipoli Campaign that is equally deserving of commemoration? Explain your choice with reference to primary source evidence.”



Figure 1. Australian soldiers advancing under fire on the first ridge, 25 April 1915. Photograph by C.E.W. Bean, Australian War Memorial, accession G00907.

Each April, Australians and New Zealanders rise before dawn to remember the landing at Gallipoli. The waves crashing, the cliffs looming, the first bullets tearing through silence. It is a scene seared into national memory, a solemn beginning that shaped our story. Yet if we stop there, we commemorate only half the narrative. If the landing at Gallipoli forged the Anzac legend in fire, it was the evacuation that cooled and sharpened it into steel. Then, in silence, shadow, and impossible coordination, the Anzac values were tested most deeply and proven beyond doubt. The Australian War Memorial defines the Anzac spirit as a set of “positive qualities” shown by our soldiers: endurance, courage, ingenuity, good humour, and mateship.¹ However, what held those values together—what kept men steady through the final nights—was something deeper still: loyalty. These values were lived by souls in trenches, on decks, and in the quiet moments before departure. The legend is often remembered for its noise: the charge, the landing, the clash; but what proved it was silence, the stillness, and the choice to

¹Australian War Memorial, “Anzac Spirit”, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/anzac/spirit>.

stay. If 25 April, 1915 marked the birth of these ideals, the nights between the 18 and 20 December, 1915 revealed their full bloom.² It was then, in silence, discipline, and quiet loyalty, that the evacuation most purely embodied the values of endurance, courage, ingenuity, humour, and mateship we commemorate today.

Endurance

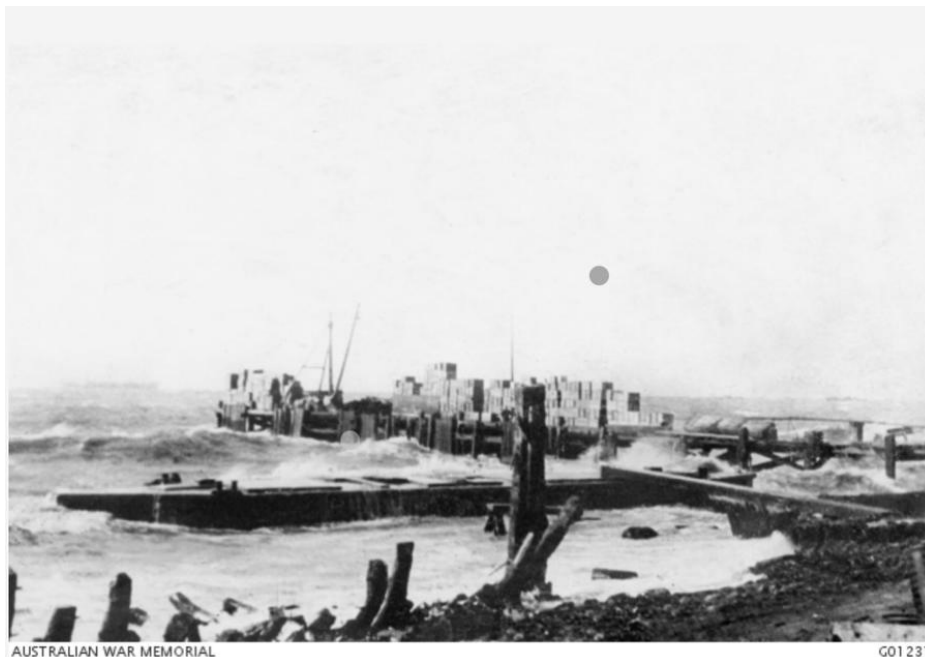


Figure 2. The wind-lashed waters about Anzac Pier. The first warning of the coming winter at Anzac, October 1915. Photograph by C. E. W. Bean, Australian War Memorial, accession G01231.

By December, Gallipoli was a wasteland of trench rot, dysentery, and despair.³ Soldiers woke in waterlogged dug-outs, ate meagre meals, and wore boots that peeled the skin off their feet.⁴ Many were sick; others were dying.⁵ However, unlike earlier months, there was no hope of reinforcement, no dream of turning the tide. The campaign was ending, yet still they held their positions. This form of endurance was steadfastly patient. To suppress fear for the sake of others revealed a deeper, more disciplined strength. At the landing, endurance meant pushing forward; however, at the evacuation, it meant standing guard for those not yet gone. That is a harder and more telling choice. If endurance defines the Anzac spirit, it was not the fight but the departure that demanded its purest form.

² Department of Veterans' Affairs, "Evacuation from Gallipoli 1915," Anzac Portal, last updated March 10, 2023, <https://anzacportal.dva.gov.au/wars-and-missions/ww1/where-australians-served/gallipoli/evacuations-from-anzac>.

³ C. E. W. Bean, *Anzac to Amiens* (Canberra: Australian War Memorial, 1946), 173–74.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

Courage



Figure 3. Australian soldiers dress a wounded comrade on an exposed slope at Gallipoli, 1915. Photograph by the Australian War Records Section, Australian War Memorial, accession H10369, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/H10369>.

Historian Dr Bill Gammage wrote that “basic changes had taken place in the minds of many fighting men”, and that their lives “were never the same again”.⁶ What changed them was not just hardship, but the kind of courage that asks for nothing in return. It was the courage to hold ground they knew would be abandoned. To bury mates quietly under falling shells. To stay steady while the plan unravelled around them. These were not acts of conquest, but choices made in collapse. The evacuation revealed a deeper heroism—not boldness in battle, but bravery without spectacle. It was the decision to stay calm. To remain behind. To trust in silence. The legend was built on restraint—on men who waited for the final boat. If the landing made Anzac Day iconic, it was the leaving that made it honest. That is courage.

⁶ Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974), quoted in “The Broken Years – Australian Soldiers in the Great War,” *Regimental Books*, accessed 31 July 2025, <https://regimental-books.com.au/product/the-broken-years-australian-soldiers-in-the-great-war/>.

Ingenuity



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL G01291

Figure 4. A drip rifle left behind to fire long after its owner had departed. Anzac ingenuity deployed in silence, 17 December 1915. Photograph by C.E.W. Bean, Australian War Memorial, accession G01291.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL G01289

Figure 5. Soldiers stage a cricket match under Ottoman shell fire, 17 December 1915. Photograph C. E. W. Bean, Australian War Memorial, accession G01289.

Ingenuity became the heartbeat of the operation. How do you evacuate thousands from trenches without being noticed? You invent. The “drip rifle” crafted by Lance Corporal William Scurry was a slow drip of water to trigger a rifle hours after its owner had slipped away.⁷ It allowed entire positions to keep firing automatically, creating the illusion of full trenches while the men vanished unnoticed. This was a safeguard left by men who knew their task was not to fight, but to cover the footsteps of their mates. Some of those who remained behind to set the final drip rifles knew they might not escape. They chose silence over safety, invention over impulse. That kind of ingenuity is its own form of heroism. It was not the landing that called for this kind of invention, but the leaving. When there was no glory to be found, just risk. Just trust and loyalty. Just mates looking out for each other in the dark. Ingenuity extended into psychological warfare. On 17 December 1915, soldiers staged a cricket match at Shell Green under enemy artillery fire.⁸ It was performance—calculated theatre meant to project calm and distract the Ottomans from the quiet retreat already under way. It was creative survival; a calm mind under stress, a refusal to panic. At the landing, ingenuity responded to chaos. Ingenuity shaped the illusion of order in the evacuation: silent, synchronised, and exact.

⁷ Australian War Memorial, “Drip (or ‘Pop Off’) Rifle,” Encyclopedia, last updated 20 May 2021, https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/gallipoli/drip_rifle.

⁸ C. E. W. Bean, “A game of cricket was played on Shell Green in an attempt to distract the Turks from the imminent departure of allied troops,” photograph, 17 December 1915, Australian War Memorial, accession G01289, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/C46331>.

Good Humour



Figure 6. "Xmas Day in Gallipoli." A darkly satirical cartoon submitted by a soldier for *The Anzac Book*, edited by C.E.W. Bean. Australian War Memorial, accession RC02954.

In the freezing final days, good humour was defiance. In a war of mud, hunger, and silence, laughter was the last thing the enemy could not take from the soldiers. It was a tool, a release, a reminder of humanity. Gallipoli's trenches were steeped in dark humour—from parody poems to mock orders and biting cartoons. As *The Anzac Book* reveals, soldiers turned hardship into satire, lampooning their rations, routines, and even the inevitability of death.⁹ Humour was resistance etched in ink and irony; it was a daily resilience against the force to come. The Sir John Monash Centre describes humour as a lifeline at Gallipoli: "a way to build unity, to preserve mental clarity, and to resist despair."¹⁰ The fact that soldiers joked as they evacuated—laughed while slipping away under cover of darkness—reveals a form of resilience untouched by enemy fire. Their humour was control: a deliberate act of defiance in the face of collapse. If the legend began in the landing, it was this kind of humour—calm, deliberate, unwavering—that carried it through the leaving.

⁹ C. E. W. Bean, ed., *The Anzac Book: Written and Illustrated in Gallipoli by the Men of Anzac* (London: Cassell & Company, 1916).

¹⁰ Sir John Monash Centre, "Trench Humour," 14 February 2018, <https://sjmc.gov.au/trench-humour/>.

Mateship



Figure 7. An Australian carrying a wounded comrade on Walkers Ridge, Gallipoli, 1915. Photograph by Ernest Brooks, Australian War Memorial, accession G00599, <https://www.awm.gov.au/collection/G00599>.

Mateship, perhaps the most sacred of all Anzac ideals, took its purest form in whispered promises on the last departing boats. It lived in men carrying their mates' gear even as their legs gave out. Some drew straws to stay behind and man the final rifles—risking death so that others might live. Clyde Hunter captured it simply: “Mateship meant everything.”¹¹ Mateship meant staying when it was easier to go. It meant silence when fear begged for speech. It meant loyalty without conditions. Mateship was upheld in the quiet message that no one would be left behind. The Shell Green cricket match did more than fool the Ottomans—it reassured the men themselves. Each stroke of the bat signalled trust: that the plan would hold, that no one would be forgotten. If, at the landing, mateship was loud, at the evacuation it was silent and unshakeable.

“In our hearts it was to know we were leaving our dead comrades behind.”¹² This was not mateship in the form of heroics or grand gestures—it was presence. A choice to walk slowly when you wanted to run. To carry silence, not fear. The evacuation demanded restraint: steady hands rigging rifles, soft steps past shallow graves, trust in a plan that placed others before self. These men did not just fight together—they withdrew together, with care and discipline. If the landing made them brothers in arms, it was the leaving that made them brothers in spirit. That is the Anzac legacy we honour—quiet, loyal, and complete.

¹¹ Claire Hunter, “Mateship Meant Everything,” Australian War Memorial (blog), 8 August 2018, <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/blog/bill-grayden-and-kokoda>.

¹² Jack Linton Young Martyn, letter to his mother, 1915, quoted in Matthew Tonks, “The evacuation from Gallipoli in the soldiers’ own words,” WW100 New Zealand, 10 December 2015, <https://ww100.govt.nz/the-evacuation-from-gallipoli>.

Loyalty



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL PS1580

Figure 8. Charles Bean in a Gallipoli trench, 1915. The quiet observer who gave voice to the Anzac silence, 26 July 1915. Photograph by Phillip F. E. Schuler, Australian War Memorial, accession PS1580.

In *Anzac to Amiens*, Charles Bean distilled the values he believed defined the Anzac spirit: “Anzac stood, and still stands, for reckless valour in a good cause, for enterprise, resourcefulness, fidelity, comradeship, and endurance that will never own defeat.”¹³ Bean witnessed the evacuation firsthand. What struck him was not action or victory, but loyalty in retreat—men begging to be the last to leave, tidying their mates’ graves, refusing to abandon the trenches they had held for months.¹⁴ One soldier murmured in the dark to Field Marshal Sir William Birdwood, “I hope they won’t hear us marching down the Deres.”¹⁵ Others demanded it was their right to be placed in the rearguard, arguing, “I was here first and I have a right to be last!”¹⁶ These were not gestures of conquest, but rather quiet, steady, and unshaken acts of care. Bean described General White’s evacuation plan as “a model of precision and clear thinking.”¹⁷ However, he saw something deeper than strategy: restraint, control, and a refusal to let go until everyone was safe.¹⁸ This was not the loud birth of a legend. It was the final proof of it. The evacuation marked not the end of the Anzac spirit but its maturity. That, Bean believed, was its true inheritance: loyalty lived in silence.

¹³ Bean, *Anzac to Amiens*, 181.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 174–181.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 168–182.

That kind of loyalty lived beyond 1915. In recent times it has found quieter forms.

It was there during Covid-19.

There in the hospital wards, the empty classrooms, the closed-off aged-care homes.

In the long months when people showed up.

It is there when fire comes through, and someone stays to fight.

When floodwaters rise and someone wades to lend a helping hand.

It is the everyday someone who lends a helping hand.

There are no medals, no bugle. But it is the same ideals that held those men on the shore—that choice to stay calm, steady, and not depart until everyone is safe. That epitomises Anzac values.

Next April, as we gather at the shoreline and the bugle sounds, let us remember not only how they arrived but also how they left. The frost. The careful steps into black water. The ones who stayed until the last man was gone. Let us honour the days when courage was quiet, ingenuity meant survival, when endurance did not falter. Let us remember the silence that proved them. We do not need a new day. What we need is a fuller memory. Let Anzac Day honour both the landing and the leaving: the bravery of those who rushed ashore and the strength of those who walked away, steadfast for generations to come.

Lest we forget.

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