

The ANZAC Legend

Much of the 'Australian character', as it is popularly imagined, was first observed by the official war historian C.E.W. Bean, whose portrayal of the physical fit, casually competent soldier, suspicious of pretensions and airs, who countered authority with a democratising cynicism and deprecating humour, has become an enduring national image. The excerpt below, taken from *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, is an example of Charles Bean's writing.

Long before the end of this great battle the Australian soldier had revealed to himself, to his own officers, and to a few of those outsiders who watched him closely, what manner of fighter he was. He had not yet the astonishing mastery of the soldier's craft which marked him in 1918. But he had scattered to the winds once and for all the notion often reiterated, that an Australian force would be ineffective through lack of discipline. In flame of the whitest heat was tested the discipline of this new force, raised suddenly from a people unaccustomed to restraint, naturally haters of the system of cast-iron subordination on which most armies are trained. It was not the discipline of habit which made either Australians or New Zealanders endure.

What motive sustained them? At the end of the second or third day of the Landing, when they had fought without sleep until the whole world seemed a dream, and they scarcely knew whether it was a world of reality or of delirium-and often, no doubt, it held something of both ; when half of each battalion had been annihilated, and there seemed no prospect before any man except that of wounds or death in the most vile surroundings; when the dead lay three deep in the rifle-pits under the blue sky and the place was filled with stench and sickness, and reason had almost vanished-what was it then that carried each man on?

The Australian loved fighting better than most, but it is an occupation from which the glamour quickly wears. It was not hatred of the Turk. It is true that the men at this time hated their enemy for his supposed ill-treatment of the wounded-and the fact that, **of** the hundreds who lay out. Only one wounded man survived in Turkish hands has justified their suspicions. But hatred was not the motive which inspired them. Nor was it purely patriotism, as it would have been had they fought on Australian soil. The love of country in Australians and New Zealanders was intense-how strong, they did not realise until

they were far away from their home. Nor, in most cases, was the motive their loyalty to the tie between Australia and Great Britain. Although, singly or combined, all these were powerful influences, they were not the chief.

Nor was it the desire for fame that made them steer their course so straight in the hour of crucial trial. They knew too well the chance that their families, possibly even the men beside them, would never know how they died. Doubtless the weaker were swept on by the stronger. In every army which enters into battle there is a part which is dependent for its resolution upon the nearest strong man. If he endures, those around him will endure; if he turns, they turn; if he falls, they may become confused. But the Australian force contained more than its share of men who were masters of their own minds and decisions. What was the dominant motive that impelled them? It was not love of a fight.

It lay in the mettle of the men themselves. To be the sort of man who would give way when his mates were trusting to his firmness; to be the sort of man who would fail when the line, the whole force, and the allied cause required his endurance; to have made it necessary for another unit to do his own unit's work ; to live the rest of his life haunted by the knowledge that he had set his hand to a soldier's task and had lacked the grit to carry it through-that was the prospect which these men could not face. Life was very dear, but life was not worth living unless they could be true to their idea of **Australian** manhood. Standing upon that alone, when help failed and hope faded, when the end loomed clear in front of them, when the whole world seemed to crumble and the heaven to fall in, they faced its ruin undismayed.

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Source: C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918, Volume I – The Story of ANZAC from the outbreak of war to the end of the first phase of the Gallipoli Campaign, May 4, 1915* (11th edition, 1941).

Visit the [Australian War Memorial](#) for *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*.