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**WAR, SPORT
AND THE ANZAC
TRADITION**

Kevin Blackburn





War, Sport and the Anzac Tradition

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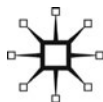


War, Sport and the Anzac Tradition

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Introduction

Abstract: *In contemporary Australia, sport and war are inextricably linked. Cricket and the different codes of football strongly associate themselves with the Anzac tradition, emphasising that the Australian national character is displayed in prowess on both the sporting field and the battlefield. This is most evident on Anzac Day when sport virtually appropriates the day and conducts its own rituals to commemorate the Australian war dead. The connection is not just a recent phenomenon.*



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While it seems self-evident that sport is not war and war is not sport, the language of these two activities has become intertwined in contemporary Australian society, according to historians Jim Davidson and Robert Pascoe.¹ There is much evidence for this observation. Even Ricky Ponting, Australian Test Cricket captain (2004–2011), has lamented: ‘There are often references to war and battles in sport but it is disrespectful to draw any comparison between the two.’² Other players of elite sport in Australia have been less reserved. Football clubs, to show that the sporting prowess of their players is similar to qualities required on the battlefield, have often had their players go through the highly challenging obstacle course at the Canungra army training base in the Australian State of Queensland. In 2015, Michael Rischitelli, of the Australian rules football team, the Suns, summed up his view of what he was doing: ‘We don’t get to experience the leadership qualities you need in war, but this is the closest we’ll get.’³

The nature of how sports metaphors have been applied to the military has also been startling at times. One such sports metaphor was uttered on 8 July 2014 by Shinzo Abe, the Japanese Prime Minister, just before signing military and economic agreements with his Australian counterpart, Tony Abbott. Abe aimed to strengthen ties in order to balance a militarily assertive China in the Asia-Pacific. He told the Australian Parliament: ‘We will now join up in a scrum, just like in rugby’ in order ‘to safeguard peace.’⁴ Abe most likely knew that Abbott had been a keen rugby player in his youth when he played for Sydney University.

Perhaps, too, Abe was playing to a broader Australian audience. In Australia, this mixing of sport and war is best exemplified by what happens every 25th April, Anzac Day, the day to remember Australia’s war dead. It marks the day in World War I when Australian soldiers first fought together as the troops of the Australian nation, which had been founded in 1901. They were part of the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) which landed at Gallipoli in Turkey on 25 April 1915.

On Anzac Day, after the solemn ceremonies and marches of the morning, an Australian rules football match is played between Collingwood and Essendon, among the oldest clubs in the national football competition. Australian rules football is regarded by many Australians as ‘the national game’, and unlike other football codes, such as rugby and soccer, it is not played outside of Australia. The playing field for the Anzac Day game between the two rival teams is Australia’s most well-known sports

venue, the Melbourne Cricket Ground. A capacity crowd of over 90,000 spectators attends while the match is televised live around the nation.

Melbourne's most widely read newspaper, the *Herald Sun* regularly reinforces the connection between sport and war by publishing photographs of the Collingwood and Essendon Australian rules football captains flanking a veteran. The paper usually refers to all three as 'Anzac Day Heroes.' The photographs and the captions imply that the footballers are on the same level as the war heroes. In 2013, the two captains were shown in a large photograph on the front page of the newspaper in front of the Shrine of Remembrance with Corporal Alex Shain, the only woman serving on the frontline in Afghanistan at the time, and who also saw her friends killed in combat.⁵

Just before the start of the Anzac Day match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in the early afternoon, the rituals of the morning's dawn service are re-enacted on the playing field. Four armed Australian soldiers slowly march onto the ground from opposite directions at the beat of slow drumming. They then form a Catafalque Party, or guard, around the Australian and New Zealand flags, which are flown at half-mast. Next to the soldiers are the players from the two teams lined up in two opposing rows. The 90,000 strong crowd stands as the Ode to the Fallen is read out by the President of the Australian veterans' association, the Returned & Services League. The Last Post is played by a lone bugler. One minute of silence is observed for the fallen. Lastly the national anthems of both New Zealand and Australia are played, and then the game begins. Not surprisingly, when the Anzac Day match is played the commentary on the game at times becomes overblown with the use of military terms to describe the play on the field and references to 'heroes on the ground'. When the game is over, the losing side is said to be 'gallant in defeat'.

At the end of the game, the President of the Returned & Services League of the State of Victoria presents the Anzac Day medal to 'the player whose conduct and play during the game best exemplifies the Anzac spirit – skill, courage in adversity, self-sacrifice, teamwork and fairplay'. The Victorian State Returned & Services League also provides the Anzac Day Trophy which its president presents to the winning team. The trophy is made from wood and metal from the battlefields of Gallipoli and Villers-Bretonneux on the Western Front and is 'in dedication for those footballers who served in times of war'. The names of Victorian Football League players 'known to have sacrificed their lives during active service' are inscribed on the trophy. Robert Pascoe has

documented how these particular rituals of sport and commemoration are new and invented, only dating back to no later than 1995 when the Anzac Day Australian rules game was introduced. However, Pascoe suggests that ideas that mix sport and war do have a long continuous history going back to World War I.⁶

This centrality of sport in the Australian notion of Anzac also has been illustrated in late twentieth-century Australian cinema. In director Peter Weir's 1981 film, *Gallipoli*, the character Archy sprints unarmed across no man's land at the Nek, having dropped his rifle, as if he is running in a track race. He runs into a hail of bullets as he makes his way towards the Turkish trenches. Inevitably, Archy falls after being shot, and the film ends. The story of the movie focuses on two Western Australian country sprinters Archy Hamilton and Frank Dunne who join up together. The final dramatic scene of the fictional movie seems to be based on a story told in the Australian official war history of the Gallipoli campaign written by C. E. W. Bean. In Bean's two-volume official history, *The Anzac Story*, published in 1921 and 1924, there is a description of Western Australian sprinter Wilfred Harper's own run towards the Turks' trenches at the Nek. Harper, according to Bean, 'was last seen running forward like a schoolboy in a foot-race, with all the speed he could compass'.⁷

This enduring link between Anzac and sport, which is evident in Peter Weir's film recreating in 1981 a scene that Bean conjured up in the 1920s, suggests that both the sporting field and the battlefield have been places for the construction of Australian masculinity. Archy's and Harper's sprints towards the enemy trenches are glimpses into how manhood was proven on the battlefield by overcoming the fear of death in order to make the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. According to Bean, for the Australian soldier, 'Life was very dear but life was not worth living unless they could be true to their ideas of Australian manhood'.⁸ These scenes show how sport was employed to help overcome this fear.

The connection between sport and war provided by the story of Harper is far from an isolated occurrence in the Australian official histories of World War I. The volumes used many sporting analogies and metaphors to describe specifically the Australian male experience of war. Bean also described Australian soldiers watching their comrades attack at Lone Pine as 'a crowd not unlike that lining the rope round a cricket field'.⁹ It was not just Bean who employed the sports metaphors in the Australian official histories. H. S. Gullett, who wrote the volume on the Australians in Palestine, felt compelled to write of 'the strong sporting instinct of the

young men of Australia and New Zealand'.¹⁰ In contrast, one can search in vain for similar metaphors in the British and New Zealand official histories of Gallipoli and, more generally, World War I.

Perhaps the absence of sports metaphors in the official war histories of other countries is due to these accounts of war being histories of military strategy and tactics. In contrast, Bean and his fellow authors focused more on the experiences of the ordinary soldier in order to sketch a national character: 'The first question of my fellow historians and myself clearly was: How did the Australian people – and the Australian character, if there is one – come through the universally recognized test of this, their first great war?'¹¹ Bean affirmed that 'the big thing in the war for Australia was the discovery of the character of Australian men. It was character which rushed the hills at Gallipoli and held out there during the long afternoon and night'.¹²

For Bean, this national character, which he saw as having been tested in war, originated from the male experience on the Australian frontier. Bean believed that 'the bushman is the hero of the Australian boy; the arts of the bush life are his ambitions'. He elaborated that the Australian male 'learns something of half the arts of a soldier by the time he is ten years old – to sleep comfortably in any shelter, to cook meat or bake flour, to catch a horse, to find his way across country by day or night, to ride, or at the worst, to "stick on."'¹³ These characteristics, Bean felt, had made the Australians superior soldiers in endurance, ruggedness, resourcefulness, determination, practicality and independent mindedness. The Australians were also stereotyped as uniquely egalitarian and anti-authoritarian, sharing the comradely bonds of mateship.

Bean and his fellow war history authors, according to cultural studies critic Graham Seal, were conscious that they were fashioning an 'Anzac tradition' in their story telling.¹⁴ The power of Bean's work and that of other writers who followed him meant that soldiers in later wars saw themselves as following in the Anzac tradition.¹⁵ Australian historian John Barrett, in his survey of 3,700 soldiers who served in the Australian military from 1939 to 1945, concluded 'that the Anzac tradition influenced many young men in World War II'.¹⁶

What role did sport play in the Anzac tradition? Reflections on the experience of the Anzacs by one of their commanders, General Sir John Monash attributed what Bean saw as the outstanding characteristics of the Australian soldier to several factors, one of which was 'the instinct of sport and adventure which is his national heritage'.¹⁷ Monash believed

that this love of sport had contributed to ‘creating a great national tradition.’¹⁸

In Australia, the work of historians such as Murray Phillips, Daryl Adair, John Nauright and Dale Blair has chronicled very well the entwining of sport and war during World War I when sportsmen were even urged to join up in sportsmen’s battalions and rally around the cry of ‘play up play up and play the game’ – the game being the war.¹⁹ Australia’s mixing of sport and war from World War I, while distinctive, was not unique. American historian Wanda Ellen Wakefield has described how in the United States sport and war were seen as similar endeavours during World War I. From her study, she concludes that in America, ‘The War itself was often referred to as a game, as despite the years of mass slaughter on the Western Front many still clung to a notion that participation in battle could be similar to participation in a game ... thus meeting gender expectations that equated team play with masculinity since the end of the nineteenth century.’²⁰

British historians working on the relationship between sport and war have also documented a similar trend. Britain, too, had its sportsmen’s battalions. Tony Mason and Eliza Riedi see the outbreak of World War I as a catalyst for the belief that war was like sport.²¹ Cross-cultural studies of sport have tended to confirm the rise to prominence of sport in the military during World War I.²² However, only Mason and Riedi in Britain and Wakefield in America have attempted to trace beyond World War I this connection between sport, war and the military.

This study sets out questions to be asked when investigating the role of sport in the Anzac tradition and how it has been constructed from World War I to contemporary times. What are the origins of the role that sport plays in the Anzac tradition? Does it begin with the experience of World War I? How has sport manifested itself in the Anzac tradition since World War I? Have similar cultures, namely Britain, also linked the two as emphatically as can be found in the Anzac legend and sustained such a connection across generations until the present?

Notes

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- 3 Michael Whiting, 'Gold Coast players join the army for a day', 2 February 2015 Gold Coast Suns, <http://www.goldcoastfc.com.au/news/2015-02-02/gold-coast-players-join-the-army-for-a-day>
- 4 Shinzo Abe, *Commonwealth of Australia, House of Representatives, Hansard*, 8 July 2014.
- 5 *Herald Sun* (Melbourne), 25 April 2013.
- 6 Pascoe, 'The AFL Anzac Day Match'.
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- 10 H. S. Gullett, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918: Volume VII: The AIF in Sinai and Palestine* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1923), p. 18.
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- 15 See Marilyn Lake, 'The Power of Anzac', in M. McKernan and M. Browne (eds), *Australia: Two Centuries of War and Peace* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1988), pp. 331–335.
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- 18 Monash, *The Australian Victories in France in 1918*, p. 290.
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