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Anzac Day: Lessons of war now forgotten on the home front



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Gallipoli – and the celebration of it – is like a wild horse. In some decades, the 1970s for instance, the horse gallops away from the nation that owns and usually honours it. And then it quietly returns home, though not permanently.

[After the Australian soldiers landed on the beach at Gallipoli on Sunday, April 25, 1915, the nation was slow to receive and digest the news.](#) Then the honour roll of the dead and wounded began to dominate the newspapers. Most citizens were sad but proud.

Our soldiers had fought bravely in the Boer War (1899-1902), but that war was minor in the eyes of the watching world. In contrast, Gallipoli was an episode in the Great War, and at times the fighting against Turkish soldiers on the steep hills might help to decide whether the British Empire and France would win the war.

A major aim of the Gallipoli campaign was to open the Dardanelles, the narrow seaway between Europe and Asia Minor, and thus allow British and French fleets to

supply southern Russian ports with munitions.

Britain's ally, Tsarist Russia, fielding the largest army in the world, was busily fighting Germany and Austro-Hungary but was short of munitions and even army boots. We now know that in Berlin – nearly four months after the Gallipoli fighting began – the German naval headquarters believed it might be a turning point in the war and even lead to Germany's defeat.

In recent decades influential historians – especially in Australia – have downgraded the Gallipoli campaign into a debacle, a tragic sideshow, a series of battles unwinnable from the start. The criticism was not of the brave soldiers but those on high.

In all, 8700 Australians died and more were seriously wounded. The British and the French armies lost even more.

[It is fair to suggest that Gallipoli was not unique in its mishaps. Most wars, and most military campaigns, are marred by a blend of blunders and over-optimistic predictions.](#) British politicians and generals made their share of mistakes before the landings at Gallipoli began.

Peter Weir's fascinating movie Gallipoli was popular here in the 1980s partly because of its anti-British sentiments.

Mistakenly, when younger, I thought that Gallipoli was a defeat for Australia. But the evacuation of our forces during a few nights in December 1915 was so successful that Gallipoli in football terms might be viewed as a drawn match; moreover, a match played away from home.

Our emphasis on Gallipoli diverts attention from World War II. Then Australia itself was in peril but few of our leaders were prepared for that peril.

Essington Lewis, the chief executive of Broken Hill Proprietary, visiting Japan in 1934, rightly concluded that it was secretly preparing for a major war in the Pacific. At a large aircraft factory near Port Melbourne in 1939 his team launched their first planes, the Wirraways. Not fast enough, they were shot down in nearly every duel in 1941 and 1942.

But soon appeared the Beauforts and Beaufighters, impressive aircraft made in factories in Melbourne and Sydney, and they certainly competed against most Japanese planes.

Lewis was appointed director of every kind of wartime manufacturing for the Australian government and led a huge workforce of men and women. A country boy at heart, he was to die, aged 80, after a fall from his horse.

[The fear that Japan would attack Australia was accentuated in 1940.](#) The abrupt defeat of France and The Netherlands by Nazi Germany exposed all the European colonies in Southeast Asia to the danger of a Japanese attack.

On December 8, 1941, the Japanese forces began one of the most brilliant campaigns in the history of warfare. Their aircraft carriers surprised the American naval base at Pearl Harbor, and at exactly the same hour – on the far side of the Pacific – they landed troops in Thailand and British Malaya.

Within a few days their dive bombers sank the two great British warships near Singapore, and in a sudden attack on the American base in The Philippines they destroyed American air power in the region. In Southeast Asia in the space of 10 weeks Japan had gained almost total command of sea and air. Hong Kong, French Indo-China, British Burma, the Dutch East Indies (being the present Indonesia), Portuguese Timor and portions of Australia's New Guinea had been largely taken over by the Japanese.

Singapore fell on February 15, 1942. Four days later Darwin was bombed, twice in the same day, and on dozens of later days.

The shock felt across Australia was acute.

Even boys in Ballarat – I was aged 11 – were sent home to bring back spades, shovels and picks, and for days in the school grounds we dug shallow air-raid trenches in which we might shelter if Japanese planes arrived overhead.

In May, the Battle of the Coral Sea ended in a draw but it saved Torres Strait and Port Moresby from falling into Japanese hands. Here was an early turning point in Australia's war.

Japanese planes and submarines still ventured far south. The entry of three midget submarines into Sydney Harbour in June 1942 is well known. More remarkable was the huge Japanese submarine that surfaced at night near Sydney and sent a portable seaplane across the harbour to gather information on all the ships anchored there.

Then the submarine surfaced near King Island and the little seaplane flew, unrecognised, over the heart of the nation's munitions industry around Footscray before flying past Port Phillip Heads and back to the waiting submarine. Meanwhile Australian ships were sunk by Japanese torpedoes on the sea route between Whyalla, Sydney and Newcastle.

[We like to think – it is indelible folklore – that the Labor Party's John Curtin, several months after becoming prime minister, persuaded the American armed forces to come to our aid.](#) His letter, published in the Melbourne Herald just after Christmas 1941, was a powerful plea for help.

But his letter had no effect. Washington already felt goodwill towards Australians, but the main reason for its decision to defend our country and our sea lanes was thereby to acquire a vital launching pad and supply base in the long struggle to regain the tropical lands already in Japanese control.

The first American convoy was already here, a week before Christmas 1941. Its commander was initially on a voyage to The Philippines but the surrounding seas and air space were already controlled by the victorious Japanese, and he changed course to Brisbane.

More American ships and aircraft reached Australia, and even Ballarat – far to the south – quickly became the temporary host to thousands of newly arrived American soldiers.

At the end of the war, Australian politicians of all parties knew their country had achieved a narrow escape. They learned from the experience. Sure that their nation in the next war could not defend itself without a much larger population and a strong industrial base, they conducted in the quarter century from 1945 to 1970 ambitious forms of nation-building.

We forget that they did not just seek migrants as such. They sought people – new Australians – whose first loyalty would unfailingly be to Australia.

Lest we forget.

*In 1973 Geoffrey Blainey completed his book *The Causes of War*. An updated edition is reported to be much discussed at the Pentagon this year.*

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