

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ANZAC DAY TO AN OLD DIGGER

ANZAC Day holds a differing significance for different Australians and New Zealanders. The significance can change throughout one's life. As a boy scout I attended the ANZAC Day Commemorative Services at the cenotaph in Sarina, the town where I was born. However, although my father, four uncles and an aunt were serving members of Australian forces involved in World War II at the time, the ANZAC Day Commemorative Service had little significance for me. In retrospect, I'm certain that it had much more effect on my mother whose husband, my father, was at war in Papua New Guinea, New Britain and Morotai.



The Cenotaph in Broad Street, Sarina, north Queensland, as I remember it as a boy during World War II

Later, as a young army officer yet to experience combat, the ANZAC Day Services had gained more significance. None of my next-of-kin had been killed during the Second World War but I better understood the significance of the day.

It was only after I first experienced combat and lost men that the significance of remembrance of war dead really made an impression on me.

No commander wants to lose any of his men during combat however, it sometimes happens and a commander has the unenviable task of writing to a deceased soldier's closest next-of-kin to inform them of their tragic loss. Although the deceased Digger was part of my Team it was difficult to put myself in the position of the parents, wife or father who lost their dear one.

On the death of a soldier in combat, his commander is required to write a letter to the deceased family explaining how he was killed, expressing condolences and extolling the virtues of their son, husband and/or father. Writing that letter to the next-of-kin takes place after the combat is over and usually in a secure environment, but it's the closest a commander gets to feel what the deceased's next-of-kin feel even more so.

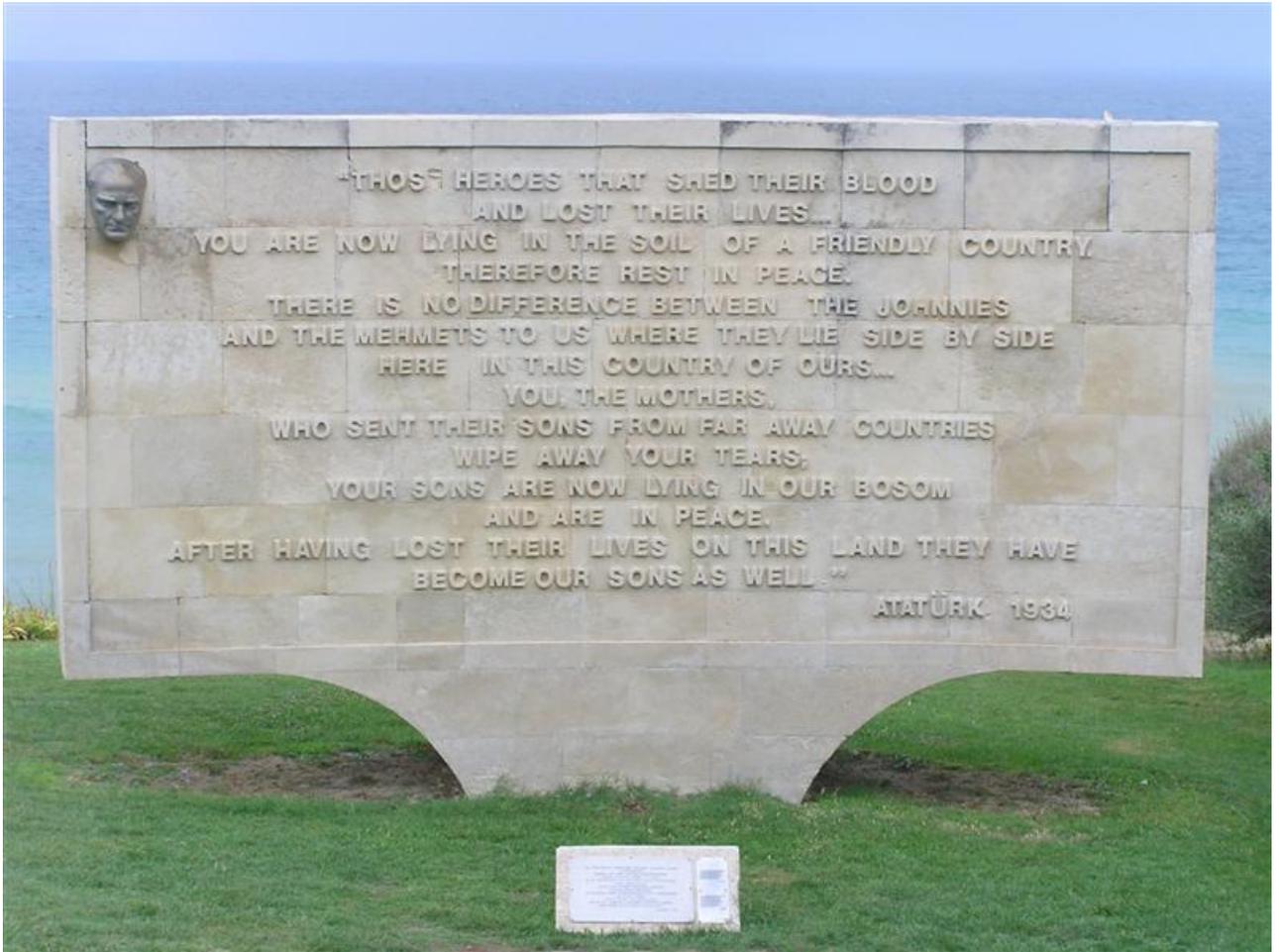
While still on combat operations, it is the night after a day of combat, or when the action dies down, that one gets a chance to sleep, but sleep doesn't come easy.

First, I wondered if there was some way the loss of that Digger or several Diggers could have been prevented. I think of how their parents, siblings, wife and/or girlfriend and children are going to take the tragic news. Unlike the officer who has to personally deliver the news, I only have a letter to write and send. I didn't have to face the grieving next-of-kin.

But you know, those immediate after-action thoughts are not restricted to the Diggers you may have lost. Once you see the personal effects of enemy you have killed, the letters, photographs and/or diaries, thoughts of their next-of-kin are also on your mind. During combat, those enemy went through what we had gone through. They are fellow human beings who also deserve our respect.

When former enemies get together post-war it is the mutual understanding between the combat soldiers on both sides which closer unites former opponents.

At Gallipoli, Mustafa Kemal, the Republic of Turkey's first president after the 1914-18 War had the following memorial erected. It illustrates the deep understanding which can develop between former enemies:



“THOSE HEROES THAT SHED THEIR BLOOD
AND LOST THEIR LIVES ...
YOU ARE NOW LYING IN THE SOIL OF A FRIENDLY COUNTRY.
THEREFORE REST IN PEACE.
THERE IS NO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE JOHNNIES
AND THE MEHMETS TO US WHERE THEY LAY SIDE BY SIDE
HERE IN THIS COUNTRY OF OURS ...
YOU, THE MOTHERS,
WHO SENT THEIR SONS FROM FAR AWAY COUNTRIES
WIPE AWAY YOUR TEARS.
YOUR SONS ARE NOW LIVING IN OUR BOSOM
AND ARE IN PEACE.
AFTER HAVING LOST THEIR LIVES ON THIS LAND THEY HAVE
BECOME OUR SONS AS WELL”
ATATURK 1934

Most who have faced actual combat are left with the futility and tragedy of war.

Now in my eighties, during the two minutes of silence between the playing of the *'Last Post'* and *'Reveille'*, my thoughts are with those guys I lost in combat and their parents, siblings, wives and/or children.

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