
Gift to the Nation

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Thank you Director-General.....Prime Minister; Guests

Mythos---meaning a narrative theme or pattern---was the classical Greek understanding of culture as a body of timeless, archetypal stories from a long time ago.

Australia's involvement in World War One has a central theme, and 376,000 contributing biographies. They belong to the volunteers who enlisted to serve and preserve democracy, and to defeat tyranny and dictatorship. Their stories range from the genius of General Sir John Monash, to the courage of 'Mad Dog' Murray, who was the most highly decorated soldier of the conflict. The narratives rove from the heroics of Albert Jacka to the boldness of 14 year old Jimmy Martin. They cover the achievements of the Light Horse in Arabia commanded by General Sir Harry Chauvel, which makes fiction out of some key aspects of T E Lawrence's exploits. There are tales of brothers and cousins serving together. The remarkable family stories include one of a father and son, Walter, 44 years, and Lyall, 19 years, who served together under Monash and were wounded in action in the drive for Allied victory in 1918.

The unlocking of these myriad narratives begins in the National Archives' project to preserve in digital form the service records of the First Australian Imperial Force---AIF. It is truly a *Gift to the Nation* for students, journalists, authors, academics, researchers, historians, film-makers, and families interested in knowing about the sacrifices of their relatives. This easily-accessed Internet treasure-trove is a first step on the

path to the comprehension of enormous achievement, which is so little understood beyond Gallipoli. (pause)

The central narrative of Australia's involvement in WW1 had three stages. In the First, the spirit of the nation was born at Anzac Cove in 1915. Here Australians, formerly from a group of disparate States, fought together as one nation for the first time. Yet Gallipoli was a failure in a wasteful side-show to the major conflict in Europe. Nevertheless it will remain forever a key to Australia's historical Mythos.

30,000 of those human stories are in the archive.

Stage Two of the over-riding theme, was in 1916 and 1917. This saw 250,000 further stories unfold in the main war theatre of the Western Front in Europe. The diggers were NOT part of an Australian Army. They were tacked on to British Armies right along the Front. The diggers suffered often under incompetent British Commanders. These 'leaders' had little idea of how to win. Soldiers were thrown into futile battles; they were fodder for enemy artillery. There were some victories; some losses; but mainly stalemate. Several million died.

There was NO major Allied victory in those brutal years, 1916, 1917.

Stage Three began in mid-1918, when the diggers were finally joined up as one Army under Monash, the most resourceful commander in the war. He was also unusual; he cared about the lives of his charges. Monash had a plan to terminate the conflict quickly in 1918, when others saw the war stretching into the 1920s.

Matters changed dramatically under his leadership. The AIF became the biggest Allied Corps of 20 on the Western Front. Monash had a 208,000 strong Army, which is seven times the size of our current Defence Force. On 8th August 1918, in the Battle of Amiens in Northern France, his masterplan was executed by the diggers. *Inside 48 hours, with a*

Canadian force in support on day 2, THEY DEFEATED TWO GERMAN ARMIES. Effectively this ended the War.

ALL the key German commanders said, without equivocation, that after Amiens *they could not now win the war, they could only defend.* (pause)

The AIF under Monash continued on after Amiens. It tackled 39 German Divisions, including the crack Prussian Guard, and defeated every one of them. There were one million enemy soldiers in those 39 Divisions, the equivalent of the ENTIRE German force on the Russian Front.

In 100 days, the diggers liberated 116 French towns and villages. (pause).

Mythos was meant to leave the ancient Greeks with understanding and themes for the *conduct* of their nation and the lives of citizens. Comprehending this rich vein in Australia's short history, based in the raw files at the National Archive, has profound resonance for today.

It shows us that courage, not just in war, combined with the planning of the best minds and wills, can take on any challenge and win.

(pause)

Here with us today, there are no relatives of John Monash, Mad Dog Murray, Albert Jacka, Harry Chauvel or Jimmy Martin. But the son and grandson of father and son Walter and Lyall, IS with us.

He is John Howard, the Prime Minister.

Thank you.