

Hollow or Hallowed?

No matter what talk-back radio or the clique of right-wing boofheads who range freely across the pages of the nation's newspapers would have you believe, this war has ended the post- World War 2 consensus, created deep divisions within Australian society and will cause us to re-evaluate many of our values, institutions and traditions – starting with ANZAC Day.

As ANZAC Day approaches and we prepare to honour the sacrifices made by past generations, we face the difficult task of telling the younger generations what the message now is. They have invigorated a flagging tradition and having the old “diggers” reminding them that war is not glorious has softened any nationalist or jingoistic overtones it once had. But post our involvement in Iraq where, unlike previous conflicts, we are the aggressor and this war has been presented like some elongated video game with all the nasty bits edited out for the Americans, is the message still the same? Are wars now acceptable even when the pretext looks shaky and its legality dubious? Will people who have supported or been part of the ANZAC parade in the past still feel the same if it is now associated with the Iraq war? Will Howard, the master of “wedge politics”, seize upon a big turnout as evidence that the Australian community support his decision to join the “collation of the willing?”

That we are even raising such questions will cause outrage in some quarters and it will be pointed out that ANZAC Day is about honouring those who served their country. Fine, but history does not bear out that argument, as, in the past, Australia has been fussy about which names are added to the pantheon. Boer War, Korean and Vietnam veterans have all received short shrift because they fought in what were later seen as unpopular conflicts. Yet, they all set sail from these shores to support our allies and defend the greater cause of democracy with the blessing of the government of the day ringing in their ears. Barton, Hughes, Menzies, Holt and now Howard have all urged us to support our servicemen, yet when they came home or found themselves in strife they were found wanting.

It has been our proud boast that from World War 1 onwards no Australian serviceman was executed by “foreign” court martials. Not quite. Whilst it spared 121 Australians sentenced to death in World War 1, it could not save two Australian soldiers attached to New Zealand units not covered by Section 98 of the 1903 Defence Act. Two Australian mariners serving on British ships were also faced with the same fate during World War 2. Although both cases were referred back to the High Court in Australia, the judiciary thought better of countermanding the wishes of our allies. Howard's callous disregard for the plight of David Hicks reveals which way he'd go in a tight spot. Hicks may not an Australian serviceman, he was a soldier and an Australian citizen and Howard's acquiescence to America's flagrant disregard for every human convention ever ratified does not auger well should any of our troops be involved in a controversial incident.

Ironically, the men whose sacrifice prompted the inclusion of Section 98 still await justice. Harry “The Breaker” Morant and Peter Handcock were the

first Australians to pay the ultimate price for the politics of war when they were executed by a British firing squad on February 27th, 1902 having been found guilty of shooting Boer prisoners. However, during the courts martial Morant revealed that he had acted on orders from Kitchener to “take no prisoners”, an allegation denied by Kitchener and the British government. Barton, to his eternal discredit, accepted Kitchener’s statement at face value and asked no questions, despite many obvious inconsistencies in his version of events.

In the intervening century historical research has uncovered the truth bit by bit. I have spent the past year producing a updated and expanded edition of *“Shoot Straight, You Bastards!”* my book on the Morant “Affair.” Morant did wrong and deserved some punishment, no question, but the evidence shows he was following Kitchener’s orders to “take no prisoners.” Those orders were enshrined in the British Manual of Military Law, were issued verbally by Kitchener and endorsed by Broderick, the Secretary of State for War. There are also countless documented cases of Boers being shot under these orders, names that never appeared in the House of Commons Blue Books where the details of all trials and executions were to be recorded. In fact, they record only four Boers were shot for wearing khaki during the whole war and the one surviving court martial record, involving Kitchener’s brother, shows there was no difference between his actions and Morant’s. Had this been proved at the courts martial, British military law (or the later Nuremberg Charter) would have demanded Kitchener take ultimate responsibility.

It is also now a historical fact that Kitchener manipulated evidence and the witnesses in order to secure a guilty verdict and that the courts martial procedures were seriously flawed. Most notably, a plea of condonation, which would have seen all charges quashed, was denied after the accused had performed “a duty of honour” in defending the fort against a Boer attack. In short, the courts martial will never stand up to independent judicial scrutiny. Will anyone from the “coalition of the unwilling” (the RSL, the War Memorial and the Department of Veteran’s Affairs) step forwards to wrong this right? Not on your life. At least the two Australians shot in World War 1 were pardoned – albeit by the Kiwis who has the courage to confront their past. Perhaps in light of the hypocrisy dating back to the “Morant Affair” we should not be surprised at the level of opposition to the Iraq war or our ability to spot the perfidy that lies at its heart.

So, will the Iraq conflict become part of ANZAC lore or will we continue to pick and choose? Who decides and where can I write to them? We’ve won the war, but winning the peace will be more important – for those Australians out there as well as the Iraqis. We won’t know for another year whether the war was ultimately fought for good or evil, but its time we resolved these historical and contemporary issues before ANZAC Day becomes more hollow than hallowed.

As they were led out into the small courtyard behind the front wall of Pretoria gaol, where they were shot, Morant remarked to Handcock “This is what comes of Empire building”. Seeing Tony Blair using Northern Ireland as a platform to assure the Iraqis that they have come to liberate not occupy, this statement still has resonance a century later. Perhaps we should re-

examine Morant's place in history and re-cast him as an anti-war hero. If anyone saw through war for what it was, it was Harry.

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An Updated and Expanded edition of "Shoot Straight, You Bastards!"
has just been released by Random House.*

This article appeared in the "Canberra Times" in February, 2004