

Application for the Premier's ANZAC Spirit School Prize

2009

Question 1: Using a Case Study on a fallen soldier on the Western Front, what lessons can be learnt from studying the Great War of 1914-18?

By Jessie Lewcock, St. Peter's Collegiate Girls School



The soldier I have chosen to study is Corporal Lawrence Carthage Weathers, VC.

Lawrence Weathers was born in Te Kopuru, New Zealand, on the 14th of May 1890. His family then moved to South Australia when he was seven. Weathers was educated at Snowtown Primary school, before leaving to follow his father and become an undertaker. Weathers married Annie Watson in 1913, and they went on to have two sons.

In early 1916, after receiving news of his elder brother's death at Gallipoli, Weathers enlisted with the Australian Imperial Force, and later departed for France as part of the 43rd Battalion.

After training in England, Weathers became extremely ill and was confined to hospital in France between January and April 1917.

When he recovered, Weathers fought in the battle of Messines in Belgium, and on the night of the 10th of June 1917 was severely wounded by gunfire. He did not return to his battalion until December 1917.

In May of 1918, he was promoted to lance corporal, but did not see much action as he was badly gassed in Villers-Bretonneux four days later. This time he returned to his battalion within a month.

On the 2nd of September 1918, Weathers joined an advanced bombing party to capture a series of enemy trenches just north of Peronne, France. Their target was a tangled, zigzagging trench called the Scutari Trench. When his parties advance was halted by severe machine gun fire from a hidden garrison, Weathers jumped over the barbed wire and into the trench, killing the leader of the garrison. Weathers then returned to his party, restocked with more bombs, and jumped once again into the enemy trench with three other soldiers. This time, when he returned, Weathers brought with him 180 prisoners and thirteen machine guns, and was festooned with souvenirs from the enemy trenches that he conquered. For this gallant act, he was nominated for a Victoria Cross.

After a short respite, Weathers was promoted to corporal on the 10th of September, 1918, his fifth wedding anniversary. He then marched with the 43rd to attack the Hindenburg Line. On the morning of the 29th of September 1918, Weathers and a small party of troops were hit by shell fire. Weathers sustained mortal wounds, and died before sunset at a regimental aid post. The same shell that killed Lawrence Weathers also killed his uncle, J.J. Weathers.

Lawrence Weathers never knew that he had won the VC. It was gazetted on the 24th of December 1918, nearly three months after he died.

One of the most important lessons that can be learnt from the Great War is that victory is never enough. Corporal Weather's mother and father lost both of their sons to the war, and during my research, I have read many stories of parents who have lost all three or four of their sons, sometimes with only one son returning home to find his family shattered. Every day, I have read of young children whose mums or dads don't come home or if they do, they return as broken people, a fraction of who they used to be. I have read of the horrendous suicide rates of Afghanistan Veterans from America, and can only think that a similar situation could be occurring in Australia. So, no matter how great the victory, no matter how successful the campaign, it is never enough to bring back the lives of those lost, and those lost in their own minds. It will never be enough.

From studying the Great War, and particularly the story of Corporal Weathers, it is clear that war can not only bring out the best in men, but also the worst. Weathers displayed gallantry, above and beyond the call of duty. This gallantry finally cost him his life. The irony of his actions, whilst celebrated by the Australian and Allied troops, would have been reviled by the enemy. This is a recurring theme throughout war. One mans' heroic act is another mans' worst nightmare. For every gallant, heroic act there is a usually a consequence that causes pain or death to another. This to me, demonstrates the futility of war.

Another of the greatest lessons that should have been learnt from the Great War was its futility. It destroyed an entire generation of young men, from both sides of the conflict. It affected millions of people around the world, not just those that were directly involved in the battle lines. It left both sides of the war financially ruined, and probably helped to cause the Great Depression.

We gained almost nothing, and lost a generation of young men. And sadly, humankind failed to learn from the most important lesson of World War I - that it should never happen again. Promises were made, and vows were taken that the world would never again be at war with each other. Ironically, just twenty one years later, we were once again a world at war, with the commencement of World War II - a war that would be known as the bloodiest of all.

The Great War, and my study of Corporal Weathers, has reinforced my opinion that war is a terrible, horrible thing. In all wars, there are heartbroken families and parentless children left with only memories of their lost ones and the so called 'lucky' soldiers that return home, only to find themselves a totally different person. I could say that I wish that there would never be a war again, but I know deep down that my wish will not come true, at least not until the harvest of human greed has been reaped and the human nature for the love of power has been forgotten. Maybe then, my wish will come true.

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Question 2: What does the ANZAC Spirit mean to you?

By Jessie Lewcock, St. Peter's Collegiate Girl's School.

Words can not describe the way I feel when it comes to the ANZACs. They are my heroes. When someone says the word 'ANZAC', thoughts of Diggers circle through my head. I see them running gallantly over trenches, bayonets fixed at the ready. I see Simpson and his donkey, winding through the steep gullies of Gallipoli. I see outnumbered Diggers fighting in French towns. I see veterans marching on ANZAC Day, proudly displaying their medals. I see proud children smiling and waving Australian flags and marching in memory of fallen loved ones. I hear the Last Post. Most sadly, I see them falling, sacrificing their lives for their mates and Australia. Their sacrifice means that I am free today, able to see and hear these things and throughout my life I must honour them for this gift. Their courageous march into battle inspires me when facing battles of my own; to keep my chin up, stay strong and just keep going, no matter the struggle ahead.

When the ANZAC spirit was first witnessed on the blood-stained beaches of Gallipoli, and then further displayed in the trenches and villages of the Western front, I believe it created the foundation of Australian life. Australia was a new country, with no forged identity of its own. This changed when Australia went to war, and formed the ANZACs with our New Zealand cousins. Australians and the world watched their acts of courage, undying mateship and bravery with awe. This newly created ANZAC Spirit was adopted in Australia as a way of life. This spirit continues today and Australians have some of the most admirable qualities of any people in the world.

The ANZAC Spirit remains encased inside their medals. I have a set of WWII medals from my great uncle, and they mean more than the world to me. I have marched with them on the right side of my chest on ANZAC Day, and it was one of the proudest moments of my life. I cry when I see medals in antique stores, fading in dusty cabinets. I believe that they should be properly looked after, respected and appreciated for they represent the sacrifice of the ANZACs. These medals should stay with families, or be preserved in museums or memorials. Young people need to recognise the significance of these medals. They are symbols of spirit and sacrifice, and should be forever treated that way.

The ANZAC Spirit, to me, means respecting today's troops and peacekeepers who are serving and returning home from deployments in Afghanistan, Iraq, East Timor and other trouble spots around the world. They are our modern ANZACs, our Diggers in desert camouflage instead of khaki, and wearing the blue berets of UN peacekeepers instead of slouch hats, who are keeping our ANZAC Spirit alive. As a nation, we need to ensure we do not repeat the treatment received by many Vietnam Veterans upon their return. These men and women are defending our country from terrorism, protecting us as we go about our daily lives. We need to provide them and their families with all the support they need as a way of thanking them for protecting us and continuing the ANZAC Spirit.

Thankfully but regrettably, only a handful of Australians have died in Afghanistan and Iraq but we still need to keep their families in our hearts and assist them, for their young men have given the greatest sacrifice that any person could give for their nation. These fallen soldiers are symbols of the ANZAC Spirit today and we need to support these new ANZACs and their families.

I believe the ANZAC Spirit has its own war to fight in coming years. Every day, I see people my age meandering sluggishly through life, with little or no respect for themselves or others. They commit petty crimes for attention, and have no remorse once caught. They drink and take drugs, not only hurting themselves, but also those who care for them. It is in these kinds of behaviour that we witness the ANZAC Spirit that was once so proudly upheld slowly fading away. We still have the same strong qualities of mateship, courage, and bravery, but many fail to recognise where these qualities originated, and how they came to be, and they are often replaced by qualities of selfishness, laziness and disrespect. The fight will be tough, but worthwhile, as renewing the ANZAC Spirit in young Australians will create a better Australia.

Here, I would like to present some ideas that I believe will help to add a little more ANZAC Spirit into the lives of everyday Australians. Firstly, every Australian should attend a dawn service on ANZAC Day, watch the veterans marching in the city, and attend a RSL afterwards to help remember the fallen and returned soldiers. Secondly, every Australian, especially school children, should be encouraged to observe a minutes silence at eleven o'clock on Remembrance Day, no matter how important the phone call or conversation at that time. This would show respect for those who have fallen for us. Thirdly, every Australian should be encouraged to visit the War Memorial in Canberra at some point, to pay tribute to the thousands of fallen soldiers whose names appear on the Roll of Honour. This pilgrimage should be as important as the pilgrimage to Gallipoli has become. Finally, every parent should tell their children the story of the ANZACs, and strive to keep the ANZAC Spirit alive through their children to ensure that the fallen are never forgotten.

When I think of the ANZAC spirit, it makes me want to smile. It makes me want to cry, rejoice, and mourn. It makes me want to remember. Remember everything that our soldiers fought for, to protect us and to give us a brighter future. The ANZAC Spirit is you. It is my brother. It is my next door neighbour. It is me. Everything that makes me Australian, and makes me who I am, is part of the ANZAC Spirit.