

Quaker Peace & Legislation Committee



ANZAC CONVERSATIONS (3): Voices of Those Who Gave Military Service

*Note: The project **Anzac Conversations: Lessons Learned** was initiated by QPLC and supported by a grant from the Department of Veterans Affairs in 2015. This is a report arising from the third event held as part of the project.*

The Event

On Sunday 30 August 2015, between 2 and 5pm, at the Friends Meeting House, Turner ACT, about 25 people (Quakers and others) attended this public meeting, on the theme 'Voices of Those who Gave Military Service'. Lorraine Thomson chaired the event, and the speakers each presented their perspectives and then responded to questions and comments from the participants. Audio-visual material enhanced the session.

The Speakers

Guy Hansen, director of exhibitions at the National Library of Australia, reflected on the exhibition 'Keepsakes' which was displayed at the Library from late 2014 to mid-2015, and represented the voices of those who served in World War 1 through diaries, letters, photos and mementos. The exhibition – which drew on the substantial holdings of the Library - showed how the personal experiences of soldiers, nurses, politicians, artists, writers and families at home became our collective memory. Guy used projected images to show the faces of some of the major players in WW1 – Billy Hughes (Prime Minister), General John Monash (military leader), Munro Ferguson (Governor-General), and Keith Murdoch (journalist) – and highlighted the significant roles they played in supporting the war effort.

Propaganda posters played an important part in recruiting soldiers, and most of their content showed contempt for the German 'enemy'. Women were often part of the campaign to shame men into joining up. Guy gave an example of a studio photo of a soldier and his wife who married just before leaving for overseas, and said this was a common practice. About 400,000 joined up, some enticed by the opportunity to 'see the world'. Many kept photo albums of their sightseeing. Personal correspondence home tended to show the 'up' side to avoid upsetting families, and censorship also limited what information about the actual war experience could be passed on. The print media remained the primary source of knowledge at home.

There was considerable division within the Australian community about the war, as shown by the conscription campaigns. Progress in many parts of society was halted by the war. Cartoons of the time, especially by David Lowe, showed up the conflicts in the community and satirised the leaders like Billy Hughes. Even soldiers were keen to get copies that were published in Lowe's 'The Billy Book'. Other artists such as Norman Lindsay and his sister Ruby Lind, and Will Dyson did excellent drawings of life in wartime London and at the front. Frank Hurley's photos added another dimension. The Library also has the English translation of the German book 'All Quiet on the Western Front' – a translation done by Arthur Wheen, an Australian.

During discussion after the presentation, Guy said that some senior soldiers did express disillusionment with the war because they were less subject to censorship. He also referred to the Library's collection of Oral History and the inclusion of wartime experiences in the life stories of those represented.

For more details about the 'Keepsakes' exhibition, see the essay by Guy Hansen at <http://www.nla.gov.au/exhibitions/keepsakes>

Graham Walker AM, a veteran of the Vietnam War and an active worker for the Vietnam Veterans Federation, called his presentation 'The Other Side of the Anzac Story'. He began by referring to an 'epidemic' that began on the war front in 1914 – shell shock as it became known. It was often associated with heavy artillery bombardments. The symptoms were more than physical – they included mental impairment, paralysis, insomnia, blindness, headaches, and tremors among the soldiers. The initial response by the authorities was to see this as a sign of malingering, moral weakness or at best a genetic predisposition. In either case, the fault lay with the soldier. It was not until many decades later that the medical profession recognized that no one was immune and that the cause lay with the trauma of war and not with any weakness in the soldier.

Soldiers returned home to an uncomprehending public. The sufferers did not recover as expected, and others succumbed after returning. In some cases pensions were denied to deserving soldiers, and families had to cope on their own. Violent behaviour affected families and was not recognized by government authorities as arising from the trauma of war. The soldier settlement schemes engaged around 40,000 ex-soldiers but failed owing to poor land quality, small holdings, lack of farming knowledge, and falling prices. In addition, the war caused physical and psychological disabilities of many of the veterans. Suicides were not uncommon as a result.

Vietnam was a different kind of war, so psychological casualties on the battlefield were fewer, but the impact of fighting in an area where unexpected dangers were always present from mines, guerrilla attacks etc., did lead to delayed stress not unlike WW1. Eventually 'post-traumatic stress disorder' (PTSD) was identified and accepted as real. Of 60,000 Vietnam veterans about half have had a compensation claim accepted for PTSD, depression, anxiety, or substance abuse, and some 20,000 were permanently incapacitated. 'Suicidality' – thinking about, planning, or attempting suicide – has a much higher incidence for these veterans than for the wider community. However, these veterans have spoken out and got services and support

such as counselling. In due course the impact on families (family dysfunction) was also recognized more fully and steps taken to offer support. Veterans of recent wars are also subject to similar stresses and will need support in many cases.

In the discussion that followed, it was acknowledged that the growing hostility of Australians to the Vietnam War did have a bad effect on returning soldiers, and this has led to more care in differentiating the role of soldiers from the political decisions about going to war. The effects of Agent Orange are now understood better and soldiers affected are now eligible for medical support and compensation. Overall the Department of Veterans Affairs is better prepared to help returning soldiers and their families but the Repatriation system is still far from ideal.

Vietnam Veterans have a wide variety of views about the war in which they fought. There seems to be still a propensity among human beings to get involved in war.

There was some discussion of the alternative non-violent options available to build community and mutual support without the need for war. Sporting and social examples were given. There was a view that Parliament should be involved in decisions to go to war, rather than the executive government having the only say. On the matter of conscientious objection, it was pointed out by Graham that soldiers may not disobey a lawful order, but can refuse to obey an unlawful one (e.g. to commit an atrocity).

Lorraine Thomson reported that Gary Oakley of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Veterans and Service Association had been unable to attend. She concluded the session by giving a brief summary of the three sessions held, and inviting participants to come again for the fourth session to be held later.

Canberra

September 2015