

Australia: Camp Gallipoli fails to attract support

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Despite extensive media promotion, federal government and Anzac Centenary Board endorsement and a publicity campaign lasting 12 months, Australia's "Camp Gallipoli"—an overnight sleep-over on Friday promoting patriotism, militarism and war—has been a disaster for its organisers.

Held in five Australian state capitals and running in tandem with official Anzac Day commemorations the following day, Camp Gallipoli only attracted about 24,000 participants nationally.

Last year organisers had predicted that up to 250,000 would attend the \$20 million event. Only 5,000 came to the Sydney event and about 6,000 each in Melbourne and Brisbane, paying \$50 a ticket for an adult entry or \$121, including food. A planned Camp Gallipoli in Auckland, New Zealand was cancelled early this month after only 102 tickets were sold. Over 10,000 had been predicted to attend.

The low attendances at Camp Gallipoli reflect a reaction against the barrage of Anzac Day propaganda and the associated crass commercialism as well as broad anti-war sentiment.

The Camp Gallipoli project was initiated early last year by Chris Fox, a South Australia businessman and advertising executive, and registered as a non-profit organisation. It was provided with a \$2.5 million grant from the federal government and sponsored by the Returned Services League, Legacy, sporting organisations and various corporations, including banks, media, retailers and a camping equipment manufacturer.

Fox promoted the event as a celebration of the so-called "Anzac Spirit" of "mateship," "democracy" and "freedom" which was supposedly a product of the Australian and New Zealand (Anzac) military participation in the 1915 British-French led invasion of

the Dardanelles in Turkey. In line with the official national mythology, the bloodbath at Gallipoli, he repeated ad nauseam, represented "the birth of the Australian nation."

Olympic athletes, footballers and cricket stars and medal winning Australian military veterans who served in Afghanistan were recruited to promote Camp Gallipoli and speak at the event and regurgitate this nationalist propaganda rhetoric. An "Anzac Flame" torch relay was held through parts of Australia to promote the sleep-over. School students were targeted and encouraged to send contingents.

Camp Gallipoli participants were told that Friday's proceedings would provide them with the opportunity to "sleep under the stars like the original Anzacs" and "celebrate the tradition of equality, loyalty and friendship."

The event was thoroughly commercialised and aimed at inculcating its participants, especially the children and school students in attendance, with Australian patriotism and the glorification of militarism and war.

In the lead up to Friday, the organisation was told that three of its Anzac-branded products—a beanie, a hoodie and a small beer bottle holder—being sold by the Target retail chain breached the government's merchandise conditions and the items had to be withdrawn.

Camp Gallipoli CEO Chris Fox told the media that the project was "being bogged down in negativity" and said that those complaining on social media were "snipers." Organisers then told those who had purchased special souvenir military swags for between \$275 and \$375 to sleep in at Camp Gallipoli that they could not erect the small tents at the venues.

Heavy downpours inundated Sydney for most of last week and ticket holders began to voice concerns about not being able to bring tents. Fox reacted to the

complaints by declaring, “We’re asking them to go out of their way for one night. If anyone’s worried about a little rain, we would say to them, ‘Toughen up, you buggers.’”

Fox told the *Sydney Morning Herald* that people should remember the terrible conditions the soldiers faced at Gallipoli—vermin, dysentery and the constant fear of death. “Eleven thousand Anzacs perished. They were all kids, all babies,” he said. “Everyone was your mate; the bond was forged in hellish conditions.”

Sydney organisers, however, moved the event from Centennial Park to the Entertainment Quarter—a series of shops and cinemas alongside Fox Studios—in Moore Park. Half those attending could sleep on an oval with others inside at the Hordern Pavilion and the Royal Hall of Industries.

Those entering Camp Gallipoli in Sydney walked through a corridor replica of a sandbagged WWI trench to a courtyard where the burning Anzac Flame stood on a cheaply made structure. People were lining up to be photographed in front of the flame.

There were school delegations from a number of private schools and excited young children with parents, many from Sydney’s better off northern and eastern suburbs. A number of those in attendance were ex-soldiers with their wives and girlfriends. The sleep-over had a bizarre carnival like atmosphere with those in attendance having little or no idea about the how and why World War I broke out or that it had nothing to do with “democracy” and “freedom.”

A health insurance marketing manager told this reporter that he came because his wife knew that he liked military events and had bought him the ticket. Two other participants said they had come because they had been given free tickets a few days earlier. The Camp Gallipoli merchandise stand did a brisk trade selling t-shirts, badges, caps, scarves and other items.

Giant projection screens played various video clips including brief interviews with Gallipoli and Western Front veterans, and advertising style promotions of the Camp Gallipoli Anzac Torch relay.

Channel Nine newsreader Peter Overton, who compered the proceedings in Sydney, told the audience: “You don’t have to have fought in a war to possess the Anzac spirit.” He interviewed Australian soldiers and sporting stars who had been involved in the US-led invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan and two members of

the Returned Services League.

The Australian and New Zealand national anthems were sung and entertainment was provided by live groups, military bagpipe bands and a choir that sang “Waltzing Matilda” and “I Still Call Australia Home.”

This basic program was repeated at other Camp Gallipoli venues, with the evening’s entertainment concluding with a screening of Russell Crowe’s movie, *The Water Diviner*. Attendees were woken the next morning with a military bugle call and a dawn memorial service was held.

Camp Gallipoli was a thoroughly tacky and deeply reactionary affair. Its organisers have given no indication of the total numbers attending Friday’s sleep-over in Australia. Nor have they released an official statement about their failure to attract significant numbers or whether they intend to hold the event next year.



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