Anzac Day 2018: Australia stages a “gender-inclusive” glorification of war

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2 May 2018

Anzac Day marches in Australia on April 25 were led by hundreds of female soldiers—past and present—as part of the government’s annual glorification of nationalism and militarism. Female participants in the US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were given pride of place.

Anzac Day venerates the April 25, 1915 landing of Australian, New Zealand, French and British troops at Gallipoli Cove in Turkey during World War I. The nine-month battle ended in a disastrous defeat. But annual Anzac ceremonies, under the banner of “remembering the fallen,” are used to promote the military, as well as to condition the population, and young people in particular, for future “sacrifices” for the nation.

In line with this year’s “gender-inclusive” Anzac Day spin, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) news site featured Major Sally Heidenreich, a former army intelligence officer.

Heidenreich served in Iraq and then Afghanistan, where she led the “Fusion and Targeting Cell”—a Special Operations Task Group squad that organised the assassination of alleged insurgents fighting against the US-led occupation of their country.

Her job was “incredibly rewarding,” she told the ABC. “We would either dispatch ground troops to target them if possible or, if the terrain in question was too remote or inhospitable, my team and I would target them ourselves, using specialised military assets.”

Heidenreich, who is married to a retired Special Air Services Regiment officer, is now a well-connected lawyer and a member of South Australia’s Veterans Advisory Council.

During the 1960s and 1970s, it was common wisdom among students, young workers, and leading writers and artists, to view the annual memorial as a historical anachronism. Today, politicians of every stripe and the corporate media promote Anzac Day with almost quasi-religious fervour. Public figures who dare criticise the militarist and jingoistic rhetoric are denounced and intimidated into silence. SBS journalist Scott McIntyre, was sacked and blacklisted in 2015.

To cover up their underlying political agenda, Liberal-National Coalition and Labor Party leaders, along with every other parliamentary representative insists that Anzac Day is not about glorifying war. These disingenuous claims are made even as they call for youth to honour the “selfless devotion” of military veterans and prepare to do the same.

With the death of all remaining WWI veterans, and with few surviving WWII veterans able to participate, Anzac Day parades are increasingly made up of the descendants of former soldiers. Young children and teenagers march wearing their relatives’ war medals. Schools with military cadet groups, school bands and youth groups run by the police and the Returned Services League are heavily represented.

Last week’s event, in the final year of the Australian government’s four-year, $600 million World War I centenary celebrations, focused on the April 24–25 military victory of Australian and British forces in 1918 against German troops at Villers-Bretonneux. Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull travelled to northern France to officially open the “Sir John Monash Centre” just outside the town.

Monash was a commander of the hundreds of thousands of young men and women who were sent by the Australian ruling class and its Labor and trade union apparatuses to kill and be killed in the war, to demonstrate their loyalty to the British Empire.

Politicians and military chiefs today hail the purported “military genius” of Monash, who was appointed in May 1918 as the commander-in-chief of all Australian troops on the Western Front. In 2015, then Prime Minister Tony Abbott took the nationalist propaganda to the point of declaring that Australian and American troops under Monash’s command “won the war” in late 1918.

The truth is that “peace” was the fearful response of the ruling classes to the impact of the October 1917 Russian Revolution, and the development of mass anti-war, anti-capitalist movements in all the countries involved, including Australia. This, of course, is left out of the Anzac Day ceremonies.

Opening the $100 million Monash centre, Turnbull declared that Anzac Day was not about military “triumphalism.” Australia’s military forces, he insisted, always fought for “freedom, parliamentary democracy, the rule of law, mutual respect, the equality of men and women and a fair go.”

These lies are belied by the real historical record. From

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World War I to World War II, through to the US-led wars in Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria, Australian military operations have had nothing to do with "freedom" or "the rule of law." They have been conducted for the geostrategic and economic interests of the Australian capitalist class.

Contrary to Turnbull's denials of triumphalism, the corporate media saturated the population with self-serving propaganda about Villers-Bretonneux. The *Sydney Morning Herald* and other Fairfax Media outlets, along with the ABC, were so enthusiastic they featured jingoistic historian Jonathan King, who claimed that Monash and two other generals, Harold "Pompey" Elliott and William Glasgow, were directly involved in the battle.

King contended that Monash motivated his troops with "an impassioned pep talk" and "powerful use of Anzac Day" before the April 24–25 assault on German lines. Wider knowledge of this military success, King claimed, could help transform Anzac Day from a "day of mourning" into one that celebrated "victory."

"If Monash could use Anzac Day to inspire his troops to win, surely we can use this centenary to change the Anzac Day story," King wrote.

King's entire story, however, was a historical fantasy. Monash played no part in the battle and did not address the troops. Nor were the two other generals directly involved in attack. The Fairfax newspapers and the ABC have been forced to issue corrections.

An April 25 editorial in the *Australian* declared that the sacrifices made by Australian troops at Villers-Bretonneux were "an enduring part of our nation's genetic code, ceremonies and evolving culture." It regaled its readers with the horrifying testimony contained in a letter sent by a soldier who was involved in the bloody slaughter.

"Bayonets passed with ease through grey-clad bodies and withdrawn with a sucking noise," the letter said. "One saw running forms in the dark, trying to escape, only to be stabbed or shot down as they ran… we were berserk, every one of us, there was no quarter… the killing went on. There was blood all over my rifle & bayonet & hands. Dawn broke & we started sniping & got many more Huns."

The macabre editorial went on to quote Major General Elliott, who boasted that his men had "perfected a throat jab"—thrusting their bayonets "under the chin and into the spinal cord"—to "easily and quickly" eliminate enemy troops.

The reality of the "Second Battle of Villers-Bretonneux" is sheer horror. Of the 3,900 Australian troops hurled into the carnage, close to 2,500 were killed or wounded. Even greater numbers of British, French and German soldiers lost their lives. In its aftermath, some of the traumatised Australian survivors went on an alcohol-fuelled looting rampage—mention of which is politely excluded from official commemorations.

There are seven more months until the Australian government's four-year WWI centenary celebrations end, but the state-funded juggernaut will roll on and become an even more toxic presence.

According to current estimates, the combined Australian government expenditure—state and federal—of at least $600 million on the war centenary, dwarfs the amount spent by any other participant in WWI. By 2028, Australia will have spent $1.1 billion on the centenary and war memorials.

This includes the Monash Centre, which features an "Immersive Gallery" so patrons can "manipulate large-scale 3D virtual objects such as tanks and artillery guns." War Memorial chief Brendon Nelson has called for $500 million to be allocated to construct an even larger Australian War Memorial in Canberra.

Last week, Nelson told the media the expanded facility should include a special section dedicated to military personnel involved in Canberra's reactionary "Operation Sovereign Borders" program.

This ongoing naval and air campaign, which has bipartisan support from Labor, prevents asylum seekers from reaching Australian shores. Those captured—many seeking to escape the consequences of the US-led wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East—are incarcerated for years in Australia's offshore concentration camps.

In 2016–17, Australia spent over $4 billion capturing, detaining and deporting some of the most vulnerable people on the planet. This was more than the annual global budget of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Border protection, Nelson declared last week, was "arguably the most important thing our military is doing with other agencies." Labor Party defence spokesman Richard Marles agreed immediately, endorsing Nelson's suggestion that those involved in this brutal work should be venerated.

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