

ON ANZAC DAY ARE WE NOT ALL AUSTRALIANS?



Abalinx - Peter Adamis - 18 April 2015

ANZAC Day is soon upon us and many like me will be attending the traditional dawn service somewhere in Australia and in the remote parts of the world where our Defence Force personnel are stationed. This year I will not be making the annual pilgrimage to the Shrine Melbourne but will merely step outside my front gate and walk the 50 paces or so across to the Watsonia RSL adjacent to our old home. I will stand alongside many others who will come to pay their respects to the fallen and listen to the speeches of a bygone era. An era in which many Australians, (of which according to Australian military records a few were of Hellenic origin) had taken up the challenge for whatever reason and went off to war.

As I stand silently to one side and look around my environment, my mind immediately goes to all the mates I have served with and who have since passed through one door we call life and into another realm not known to us. I see a myriad of faces, skin colours, diverse clothing, the mounted police reminiscent of the Australian light horse, the children waving their flags, the parents, the loners, the wrinkled old faces, the usual RSL suspects as I call them, the political masters so to speak and the interested onlooker.

I would day dream of those men who long before me made the decision to go to war and never returned. I think of the many who wore the uniform of Australia and never came home and then my thoughts would meander to the living, the orphans, the widows, grieving parents, friends and relatives and others left behind to live out their lives without their loved ones who lay buried in far off lands.

Of those men and women who landed at Egypt, Lemnos, Gallipoli, Russia, Western Front and of those who succumbed to their wounds as a result of gas, shock, deprivation, bombs, buried alive, bayoneted, bullets and other evils that mankind could invent to bring destruction on their fellow man. Despite the joyful and youthful exuberance displayed by enthusiastic volunteers, those who went to war found that it was no laughing matter. Many would return to a home that welcomed back with open arm ignorant of the horrors their loved ones had faced. Australians of Greek heritage that have grown up in Australia have come to realise that Greece also had a part to play in WW1 and it was not all about Gallipoli alone.

Many of these Australians have created organisations depicting the Greek support given to the allies with emphasis on the Greek and Australian connection. Organisations such as the Australian Hellenic RSLs, the Australian Hellenic Memorials, the Spartan King Leonidas commemorations in each Australian state, AHEPA, The numerous Australian Greek community organisations, The Lemons Landings, and those who served at Thessaloniki, Greece, to name but a few contributing to the ANZAC spirit.

I would also take my mind back to a dawn service that my wife and I attended in Cairns, Far North Queensland, where we had gone to visit that grand old man of the Royal Australian Regiment, (RAR); Warrie George Mansford. A legend during our life time he was a typical larrikin and a great soldier. A man's man who rose through the ranks to become a Brigadier and well thought of. How he become a Brigadier is beyond me, as he was the worst dressed officer we had ever met. But we would not have had it any other way. We all loved "Warrie" George to death. Now in his mid Eighties and the bugger still living alone, my thoughts are always with him. Why was he special to me? The answer is simple, he accepted me as I was and assisted me through the examples he set as a soldier and as an officer throughout my military career.

Another chap who will probably kill me for mentioning him is "Uncle Maurie" Barwick (Barwickopoulos). I first met him in 1972 when he was the second in command of the Infantry Centre in Ingleburn, an outskirts town of Sydney. I did not know of him personally until I was posted to the same unit in 1985 in Geelong and the rest is history. My children grew up calling him Uncle Maurie and it was not until 30 years later when Maurice said to me, Peter its time you grew up and called me Maurice. No said no problem "Sir" and yes "Uncle Maurie". Maurice was special in many ways of which will become the title of another article dedicated to him alone.

Suffice to say, I was astounded to hear that his wife Thelma who has since passed away was of Hellenic Spartan origins. Her grandfather had apparently left Sparta in Laconia Greece in the 1980s' and made his way to the USA before turning his eyes towards the rich gold fields of Victoria. He married Australian lass and they lived in Castlemaine until his death. Thelma who was a lovely lady is sadly missed and is now buried alongside her grandfather and father. (Thelma passed away on my birthday - 28 March a few years ago). As the President of the Victorian Laconian Spartan community, I intend to make him a member of our community in accordance with the constitution.

These are but random thoughts that my mind would think of as I walk into the members lounge once the dawn service is over. I will buy one drink and silently salute my mates since gone before making my way back home. I guess ANZAC Day to me is one for acknowledging and thanking those who have since gone before me, promising that I will remember them. I have not sought the limelight other than to protest against those who wished to silence my attempts to remember my mates and of those with whom I served with. I guess that brings me to the identity demons I have had to fight over the years in order to be accepted and acknowledged for being an Aussie. As Malcolm Fraser once said, "life was not meant to be easy"

On this auspicious day, I wonder how many still consider themselves Greek and how many identify with their Hellenic origins now that they live in a country we call home, Australia. My uneducated guess is that most if not all are proud of their past no matter how far removed. Why, if one asks is it so important to be identified with a Hellenic past is not difficult to answer. We all come from somewhere and the need to identify with our origins is important to all of us if we are to be considered Australian citizens.

Many have struggled with this dilemma over the years and others have shrugged it off as taking it for granted that they consider themselves Australians, Greek, Australian Greeks, Greek Australians or just plain Aussies that have Hellenic origins. As for me, I guess I am sympathetic with the latter and consider myself just an ordinary Aussie bloke with proud Hellenic origins. Does it matter? I can only hazard a guess that it only when I feel threatened or that my loyalty to this nation we call home, Australia is being questioned by ignorant and ill informed individuals.

With all my faults and rascal characteristics, I love being an Aussie with a Greek heritage. On the other hand, after 30 years of military service, service to the community and contributing to its political stability over a 25 year period, I still get

called a 'Greek'. Some call me erratic, volatile and unpredictable, but are they fair comments about a bloke who is passionate about his love for his country, Australia. Are not these words attempts to make me feel like a second class citizen in a country where I have worked my butt off? Are these adjectives a fair crack of the whip or are they designed to reduce my effectiveness in a world surrounded by technology.

In the old days of the Fifties, Sixties and Seventies, adjectives such as "wog", "dago", "spags" and "greaser" were used to make us feel inferior and reduce our confidence levels which I must add were not helped when one is trying to fit into an alien culture. It took time, patience, and finally fighting back against our tormentors in order to gain the respect and self esteem that was slowly eroded our well being and personal development. Does it appear that i am bitching about a past that cannot be corrected; I guess I am, but that's not my point. My point is that we have come a long way and that we are now part of the Australian landscape and in doing so has strengthened the very fabric of Australian society.

Today I hear that the younger generation call themselves "wogs" and I cringe in fear and my fighting spirit once again returns within my body wanting to lash out in anger at these young fools who dont know if they are Arthur or Martha. I would have thought that they would consider themselves Australians with a proud Hellenic past. I wonder whether it's me that has lost the plot and am I banging my head up against a brick wall for nothing. In my opinion, the youth of today are doing themselves a disservice by alienating themselves from the rest of society if they continue thinking along those lines. Call me an old bugger; call me what you like, but while I am still alive I will continue to integrate the two cultures into one.

When I attend the annual Greek Independence day march at the shrine with my Spartan and Laconian brethren, I do so with pride to remind observers and those watching the march from the sidelines, that I march with pride as an Australian with a Hellenic background and to demonstrate to others that, "hey it is ok to be an Aussie Greek" and represent both countries. After all we are all Australians no matter where we come from. I also attend the "OXI" Day celebrations from time to time, out of respect rather than to draw attention to myself.

Yet even at such events I come across some who question my validity because I did not go to war. (I guess 30 years of military service and peace keeping is nothing?) I still chuckle to myself when I come across a few who wear their ribbons, peering down at me (I am a little bloke I guess) because I wear the Royal

Australian (RAR) Skippy badge with pride. How many medals am I entitled to, who cares, for I dont. In any case this need to demonstrate self worth is evident in many cultures and workplaces which I find abhorrent and beneath the dignity of those who have served.

I also avoid ceremonies where I find individuals who wish bring attention to themselves in order to gain recognition and greater status within the veteran community. I have met them all. There others who wear an array of diverse medals and badges, knowing that they did not serve at all and I cringe at the sight of them. These are isolated cases and I guess everyone wants to belong and be a part of an event that will be recorded in the annals of community and Australian history. That to me is un-Australian and not the Aussie way and my mates would be turning in their graves. History in such cases will be the rightful judge of all them.

On ANZAC Day, where will you find the average Aussie with a Hellenic background one may ask? I will tell you for the answer is but a simple one. You will find them standing beside you at an ANZAC dawn service. You will not know that they have a Hellenic background and why should you? On ANZAC DAY, are we not all Australians?



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