

A modest and muted Anzac day

[Andrew Hamilton](#)

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This year the celebration of Anzac Day will be muted. No marches, no large reunions, few speeches at war memorials. The soldiers and others who lost their lives in war will be remembered, however, as they should be. Indeed, the celebration will perhaps speak more eloquently because of its simplicity.



In recent years the rhetoric surrounding Anzac Day has become overblown. The day has been depicted as a symbol of Australian power and military prowess, and so of the distinctive qualities of Australian citizens. It has invested contemporary Australians and their leaders with unearned qualities built on make-believe.

The construction of Anzac Day as a celebration of an imagined heroic Australian identity obscures the death and loss both of soldiers and of their relatives and friends, the cost to families and to Australian society of their loss, and the responsibility of their descendants to turn from war.

This year the backdrop against which Anzac Day will be seen will not show idealised figures in warlike poses or sportsmen looking mean, but people who have lost life and livings, first to bushfires and now to the coronavirus.

In just a few months we have seen the reality of bushfire with its devastation of forests and impoverishment of local people in the areas that it touched. We have seen the ash and smelled the

smoke that drove away the comfortable illusion that climate change was unreal, and if real, that it was harmless.

And we have seen the cost that fire and sickness have brought to many individuals and the strain they have placed on communities. We have seen our leaders aimless in the face of fire and, like the rest of us, struggling to comprehend the COVID-19 pandemic, and the vulnerability of an economy built on debt. We have also seen them at their best as they jettisoned their fixed ideas to respond in order to address the threat to the community posed by the virus.

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Above all we have seen the courage and generosity of many Australians, their willingness to sacrifice their own freedom of movement and financial security for the good of the community. These are not narrowly national qualities. They reflect the best of our shared humanity.

When seen against the events of the year, Anzac Day will be a calling to mind of things past, things present and things future. We remember and stay with the pain, loss and grief of those who died in war and those who returned from it wounded in body and spirit. We remember, too, the courage and generosity with which so many supported one another. We remember the pain of those who grieved their deaths and whose lives were changed forever by their wounding.

This year, too, the isolation and anxiety which many share as we celebrate Anzac Day will echo some aspects of the experience of soldiers in war. This will be a time to remember and stay with the pain, loss and grief of those who have died through bushfire and virus, and the loss of those whose lives have been devastated by them.

As we hold together Anzac Day and the trials of this year, too, we remember and are grateful for the humble and self-sacrificing lives hidden like pearls in the darkness of each event. It is a day, perhaps, to hold in special honour the unprotected nurses, doctors and stretcher bearers who have risked their lives in the face of bullets and viruses.

This year the celebration of Anzac Day will necessarily be modest in its exclusion of marches and gatherings. It should also be modest in its rhetoric, forsaking any glorification of the day that would make the acts of generosity and bravery displayed in battle typical of the nation today or of its leaders. It should allow us to grieve the lives lost and forever shadowed in war and give thanks for the more domestic virtues displayed in the aftermath of war and the flu that followed it.

The celebration of Anzac Day also looks to the future. If we grieve loss and give thanks for self-sacrifice on Anzac Day, we should also commit ourselves to a future in which we turn from wars, share burdens, give priority to the most disadvantaged, and shape a more just society.



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Main image: Simpson and Duffy in action in Shrapnel Gully, Gallipoli ([AWM A03114](#))

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