

# Echo of the Bugle

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The sound that distinguishes Anzac Day from others is the bugle call. The solitary call of the Last Post reverberates down the generations as a mournful cry for the loss of war. In the First World War it was the loss of so many young lives and for what? A toehold on some peninsula, a futile charge into no man's land? The loss swept into every Australian household. Mothers lost their sons. Young women lost brothers, boyfriends, lovers, husbands. And for fathers, adding to the pain of loss, was the bitter aftertaste of guilt summarised so succinctly by Rudyard Kipling, who lost his own son in that war, "If any question why we died/Tell them, because our fathers lied."

Yet the generation of Australians who served in the First World War had qualities we no longer possess and this is our loss. My great Uncle, Michael O'Donnell, was killed in the First World War. Nine years ago I wrote an article for this newspaper telling his extraordinary story. A professional soldier, he was in the Commonwealth Military Forces when war broke out in 1914. He was the first volunteer for the Australian Imperial Forces in Western Australia where he was drilling troops. But he ran into conflict with his superior officer, Colonel Battye, who for 10 months blocked Michael's promotion to officer (Michael had passed his officers exams) and transfer to war duty.

But stubbornness runs in the family. Michael resigned his commission and enlisted in the AIF as a private. He was set to drilling troops. Frustrated, Michael talked his way into an open ticket of leave and travelled from Leonora, WA, to Adelaide via steamship and reenlisted under a false name. But his drilling talents were soon recognised and so was he. There followed 3 Court Martials – one for enlisting under a false name and two for deserting. This was in a time of war. He was facing the firing squad! The ticket of leave along with a government inquiry saved him. He was permitted to do his officers training at Duntroon and given the rank of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant. He embarked for France and was killed at Bullecourt in 1917.

From time to time I think of Michael and his stubbornness. Then a few weeks ago a letter arrived in the post. I opened it and out fell a postcard written by Michael. The Christian Brothers were sorting their archives. Brother Bernard found my article with the postcard and sent it to me. It was a photo of the young soldier, Lieutenant Michael O'Donnell at 21. It was sent in 1911 to commemorate a particularly gruelling march of the previous year. This march tells the story of a country preparing for war.

Military training was compulsory for schoolboys in those times. In 1910, Officer in Charge of Cadets, Lt Michael O'Donnell, marched 70 boys

from the Christian Brother's School, Abbotsford (Kevin Sheedy's old school among others) to, wait for it, Bendigo and back. Some of the boys were primary school age. The youngest cadet was 11. Each boy carried with him a spare pair of boots, 3 pounds of potatoes, 2 pounds of onions and more. Today, it is difficult to imagine children as young as 11 marching to Bendigo and back. They'd whinge the whole way, probably. But these were different times.

In 1910 the virtues of duty, loyalty and honour were highly valued. And it was a sense of duty that drew Michael O'Donnell to war. He didn't go for the adventure, though it was indeed an adventure. Nor did he join up because of his mates. He'd left everyone he knew behind. It was his sense of duty, but not to King and Empire. His family were for Irish Home Rule and anti-British. This caused on-going conflict with his superiors.

Michael O'Donnell went to war out of a sense of duty. He was a soldier. He wanted to serve his country, Australia, in wartime. His generation lived and died because of their sense of duty to their country, their families and their mates. It was their fathers, the politicians, as Kipling noted, who allowed so many to die for so little purpose. Yet we respect those boys who went to war because we doubt if we could do it. On Anzac Day we think of them. We wonder if we could clamber out of a muddy, wet and bloody trench at a whistle call to – almost – certain death. We doubt that we could do it because we don't hold the same values. These days, most of us only serve ourselves. Yet, ironically, our self-absorption contributes to the modern malaise of depression, suicide and drug abuse. Such social ills result, in part, when the only person you have to worry about is yourself because sometimes it's hardly worth the effort.

But in another era boys as young as 11 could march to Bendigo and young men would go to war because they served a cause larger than themselves. They served their country. They stood up for their families. They stood by their mates. And each year their sense of duty captures our imagination when we hear the bugle call.