

DONOVAN JOYNT, VC:

A Man of His Time

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The Australian Character of Yesteryear

I have quite an extensive military library. Among my books are half a dozen biographies written by WWI soldiers and another half dozen books written about them. I much prefer the former personal accounts as they are a truer representation of the culture and attitudes of the period as they encapsulate the characteristics of the Australians of the early 20th century. There is something about the stories they tell that has always puzzled me because I know that a dozen soldiers could not have collaborated to create the Anzac of yesteryear as a myth for posterity. Yet the single theme that runs through every story is their unity of outlook and unshamed pride in being Australian.

If we compare our Australian society today to that of yesteryear, it appears that somewhere along the way we lost our national spirit and our pride in our country. Donovan Joynt's unvarnished story of his life and times perhaps helps to answer the question of whether or not Australians today are true descendants of the first Anzacs or are now a shadow of our forebears.

THE GREAT ADVENTURE BEGINS

Prior to the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, the Australian Colonies had raised contingents from 1845 onwards to fight in the Maori Wars in New Zealand, through the farcical commitment to the Sudan in 1885, the Relief of Peking (Beijing) in 1900 and the Boer War from 1899-1902. These ad hoc forces were raised with relative ease as all colonies (and then the federated Commonwealth from 1911)



maintained a form of a universal, if rudimentary, military training scheme. In both city and country, being a member of your local militia unit was regarded as both a mark of status and an obligation to the nation from school to adulthood.

Shooting competitions and sporting challenges between rival militia and artillery units were often also the centre of local social life. When the Victorian Government offered the British Government an all-volunteer contingent of 626 men to fight in the Boer War, over 4,000 applications were immediately received.

It is therefore unsurprising that when Australia declared its support for the British Empire on 15th August 1914 to commit an all-volunteer Infantry Division and a Light Horse Brigade the ranks were quickly filled. In fact, the response was so

great that just a month later the decision was made to raise another Infantry Brigade and two more Light Horse Brigades. The AIF continued to grow throughout the war, until there were five infantry divisions, two mounted divisions and a mixture of other units.

As is apparently the Australian way, the first contingent of the AIF suffered from widespread equipment shortages that delayed its deployment and their initial engagement on the fatal shores of the Gallipoli Peninsula on 25th April 1915. By 3rd May about 2,300 Australians of the 8,800 who were to die on Gallipoli had already been killed. The 16th Battalion landed on the evening of 26th April and moved to their positions in Monash Valley. Only 307 of its 955 men survived their first week in the frontline.

ENTER DONOVAN JOYNT

Donovan Joynt had not joined the first recruiting rush as

he was a farmer and needed to harvest his crops before answering the 'call to arms'. While he waited he received a message that his father was dying. He rushed to his bedside in time to say goodbye and then settled his father's affairs before returning to his farm. There he found that his pea cop had been razed in a bushfire and his potato crop was ruined by white moth grubs. This misfortune would have broken the spirit of a less resilient person, but like many a pioneering Australian he weathered the blows as best he could, sold whatever he had remaining and travelled to the Recruiting Office in Melbourne. Having served as a corporal in the Victorian Rifles, Militia, Joynt applied for officer training and was one of those who were accepted.

On graduation he was promoted to Sergeant Instructor! This was a personal disappointment as it meant that he and his fellow 'officers' missed the Gallipoli fiasco. After further training he was granted his Commission as a Lieutenant and posted to command a draft embarking for Egypt. Their staging at the Pyramids Camp was brief as the Gallipoli Campaign had already ended, so shortly afterwards orders arrived for their move to France and the Western Front.

Lt. Joynt's story about this period reads like a tourist's excitable travel diary. Like many Australians (then and now) he had a desire to visit and see the wonders of England and Europe. If some places were drab and dull compared to the blue skies of Australia he failed to notice.

FIRST BLOOD AT POZIERES AND THE YPRES SECTOR

The bloodbath of the battle for Pozieres had been raging for some weeks when Donovan was tasked with taking a small group of six replacements forward to the 5th battalion in the front line. During a short stop one of this 'clean skin' group mused that he was more afraid of being afraid when under fire than he was of death itself. The others agreed and Joynt recorded that he thought to himself "How will I behave?" We can now answer both questions: Joynt became a fearless warrior and all six men in his reinforcement group were killed in the next few months.

Joynt joined A Coy, 8th Battalion, only to find that there was the only one officer still alive and the Company consisted of only fifteen men under constant artillery fire. Three more men were killed while awaiting an expected German attack that never came. Joynt records at they were ready and determined to 'put up a show' and that the pitifully few in his small band were actually disappointed when no attack came. Yet, as the carnage went on Joynt and others expressed their regret that they had missed the worst of it. One would expect that they would thank their luck that they had missed

the slaughter, but instead they cursed their fate at not being at Pozieres with their mates.

In 45-days the three Australian divisions lost 23,000 killed or wounded with Pozieres Ridge costing 7,000 casualties alone.

First Raid, First Wound

Gaining intelligence through raiding enemy trenches was a highly dangerous but essential venture. One night Joynt lead his raiding party of eight volunteers as they crawled across the 50m separating them from the enemy trenches. They became entangled in a maze of low barbed wire that had not been detected. They overcame this by simply standing up and charging with wild cries. The German sentry surrendered, but some other German soldiers threw grenades and wounded Joynt and one of the raiders. Having captured a prisoner and some papers the raiders moved to withdraw. Joynt stayed to the last, but then found his right arm was paralysed and he could not climb the parapet to leave! He walked down the trench until he found a step and was finally able to exit. Unfortunately, as he crossed 'no-man's land' his puttee legging became entangled in the barbed wire. He could not untangle it and collapsed due to his wound. Fortunately, LtCol Gordon Bennett, CO of the 6th Battalion (who later commanded the ill-fated 8th Division in Singapore) and his runner saw him and ran to his aid. His wound was far more serious than he thought and he was sent to England and a hospital there to recover and convalesce. His near-death experience had not dampened either his enthusiasm or that of his recovering comrades '... who longed to be back with their mates.'

BACK TO THE FRONT

Joynt was now the experienced, hardened veteran he had once wondered if he could ever be. He did not lack imagination and was not fatalistic about the fact that death stalked them all. An example was where the Germans voluntarily withdrew to a better position. Noticing that there appeared to be nobody occupying the German trenches he casually walked forward to low ridge. The trenches were indeed empty. He continued his lone and unauthorized reconnaissance until he reached the first trench line of the formidable 'Hindenburg Line'. As he turned to retrace his path bullets began whizzing past so closely that he had to take cover. An hour later he made the final dash followed by another volley. On return to his lines he found six bullet holes in his coat, but none had even scratched him!

ANOTHER BATTLE OF ATTRITION AT PASSCHENDAELE

In October 1917 several close comrades from his battalion, who Joynt describes as 'magnificent and fearless officers'

were killed, once more thinning the ranks of the veterans. Among them was his brother Gerald. It would seemingly be impossible for Joynt not to be affected by these accumulating catastrophic events, yet if his writing is anything to go by he remained undaunted and determined. There is no indication that he questioned the purpose of the war, or the cost in lives. Australia was committed to the war and it must go on until it is won!

THE FINAL CHAPTER

After all that had happened, it is hard to know what motivated Joynt to take ever-increasing risks and more daring feats of arms. He had seen too many of his comrades die to have developed an 'immortality syndrome', but his Victoria Cross citation records several actions in which he rallied his troops to attack strongly defended positions in the face of machine gun fire and artillery shelling. His élan and reckless courage broke the spirit of the defenders and brought about their surrender. On 25th August 1918 his luck ran out and he was severely wounded by an artillery shell. His war was over.

Despite his unstinting service and sacrifice for his country (and the British Empire) in 1929 when the Great Depression made his farm unprofitable the Closer Settlement Board foreclosed on his soldier settlement farm and financially ruined him. Later, when he commanded a militia battalion, he was accused by the Army of misappropriating £300 from regimental funds. A simple audit would have shown that rather than make an extra £300 profit, or taking the money himself he had lowered the prices in the soldier's canteen.

Joynt never complained about the cards fate had dealt him, nor the people who treated him badly. He was a man of the 'old school' who never indulged in introspection or self-doubt. He prized his word as his bond and his honour above all else. Despite his financial struggles, he dedicated himself to the establishment of The Melbourne Shrine of Remembrance, the foundation of the Returned Services League as a place for old comrades to meet and as a service to former soldiers. He overcame further obstacles as a Founder of Legacy, an organization established to look after the children of deceased soldiers.

After WWI, Joynt served in the militia. In WW2, now a Major, he enlisted in 1939 and served until 1944 when he was discharged with the rank of Honorary Lieutenant Colonel.

THE CULTURE OF MODERN TIMES

Lt Donovan Joynt, VC was a courageous hero, yet when peace returned he was mistreated at every turn by Government bureaucrats, military bureaucrats (both uniformed and civilian) and local officialdom. One example will suffice: in

1968 all-living Australian VC holders were invited to attend a ceremony and a series of functions in London. The RAF would assume responsibility for their travel and accommodation from Singapore (where the Commonwealth Brigade was based). The RAAF was asked to assist in the movement of the Australians to Singapore. They declined, so Joynt, VC and his fellow heroes paid for their own commercial tickets to Singapore. No other Commonwealth country followed Australia's lead ...

Despite all the trials, setbacks and obstacles he experienced, Joynt never deviated from following his own path of honour and integrity.

Donovan Joynt, VC was a man of his time the like of which is becoming ever rarer.

Yet my own assessment is that given the opportunity many of today's young Australians would unselfishly rise to the call to arms to defend Australia. But once again the failures will be at the strategic political, bureaucratic and senior military leadership levels. The greatest concern is that there is clear evidence of a whole cabal of powerful forces within Australian society who appear to be determined to divide our national unity and are acting against our sovereign and defence interests.

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4. <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/lay-percy-perce-7125>
5. The War Diaries of Captain Percy Lay: 1914-19 - J. L. Turner (ed), private print, Ballarat, 1981
6. The title of Donovan Joynt's biography is taken from the Rudyard Kipling poem: 'The Lost Legion' which begins:

*There's a Legion that never was 'listed',
That carries no colours or crest,
But, split in a thousand detachments,
Is breaking the road for the rest.*