What is ANZAC Day?

ANZAC Day – 25 April – is probably Australia's most important national occasion. It marks the anniversary of the first major military action fought by Australian and New Zealand forces during the First World War. ANZAC stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corps. The soldiers in those forces quickly became known as ANZACs, and the pride they soon took in that name endures to this day.

Why is this day special to Australians?

When war broke out in 1914 Australia had been a federal commonwealth for only 14 years. The new national government was eager to establish its reputation among the nations of the world. In 1915 Australian and New Zealand soldiers formed part of the allied expedition that set out to capture the Gallipoli peninsula to open the way to the Black Sea for the allied navies. The plan was to capture Constantinople (now Istanbul), the capital of the Ottoman Empire and an ally of Germany. They landed at Gallipoli on 25 April, meeting fierce resistance from the Turkish defenders. What had been planned as a bold stroke to knock Turkey out of the war quickly became a stalemate, and the campaign dragged on for eight months. At the end of 1915 the allied forces were evacuated after both sides had suffered heavy casualties and endured great hardships. Over 8,000 Australian soldiers were killed. News of the landing at Gallipoli made a profound impact on Australians at home and 25 April quickly became the day on which Australians remembered the sacrifice of those who had died in war.

Although the Gallipoli campaign failed in its military objectives of capturing Constantinople and knocking Turkey out of the war, the Australian and New Zealand actions during the campaign bequeathed an intangible but powerful legacy. The creation of what became known as the "ANZAC legend" became an important part of the national identity of both nations. This shaped the ways they viewed both their past and future.

Early commemorations

The date, 25 April, was officially named ANZAC Day in 1916 and was marked by a wide variety of ceremonies and services in Australia, a march through London, and a sports day in the Australian camp in Egypt. In London over 2,000 Australian and New Zealand troops marched through the streets. A London newspaper headline dubbed them "The knights of Gallipoli". Marches were held all over Australia in 1916. Wounded soldiers from Gallipoli attended the Sydney march in convoys of cars, attended by nurses. For the remaining years of the war, ANZAC Day was used as an occasion for patriotic rallies and recruiting campaigns, and parades of serving members of the AIF were held in most cities.

During the 1920s ANZAC Day became established as a national day of commemoration for the 60,000 Australians who died during the war. The first year in which all states observed some form of public holiday together on ANZAC Day was 1927. By the mid-1930s all the rituals we today associate with the day – dawn vigils, marches, memorial services, reunions, two-up games – were firmly established as part of ANZAC Day culture.
With the coming of the Second World War, ANZAC Day was used to also commemorate the lives of Australians lost in that war. In subsequent years the meaning of the day has been further broadened to include Australians killed in all the military operations in which Australia has been involved.

ANZAC Day was first commemorated at the Memorial in 1942 but, due to government orders preventing large public gatherings in case of Japanese air attack, it was a small affair and was neither a march nor a memorial service. ANZAC Day has been annually commemorated at the Memorial ever since.

What does it mean today?

Australians recognise 25 April as an occasion of national commemoration. Commemorative services are held at dawn – the time of the original landing – across the nation. Later in the day, ex-servicemen and women meet and join in marches through the major cities and many smaller centres. Commemorative ceremonies are held at war memorials around the country. It is a day when Australians reflect on the many different meanings of war.

Dawn Service

The Dawn Service observed on ANZAC Day has its origins in an operational routine which is still observed by the Australian Army today. During battle, the half-light of dawn was one of the most favoured times for an attack. Soldiers in defensive positions were, therefore, woken up in the dark, before dawn, so by the time first light crept across the battlefield they were awake, alert, and manning their weapons. This was, and still is, known as "stand-to". It was also repeated at sunset.

After the First World War, returned soldiers sought the comradeship they felt in those quiet, peaceful moments before dawn. With symbolic links to the dawn landing at Gallipoli, a dawn stand-to or ceremony became a common form of ANZAC Day remembrance during the 1920s; the first official dawn service was held at the Sydney Cenotaph in 1927. Dawn services were originally very simple and followed the operational ritual. In many cases they were restricted to veterans only and the daytime ceremony was for families and other well-wishers. Before dawn the gathered veterans would be ordered to "stand to" and two minutes' silence would follow. At the end of this time a lone bugler would play the Last Post and then concluded the service with Reveille. In more recent times the families and young people have been encouraged to take part in dawn services, and services in Australian capital cities have seen some of the largest turnouts ever. Reflecting this change, the ceremonies have become more elaborate, incorporating hymns, readings, pipers, and rifle volleys. Others, though, have retained the simple format of the dawn stand-to, familiar to so many soldiers.

The ANZAC Day ceremony

Each year the commemorations follow a pattern that is familiar to each generation of Australians. A typical ANZAC Day service contains the following features: introduction, hymn, prayer, an address, laying of wreaths, recitation, Last Post, a period of silence, Rouse or Reveille, and the national anthem. At the Memorial, families often place red poppies beside the names of relatives on the Memorial's Roll of Honour after events such as the ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day services.