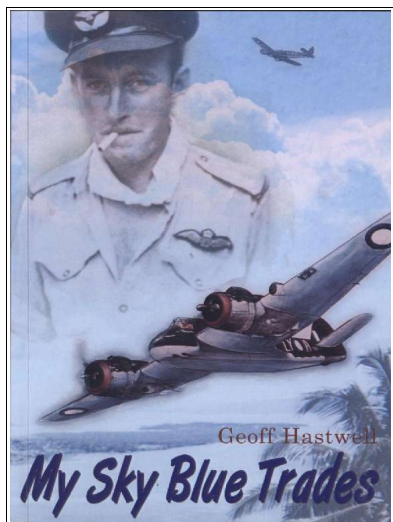


ANZAC... A reflection on fourteen years on the 'Asphalt Mile'

My father flew with the RAAF in New Guinea during 1943 – 1944. When he passed away early in 1994, I resolved to take his place at the Dawn Service and at the March through Adelaide on April 25th.



Cover of Geoff's recent novel

I did so with mixed motives and some unease of mind as, since the Vietnam 'conflict', I was deeply suspicious of war as a means of resolving disputes. Moreover, Dad and I had disagreed on the pros and cons of Vietnam as a 'just war', though never (sadly) discussing or debating the issues at length.

However, I loved him and wanted to commemorate, remember and acknowledge his contribution to one of the few wars (in my view) that Australia has fought with some validity and moral certainty. I had written a short radio play around a controversial incident involving Dad's Squadron – which fortunately took place before he joined it. I was (and am) well aware of the difficulty and danger of later generations pointing fingers at our servicemen and women – war continually throws up profound contradictions, ambiguities and ultimately imponderable situations. This applies to every war in history, whatever the reason it begins and whoever its leaders may be. NO side or individual is spared the hard lessons or potential horrors all soldiers face....

So, for fourteen years, I've joined the ever-thinning ranks of 30 Squadron men on ANZAC Day. A year or two ago, the granddaughter of one of the men too ill to march accompanied the contingent; this year a grandson (a Qantas pilot!) did the same. Then, six or seven strong, we stepped out along Pulteney Street and North Terrace and marched ('shuffled') to our end point at the Cross of Sacrifice. And once again my belly filled with a jumble of emotions, positive and negative.

On the plus side of the ledger, it is immensely moving and heartening to talk with Dad's comrades, before, after and (at times) during the March. None of the men could be labelled 'jingoistic' or 'war-monger' or 'killer'.... There is, oppositely, a deep humbleness in their demeanour, a self-deprecating and shy "Let's get through this, fellers" approach. For some, this last factor is increasingly difficult. One man, John, was pushed in a wheelchair by his daughter, who was on the March for the first time. Another man, one of Dad's good friends from the war, has had to miss the last two Marches with a bad leg.

But on the March itself, along the 'Asphalt Mile' I become more than a tad churned up, baffled, angry. Why, I ask myself year after year, do the onlookers behave as they do? Why do they cheer, yell comments like, "You bewdy, mate!", applaud, wave flags? Such actions, on this Day, to me are out of place, insensitive, WRONG! ANZAC Day, for me, should be dedicated to a reflection on the horror of wars; the waste, the stupidity, the evil and the tragedy.... We should employ the Day in a firm resolve to eschew fighting as a first, second or third resort in our world affairs. (The people who maintain, 'There are worse things than war' never seem to offer an instance!) ANZAC Day is NOT, in my humble opinion, a party day, a fun day, a 'let your hair down' kind of day!

But so sadly, it seems to be getting that way more and more. The crowds lining Adelaide footpaths multiply; media hype is endless and nauseating. Look at the total travesty which spreads over ANZAC Cove each April.... ('I'm doing my European trip so I'll dash over to Turkey for ANZAC Day.') And the Western Front war cemeteries (how many thousand graves?) pack 'em in, busload upon busload. Do human beings have a weird, masochistic streak which revels in tragedy? Are we, not far beneath our pragmatic, sensible exteriors, sentimental marshmallows who adore a red poppy and a misty moment by a headstone.....? I don't know.

I do know that, if we allow cheap sentimentality and maudlin ceremony to intrude too often, the ones who WANT us to go to wars, the folk who trot out platitudes and cliches and jingoistic nonsense will prevail. As they did in Vietnam, Gulf War One and Two, Afghanistan, Iraq. When will it end? Iran? North Korea? China.....?

Of course, harking back to the 'Great War', as the First World War was originally known, I remember this moment on television recently. A military historian was asked by an interviewer, innocently enough: "Did any good at all come out of the Great War?". The response was assured, unequivocal: "Of course. Prussian militarism was wiped out entirely." Meaning then, that Hitler and the Nazis came out of a complete vacuum!

No, dear reader – be VERY wary of those who would lead us to the abyss of war. And on ANZAC Day, as I try to do, be on guard, vigilant, prepared to question sharply the motives of people who cheer, applaud, REVEL in war – on ANZAC or any other day.

Antoine de Saint-Exupery, the World War Two flyer shot down in action, puts it so well and so truly in 'Flight to Arras': 'War is not an adventure. It is a disease. It is like typhus.'

LEST WE FORGET.....

Geoff Hastwell 29/4/08