

Anzac Day and the Little Man with only One Arm

Baz said to meet in the pub just down the road from the newspaper office. A beer or two, he said. The Grenadier.

“Maybe three,” said Jason with a wry grin. “Maybe three...”

I knew ANZAC Day was regarded as a National holiday throughout Australia, not just a day off, not just a day down at the beach or a barbie in the back yard. I had been told what to expect long before I'd made Australia my new home. But I hadn't expected this.

“The law is hot on drink driving,” Baz warned. “If you don't want your collar felt, I'd take the train. I am.”

I had heeded the warning. The 9.35 into Adelaide station was packed; so many Aussies wanted to share the day. Share it with brave men like Baz and Jason who'd volunteered and flown Spitfires and Hurricanes and helped rout the Japs in the Islands.

Then I'd joined the crowds lining the route, King William Street, ten and twelve deep, watching the march. The band, resplendent, played. The crowd cheered, Aussie flags waved. I caught a glimpse of Baz with the handlebar moustache and Jason with the tiny tash. There they were, striding out. So smart, so focused, such determination written on their faces for the day. Their day.

“Brave bastards,” muttered the man to my right. “Brave bastards came through hell.” I turned and nodded to him. I shared his thought.

And then they passed, so proud. And I was proud to know them. Baz and Jason, proud to work alongside them on the paper, Baz the sub-editor, Jason the senior writer. Proud for what they had done for their country, our country, our freedom.

“Brave bastards, all of them,” he said again as the last man trailed off down King William Street and out of sight. And the sound of the band trailed off too.

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I'm through the door and the pub's heaving. The men are there already, straight off the march, still smart and pristine, their uniforms still blinking in the light of day for the first time in twelve months, spruced up, freshly ironed for the occasion, their wives had seen to that. Digger hats brushed, shirts ironed and jackets festooned with medals.

“Brave bastards,” the man at my side had said. “Gallipoli, Flanders Fields, Singapore, El Alamein.”

"I'll get them in," I say after I've pushed through. There's a dozen serving, the beer keeps coming, glasses filled as fast as emptied. Beer swills across the counter and spills over and down onto the floor. "Cheers," I say, among the noise.

"Cheers."

"Cheers."

"Well, did you enjoy it?" says Baz. "Your first ANZAC Day."

"I did. All those men, all *you* men... I didn't realise."

"You're not the only one." Jason puts his beer down, wipes his lips with the back of his hand. "The younger generation. It's all past history to them. We're all Old Timers. Yesterday's news although it was barely ten years ago."

I nod in agreement. "Back home ours is Remembrance Sunday, a minute's silence, then we get on with our lives as though nothing happened."

There's a pause while it sinks in.

"But I reckon you Aussies respect your war heroes much more than we do. What I saw today in King William Street is proof. The crowds, the sentiment, the appreciation of what you all did."

Did Baz say, "Maybe"?

And Jason, "Perhaps"?

You can scarcely hear in the bar. "There's a room out the back, it's quieter," says Jason. He points. Ruddy cheeks, the tiny tash. "It's quieter there." He has to shout to make himself heard.

Tables, chairs, an aspidistra in the corner, men sitting, leaning over, talking together. Sharing jokes. Yes, it's quieter in here even though it's still packed.

I find myself standing over a table with a group of three soldiers in uniforms of the First World War, chatting about what they went through. Reminiscing, telling their experiences, the details, the days, the nights, their comrades, the dead. Yes, the dead, the men they left behind on the battlefield. Good Aussie men.

I'm looking down on a man of around sixty, maybe more, it's hard to tell, the hair is all but gone, the face lined. He looks up and asks softly, "Your first ANZAC Day, son?"

"Yes, we have Remembrance Sunday, up in London," I find myself explaining all over again. "I've never been."

He has a pleasant face, pock marked, eyebrows like an overgrown hedge. A little man with sad, blue eyes and just one arm. "Flanders Fields," he tells me. "But not before we had taken the village." Yes, just one arm.

"The village?"

“Villers-Bretonneux.” His hand is trembling. His left hand. His only hand. “Villers-Bretonneux,” he says again. “Picardy. It comes back to you on ANZAC Day as if it’s yesterday. And it was slaughter.”

I am not sure if he wants to talk about it. Jason said some bottle it up, their experiences, the trenches in the First World War, Japanese camps in the Second. “Some things you cannot share. Some experiences you keep to yourself. Keep from your loved ones.”

The man looks up at me.

“I want to hear,” I say.

“You know the song?”

I don’t.

And he starts to sing in a low, quiet voice, with a strong Australian accent.

“Roses are shining in Picardy
 In the hush of the silver dew,
 Roses are shining in Picardy
 But there’s never a rose like you
 And the roses will die with the summer time
 And our roads may be far apart
 But there’s one rose that dies not in Picardy,
 ‘Tis the rose that I keep in my heart.

“Villers-Bretonneux,” he’s saying now. “The orders came down from the top. Drive the Germans out. Drive them out.”

He’s looking up at me again. His eyes confirm he is there, this minute, now. He can hear the thunder of war, the smell of fear, the sound of death.

“I was part of the 13th Division under Brigadier-General Glasgow and Glasgow was ordered to take the village. In daylight...” He hesitates. “I tell you in bloody daylight and Glasgow told them.”

“Told them?”

“The Germans were entrenched, you see, son. Dug in. And on high ground. Their guns well set and machine gun entrenchments ready. Slaughter it would have been... he told them, slaughter.”

I’m feeling pleased for the little man with pock marked face, sad eyes and one arm. Pleased his leader told them what it would be.

“Then Glasgow came up with this plan to surprise them, surprise the Jerries.” He takes a sip of his beer. “At night. After darkness fell. No artillery to warn them. That was the trick.”

My mind is visualising the darkness, the Germans set, the Aussies outnumbered.

“Yes, outnumbered,” he is saying. “Outnumbered ten to one. Not that we knew it at the time, you understand. They didn’t tell us at the time.”

I think to myself how Churchill said truth was the first casualty in war.

“Then he gave the order, Glasgow did. And we scrambled to get at them. Out of the trenches, out of our fox holes. Over the top we went, every man-jack of us. And the cry went out, ‘Get the machine guns. Get the bloody Kraut machine guns – or die.’ My mate, Harold on my left, a chap by the name of Nichols from Ballarat on the right, just lads, all of us. Through the swish and patter.”

“Patter?”

“The machine guns. A sort of pattering noise and the swish of the bullets and the men dropping like flies, no sound except the thump of them hitting the ground. No time to stop, to look back. No time to help them.”

He sighs, draws breath. He is there, now. “We ran hard and fast. Heads down. Then stood still, motionless, when the Very lights lit up the night sky.”

“Standing still?”

“You can’t pick up a motionless figure, son. Only a moving one.”

I scarcely dare ask. “That where you lost your right arm?”

“Not till it was nearly over. Copped one in the elbow. Smashed the bone. They could have saved my arm but it took time to get the medics in and me away.”

I am at a loss as to what to say.

He knows my discomfort. “I hope you never go through it son. Hope you never...”

His voice trails off. The tears in his eyes. Those sad eyes.

“The war to end all wars, they assured us. And we were at it again just a handful of years later. The Jerries and us. What’s wrong with them, son? What’s wrong with us? So much slaughter. So many of my comrades left back there on the fields of Picardy.”

Years later I would stand on those fields in northern France and know exactly what he meant. The little man with only one arm.

Richard Holdsworth June 2026