

On the 11th, remember the living

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Across our nation today we will pause to commemorate a great war that began before most of us were alive and ended with the deaths of 60,000 Australian soldiers. Our leaders will make speeches echoing honour and sacrifice, school captains will lay wreaths, and trumpeted reveilles will puncture a minute's silence. But what is the point of all this national emotional investment in commemoration?

Australians seem obsessed with commemorating world wars. We watch high-rating TV shows in which Australians trace the footsteps of their military ancestors. We've built thousands of war memorials and hundreds of RSL clubs. We swim in war memorial pools. We drive to our national capital on a Remembrance Driveway, where roadside toilets remember our Victoria Cross winners. We can buy sand from Gallipoli over the counter at any Australia Post, and buy military histories by the metre in our bookstores. At football grand finals the names of fallen soldiers grace the big screen. Commemoration is almost inescapable - lest we forget.

Commemoration sells and war memorials are a growth industry in Australia. This year, while the Australian Defence Force budget was cut, the Australian War Memorial budget increased 25 per cent. Staff and seed funds from government are supporting a campaign for a \$3.5 million Peacekeepers Memorial, and another group is soliciting for a \$3 million edifice to the distant Boer War. Another \$25 million is planned for two new world war memorials beside Lake Burley Griffin. The Prime Minister has committed \$8.1 million to building new war memorials in Wellington and Washington. At \$39.6 million, the planned outlay on these memorials will be greater than the budget of Australia's peak intelligence agency, the Office of National Assessments.

The nation's predilection for war memorials is hardly new - the defence precinct at Russell Hill had a functioning war memorial a decade before a functioning defence headquarters was built.

Yet despite the proliferation of war memorials and a fetish for military history, the gulf between the Australian public and the military that serve them has never been greater. The public does not understand the complexity or context of the modern war our soldiers are fighting in Afghanistan. Many soldiers now question how much the public care. Last week, news of 10 soldiers being shot was buried behind a deluge of Qantas commentary. In May, when two Diggers were killed, a federal MP noted his office had been besieged by hundreds of calls about the welfare of Australian cattle in Indonesia, but not a single call about the welfare of Australian soldiers in Afghanistan.

After a decade of war in the Middle East, private citizens here - with a few honourable exceptions - have done little new to help ease returned and wounded soldiers back into their communities. In Britain an enormously successful charity campaign, Help for Heroes, has raised \$175 million for wounded veterans in four years. Movie stars and prime ministers have signed on to build country houses where soldiers and their families can recuperate, funded by celebrity cookbooks and chart-topping music singles. In the US, the Sopranos star James Gandolfini has produced a critically acclaimed HBO documentary to help soldiers with post traumatic stress disorder. A private group has pioneered "Operation Proper Exit": an innovative program that takes wounded soldiers back into war zones to see where they were injured, thank colleagues who saved their lives, and leave the war on their own terms.

But in Australia, our wounded soldiers are invisible. Comparatively few charities exist to support the families left behind whilst soldiers fight overseas. The poker machine lobby cynically brandishes "Clubs support our Diggers" signs, yet in NSW, where gambling nets a \$3.2 billion annual profit for registered clubs, RSL clubs donate a pitiful \$6 million to veterans. Top US entertainers perform for their soldiers, but only five of our top 120 musicians have joined ADF-organised entertainment tours. Few celebrities volunteer to perform for military families here in Australia. Neither movie stars nor rugby players volunteer to visit wounded soldiers. No wonder our soldiers and their families are confused that so much commemorative effort isn't matched with contemporary concern.

Our soldiers serving in the Defence Force today are the new unknown soldiers. They weren't invited to Kevin Rudd's 2020 Summit, can't speak in public and are absent from discussions about Australia's future. Only one sits on the Anzac Centenary Advisory Board that will oversee an orgy of commemoration between 2014 and 2018.

Somewhere in all of this Anzac nostalgia we've forgotten that commemoration in a vacuum is pointless. Why remember Gallipoli and the Somme if not to learn from the tragic sacrifice and never make the same mistakes again?

Australians are apathetic about the decisions that shape where, how, and with what our soldiers fight. Yet they are passionate about military history. There were 50 per cent more public submissions to the Anzac Centenary Commission than to Australia's last defence white paper.

Our Defence Force has serious problems that need more than a minute's reflection. Rather than building a new Anzac interpretive centre for last century's military, we need one for today's. We've forgotten that our national investment in commemoration needs a consequence.

Building war memorials is easy; building sound defence policy is hard. It's time we started caring more about soldiers who are alive, than those long dead.

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