

AFTER THE WAR

About the author

Dr Leigh Straw is an academic, historian and author. Her books include fictional crime novels set in Fremantle and Sydney (*Limestone* and *Sophia Lane*), a history of criminal women in Perth and Fremantle (*Drunks, Pests and Harlots*) and her most recent publication, *The Worst Woman in Sydney: The Life and Crimes of Kate Leigh* (NewSouth Books, 2016). Leigh has been researching and teaching Australian history for over twenty years and lectures at the University of Notre Dame, Fremantle.

AFTER THE WAR

*RETURNED SOLDIERS AND THE
MENTAL AND PHYSICAL SCARS OF
WORLD WAR I*

LEIGH STRAW



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This book is dedicated to

ALAN DIGGINS

*Thank you for sharing your dad's story and
for being an inspiration to me.*

and

NATALIE DIGGINS

The memories that bind, keep us close, always.

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PREFACE: 'COLLIE'S DREADFUL TRAGEDY'

On a cold winter's evening in July 1929, Muriel Pope walked home from the local cinema with her friend, Arthur Read. It was a relatively quiet night as the pair strolled near the railway line in Collie, a mining town south of Perth. Suddenly, a man appeared near them, armed with a gun. With little hesitation, he shot Muriel three times at close range before Arthur was able to tackle him to the ground. It was at this point that the assailant turned the gun on himself. Bloodied and dazed from a bullet wound to the head, the man fell back against a tree while Muriel slumped to the ground, dead from a fatal wound to the heart.

As details of the murder-suicide circulated around the town the next day, locals were saddened and shocked. Muriel Pope was a widowed mother of five small children. The murderer was also married with four children and was from a well-known mining family.¹ Jealousy was alleged at the inquest and Arthur Read gave evidence that in the weeks leading up to her death, Muriel had ignored the advances of a male neighbour. Unable to accept this rejection, the man continued to harass her and warned Read that no one else would have her. The newspapers referred to it as a sensational tale of unrequited love and murderous intent. Muriel was the victim of one man's jealous rage.²

The Collie murder story had long been relegated to the archives and local history before I came across it. By chance, in

2010, while researching crime in Western Australia, a 'Collie Massacre' headline caught my attention as I scrolled through microfilm copies of *Truth* newspaper at the Battye Library in Perth. My husband's family were originally from Collie and I wondered if they had heard about the murder-suicide. I printed off the front page and glanced only briefly at the photograph of the murderer, not reading the article until later.

What I hadn't noticed – and would shock me as I showed the article to family – is the killer was identified as Andrew Straw. Dressed in war uniform and a slouch hat, a hauntingly familiar face stared out at me from the front page of *Truth*. Andrew Straw bore a striking resemblance to my husband. I had unearthed an unexpected family story.

Andrew Straw is an elusive figure in the Straw family. Different stories have surfaced over the years about his death and his role in the murder of Muriel Pope. 'Andy', as relatives affectionately refer to him, left unanswered questions in the wake of his death. In trying to piece together how a likeable man – with a wife and a family of his own – had killed a woman in a jealous rage, I wanted to see if there were any other mitigating circumstances. After years of looking at state and national war memorials with my husband – keen to find mention of a Straw family member – I had found a personal connection with World War I, but it was not the story we had expected. Andrew Straw survived the European battlefields of World War I, but by the end of the 1920s his life had taken a dramatic turn and he resolved to kill his neighbour. As I looked for family records relating to Andrew, I realised there was a wider context to his story. He was a returned serviceman who, according to his friends, lost his sanity during the war. His troubled story begged greater clarity.

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Muriel Pope, Andrew's victim, also heightened my interest in the war aspect of the murder story. Muriel was a casualty of the war even before her untimely death. Her husband, Percy Pope, was hospitalised on a number of occasions while fighting in the war. He was eventually repatriated back to Western Australia before the end of the war and died of tuberculosis a few years later. Like so many other servicemen, Percy had survived the war but his injuries would eventually take his life.³

In my efforts to uncover any evidence that the war may have mentally or physically impacted on Andrew Straw, I was drawn to the stories of many other returned servicemen who struggled to adjust to civilian life. The Collie murder case thus turned into a story about the effects of the Great War on returned servicemen and their families. Historians write history because they feel compelled to tell stories that provide a better understanding of and engagement with the past. In engaging with our family's past, the history I felt compelled to share has become more than a family story.

Notes

- 1 'The Mad Secret of The Collie Massacre', *Truth*, 28 July 1929, p. 1; 'Collie's Dreadful Tragedy', *Mirror*, 27 July 1929, p. 1.
- 2 'Collie's Dreadful Tragedy', *Mirror*, 27 July 1929, p. 1.
- 3 National Archives Australia: First Australian Imperial Force Personnel Dossiers 1914–1920 (hereafter NAA AIF Personnel Dossiers), 'POPE Percy John: Service Number', Statement of Service record, Series B2455, Item 8020191, accessed online 1 September 2013, < <http://recordsearch.naa.gov.au/NameSearch/Interface/ItemDetail.aspx?Barcode=8020191> >

INTRODUCTION

In August 1916, Sergeant Guy Clifton Lukin wrote to the mother of his mate, Robert Adam. He penned the letter in reply to one from Mrs Adam asking about her son's death at the Western Front. Guy answered as best he could:

One of the men in Bob's platoon told me he (Bob) was the bravest & coolest man he had ever seen under fire, in fact he was too brave & it makes me almost cry to see our boys being killed with big shells & we don't even get a fighting chance with them...but there is one thing certain our boys will never give in they will fight to the finish & to a man...I'm proud to have been a friend of Bob's – he was loved by all his men & no one could have done more than he did...¹

By the time the war ended in 1918, Guy Lukin had lost two brothers, cousins, friends, and many men he commanded into battle. Wounded in April 1917 and awarded a Distinguished Conduct Medal for his 'gallantry and devotion to duty', the war remained a defining moment in Guy's life as it would for so many of the thousands of other men who were repatriated to Western Australia after active service.²

More than a century after Guy's heartfelt letter to a grieving mother, World War I remains a foundational story in the history of Australia. The war, it has been argued, provided the newly federated Australian nation with a national story and legend that ordinary Australians could identify with. In the decades following Australia's 'baptism of fire'³, World War I has featured in national identity and nationalism. It is a story, grounded in the Anzac Legend, that has been used to bind the nation – an imagined community of citizens – around a shared sense of history.⁴ Despite recent criticism of the militarisation of Australian history and national identity, World War I dominates popular understandings of the 'birth of the nation'.⁵ In fact, as Carolyn Holbrook aptly states, 'the extraordinary currency of the Anzac legend in contemporary Australian society' is a striking phenomenon.⁶

The Anzac story has served a 'socially cohesive function in terms of common identification with a powerful collective memory and the veneration of national characteristics, whether real or imagined'.⁷ This national story was inspired early on by the works of Charles Edwin Woodrow Bean. As the official war historian and present with troops from the first landing in Gallipoli on 25 April 1915, Bean's accounts of the war were instrumental in popularising the Anzac Legend. Inspired by the bush mythology of the late nineteenth century, Bean believed the bush ethos characterised Australians and applied this to his depictions of the Australian Infantry Force (AIF) soldiers in World War I. As the official war correspondent, Bean observed the troops and shared their experiences in dispatches to the press and later in his six-volume contribution to the twelve volumes making up the *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, which he edited. Bean's recollections of Australians at war tied in well with popular Australian identity. Egalitarianism, mateship, larrikinism

and anti-authoritarianism all came to define the troops and their ‘digger’ identities. Bean’s books – particularly his popular *Anzac Book* – inspired public interest in seeing the soldiers as establishing an Australian reputation internationally and exhibiting national characteristics taken up more broadly in Australian national identity.⁸

Renewed interest in World War I and its connection to national history and identity has been influenced in recent decades by government ritualisation of war and commemoration, particularly the annual Anzac Day Service on 25 April. Since the 1980s, Bob Hawke, Paul Keating, John Howard and, more recently, Kevin Rudd and Julia Gillard, have, as prime ministers, used war in the ‘cause of national identity politics’, whether in a conservative manner or contested within revised histories of the nation.⁹ It wasn’t always like this. In the first years after the war, politicians and prime ministers ‘were concerned with its immediate legacies: the burial of the dead, the raising of memorials, the reassurance of a traumatised population’.¹⁰ The recent increased popularity of Anzac Day and Australian war history has coincided with federal government support for war as an intrinsic part of Australian identity. As Anna Clark highlights, this trend became evident when successive prime ministers made significant gestures in official commemoration of war history, including Bob Hawke’s visit to Gallipoli in 1990; Paul Keating’s commemoration of the Unknown Soldier in 1993; and John Howard’s support for ‘the “digger” as the centre of Australia’s national identity’.¹¹ At the Dawn Service in 2005, Prime Minister Howard declared: ‘Those who fought here in places like Quinn’s Post, Pope’s Hill and the Nek changed forever the way we saw our world and ourselves. They bequeath Australia a lasting sense of national identity’.¹² Former prime minister Julia Gillard, speaking in Townsville on

Anzac Day 2013, commemorated the day as representing, ‘the spirit of being Australian, and our history and what’s forged and shaped us’.¹³ This official patronage for an Anzac tradition, renewed by federal governments from the 1980s, has ensured war history remains a popular part of the Australian national story.

The ‘Anzac tradition’ that recent prime ministers have referred to is public and institutionalised.¹⁴ Different to the private ‘digger’ identity and tradition, ‘Anzac’ has been popularised into the name given to troops and a ‘growing and elaborate mythology of national duty, sacrifice and loyalty’.¹⁵ Originally used to refer to the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) in the Gallipoli campaign, the term was applied more generally to servicemen fighting in the war and has become a key part of popular conceptions of the war. ‘Anzac’ became an important part of the legend created around the wartime experiences of servicemen and came to symbolise Australians at war. In recent years, the ‘Anzac spirit’ has been used to connect war experiences with national identity.¹⁶ World War I commemorative events across the country since 2014 – marking the centenary of the start of the war – have further enhanced the public’s interest in the ‘Anzac tradition’. As Carolyn Holbrook states: ‘In a settler nation that is conspicuously short of unifying mythologies, the Anzac legend is uniquely powerful’.¹⁷

Australian historical interest in the Great War has followed clear developments and trends in the establishment of a broad historiography. In the decades following the war, historians produced work in the shadow of, and indebted to, C. E. W. Bean. So important is Bean’s contribution to Australian historiography, no other comprehensive history of the AIF has been created to compete with it.¹⁸ Army history has also dominated war historiography, to such an extent that for much of the twentieth

century, ‘The ANZAC of popular imagination is therefore a soldier, not a sailor or airman’.¹⁹ Since the 1980s, however, naval and air experiences have extended recognition of different types of war service. The ‘memory industry’ is another key part of war historiography and has greatly contributed to popular understandings, with national patronage from the Australian War Memorial. War memory sponsored by the state at the national level allows for a population to imagine the national community and thus commemorate the ‘spirit’ of the nation.²⁰ However, it must also resonate with individuals, families and local communities whereby memory provides psychological meaning for those dealing with war loss and suffering. It’s also important to remember here that the Anzac story is linked to ‘the *memory* of an event’ and what people believed to have happened.²¹ The public memory of what happened is sometimes far removed from what *actually* happened, as Carolyn Holbrook highlights.²² This is important when considering how public memory has shaped understandings of the war beyond what was actually experienced by the people who fought.

Particular genres of interest are discernible in war scholarship. With few broad surveys of the war by academic historians – aside from the works of Jeffrey Grey and Alan Stephens²³ – war scholarship has been mainly divided along the lines of traditional military history and war and society history.²⁴ Outside of the military histories, popular genres of war history have emerged and include studies of war and society, gender, home front, mourning and commemoration.

While Bean’s histories provided a positive national story, they also ‘marginalised war experiences’ that did not conform to ‘themes of national identity and achievement’.²⁵ The ‘bad characters’ of the war, for example, have not featured in war history until recently with Peter Stanley’s history of military indiscipline in the AIF.²⁶

In seeking to address the realities of war – outside of the positive portrayals of the legend – Stanley’s work is important in detailing not just the indiscipline of some soldiers but acknowledging the wider context of their experiences ‘as survivors of some of the most traumatic ordeals that Australians have ever endured’.²⁷

In an effort to account for the consequences of physical and mental breakdowns brought on by war service, recent historical works have generated greater discussion about the realities of war and its legacies for individuals and families into peacetime. The works of Joy Damousi, Bill Gammage, Ken Inglis, Marina Larsson, Alistair Thomson and Bart Ziino, for example, address the importance of memory, mourning, commemoration, repatriation and disability in war history and its social impacts.²⁸ This is exemplified in the collective work *Anzac Legacies: Australians and the Aftermath of War*.²⁹ The stories of men living with the legend featured in the works of Marina Larsson and Alistair Thomson. Such personal and family stories extend war history beyond Armistice to include the hard years that followed for individuals and families trying to come to terms with the aftermath of war in Australia. This is particularly poignant in the lives of men who were disabled or suffered from deteriorating mental health.³⁰ Marina Larsson highlights the silent histories that still remain and the neglect for these men and their families in official war history: ‘It is only by admitting to the devastating effects of war on the private lives of Australian families that the true cost of war for the nation can ever truly be understood’.³¹

After the War is a history located with the existing scholarship on war and its impacts on society. It tells a story of war’s aftermath on returned soldiers of the AIF (later re-named the 1st AIF to distinguish it from the 2nd AIF of World War II) and the society they came home to. Michael McKernan’s argument in his history

of Australian prisoners of war is relevant to this study: experiences and consequences of war do not end with an armistice. For some, the war continued to invade civilian and private life in ways that would resonate for years afterwards.³² Stephen Garton's random sample of more than 1,000 war pensioners from Veterans' Affairs files (from the two world wars and Vietnam) is evidence of the ongoing impact of war on the lives of those who returned from active service. According to Garton, veterans displayed 'higher rates of employment disruption, suicide, vagrancy, and marital instability than ordinary Australians'. They took more time off work due to illness and some were chronically unemployed.³³

Of the 330,000 Australian men who enlisted and served in the war, close to 60,000 never returned home. Australians suffered just under 5 per cent of all Allied casualties but in terms of their own losses, the war dead were over 14 per cent of all men who had enlisted from August 1914.³⁴ Western Australia's commitment to the war effort was the highest in the country, by proportion of population. Close to 10 per cent of the state's population enlisted in the war.³⁵ More than 8,000 West Australian men died in the war. Of the 32,000 West Australian men who enlisted in the war, 23,700 returned. Yet, while three in four West Australian men survived the war, over two-thirds were injured.³⁶ A staggering 20 million men were injured in the war across all fighting nations.³⁷

After the War is a history of repatriation and return and the impact of war experiences on the home front. Unlike the cessation of fighting which history can neatly work into beginning and ending dates – in this case 1914–1918 – 'return' was a process that involved years and sometimes decades of support. For the men who required mental and physical treatment after demobilisation, their repatriation stories, 'on the periphery of our popular histories of war', require greater understanding of the 'damaged

and dependent veteran' who brought the war back home in a confronting and emotional manner.³⁸

The returned servicemen in this book tell a story of war's aftermath in Western Australia. Ernest David Corse served with the 10th Light Horse Regiment in the war but returned home to his wife and three children months after enlisting and serving in Gallipoli. Suffering from tuberculosis, Ernest was hospitalised at Woorloo Sanatorium, over 60 kilometres east of Perth, and the jubilation of his return was followed by months of treatment and the breakdown of his family life.³⁹ For the Corse family, the battlefield had directly impacted on the home front, despite the fact their loved one had returned alive. Ernest's story is West Australian-based but it speaks also to the national story. Ernest was one of the many Australian servicemen popularised as Anzacs and faced with the task of returning home to rebuild their lives.

The stories informing this study feature men living in Western Australia after active service in the war. Of the 23,700 servicemen who returned to the state⁴⁰, not all were West Australian born. To limit analysis to only those born in the state denies the mixed demographics of the population at the time. It was a largely immigrant one with those born in WA a minority of the population. Most Australian migrants came from Victoria and New South Wales.⁴¹ A quarter of all non-Indigenous people in 1921 were born overseas, of which a large number were from the British Isles.⁴² Embarking for the war from another Australian state also did not preclude men from inclusion in this study. Under these broad parameters, if they were repatriated to Western Australia, their war and postwar experiences were considered. The majority of men featured as case studies were born in Western Australia or had moved to the state as children or teenagers. Others had not spent a great deal of time in the state before the war but remained

in Western Australia after. All of these men died in Western Australia and are thus a part of its landscape of loss.

This book explores the history of repatriation and return through analysis of treatment and suicide as key factors affecting veterans' health and mortality in postwar Western Australia. The search for answers to the Collie murder-suicide of 1929 is the over-arching narrative that binds the focus of tuberculosis and mental-health treatment, and suicide. The first three chapters detail the role of Western Australians in the war effort, the realities of the battlefield and the return of servicemen to their home communities. Chapter 4 considers the impact of tuberculosis on returned servicemen, their families and the wider community. In chapter 5, histories of shell shock and psychiatric treatment are explored and organised around personal and family experiences of treatment provided at the main state institutions and homes. Chapter 6 details the personal struggles of returned servicemen who were unable to cope with their war experiences after their return to civilian life. Such men took their own lives, including William Frederick Elliott who suicided in September 1921 and left behind a note citing 'mental pain' as being responsible for his decision to take his life.⁴³ Suicide, as a result of war trauma, is an important part of the wider history of war's aftermath. Chapter 7 explores some family stories of life after the war with physically and mentally affected soldiers.

After the War raises particular questions in analysing the lives of returned soldiers. In looking at the combat experiences of soldiers on the battlefields, it raises the question of the extent to which the war was a contributing factor in postwar breakdowns. What do personal battles with war-related illnesses reveal about state, public and personal histories of sanatorium treatment for returned servicemen? How did the war lead some men to suicide?

Overcoming the mental and physical impacts of war proved even harder than combat for some returned soldiers in Western Australia.

In an effort to address these questions, military, hospital, sanatorium, newspaper, and personal records have been used to detail postwar lives. Their stories are present in the state records relating to Wooroloo Sanatorium, Edward Millen Home, Claremont Hospital for the Insane, Stromness Hospital and Lemnos Hospital. Veteran's Case Files, available through the National Archives of Australia, have been an essential part of building individual profiles (a close, socio-biographical study) and mapping the medical and institutional lives of returned servicemen.

After the War closely follows the lives of a dozen or so men whose stories communicate the social meaning of the past in a more personal way. Their individual and family stories flow through the book and were brought to life by daughters, sons and grandchildren who became involved in this project and wanted their previously 'silent' histories shared. Veteran and family experiences form a narrative thread through which the thematic histories presented here are told.

Alongside archival research, *After the War* is informed by oral testimonies, inspired in part by Alistair Thomson's seminal work on Anzac memories and the connection between public legends and personal memory.⁴⁴ In my interviews with surviving family members, I engaged with people as sources, as eyewitnesses to the past.⁴⁵ In doing so, this 'active human relationship'⁴⁶ transformed my own practice of history by allowing me to share the stories and experiences on a human level. Oral history – 'the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction'⁴⁷ – brings together history and the community and can communicate the social meaning of history

in a more personable way.⁴⁸ As an historian interpreting the past, interviews afforded me an opportunity to know more about the aftermath of the war on the families of returned servicemen and to gain greater insight into the characters of the men. If, as Paul Thompson claims, '[a]ll history ultimately depends on its social purpose',⁴⁹ I needed to be clear with participants about what I hoped to achieve with the project and the social purpose their stories would serve for the wider public.

One of the achievements of oral history is its ability to give a voice to ordinary people who might have previously felt their experiences were not a part of particular social and community histories. From the very first interviews, I discovered my social purpose was bound to the personal needs behind the participants engaging with this history. Some individuals wanted to give the veterans in their family a greater voice within war history, particularly war's aftermath and the difficulties facing servicemen returning to civilian life. Others, however, had not thought about the broader picture but simply wanted a father, grandfather or uncle mentioned in the history of life after the war. In one of my first interviews I was reminded also of my own expectations of the central place of war in family experiences. Despite having family members who fought in the war and returned to their families, the war remained a minor part of life for some people and did not deeply affect their lives as much as I had expected. Interviews displayed for me the diversity of experiences of war and war service.



Returned servicemen faced a world that had dramatically changed since enlisting in the war. Some men were able to rebuild their lives and reconnect with family and their local community. For

so many of the returned servicemen, the war deeply influenced their postwar settlement, health and mental state. It was not necessarily that some men were able to completely overcome their war experiences. Even those who adjusted well enough to civilian life carried with them memories of war and its place in their sense of self. For Walter 'Tom' White, a soldier settler at Winchester, the war was physically embedded in his body. As he set up a farm with his wife and children, he walked each day on shrapnel lodged in his foot from the Gallipoli campaign.⁵⁰ For others the war was almost inescapable despite their efforts to move beyond it, particularly men who were hospitalised and institutionalised, or took their own lives.

War traumatised members of the AIF. In the last few decades, Australian war history and narratives have been influenced by new ideas around war, trauma and victimhood. As Christina Twomey argues, 'war's traumatising effects have been a central trope in the post-1980s incarnation of Anzac'.⁵¹ Personalised stories now feature in war histories and have influenced public interest in the 'traumatised individual' and the veteran as 'victim of war's horrors'.⁵²

Returned soldiers experienced traumatic stress that involved 'a fundamental rift or breakdown of psychological functioning (memory, behaviour, emotion) which occurs as a result of an unbearably intense experience that is life threatening to the self or others'.⁵³ The ways in which they dealt with their war trauma affected the postwar lives of all of those who served. While some suppressed the memories enough for them not to impact on their ability to cope, other men could not avoid thinking about the war and experienced social, familial or occupational dysfunction.⁵⁴ For returned soldiers who could not cope and decided to take their lives, the war had drastically traumatised their 'positive beliefs about the world' and led to a loss of a sense of the importance

of family, friends, the future and their own sense of self-worth. Unable to suppress the memories enough and cope, returned soldiers experienced what has now been termed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). While this condition can be the outcome of one devastating single event, men of World War I experienced a complex version of PTSD, primarily meaning myriad complex events that made up their war service, damaged their psyche and created war trauma.⁵⁵ While the history presented here deals specifically with World War I, the devastating impacts of PTSD has ongoing relevance to understandings of the devastating impacts of war on current service men and women.

War trauma deeply affected wives, children, families and the wider community. In telling the stories of returned servicemen, this study is also based on an understanding of war trauma as it impacted on the lives of people closest to the men who served in World War I. As Joy Damousi's work on war widows has shown, wives experienced the silences, the survivor guilt complexes, and trauma as it was lived out in everyday lives.⁵⁶ Given the passage of more than 100 years since the start of World War I, I have not been able to talk with the wives of returned soldiers but have garnered some of their experiences from inquest and newspaper records. I have, however, been able to talk with sons and daughters who have shared details of their lives with their parents and the impacts of the war and its aftermath. While the soldiers presented in this study take centrestage as the main characters, *After the War* is also a story of trauma as it impacted on marriages and family life. In the aftermath of the Collie murder-suicide of 1929, the story framing this book, it was the Pope and Straw families who were left to pick up the pieces and recover a semblance of family life.

When repatriated members of the AIF stepped onto home soil once again, they bridged the gap between the battlefields and the home front. Having witnessed the brutality of war and the devastation of loss on a mass scale, they had somehow survived the enemy's attempts to add their name to the long list of the war dead. For the thousands of men who returned to Western Australia, the war receded from their immediate view as they readjusted to civilian life, but its impacts endured. For the men returning with disabilities, mental health problems and a lowered sense of self-worth that led some to take their own lives, their stories speak across the decades. The past is present in what our current ex-servicemen and women face when returning to their former lives from current wars and conflicts. Yet their stories are not always told, particularly the more confronting experiences of mental illness and suicide. Veterans widen our knowledge of the war and its aftermath. This book charts some of their stories from World War I. As much as it is important to commemorate the war dead, it is also imperative that we follow the survivors as they moved into peacetime, following on from what Robert Adam, Guy Lukin's mate, called 'the awfulness of this war'.⁵⁷

Notes

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 - 15 *ibid*, p. 157.
 - 16 Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, p. 233.
 - 17 Holbrook, *ANZAC: the Unauthorised Biography*, p. 206.
 - 18 Joan Beaumont, 'Anzac Day to VP Day: arguments and interpretations', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, vol. 40 (February 2007), 7 pages.
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