



Reflections

Midwinter Memorial Ceremony

Kingston, 19 June 2015

I commence by thanking the Director for inviting me to give this short address. It is a privilege, both as a former expeditioner and President of the ANARE Club and as a veteran, to accept his invitation.

Today we are commemorating two different groups of Antarcticans – those who died on, or as a result of, Active Service in the Great War, and those members of the Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions over the past 67 years who died whilst on Australian Expeditions or other associated activities.

At first, it might appear that these two groups have little in common, but that is, in fact, far from being the case. All died far from their homes and from those that loved them and when involved in going about their nation's business. All had the common experience of boredom, drudgery, hardship and periods of emergency and terror that can be found in the Antarctic and on Active Service. What brings these two groups together is that all had shared the experience of Antarctica and had heard Aurora's song on a polar sunset.

I have sometimes heard it expressed that military service and expedition life are mutually incompatible but it has been my experience that this is far from the truth. History also demonstrates the fallacy of this assumption. The early British expeditions of the Heroic Age are dominated by men with naval and military experience and these also played a part in the first Australasian expedition – Mawson chose as the leader of his Southern Party Robert Bage, an officer in the fledgling Australian Army, and as one of his two companions on his own ill-fated journey a British Light Infantry Lieutenant – Ninnis. The first post-war leader of what would become the Antarctic Division was an officer in the Royal Australian Air Force – Group Captain Stuart Campbell, and the early expeditions were

transported south on ships of the Royal Australian Navy. Dick Thompson, recently honoured by the award of the Order of Australia Medal, was a key member of the early Australian National Antarctic Research Expeditions and was a wartime veteran of the Royal Australian Navy and put his experience in operational supply and maintenance to outstanding use in those Expeditions.

What then are the common characteristics that come to the fore?

Gerald Doorly, perhaps best remembered in Antarctic circles as the third officer on the *Morning* - the relief ship for Scott's 1901 Expedition, and a merchant seaman, had won the King's Medal at the Training Ship *Worcester* and he had been assessed as demonstrating the following characteristics:

- Cheerfulness
- Ready obedience to his superiors
- Independence of character
- Self-respect
- Kindness to, and protection of the weaker members of the crew
- Readiness to forgive offence
- Desire to conciliate the differences of others; and
- Unflinching truthfulness

Whilst these may sound a trifle Victorian, there is still a lot to be said for them in the context of Antarctic service. One imbued with these strengths would be indeed an ideal expeditioner! We can recognise many of these characteristics in all those whose names we recall today.

Turning to those whose names are recorded on Great War roll one notes that they roughly reflect the involvement of Australia and New Zealand in the Great War – one died at Gallipoli, eight on the Western Front, one in Germany, two at sea and one in the Middle East. It is also very interesting to see the military skills to which they turned their hands – six of the eight sailors chose to serve in the AIF or the NZEF rather than at sea – one (Lincoln) changed from a ship on the sea to the ship of the desert – in the Camel Corps! Blake switched from geology to gunnery and Bage from astronomy to engineering. Dennistoun went from caring for dogs to flying. Clearly, adaptability was a characteristic of those early expeditioners!

While all deaths are tragic, two are particularly so. Bage died obeying an order which sent him to almost certain death, and arguably unnecessarily. If one reads the account of his death in C E W Bean's Official History of the Great War he was almost certainly chosen for the task because of his Antarctic service, which had called him to the attention of his commanders. Blake died just five weeks before the end of the war, almost certainly from friendly fire, described officially and euphemistically as 'a stray shell'.

All these men had survived the dangers of the Antarctic yet cheerfully volunteered for the higher risk of the battlefield. They did so that the world might be a better place, and it is most appropriate that their sacrifice be commemorated here, in the contemporary home of Australian Antarctic Endeavour.

That is not, for a moment, to decry the risks faced by Antarctic Expeditioners. As a former station leader, my greatest fear on both my expeditions was that of losing one of my expeditioners, just as in Viet Nam it was of losing one of my fellow soldiers. The silence of the Antarctic is just as deadly as the noise and flame of the battlefield. There too, risk is ever present and courage and daring are just as important and death is equally catastrophic. The silent swallow of the crevasse, the sudden onset of the avalanche and the insidious stealth of carbon monoxide are just as horrific and lethal as the bullet, shrapnel and the gas canister.

So today, we all – former expeditioners, veterans and members of the wider Antarctic family - remember our past comrades; we commemorate their sacrifice; and we commiserate for their loss.

Laurence Binyon's *Ode to the Fallen* is as relevant to the lost expeditioner as it is to the fallen soldier:

"They shall grow not old as we that are left grow old

Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun, and in the morning

We will remember them”

And may eternal rest be granted to these our colleagues and may light perpetual shine upon them.

Thank you.