What is it that connects us to the ANZACs of 100 years ago?

Our connection is what they did and why they did it.

The ANZACs served our nation from a sense of duty, and remain an inspiration to us today.

They believed that if they could seize the Dardanelles they could remove Turkey from the war and peace would come sooner. The ANZACs thought that joining up was the right thing to do. It was our first significant military action, the first test of a young country. On that peninsula in 1915 we saw many young men and a few young women trying to prove themselves and trying to show that our country was as good, if not better, than any other country in the Empire.

These are the characteristics I see today. They live on in our people from all walks of life - in our national character. The spirit of taking part, helping out, having a go and not giving up. We see it on the sports field, we see it in times of natural disaster or adversity and we see it when we are on the world stage. At school we see it when we are studying and taking exams. These are the characteristics that make us proud to be Australian.

So let's look at what happened in Gallipoli. Life for the ANZAC soldiers on Gallipoli was tough. Packed inside the tiny perimeter, they endured extreme weather and primitive living conditions for more than eight months. During summer, temperatures soared, while the winter months brought rain, snow and bone-chilling winds. The ANZACs held on and fought on until they were told that the plan was cancelled and then they withdrew. They had a few victories such as the iconic Lone Pine – a name that is spoken with so much pride and emotion. The most successful part of the Gallipoli campaign was the withdrawal. It was meticulously planned. Not one life was lost and the Turks didn’t even know we were gone.

The ANZACs are our inspiration. They displayed the qualities of compassion and caring for friend and foe - mateship some people call it - and they showed service before self. We share similar values here at John XXIII College. - Love and Service for Others; Care and Respect for the Individual and Justice.

The ANZACs showed fortitude, courage, initiative and perseverance – these are qualities in our people today. Their spirit lives on inside us.

Notice how I have not said the ANZACs were brilliant troops – that came later in France in 1918 – when the fighting legend of the Digger was forged. In Gallipoli they were an amateur Army learning the craft of war the hard way – from trial and error.

On Saturday we remember the sacrifice of the nation’s fallen; of the 100,000 Australian servicemen and women who died in all wars. It is a solemn day of reflection for all Australians.

Yesterday I attended the RSL’s Sunset Service at the State War memorial in King’s Park. There the Farmer brothers from Katanning were remembered. Augustus,
Kenneth, Larry and Lewis. Four Aboriginals who did not have the same privileges as white Australians but when they were soldiers they were respected for their service and treated equally by an Army that judged them on merit not on race. Larry and Gus were killed in France. Gus was recognised for his bravery with the Military Medal. Thankfully the fifth son Richard wanted to enlist but was too young to fight.

This family – not just those who were soldiers - made a massive contribution to the building of our nation.

There are some Australians whose acts in war are so remarkable and so inspiring. LTCOL Charles Groves Wright Anderson was one such man.

He commanded the 2nd /19th Infantry Battalion in the Malayan peninsula in 1942. The Army was in retreat. A phase of war that is characterised by disorder and confusion; a phase of war that requires spirit, courage, and discipline. The Japanese were close on their heels of the Australians. It would have been scary for every soldier. It would have been easy to give up and many would have done so without having trust and confidence in their leader.

When his commander was wounded Anderson took control of the brigade group and led the men on four days of heavy fighting to break through the encircling Japanese and reach Allied lines. He led a series of attacks himself and armed with his pistol and grenades, took out two machine-gun posts. Anderson had a responsibility to his force of Australian and Indian troops. He was determined not to abandon his wounded men, who were carried out in the withdrawal. He led 900 troops to safety.

His citation for the Victoria Cross says "he set a magnificent example of brave leadership, determination and outstanding courage. He not only showed fighting qualities of a very high order but throughout exposed himself to danger without any regard for his own personal safety."

He was captured and spent more than three years as a POW on the Burma Railway.

After the war he returned to his family farm and continued to serve his country when he became a Federal member of parliament.

Where do we get people like Anderson? – this sense of service to others and to his country throughout his entire life as a soldier and politician is so evident.

We get people like that because we are a culture that values a sense of fair play and duty.

Our national identity was strengthened with the ANZAC story. You don’t have to have a family connection to our soldiers of previous wars. I don’t. You just have to be proud to be an Australian. The ANZAC story connects us to 100 years ago but more importantly helps us create a better country for all Australians over the next 100 years.

Major John Liston (Retired) (Class 1984)