The AFL Anzac Day Match
Professor Robert Pascoe
Victoria University, Melbourne

WAR AND SPORT are closely interwoven in Australian culture. Peter Weir’s classic Gallipoli (1981) opens with the physical exertion of an athlete training to run across the Kimberley; it closes with his tragic sprint at the Nek a year later. ‘Find out how to get into the greatest game of them all’, calls out a spruiker for the Tenth Light Horse at the local carnival. When Archy Hamilton (Mark Lee) challenges Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson) to sign up for military service, he declares, ‘You of all people should be in it. You’re an athlete!’ Throughout the film soldiers are seen playing very Australian sports such as Australian Rules and foot-racing, in the shadow of the pyramids. One of the Great War recruiting posters urged men to Enlist in the Sportsmen’s Thousand, to put their sporting prowess at the service of the military. War in this reading is not a grisly scene of death and destruction but merely another arena for masculine camaraderie.

The Great War in fact was the cause of fierce contestations within Australian Rules football. Only four of the ten VFL clubs continued to compete; one of the other six, University, failed to reappear after the conclusion of hostilities. Gallipoli coincided with the opening of the 1915 season. The playing careers of professional footballers were disrupted. At Collingwood, for instance, an aspirant to the captaincy, Dan Minogue, found that his ambitions were blocked by another player, the famous Jock McHale, who did not go the War. Minogue went across to Richmond with a fellow veteran, led them to their first two VFL flags, and the great rivalry between these two working-class Catholic clubs began in earnest. Other returned soldiers also came back as changed men, bringing to football leadership skills they had learned in war.

By the Second World War football was beginning to be understood not as a mere entertainment that could be readily set aside to make way for the demands of total war, but as something essential to public morale in cities like Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth. The war was declared on the last weekend of the 1939 season. Although Geelong and Melbourne’s major football grounds were turned over to the military forces for accommodation, the VFL clubs continued to field teams on suburban grounds. In cultural terms war and Australian football continued to reflect each other. When Ron Barassi Senior died in 1941 at Tobruk, a lone bugler piped the Last Post for him at the MCG. The exploits of Bluey Truscott in one field magnified his reputation in the other. He was one of dozens of professional footballers whose military career was watched with interest. And then there was the Bloodbath Grand Final of 1945, played at

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Princes Park between South Melbourne and Carlton in front of a large crowd that included returned soldiers in uniform. There are several theories to explain why this match got so violent. One is that the players were performing for their fellow warriors in the stands and transgressed the rules and conventions of fair play in force at the time.

During the Asian wars of the 1950s and 1960s football continued without interruption. The cross-references between war and football were fewer, given the more limited nature of those conflicts. A Melbourne captain, Geoff Collins, was a Korean jetfighter pilot with a life-sized demon emblazoned on his fuselage. During the Vietnam War no footballers spoke out against conscription, although some players, like Brent Crosswell at Carlton, were visibly pursuing a counter-cultural lifestyle that appealed to long-haired university students. Some VFL players were drafted, such as Richmond’s Kevin Sheedy, but managed to get weekend leave from Puckapunyal to continue their football careers.

By the 1980s the animosities stirred up by the Vietnam War were receding and attendances at Anzac Day began to grow again. In some ways the 1981 film Gallipoli reflects a reconciliation between different sections of the Australian population about war and the Anzac tradition.

The invention of a football tradition

On Anzac Day 1995 the two Victorian heavyweights of the Australian Football League, Collingwood and Essendon, began what has quickly become a ‘tradition’, the Anzac Day match. Twelve seasons later the Anzac Day match at the Melbourne Cricket Ground between Essendon and Collingwood has become such a fixed moment in the AFL calendar that its comparatively recent invention has been forgotten. What are the meanings invested in this match by players, sports commentators and ‘the barrackers’ (the fans)? Why did this experiment so quickly become ingrained in the modern game?

Newspaper accounts of the Anzac Day match, especially in the pro-Collingwood tabloid press, freely use words and phrases like ‘battlefield’, ‘heroes’ and ‘Anzac spirit’ to describe the football played. The ageing respective captains, James Hird and Nathan Buckley, have been described as ‘old warhorses going at it’. There is a language common to both the military and the football team, with words like ‘drill’ and ‘contact’ used by both. The nineteenth-century term ‘barracker’ is thought to derive from the Victoria Barracks in Melbourne. Football teams have ‘team rules’, set plays and the same concentration on intra-group discipline and communication. Small group combat has become the most celebrated feature of the Australian military tradition, beginning with the raiding parties on the Western Front in 1916–1918, the success of Australian patrols in the jungles of Papua New Guinea in 1942, Australian recce forces in Vietnam, and the work of the SAS in Afghanistan and Iraq. There are similar factors making for success in this kind of warfare that are found in team sports like Australian football. Australian football exhibits courage under fire rather than the grace under pressure of traditional football. ‘The element of havoc and random chance built into the game, as well as the thumping bodily contact, make Australian football a closer depiction of actual hand-to-hand fighting on the battlefield than any other major team sport.’

There were matches played on Anzac Day before 1995, but they were not as successful as the 1995 match in attracting a crowd or providing an Anzac ceremony. In 1994 the Anzac Day match was a contest between St Kilda and Richmond, at the old Waverley Park ground, played in front of only 37,370 spectators. On Anzac Day 1992, Melbourne led Essendon by 47 points a few minutes into the last quarter, but lost by a point, yet no Anzac meaning was read into this famous Essendon comeback. Essendon and Collingwood had always drawn large crowds, but right from the start their Anzac Day match attracted massive crowds of more than 80,000, and became invested with Anzac references.

It was Essendon coach Kevin Sheedy who conceived of the idea of a fixed Anzac Day match between his club and Collingwood. (His grandfather and uncle had both served in the military.) He made contact with Graeme Allan, the Collingwood manager, who supported the idea. The rivalry between these teams had been exacerbated by the 1990 Grand Final and other matches in that period. The RSL was consulted and lent the idea its support. The then RSL President, Bruce Ruxton, is a passionate Collingwood supporter. To other clubs who were concerned that these two Victorian teams were cornering the match for themselves, Sheedy gave a typically impish reply:

It’s a difficult one, but I think sometimes you need the reward for the ideas. The AFL’s seen it that way and I think the RSL are very happy with Collingwood and Essendon…. I think sometimes you’ve got to get a reward for your own creativeness. I don’t see any problem in being rewarded for working on ideas to create a fantastic opportunity to thank first of all the RSL and the government that’s backed it up because an enormous amount of work’s been done to get this match up just for this year for a start… In the end the two clubs got together to sit down with the RSL and the AFL to make it a yearly event and then work at it and build it up to what it is now. Somewhere along the way you’d hope that you’re going to keep it and have it and be rewarded for that idea because otherwise it wouldn’t be here.8

In this explanation Sheedy is characteristically very political: he is skilled at assigning to others the rationale for various sleights of hand in his argument. Underneath his references to the AFL and the RSL is his own cunning in setting up this event.

The first Essendon-Collingwood match on Anzac Day, 25 April 1995, was a heroic draw, 17.9 – 111 to 16.15 – 111. In Australian football, a draw is difficult for both sides to handle. It suggests that the two teams must slug it again, and again, until there is a result, a conclusive winner. In a sense, this result helped the tradition to develop, for it suggested that the contest was unfinished – and perhaps would never be finished. For two Victorian sides whose state’s clubs had no mortgage on survival, this promise of survival to another day was symbolically important. (The score of 111 was also, to use cricket parlance, a ‘Nelson’, based on the erroneous idea that the famous Admiral had lost one arm, one leg and one eye, and in that game considered bad luck. By the perverse logic of sports superstitions, the double Nelson was considered good luck for football.)

Some meanings

Although Essendon and Collingwood are undoubtedly valid representatives of the Victorian clubs, other clubs contributed as many or sometimes more players to the AIF

8 AFL.com, quoted by Craig Johnson, class paper, Victoria University, 5 October 2006.
or the Second AIF who were killed in service. Melbourne lost 10 men, yet is perceived as representing the ‘officer class’, men as not worthy of the Anzac mantle. Hawthorn, another genteel club, lost six men, while St Kilda and South Melbourne lost five each.9

To deepen the irony, in the Great War Essendon was one of the clubs that did not compete, as it represented respectable Protestants, while Collingwood was one of the four working-class clubs that did. Indeed Collingwood continued to play in its traditional black-and-white strip, and thus carried the colours of old Prussia, while St Kilda changed its colours to yellow, red and black, from red, white and black, so as not to imitate Imperial Germany’s flag, and to announce its sympathy for ally Belgium.

The Anzac Day clash is thus a meeting of the two halves of Australian society divided by the conscription controversy of 1916–1917. Both teams carry black, the symbol of death, and Essendon also carries the red of Flanders field. Collingwood carries the clear dichotomy set up in total war.10 Essendon in 1922 moved from the East Melbourne Cricket Ground to Windy Hill, not far from Melbourne’s then main airport, and adopted the new nickname, ‘the Bombers’. Collingwood borrowed the tune of a Boer War marching song, Goodbye Dolly Gray, for its club anthem:

Goodbye Dolly I must leave you, though it breaks my heart to go,
Something tells me I am needed at the front to fight the foe,
See - the boys in blue are marching and I can no longer stay,
Hark - I hear the bugle calling, goodbye Dolly Gray.

Development of the tradition

The Anzac Day match has also inspired a copy in the rival National Rugby League competition, which now fixtures a match on Anzac Day between St George and East Sydney. The AFL has now begunfixtureing a match between Sydney and Melbourne in Sydney on or around Anzac Day: these teams contend for the Barassi Trophy, named in honour of Barassi’s father, the Melbourne player killed at Tobruk. These other contests do not, however, draw the same size of crowd as the Essendon-Collingwood match.

The Anzac Day match is the only new successful addition to the day’s observances in several decades. Anzac Day is of course an invented tradition in its own right – the addition of an AFL match merely forms part of a longer process of re-working. The day’s three-part division (the mortuary ritual of the Dawn Service, the ‘increase ceremony’ of the march, and the corroboree ritual of the reunions) is mirrored in the football match (the history-laden lead-up, followed by the roar of the match, and then the chaos of the celebrations).11 There have been accretions to the match itself, with greater newspaper coverage in later years and the addition of an Anzac Medal to the best player on the day from 2000 onwards.

9 A complete list of the 115 is given in Jim Main and David Allen, Fallen: The Ultimate Heroes, Crown Content, Melbourne, 2002. Coach Michael Malthouse read excerpts from this book to the Collingwood players before the 2002 match; Collingwood won that year. See Mark McGough, ‘Anzac medal was an honour and a curse’, Age, 25 April 2007, Sport, p.7.
10 Sheedy has also begun a match to celebrate indigenous footballers, ‘Dreamtime at the ‘G’, between Richmond and Essendon, because their three colours make up the Aboriginal flag. In 2007 he has proposed a multicultural match against Carlton (Age, 16 February 2007).
The tradition continued for another reason. The match became well-known for its incidents, such as Saverio Rocca’s inspirational nine goals for the Magpies in 1995, James Hird’s three Anzac medals, and teenager Mark McGough’s best-on-ground performance in 2002. An episode occurred in the 1995 match that would reverberate in the game’s history. The Collingwood ruckman, Damian Monkhurst, racially vilified an Aboriginal player on the Essendon side, Michael Long. This incident became notorious and caused the AFL to introduce a code of conduct among players on issues of cross-cultural tolerance. It also propelled Long on his personal quest to win greater recognition for the Aboriginal cause. This episode, and other encounters in subsequent Anzac Day matches, ensured that this contest would remain a prominent fixture in the AFL calendar. Football thrives on controversy, precisely because it is both a mirror to the society around it, and also a cause of social change in its own right. The Monkhurst-Long incident, given prominence and legitimacy by occurring within the Anzac Day clash, propelled the AFL to take the issue of Aboriginal players more seriously. This episode had more effect than the famous incident involving Nicky Winmar baring his black chest to the white working-class Collingwood fans the previous season at Victoria Park. In football, as in other cultural activities, framing is all.

A contested tradition

Other clubs contested the exclusivity of the Essendon-Collingwood arrangement. Why should they have the perpetual claim to Anzac Day? Port Adelaide in particular saw it as a long-term problem. This reaction is an important clue to the tradition. The only Victorian club to mount a serious objection was the Western Bulldogs (formerly Footscray). In 1994, when Sheedy was conceiving the idea, there were large changes afoot in Australian football. Fremantle and Port Adelaide were about to join the competition. Fitzroy and other Victorian clubs were threatened with closure, relocation (like South Melbourne to Sydney in 1982) or amalgamation. The AFL was beginning to offer subsidies to non-Victorian clubs to build the game into the national market. The West Coast Eagles won their second flag in 1994.

Victorian football leaders like Essendon coach Kevin Sheedy were disgruntled by these developments. Fitzroy had survived the proposed merger with Footscray of 1989, but was now being given limited options – to relocate (as South Melbourne had done), to amalgamate (like Woodville-West Torrens in the South Australian state competition) or to dissolve (as University had in 1915). The fourth option, of being relegated to the VFA (later known as the VFL) was not given to them. Port Adelaide was applying to be admitted to the AFL; Fremantle was on the verge of admission. The Victorian clubs felt besieged.

This is the important context in which the Anzac Day match was dreamed up. It was, to use the Birmingham paradigm, a magical solution to an imagined problem. The Victorian clubs anticipated that winning the Grand Final was about to become increasingly difficult for them. These clubs wanted to appeal to a nationalist narrative while refusing to welcome what they term the ‘interstate’ clubs to the competition. It was inevitable that Adelaide (1997, 1998), Brisbane (2001, 2002, 2003), Port Adelaide (2004), Sydney (2005) and West Coast (2006) would come to dominate the competition, but for

the second most important match of the season a popular Victorian club, by definition, would always win! Collingwood represents itself – it sees itself as the backbone of the competition – while Essendon represents all those Victorians who hate Collingwood.

Eight premiership points

An interesting mythology developed, again at the service of these Victorian clubs. The hierarchy at both Essendon and Collingwood came to believe the match provided a slingshot effect for their players, that Round 5 was an ideal moment of the season to motivate their players to win more matches and thus to gain an advantage over their rivals, especially their interstate rivals. The myth said that no matter what position either team held on the ladder after Round 4, the Anzac Day match would spur the players on to improved performances in the subsequent rounds. In some seasons, such as 2001, this indeed occurred. Collingwood had lost two of its first four matches, then lost the Anzac Day match to Essendon, but went on to contest the flag that season. But the legendary performances in recent years, with both teams well down the ladder, have not had the same effect. However, Australian football is a very psychological game – and every myth helps.

Newspaper representations

Finally, the Anzac Day match began to produce its own media narratives. The pro-Bomber Age refused to see the match as metaphorical – insisting in its own prim way that war is too serious to be relegated to mere sport. The tabloid Herald-Sun, catering to the Collingwood army, has known differently, lavishly borrowing the language of war to explain the match to its readers.

Just as Australia has had a people’s army tradition, so too its twin themes of sport and war can be easily interwoven in a way that would not make sense elsewhere. English football and the British military tradition do not easily co-exist in the London tabloids. But for readers of the Herald-Sun the Anzac story is an ideal frame within which to understand the nation’s most successful sporting code.

The following are examples from the Herald-Sun:

The MCG had become a field littered with heroes (26 April 1995).

MAGPIES SHOW TRUE ANZAC DAY SPIRIT
VICTORY IN CRUCIAL MIDFIELD BATTLE
On a day when everyone commemorated courage and resilience, Gavin Brown rated it as “right up there with the best wins”. Captain Brown saluted his men. What the Bombers couldn’t anticipate was the identity of the enemy who eventually buried them. Essendon, missing so many dependable senior players, realised it had to build a buffer to defend a similar Collingwood counter attack to last season’s Anzac Day draw (26 April 1996).

BATTLE OF THE MCG
Anzac Day is a sacred day for the veteran coach, who did National Service nearly 30 years ago… He played his 250-game career as if at war, but he, too, reflects on the true meaning of war on the day Australian remembers its greatest heroes (25 April 1998).
Eddie [McGuire] continued to say “they [the veterans] will see the reason why they fought so hard for the Australian culture with two great tribes going at each other”. (25 April 2001)

[Alan Didak supported Goran Ivanisevic last year against Pat Rafter in the Wimbledon final, because of his Croatian background] “But rest assured the rising Collingwood star is charged with Aussie Anzac spirit entering today’s traditional clash with Essendon” (25 April 2002).

The versions from The Age are somewhat more sombre:

FOOTBALL - ONE OF THE CROWD Martin Flanagan
We started the day … with a beer at Young and Jackson, itself an auspicious site in the history of Australians at war since it is where diggers departing for service overseas gathered to drink a last beer and bid farewell to Chloe, the girlish nude portrait upon its walls. What stories she could tell about men and war; what confidences would have been whispered into her pink ear.

We caught the tram to the ground, the RAAF flying team passing overhead just as we arrived, clawing through the sky in a tight upward turn, trailing five lots of smoke behind them.

Essendon took the field to a great roar. Before Collingwood emerged, Good-bye Dolly Gray - the song transformed into Good Old Collingwood Forever, the club's theme song - was played. Good-bye Dolly Gray was a Boer War recruiting song. The trouble when sport provides a stage for war, or the memory of war, is that it invariably does so in an entirely undiscriminating way. The Boer War was where concentration camps were first used - by the imperial forces against Boer civilians - and where the English-born Australian Breaker Morant became a pawn in imperial politics and paid for it with his life. At some point, these things, too, need to be remembered (26 April 2006).

A NATION OF BARRACKERS AT THE EXPENSE OF ALL ELSE
Jim Davidson
The risk is that sport and militarism are becoming increasingly aligned to produce a blunt equation: sport + patriotism = the military. With the collapse of high culture, and the weakening of its local forms (which looked so promising 30 years ago), we may be left with little else, particularly as sport is so deeply Australian (27 January 2007).

In this final excerpt historian Jim Davidson argues that events such as the Anzac Day match are evidence that sports-mad Australians have become militaristic and that war has attained a new legitimacy in the national culture. In this reading other art-cultural forms such as opera and ballet get devalued as sport begins to carry more and more of the nation’s cultural freight.

Our research disputes this finding. We take from Richard Schechner’s ‘performance theory’ the proposition that sport belongs to a continuum of human activities that range from hunting to public ceremony, theatre, play, ritual and dance. What has changed is not Anzac Day football, but its meanings. The meanings we now attach to Anzac Day are new and changeable. Professional football was not permitted on Anzac Day until the 1960 season. In 1959, for example, Anzac Day fell on a Saturday and so the second round of that season was postponed to 2 May. In 1960 two of the

six matches were gazetted for the Anzac Day holiday (falling on a Monday), but rain washed out the other four matches that were scheduled to be played on the preceding Saturday. The VFL’s critics, including the Premier himself, Henry Bolte, chided the League for not moving all six matches to the Monday, which would have been ‘the right and patriotic thing’.16

So football on Anzac Day was adopted overnight as a legitimate activity to add to the holiday’s official events. The newspaper accounts of the first Anzac Day matches made no attempt to link the players with the nation’s military history. Instead the institution of football was understood to be contributing financially and morally to the Anzac cause. In 1961 Melbourne defeated Essendon at Windy Hill in one of the two Anzac Day matches played that season. Although the Demons won the match against great odds, no spectre of Anzac fighting spirit was summoned up to explain the win.17 These media narratives emerged only after 1995.

Conclusion

Anzac Day is not a stable ritual, but sufficiently elastic to be altered as circumstances change. Certain elements of the Anzac tradition have become commodified, it could be argued – such as the experience of visiting modern-day Gallipoli – but in each generation there are always contradictory forces at work. Just as there is no one national identity, beloved of conservatives like John Howard, so too there is no unitary military tradition. Wars like Vietnam and Iraq cause Australians to reflect on this tradition again and again.

The AFL Anzac Day match began in 1960, as the war with Japan receded from memory and the Cold War intensified. The 1995 match came at a moment when Vietnam was being reconceptualised and the ‘Australia Remembers’ campaign sought to bring new perspectives on Australia’s role in World War Two. Just as an opera like *Madame Butterfly* can be re-read as a statement about Hiroshima, so too the Anzac Day match refracts new meanings and insights for the football faithful who gather at the MCG to share in collective observances, of which this is an important one.

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Anzac Day will be a twilight game next season. The traditional match between Collingwood and Essendon will be a standalone Saturday game held on Anzac Day next year compared to other seasons when there were games held in other states and overseas. The twilight start is also considered to be a further experiment for the AFL in hosting blockbuster matches in the later slot before moving the grand final to a twilight or night time slot. (Editor's Note: The original version of this story said the match would start at 4.40pm, but a 4.20pm start time was later confirmed by the AFL).