The ANZAC spirit

Our choir will shortly sing a Lee Kernaghan song “the spirit of the ANZACs” from which I have taken my theme for this address – “the ANZAC spirit”. Lee paints a fine antipodean portrait but I, as an historian, prefer a broader brush on a larger canvas.

From the choir’s song I quote these words:

*Side by side*

*We say with pride*

*They are one of us.*

I wish to apply this also to the men, women and children of the Ukraine to whom I dedicate this address.

It would be unconscionable of me to address you today without acknowledging the atrocities occurring in the Ukraine. I find it impossible to make any sense of these events which have stunned us all.

10% of Ukraine’s population now seek sanctuary abroad from the attacks targeted specifically against her civilian population. This is orthodox easter - we have seen the suffering and dying but wonder if the resurrection is to follow

Ethel Annakin in August 1915 wrote: i quote “someone has finely said that ‘truth is the first casualty in war’; and never was a greater untruth spoken than that war is waged for the protection of women and homes”: end quote.

In many ways women have born the brunt of war, the Russians are now seemingly actively targeting children as well.

It is a sad fact that evolution shows that weakness invites aggression.

Pete Seeger, in the 1960s asked “when will we ever learn?” Historians reluctantly seem to be forced to answer ‘never’.

My fear for the Ukraine is that a wounded bear is far more dangerous than one rampaging freely through his forest – ego intact.

The British writer H.G. Wells coined his famous phrase 10 days after WW1 was declared in a booklet entitled “the war that will end war”.

What went wrong?

Is Plato sadly correct “only the dead have seen the end of war”?

So – what is this ‘ANZAC spirit’?

If we define “spirit” as being the quality of courage, energy, and determination of a person or a people, surely, then, our minds and our hearts must turn towards eastern Europe.

This ‘ANZAC spirit’ is the only positive to which I can cling. That and the lesson of history. How frequently those who stood firm, never quailed under the most extreme pressure, supported each other, and were led by charismatic leaders came out winners.

We are moved by the courage of Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who has run the war from his office, clad in military fatigues, in his capital city defying Putin. The us president offered him a flight out of the Ukraine to which Zelenskyy responded, “I do not need tickets, I need weapons”.

This is the ANZAC spirit

We read of Leonid Stanislavskyi in Kharkiv the oldest tennis player in the world. At 98 he did not retreat when Putin’s army invaded, he stocked up his fridge and refused to budge. Unbowed, unbeaten.

This is the ANZAC spirit

When the now-sunk Russian cruiser, ‘Moskva’, attacked snake island in the Crimea on the first day of the war her captain ordered the tiny unit of troops defending the island to surrender, they gave a very ANZAC reply “Russian warship – go blank yourself”! The words became a slogan of resistance, appearing on t-shirts, postage stamps and Facebook profile pictures.

This is the ANZAC spirit

In New Zealand, during the ‘Maori wars’ of the mid-1850s a contingent of British soldiers with field artillery was preparing to blow the pa at orakau to pieces. Offered a chance to surrender rather than die the Maori chief Rewi Maniapoto rose up and called the immortal words “eh hoa, ka whawhai tonu, matou, ake, ake, ake”. (“friend, we shall fight on for ever, for ever, for ever”).

This is the ANZAC spirit

May the Ukraine draw some consolation and strength from the memory of WW11 when Britain stood alone with the mightiest army and air force in the world at the time massed across a mere 30 km of sea. Defeat seemed assured. Many events coincided to forestall Hitler’s ‘operation sealion’ but signal to them all was the single-minded resistance, the sheer pig-headed stubbornness of the British people. Fellow Aryans who refused the offer to join the Third Reich for its ‘thousand years’.

It was their spirit and the example of their leader who welded a disparate people into a dedicated, focussed fighting unit.

Winston Churchill’s famous speech “we will fight them on the beaches, we will fight them on the landing fields, we will fight them in the streets and the hills, we will never surrender” surely will strike a chord with the Ukrainian people facing a similar onslaught buoyed by having an eerily similar leader.

This is the ANZAC spirit

The women of London’s east end in front of their bombed homes on their hands and knees scrubbing their front doorsteps. This was one way for them to raise the finger at the dictator. How can you defeat people like this? They are truly indomitable.

This is the ANZAC spirit

In 1940 Britain’s army of 300,000 were trapped in France. Men with sailing skills and small boats sailed across the channel to take soldiers from the beaches and ferry them out to the vessels waiting in deeper water. A victory was snatched from defeat.

This is the ANZAC spirit

J B Priestly dedicated a 1940 broadcast to the world to a much-loved paddle-steamer, the ‘Gracie Fields’, which once took day-trippers to the isle of wight. She achieved immortality by crossing the English channel to Dunkirk’s beaches. She never returned. Priestley’s words speak also for today and for the wonderful, resilient, patient, determined Ukrainian people. Priestly spoke these words: “our grandchildren, when they learn how we began this war by snatching glory out of defeat, and then swept on to victory, may also learn how the little holiday steamers made an excursion to hell and came back glorious. The ‘PS Gracie Fields’ has paddled and churned away - for ever. But now - look - this little steamer, like all her brave and battered sisters is immortal. She'll go sailing proudly down the years in the epic of Dunkirk”. End of quote.

This is the ANZAC spirit

There may be no message more important that a country’s leaders can impart during times of war and great sacrifice than “we are all in this together.” King George VI refused advice to take his family and go to Canada in the darkest days of WWII His Queen (known to most of you as the late Queen Mother) famously stated: "the children will not leave unless I do. I shall not leave unless their father does, and the king will not leave the country in any circumstances, whatever."

This is the ANZAC spirit

The tide of tyranny laps once more against the shores of freedom. Those shores are best defended by those who love them most. The battles may seem hopeless, and some may even be lost but the war remains to be won.

Finally. The people of the Ukraine accept that any form of surrender is simply not an option. The words of the British poet, Arthur Hugh Clough, if they could be applied to them, would mean that they may also see through the immediacy of conflict to the dawning light of a democratic day for what finally will remain of the Ukraine.

To the people of the Ukraine, we remind them to

*Say not the struggle nought availeth,*

*the labour and the wounds are vain,*

*The enemy faints not, nor faileth,*

*and as things have been they remain.*

*If hopes were dupes, fears may be liars;*

*it may be, in yon smoke concealed,*

*Your comrades chase e'en now the fliers,*

*and, but for you, possess the field.*

*For while the tired waves, vainly breaking*

*seem here no painful inch to gain,*

*Far back through creeks and inlets making,*

*comes silent, flooding in, the main.*

*And not by eastern windows only,*

*when daylight comes, comes in the light,*

*In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,*

*but westward, look, the land is bright.*

I close with the words the Ukrainian people use when greeting each other:

Slava Ukraini.

Glory, indeed, to the Ukraine.

And to the ANZAC spirit.

Long may it imbue the people who need it most.