DYING TO BELONG: RECRUITING CIVILIAN SOLDIERS

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Fighting for your country is an internationally recognised call to arms. Alfred Leete’s celebrated war recruitment poster of the first world war, featuring the moustachioed Horatio Kitchener was such a call. The poster features an image of the British military megastar, pointing a gloved finger and intoning not: ‘Your country needs you!’ as has been popularly remembered, but rather: ‘Britons [Kitchener] wants you. Join your Country’s Army!’ In 1917 James Montgomery Flagg produced a version for the United States army, featuring Uncle Sam wearing a stern expression, combined with the slogan: ‘I want you for the U.S. Army’. The propaganda recruitment drives of both the great wars of the twentieth century stressed the patriotic nature of the war, urging young men to rally in support of their country or, more abstractly, of the values held dear in their land. In cases of threatened invasion the logic of these recruitment messages is clear: repel the newcomers or lose your livelihood, possibly your life, along with access to, and ability to make use of, the land. Only once in Australia’s many international military engagements could it be said that invasion seemed likely and, even then, in 1942, young men were called to take up arms to defend the values of the British empire and not to repel Japanese invasion of Australia. There is a sense of ownership and belonging that is implied in these militaristic calls to arms—implied, but not clearly stated.

The idea that to fight or die for one’s country earns a sense of belonging, or possibly ownership is the assumption explored here. Why would fighting in a war generate a sense of belonging and where did this notion come from? One obvious answer is that young men literally fought to gain a part of their country. In Australia, for example, returned soldiers were given farm land after both international wars as a reward for having fought, but the soldier settler scheme was not a success and the recruitment drives did not make any such promises of land rewards after the war. There are other ways to belong: to have lived for a very long time in a land; to know it well; to have been given guardianship of a land package in a historical continuity which must see the land handed on to the next rightful owner or owners—these are all ways of belonging. Indeed, to simply love a country or ‘feel at home’ is a way of claiming that you belong. But what sense of belonging is portrayed in the militaristic notion of fighting for your country? What does it say about the ability of women, children, the elderly or infirm, to belong to their country? This paper, therefore, will reflect upon the notion of belonging which underpins the propaganda theme of fighting for your country.

I’ll start my exploration of the theme with a Western Australian story. In 1942 Perth-based journalist Cyril Longmore was sent on the assignment of his life. Ten days after the extensive Japanese bombing of Broome, early in March, 1942, Longmore (for the West Australian) and his colleague, Harry Potter (for the Daily News) set out in a Ford V8 utility fitted with a gas producer. Their task was to report on the conditions of Broome following the bombing and also to comment on the morale of the people living in the tiny isolated coastal towns dotted along the vulnerable west coast. Longmore kept a diary and copies of his dispatches, and it is clear that despite the almost unpassable roads, it took them twenty-three days to reach Broome; the frequent strandings; the vehicle malfunctions; the bouts of dengue fever from which they both suffered; the absence of drinking water on the flooded plains; and even the occasional round with boredom, Longmore, if not Potter, had a ball. He met his hero Major G.D. Mitchell, whose commission was to organise the western civilian population into Volunteer Defence Corps (Longmore 1942, np).

Mitchell appointed Longmore to train two squads of Aboriginal men in commando warcraft. On Liveringa Station, for nine adventure-filled days, 54-year-old Longmore lived out a private Boys’ Own Adventure as he taught the men to throw grenades and to shoot and clean rifles. The point of the exercise was to enlist the skilled bushmen of the western coastal regions to assist in defence of the country and, hopefully, to forestall their being of assistance to potential Japanese invaders. Longmore wrote in his report that: ‘The life of commandos would be short and not merry if abos led the Japs to their hide-outs’. Such a scenario was a high possibility, according to the European station owners. When the training was over, Longmore wrote a report to Major Mitchell, who sent it on to the Ministry for the Army. He recommended ‘that the natives could be organised and trained to be useful—even indispensable—auxiliaries to white troops in operations in the Kimberleys ... [and he] suggested the formation of a Native Auxiliary Corps for that purpose’ (Longmore 1942, np).

To his dismay, neither he nor Major Mitchell had any response to the report. Three months later, Longmore...
returned to Perth, unable to shake off the sense that these indigenous Australians had been badly let down. They had responded well to his training. If the European station owners had been correct about the ease with which an invading Japanese force could recruit tribal people, it simply showed that indigenous Australians had not been encouraged to feel a sense of belonging to the Australian nation. Longmore did not trust the judgement or opinions of the station owners and he could not reconcile their views with his own experience. The men he’d trained had seemed genuinely keen to assist the war effort against the Japanese. The unfulfilled potential of the experiment played on his mind, until he wrote to another former journalist and fellow Western Australian, Prime Minister John Curtin. In a series of letters, he urged Curtin to make more use of Aboriginal willingness to serve in the war.

By this time Longmore’s intention had shifted from a desire to help protect this country to a moral motivation to assist the Aboriginal case for reclaiming their land. Once they had served their country, they should be acknowledged after the war, by giving them:

a wedge of their own country—a line from the end of Cambridge Gulf drawn south to meet a line drawn west from just above Derby and the creation of a black state in White Australia. I would have put forward a 50 year plan to fit the natives into the civilised world—a plan based on pastoral and agricultural teaching with the natives taught to carry out every job including management and administration—first on the stations, then (10 to 20 years hence) the art of local government—then (30 to 40 years hence) the governing of their own State and from there fit them into the Federal fabric of Australia…The compensation to be paid to white owners at present located there (surprisingly few) is a debt we already owe the natives. A black State like that could be a haven for remnants of natives in other States if they were willing to transplant themselves (Longmore 1942, np).

Clearly the Prime Minister had never seen the initial report, because at first his response was keen interest, moving to ‘grave doubts’, followed by outright rejection of the plan. After ‘full consideration’ by the Army authorities and of the Commissioner of Native Affairs, Perth’, the Prime Minister wrote:

Their report contained the following observation: The Kimberley native is wholly uneducated, and his allegiance is to the local residents rather than to the country or Empire as a whole. Such allegiance could readily be transferred, in response to small gifts, to an invading enemy (Longmore, 1942 np).

Longmore responded with a vehement denial but by the end of September, Curtin advised him that intelligence received by the Minister for the Army, Jack Forde, was that during the bombing of Broome:

a native detachment of the then Broome Guard was formed and issued with arms and equipment and given twelve to eighteen month’s training. On the occasion of the Japanese air raid on Broome on 3rd March 1942, this detachment dispersed into the bush on the sound of the first shots and portion of their arms and equipment has not yet been recovered (Longmore 1942, np).

They could not be counted on to display courage under fire: No courage, no fighting for the country, no right to belong. Longmore denied the reports, pointing out that it was the Europeans who had run and that it was simply not true that there was a native detachment in the Home Gaurd. The report was a fabrication concocted by station owners with a strong vested interest:

The white men who have lived and worked with the natives for years have exploited them shamefully and are exploiting them shamefully now. Those white men do not wish to see any scheme functioning which in the end would see an improvement in the natives’ condition. There are 250 whites (approximately) in the Kimberleys and 7000 natives who form a valuable labour reserve—slave labour (Longmore 194,2 np).

Unable to see any way forward, Longmore gave up on the idea of Aboriginal commandos. He did, however, go to press after the war with a strong call to set aside tracts of Western Australia for the indigenous population. Longmore understood that the indigenous men he met had a strong traditional sense of belonging in their land. He was making a more complicated point that these men, and all Australian Aborigines, had no sense of belonging to the Australian nation—that is to the European geo-political notion which overlaid and embraced the land and was an altogether more abstract notion denoting unity of political purpose, political system, law and common cultural beliefs.

I used this story as a case study because it signals how, within a particular European tradition, the notions of nationhood, the military story of willingness to fight for your country, and the idea of belonging are all interrelated. But when did this connection between fighting and belonging emerge in military recruitment? The long-term story of military engagement is not a story
about dying to belong. Modern warfare, with its recruitment of society and citizen soldiers, developed unevenly. A thousand years of European war provides the canvas to view its ebbs and flows but we can skip to the period, in the late seventeenth century, as mercenary batteries metamorphosed into armies of professional soldiers in the paid service of their states. In the transition to a society of professional soldiers, a clear distinction emerged between ‘the military’ and ‘the civilian’ (Howard 1975, 217).

During the eighteenth century and, in fact, for most of the next century as well, the vast majority of European and British professional soldiers were adventurers looking for financial rewards in warfare that they could not achieve through agricultural labouring. Agrarian apprenticeships could be just as harsh as conditions in the army but lacked the opportunities that existed in warfare (under certain circumstances) to acquire wealth. Soldiers therefore were not highly regarded, and respectable agricultural families were ashamed of sons who ran away to join the army. Then, quite suddenly, from 1788 to 1799, the French Revolution changed that view in France, and the ideology which drove the shift there spread throughout the rest of Europe during the next century. Based upon an ideal of broad political participation by civilians in the running of the state, the revolution also required of these newly-empowered civilians a heavy duty of civilian responsibility for maintenance and survival of the state. That radically altered the public perception of military recruits; they were no longer considered to be adventurers and rogues but, rather, were now thought of as patriots and defenders of nation and empire.

In the Napoleonic Wars, which dominated the political and military landscape of Europe from 1792 until 1815, Napoleon Bonaparte, a brilliant and ruthless military and political strategist, changed the nature both of warfare itself and of the structure and ideology of armies. Unlike any standing army at the time, the French army was neither professional nor conscripted; they were patriots and they were fighting for something. They could not be counted on to display courage under fire: No courage, no fighting for the country, no right to belong.

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In the four hundred year period prior to the Corsican General’s iconoclastic overhauling of military strategy, Europeans had settled into a pattern of limited state warfare in which relatively small professional armies positioned themselves in tried and tested patterns, employing mutually agreed rules of conflict. These armies were expensive to build and maintain, and therefore significant loss of personnel within an army could be a serious problem. As a result, warfare had become a game of strategy. The aim was to manoeuvre the enemy’s army into a position where they could not win, at which time they surrendered, sometimes without bloodshed. As with chess, an army was either defeated (through being outmanoeuvred), or it wasn’t—the decision was not a matter of opinion, much less of morale and preparedness to fight on. Napoleon ignored these protocols. He made heavy use of the murderous technology of artillery fire and the psychological weapon of fanaticism, with the result that even though they were frequently outnumbered, his soldiers not only outmanoeuvred their opponents, they completely crushed them—Napoleon’s troops pushed on until they had achieved their adversary’s total annihilation or their unconditional surrender. As with any iconoclast, his method of waging war could not be resisted by armies using previously agreed protocol, and over a relatively short period the bloody, destructive and ruthless swathe cut by the French forces left a short-term legacy of a greatly expanded and stabilised French superpower. Of longer lasting importance, it also produced the catalyst for the emergence of brutal, all-embracing, financially-crippling, modern warfare.

The Napoleonic Wars showed Europe that massed armed bodies of citizens could be trained into highly effective military machines. In the twentieth century, civilian armies, composed almost totally of fresh amateur recruits, often in the command of civilian officers, became the norm. So we can see that at some time during the mid-to-late nineteenth century, the ideological underpinning of warfare began to change, from a dispute between armies, to a business carried on between nations. One historian of war propaganda, Terence Qualter, has argued that:

when the traditional armies of the mercenaries were replaced by national armies [and] individual citizens
had, as never before, a personal interest in the outcome of war ... In the new kind of war the unprecedented consumption of munitions and other materials demanded the recruiting of the civilian populations and the mobilisation of the entire economic resources of the state ... With the nation at war, appeals to national pride and loyalty took on a new and deeper meaning (1962, 54).

It is only from this time that the hopes and aspirations of the civilian population are featured in recruitment drives. This is the moment when fighting for your country became a viable message. Early in the twentieth century, recruitment drives changed their message from financial reward to ideology.

Because we are now so familiar with the idea of fighting for your country and of earning the right to belong, we can fail to realise how recent it is as the driving force of war propaganda. Modern warfare has drawn the modern citizen into warfare in an unprecedented way and it can be startling to find how recent are campaigns to have people understand the difference. For example, the following article is clearly explaining this point to an audience who are thought to not understand it:

The days of professional armies are over. No longer do trained combatants take to the field against trained combatants purely because that is what they are paid to do. For war’s, like everything else, have been modernised. They are bigger, and brighter, and better, and bloodier than ever before. In [this] war everyone [will] be included ... everyone, including our women and children (Man 1939, 10).

This is not a nineteenth century message—it is the popular Australian magazine Man explaining in April 1939, that in modern warfare, there are no civilians. Anyone who claimed to belong to the nation, or hoped to after the war, had to be totally committed. In 1940, early in the international war, the Australian Federation of Commercial Broadcasting Stations met in Melbourne to discuss how they might combine forces to help with this persuasion process. Aware that their industry had a powerful impact on what they called ‘the people’s minds’, they agreed that the most important task was ‘to prove to every mother’s son living in this country that it was a country worth fighting for’ (Conference of the Australian Federation of Commercial Broadcasting Stations 1940, np).

It was an early twentieth-century shift in military ideology which changed the nature of warfare from a battle between armies to a life-and-death struggle between nations, which changed the nature of civic duty to include military responsibility. This changed the nature of warfare to mass warfare, and the nature of armies of mass civilian hordes. The soldier of the twentieth century changed from a paid fighter to an ideologically committed citizen. Total civilian enlistment accompanied the change. It was this shift which produced the necessity for propaganda campaigns to recruit the large civilian armies and to have the civilian population support the war. Since the beginning of the twentieth century the crux of the propaganda message has been the theme of belonging, or to put it another way, of fighting to earn the right to claim a sense of belonging.

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