

MODERATOR'S MESSAGE

ANZAC DAY 2026

On April 23, 2015, at about 10.00 am, my wife Helen and I stepped onto the sands of Anzac Cove on the Gallipoli Peninsula. With our Turkish guide, we had driven about three hours from our hotel in Istanbul. We had decided not to go on ANZAC Day because it was the 100th anniversary of the ANZAC landings right where we were standing, with a day of commemorations planned, starting with a dawn service, evidenced by the temporary seating for the multitudes just up from the beach.

Looking inland, we clearly saw the hills the ANZACS tried to secure, but ultimately failed after 8 months of bloody conflict against the soldiers of the Ottoman Empire. New Zealand lost 2,779 and Australia about 8,700 men killed during that time. Those who were shooting from the hills defending their homeland lost some 87,000 to battle and disease. That is an incredible number. The ANZAC battlefield is steep and rugged. What surprised me was its size. It measures about 2.5 km along the coast, with ANZAC Cove about the centre. The front line, with landmarks named Chunuk Bair, Bauchops Hill, Lone Pine, Quinn's Post, and the ridge known as the Nek, is on average 1km up the steep slopes and gullies from the beach. When we walked through the Lone Pine front line trenches, they were sixteen of my short-legged paces apart, the width of a suburban street. Helen stood in one, and I in the other. In that small area, about 10,000 Australians and Turks died over four days. Helen and I just looked at each other. Numbers too big to contemplate. We didn't say much after that as we moved towards Chunuk Bair. The whole battlefield is the area of an average sheep and beef farm in New Zealand, according to Google. I suspect that as you read those figures, the emotional impact will be stunted, even non-existent, no reality, no experience, no connection to what they mean. When you are up on the front-line trenches, looking back down to ANZAC Cove, it moves you with oppressive force.

We were in Türkiye for one reason: to connect with the land and atmosphere of the place. Why? Because my Great Uncle Peter John McKay was killed there. I was named Peter John after him. For me, a personal family pilgrimage. There is no grave for him among the thousands of ANZAC graves in manicured cemeteries with white crosses in perfect rows. He was just "killed in action". Uncle Peter was a farming lad from Otama in Southland. The farm is still in the McKay family. Peter was with the Otago Mounted Rifles, who were part of the push to capture Chunuk Bair, with the Wellington Mounted Rifles taking the lead. He was killed on August 7 during the assault on Bauchops Hill. He was 25 years old. Great Grandmother Jane received a letter from his friend and companion in the attack, James Hargest, indicating that Peter died from a direct hit from a Turkish artillery shell, and that was his life over with no body to bury.



It was a wet and windy day as we made our way along the frontline positions towards Chunuk Bair. I stood where the ridge Peter was killed on became part of Chunuk Bair hill. It was like looking down on a tragedy. There was no joy there, no sense of my heroic great uncle, just a deep disbelief over what happened along the hilltops and ridges down to the beech 1km away, over and over again. Eventually, I walked to the Chunuk Bair Memorial to the Missing, and there was his name. Inserted at some later date at the bottom of the Wellington Mounted Rifles list of the "killed in action". 2nd Lieutenant Peter McKay, Otago Mounted Rifles. Tears filled my eyes. Over the whole battlefield, there was a blanket of grief. An oppressive presence. It went soul deep. After a while, I reached into my jacket pocket and pulled out a rounded quartz river stone. I had chosen it months before from the Mataura River, not far from the McKay farm near Otama. I pressed the stone into the soil beneath his name at the bottom of the list. Rest in peace, Great Uncle.

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.

We will remember them.

This ANZAC Day, we are free to honour the fallen and remember them. We are honouring family members and their comrades who, despite being part of unjust wars, acted with courage in difficult circumstances. But let us be careful to recognise that there is no such thing as "Just War". This is the exact opposite of Jesus' teaching. "Love your neighbour as yourself". "You have heard the law that says the punishment must match the injury: 'An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth. 'But I say, do not resist an evil person! If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer the other cheek also" (Matthew 5:38-39). Micah writes "The LORD has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

War starts in one human heart that rejects God and diminishes human worth to nothing. War spreads when influencers with peace in their hearts remain silent in the face of the powerful. War exists when the voice of wrong power proclaims invincibility and the right to wage war. Lord, this ANZAC Day, help us to honour the fallen as we recognise the evil of war and the pain and damage of its aftermath.

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