

This moving doco is more than just a history of the ANZACs in Gallipoli



Ben Pobjie

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Anzac. Lemnos. 1915 ★★★★★

History is the gift that keeps on giving: the more you look into the past, the more stories reveal themselves and the more insights into the myriad paths that converged to make our world what it is come to light. The Greek island of Lemnos is not familiar to the average Australian, its vital role in this country's most famous military campaign rarely remarked upon when the Anzac legend is told and retold. As such, *Anzac. Lemnos 1915* has for raw material a subject most precious to a documentary-maker: a moving story of great importance that has yet to be widely related. Like all of the best historical docos, it shines a light on unseen regions of the past. Gallipoli has been covered at length on screen over the years, but here we see that still there's more to be learned.



A still from the documentary *Anzac. Lemnos. 1915.* A. W. SAVAGE

In early 1915, Allied forces began an attempt to capture the Dardanelles Strait in order to weaken the Ottoman Empire – one of the Central Powers allied with Germany – and secure a supply route to the Black Sea and Russia. They established a base on Lemnos, an island 50 kilometres from the strait. Lemnos had itself been part of the Ottoman Empire a few years earlier, having been captured by Greece in 1912 during the First Balkan War. From the island, the campaign was launched on April 25, 1915, when the Allies landed on the Gallipoli peninsula, beginning what would turn out to be a defining moment in the histories of more than one nation.

After the first night of fighting at Gallipoli, more than 2000 Allied soldiers were dead or wounded. Serious consideration was given to withdrawing then and there, such was the shock at the strength of Turkish defences and the heavy casualties. But the decision was taken to stay, and for the next eight months Allied and Ottoman forces slaughtered each other on the peninsula. As the brutal grind went on, Lemnos filled with the sick and wounded, and medical staff worked against overwhelming odds to try to save what lives they could.

The story of Lemnos, then, is not the story of the front line, not the tale of what happened in the thick of battle or the advance and retreat of armies. It's the story of the aftermath of battle, of what goes on behind the lines. It's the story of life in the midst of catastrophe and humanity maintained in hell.

Anzac. Lemnos 1915 begins with a sweeping shot of Lemnos as it is today: serene, peaceful and beautiful. Over the footage, the words of nurses serving on the island are read, telling in matter-of-fact terms of the horror to be found among the casualties of Gallipoli. The story is in large part that of the nurses, who get their due here as some of the greatest heroes of our history. Overstretched and under-resourced, these women sailed to an alien land to care for men who came back from the front in a steady stream for the better part of a year, suffering

from all manner of hideous injuries. The courage and dedication of the nurses was extraordinary, and highlighting their efforts is probably the program's most noble achievement.



Photograph of the Third Australian General Hospital at Lemnos. A. W. SAVAGE

A great documentary, of course, is more than just a good story: here, filmmakers Pria Viswalingam and Elizabeth Kaydos elevate the show to a truly powerful viewing experience. A quiet passion suffuses the project, a commitment to doing justice to the people whose story is being told. No cheap re-enactments here: the history is conveyed through photographic records of life on Lemnos and the words of the Australians who were there, read aloud from their letters and diaries. This archival material is supplemented by commentary from historians to give context: the experts provide the factual detail, but it's in the testimonies of the nurses and soldiers that the past lives and breathes. Looking back over more than a century, the ghosts of the past are made real.

It's a lesson: not just in the history of the Gallipoli campaign, not even in the fascinations of history, but in the realities of war and the ways in which the very best of us shine brightest amid the very worst.

Anzac. Lemnos. 1915 is on SBS, Thursday, April 25 at 7.30pm.



Ben Pobjie is a columnist. Connect via [Twitter](#).
