

# Mateship, diggers and wartime

Mateship' is a concept that can be traced back to early colonial times. The harsh environment in which convicts and new settlers found themselves meant that men and women closely relied on each other for all sorts of help. In Australia, a 'mate' is more than just a friend. It's a term that implies a sense of shared experience, mutual respect and unconditional assistance.

Mateship is a term traditionally used among men, and it is a term frequently used to describe the relationship between men during times of challenge. The popular notion of mateship came to the fore during the First World War.

During this period the word 'mate' became interchangeable with the word 'digger', which had its roots in the gold digging fields of the 1850s.

## Diggers and democratic heroes

The myth of the digger and the larrikin hero is an important part of the Australian experience of pastoralism, the goldfields, bushranging, shearing and droving. In *Settlers and Convicts*, first published in 1847, Alexander Harris wrote of the relationship between male pastoral workers in the early days of the British colony:

... working together in the otherwise solitary bush; habits of mutual helpfulness arise, and these elicit gratitude, and that leads on to regard. Men under these circumstances often stand by one another through thick and thin; in fact it is a universal feeling that a man ought to be able to trust his own mate in anything.



Chinese gold digger starting for work, circa 1860s. Image courtesy of the State Library of Queensland.

The principles of mateship amongst pastoral workers were further adapted by gold diggers in the mid-1800s. There was a massive influx of migrants from around the world including Asia, Europe and the Americas when gold was discovered in Australia.

The goldfields were frontier societies, where an unusual mix of men and women came together. Across the country, goldfields became cultural 'melting pots'; over half the Victorian goldfields' population of 150,000 in 1858 were British immigrants, and 40,000 were Chinese miners and workers.

The stories and experiences of goldfield workers have become part of Australian folklore. Gold diggers were portrayed in stories and songs as romantic heroes, larrikins and villains who embraced the principles of democracy. Henry Lawson wrote in *Shearers*:

They tramp in mateship side by side -  
The Protestant and Roman  
They call no biped lord or sir  
And touch their hat to no man!

The slang term 'digger' re-surfaced during the First World War when Australian and New Zealand soldiers, Anzacs, ascribed it to themselves and their mates as a term of affection, arguably due to the trench-digging aspect of the war.

'Digger' and 'dig' were used by soldiers as friendly terms of address equivalent to 'cobber' and 'mate' ... The term has tended to be defined in high-value laden ways ... 'a man for whom freedom, comradeship, a wide tolerance, and a strong sense of the innate worth of man, count for more than all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory in them.'

A G Butler, *The Digger: A Study in Democracy*, 1945 in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, p 213

Accounts of the soldiers' bravery, suffering and larrikin spirit in the First World War fused together to form the enduring image of the Aussie 'digger'. The landings on the beach at Gallipoli remain a defining moment for Australia as a nation and continue to be remembered on Anzac Day each year.



Poster produced by the Reinforcements Referendum Council in 1916 and 1917. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

## Manhood and nationhood

A study of Anzac soldiers by Bill Gammage in *The Broken Years* (1974), concludes 'mateship was a particular Australian virtue, a creed, almost a religion'. When Gammage asked 237 soldiers of the Australian Imperial Forces that served in the First World War, one in three said the experience of mateship was incomparable.

The importance of male 'mateship' during conflicts is remarkably strong. It was used during the First World War to encourage men to vote YES in favour of conscription. This poster attempts to appeal to male guilt at letting their mates down by not signing up or voting in favour of conscription.

Mateship was defined through the experience of trench warfare, concentration camps, hunger, injury, forced labour and the boredom and terror of war.

In the [Japanese POW] camps the Australians discarded their differences and became a tribe, a tribe which was always the most successful group. The core of this success was an ethos of mateship and egalitarianism which not only survived the ultimate dehumanising duress of the death camps, but shone through as the dominant Australian characteristic.

Paul Sheehan, *Among the Barbarians*, 1998

Mateship between soldiers helped define their manhood, and in turn, this helped define Australia as a nation.



Papua. October 1942. Native stretcher bearers stop at a river to give a drink of water to their patient, Private A. Baldwin, of the 2/33rd AIF. Image courtesy of the Australian War Memorial.

## Mates – not just our own

It is interesting to note the importance of shared experience in terms of what mateship means during war. In a number of instances, Australians have affectionately embraced others as 'mates'. This has helped push back the boundaries of the more traditional image of mateship existing only amongst soldiers.

During the Second World War, Indigenous people of Papua New Guinea – known then as the 'fuzzy-wuzzy angels' – helped wounded Australians through the jungle, carrying them on stretchers to safety.

During Vietnam, many stories have been written of the experience of mateship between Australian soldiers and their dogs, 'four-legged diggers', who faithfully worked to identify land mines, weapons and Viet Cong tunnels.

Russel Ward in *The Australian Legend* (1958), argued that a set of values with mateship, based on the bush traditions of Australia, at their core constitutes our national tradition. He felt that these values were equally valid across Australia in both country and towns.

## Mates as Australian legends

The experience of mateship has been recreated in countless movies, books and documentaries each presenting the concept of mateship during war in different ways. The classic 1981 film *Gallipoli* shows the harsh experience of war through the eyes of two mates who initially meet as rivals on the sprinting track in Western Australia.

Two mini-series – *Anzacs* and *Changi* – explore the two World Wars through the experiences of a group of mates. *The Odd Angry Shot* examines the Vietnam War from the experience of a group of young soldiers. Countless books and plays about Australian soldiers' experiences in Tobruk, Vietnam, Burma, Egypt and France all recount stories of mates helping each other

through thick and thin and have helped reinforce the perception of the Australian soldier as inseparable from his mates.

Women were sometimes regarded as coming between mates. Australian poet Judith Wright observed in 1965: 'The 'mateship' ingredient of the Australian tradition ... left out of account the whole relationship with women'. Yet, the experience of Australian women convicts and other colonial women on the goldfields, as drovers wives, in wartime and in action, is part of the shared experience that is recounted many times in Australian folklore as 'times of challenge'.

Franca Arena, a member of the New South Wales Parliament, vowed in 1995: 'In my next life, I will ensure that I am married to a mate, have a brother who is a mate, and related to a mate one way or another'.