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# FOUR CORNERS TELEVISION HISTORY: GALLIPOLI AND THE FALL OF SINGAPORE

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Since 1961, the long-running, award-winning *Four Corners* Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) current affairs programme, has represented two well-known events of Australian military history in *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore*, aired on 25 April 1988, and *No Prisoners* on Australian deserters at the fall of Singapore, which aired on 11 March 2002. Both programmes, reported by Chris Masters, purport to investigate Anzac mythology. Comparing and contrasting them provides insights into the genre of documentary history and the particular investigative style of *Four Corners*. Media studies analysis of *Four Corners* by Alan McKee, Stuart Cunningham, Toby Miller and Robert Pullan notes that its style is that of setting out to 'expose the truth' in a way that is not objective but is guided by a sense of partiality driven by the journalists' idea that they are reporting in the 'interests of the public'. Rather than objectively setting out both sides of an argument, the style of *Four Corners* is to partially pursue a line of inquiry that is meant to 'expose the truth' by taking the side of the argument that the reporters believe is in the public interest.<sup>1</sup> What type of history does adapting the investigative style of *Four Corners* produce in the programmes covering Australian military history in the television documentary genre?

## THE DEBATE OVER TELEVISION HISTORY DOCUMENTARIES

The phenomenon of historical documentaries on television has produced a nuanced debate among historians and documentary makers about the ways television history works. This debate provides insights into understanding *Four Corners*' approach to history in these two programmes on the Anzac legend. The investigative and argument-based format that Australian media analysts have described *Four Corners* as regularly employing in its documentaries echoes Bill Nichols' classic description of the expository genre of documentary film.<sup>2</sup> Nichols noted that documentary claims to be one of the 'discourses of sobriety', such as science, economics, politics and history, which purport

to describe what is 'real' or 'tell us the truth'. Nichols, however, argues that documentaries only represent the world and give us a likeness of it; they do not reflect it. He refers to documentaries as being 'instrumental', meaning that they outline an argument that seeks to change peoples' opinions.

The format that Nichols outlines imposes a strong narrative structure on many historical documentary makers. Writing from the perspective of an historian, rather than a film maker, David Cannadine suggested a contrast between historical writing and documentary making when he wrote that 'work being undertaken by historians today tries to present many voices and different viewpoints; but as written and presented, media history is still largely confined to linear narrative.'<sup>3</sup> Taylor Downing, a television documentary producer, has reiterated Cannadine's point that the medium of television tends to go for 'great narrative, great story telling'.<sup>4</sup>

In making out a narrative argument using film, often complex historiographical debates are ignored. Ian Jarvie, philosopher and film theorist, argues that in television history, such as the BBC's 1997 *The Nazis: A Warning From History*, 'it is not made explicit that what the viewer is getting are interesting and provocative interpretations that may or may not gain the assent of other historians.' He noted that 'the narrator sets out the interpretation, sometimes with graphics, and then interview selections are deployed to give factual feel to the interpretation.' Jarvie remarked that given the need to have a clear uninterrupted story line it is not surprising that 'the point the interview makes always coincides with that being made by the narration!'<sup>5</sup>

It is also worth assessing the ideas of Ken Burns, whose historical documentary format was much vaunted in the 1990s with both the popular and critical success of his film *The Civil War* (1990). Outlining his approach in 1995, Burns attacked historians 'for having abandoned their role as tribal story-tellers who craft tales about the past in which the nation can find its identity'.<sup>6</sup> Burns assumes that film cannot approach the analytical and interrogative approach of text and is best left to dealing with emotion and the story-telling process. He says: 'Film is not equipped to do what a book does, which is to attain profound levels of meaning and texture. But film has the power to reach profound levels of emotion'.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of debates on television history in Australia, Sue Castrique, a script writer and film maker, has also made the point that because of the importance of the narrative in many Australian documentaries, 'the audience is stuck with a narrator who like a bossy tour operator drives you in a straight chronological line'.<sup>8</sup> Michelle Arrow, a collaborator in the making of Australian documentaries, has noted that this need to follow a strong narrative means that differences in interpretations among historians seldom get airtime in Australian television history documentaries. She argues that television seems to be better at personal narratives than debates and that the format strongly requires a beginning, middle and an end.<sup>9</sup>

The *Four Corners* historical productions *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore* and *No Prisoners* quickly outline tough questions the programmes will tackle in probing the meaning of the Anzac mythology associated with Gallipoli and the fall of Singapore. In the programme on Gallipoli, it starts off with asking why thousands of young Australians go so far out of their way when travelling in Europe to visit the Gallipoli battlefield that the programme is filming. Chris Masters says: 'It is very difficult to get a clear expression of why they have gone to such considerable trouble to be here'. He then looks at the prominent place that Gallipoli and Anzac have in Australian contemporary life and asks deeper questions: 'Why do we celebrate War? Why do we celebrate defeat?'<sup>10</sup> In the *Four Corners* episode on the fall of Singapore, *No Prisoners*, the questions asked appear much more pointed and uncomfortable as they are outlined in the images and interviews that opened the show:

*Chris Masters:* Tonight, *Four Corners* confronts the big questions that emerge from the debacle that end the British Empire. Why were the Allied Forces so comprehensively defeated and how much was desertion among Australian troops to blame?

*Peter Elphick*, (historian and author of *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress*, 1995, first major book to make the accusations that large numbers of Australians deserted at the fall of Singapore): I believe the Australians were the first to desert in any great numbers.

*Chris Masters:* This British author has named alleged Australian deserters. We go in search of them.<sup>11</sup>

From these introductory remarks, it seems the approach of *Four Corners* is the investigative journalism style, 'exposing the truth' through a convincing argument format, usually found in *Four Corners*' regular coverage of contemporary social and political issues.<sup>12</sup> But in dealing with Anzac mythology, which is strong in the media and popular culture, can the *Four Corners* investigative style completely pursue difficult questions that can lead to uncomfortable answers?

#### **ANZAC MYTHOLOGY IN *FOUR CORNERS*' ARGUMENT ON GALLIPOLI**

The *Four Corners* historical productions on Anzac mythology, having stated the questions that they will tackle, quickly set out to construct the arguments that the programmes will pursue and substantiate using sound and images. This is done very much in the manner that Jarvie has described in his assessment of television history, whereby only the images and oral history interviews that confirm the argument presented by the narrator are used. Key elements of these arguments are grounded in the very Anzac mythology that one would expect *Four Corners* to be investigating. Perhaps this is

due to the documentary style of the producer of the programme, Harvey Broadbent. He had migrated from Britain to Australia with a degree in Middle Eastern Studies. Broadbent has regularly indicated in his publications a willingness to uncritically embrace the Anzac legend.<sup>13</sup> He had worked on a number of historical feature programmes for the ABC and had prepared for a decade to do a documentary on Gallipoli using oral history testimony he had gathered on film. In 1990, he used these interviews, which he had cut down and heavily edited for *Four Corners*, in the maudlin but fascinating documentary featuring extended interviews with veterans from both sides of the conflict, *Gallipoli: The Boys Who Came Home*.<sup>14</sup> Broadbent wrote of his approach: 'I have become consciousness of not wanting to debunk myths purely for the sake of journalistic impact, particularly because some of the events and performances of the Anzac initiation to war are worthy of admiration'.<sup>15</sup>

In *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore*, the voice narration (done by Chris Masters, the programme's reporter who also seems enamoured of the Anzac legend) starts with the argument: 'Australia is different. Australians are different because of Gallipoli.' The programme at its beginning ties Gallipoli and Australian nationalism together suggesting that an over-sentimental trip through Anzac mythology is about to begin. This is at odds with the asking-difficult-questions approach that is part of the *Four Corners* style. The programme compares the young visitors to the Gallipoli battlefield to the young Anzacs of 1915 and suggests a mystical communion between the two groups:

About 13,000 Australians and New Zealanders are buried in these hills. Each year about the same number find their way here. For every Anzac gravestone there is a visitor every year. Mostly they are the same as their forebears. They are as brown, if not as sleek. They are as adventurous, curious, open-hearted. They are as keen to be admired, to return home with a bevy of souvenirs. They are as hard drinking, as chauvinistic and as callow. Weeks earlier they may well have been stealing trams and carousing at the Munich Beer Festival. But as they near Anzac Cove they become quiet. There is something about this place that they find bewildering.

Given this comparison, it is not surprising that videotapes of *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore* are used by Turkey-based travel agents to show their Australian visitors on their package tours on the day-long bus ride down to the Gallipoli Peninsula from Istanbul. On their pilgrimage to the original Anzacs they are also shown Peter Weir's 1981 film *Gallipoli*, which also plays up the links between Anzacs and Australian nationalism.<sup>16</sup> This use of the *Four Corners* programme on Gallipoli suggests that it is not likely to be a rigorous examination of Anzac mythology. Rather, it is more likely to be cast in the model of 'tribal

story-teller' and leave Australians with their myths upheld rather than analysed and exposed.

When describing the Anzacs of 1915, Masters is just as sanguine about embracing the Anzac mythology as Peter Weir. He concludes when narrating over the excerpt from the country athletic track race of Weir's fictional movie *Gallipoli* a film in which Weir certainly fulfils the role of 'tribal story-teller' for the Australian nation in that he portrays the Anzacs as handsome heroes who were pioneers from the Australian frontier.<sup>17</sup>

The first men to sign up, as in the movie *Gallipoli*, were of the finest physique. After a century of coping with the endurance course that was pioneer Australia we had created a nation of athletes, if not a nation.

Masters' words echo those of C.E.W. Bean, the Australian official historian of World War I. In the 1920s, Bean fashioned the Anzac myth which cast the men that were going off to war as part of a nation of 'rugged bushmen' and that the characteristics they had developed in the bush made them the best soldiers.<sup>18</sup> *Four Corners* draws freely upon Bean as a source. An actor even re-enacts Bean's life as the chronicler of the Anzac story at Gallipoli. Masters endorses Bean's mythology surrounding the Anzacs when he says: 'Charles Bean wrote admiringly of their casual unmistakable gait, their carelessness under fire, their absence of display. Bean began to see something that he would come to describe as the Anzac spirit'. *Four Corners* actively and uncritically employs Bean's literary techniques to build the Anzac legend rather than analyse it. When covering Anzacs at the battle for Lone Pine, it notes that 'Bean records their muted conversation.' "Can you find room for me beside Jimmy there", says one young Australian, "Him and me are mates, an' we're goin' over together." Bean uses the quote as indeed *Four Corners* does, to prove in Beans' words: 'The strongest bond in the Australian Imperial Force was that between a man and his mate.'<sup>19</sup>

*Four Corners*, however, omitted the work of more recent historians who interrogated this aspect of Anzac mythology using statistical analysis of the recruitment of the first Australian Imperial Force. The military historians appearing in the programme, James Robert Rhodes, from Britain, and Denis Winter and Peter Andreas Pedersen, both then at the Australian War Memorial, are mainly used to analyse the strategies behind the battle rather than assess the Anzac legend. However, Winter's ideas that he would later publish from his work at the Australian War Memorial, that the Anzacs were not 'country boys' but comprised of many recent British immigrants to Australia still very loyal to Britain, are not used.<sup>20</sup>

The historians who had done critical research on the Anzac legend that Bean fashioned from Gallipoli, did not participate in the programme. This supports Cannadine's and Arrow's point that television history has problems dealing with presenting the different interpretations of historians as it interrupts the flow of the narrative or story being told. In the 1980s, as Jenny Macleod has documented, Bean and the Anzac legend were undergoing intense scrutiny and debate by historians in Australia.<sup>21</sup> The statistical analysis of who were the first Anzacs done by historian Lloyd Robson in the 1970s was widely circulated in university history courses during the 1980s and suggested that most Anzacs did not come from the Australian bush but from urban areas. Historian Ken Inglis' work on how Bean fashioned the Anzac legend in the official war histories was also well-known.<sup>22</sup> Robson was very critical of Bean's constant attempts to play up the Anzacs as 'boys from the bush' who drew their values from the frontier, and that these bush values were at the core of those of the Australian forces, and indeed the values of the Australian nation. The most common occupations, according to Robson, were industrial workers from New South Wales, a dominant state, while recruits from farming occupations were negligible in Victoria, also a major state. The more rural states of Queensland and Tasmania had a greater number of men from the country but these were small in comparison to the large numbers from urban occupations.<sup>23</sup>

In the *Four Corners* programme on Gallipoli, as in Bean's work, we hear of 'wine growers from Barossa Valley and cane growers from North Queensland' but urban recruits are not mentioned. This is odd given the testimony from the veterans used in the programme that hints that they were urban workers. Frank Parker briefly mentions in passing regularly seeing ships during his pre-war life at Port Melbourne and never guessing that he would be one day on one in uniform. Leopold 'Bill' De Saxe speaks of Gladesville in Sydney, and nothing about the bush. Even when we hear the Turkish side of the Gallipoli story, the bush image continues. Masters introduces Adil Sahin, a Turkish veteran aged seventeen in 1915, with the words, 'like many of the Australians, Adil Sahin, was a farmer training to be a killer'. Thus, it is no surprise to hear in the next sentence that 'the Turks, were, as they are now, a rugged lot'.

*Four Corners* uses the mythology of the Anzacs as bushmen to explain the success on 25 April 1915 of a few small advance Anzac parties approaching the top of Chunuk Bair, the crest of a high ridge, far inland, which had commanding view of the surrounding country, including the Dardenelles waterways on the other side of the Gallipoli Peninsula. The programme implies that if these few Anzacs had taken Chunuk Bair they could have won the entire Gallipoli campaign.<sup>24</sup> Masters says 'to have got this far so quickly was a remarkable feat of physical endurance alone'. We are then told that the Anzacs who reached the slopes of Chunuk Bair 'were a mixed lot from the backblocks of Australia and New Zealand'. The programme quickly cuts to an excerpt from an interview with

veteran Frank Parker, who remembers how they could see the sea on the other side of the Gallipoli Peninsula when members of his battalion were approaching the slopes of Chunuk Bair on that day. Frank Parker, however, was certainly not from the 'backblocks'. According to the embarkation records of the First Australian Imperial Force, Frank Parker, before he enlisted, was a Railway Porter who lived in Port Melbourne.

Other Gallipoli veterans interviewed, judging from their enlistment records, also appear not to be bushmen: Tom Usher from Queensland was a planning machinist from inner city Brisbane; 'Bill' De Saxe was a bank clerk from the New South Wales coastal town of Moruya; Basil Holmes seems to be an orchardist from a family in Sydney's affluent North Shore; while Lionel Simpson, who was in the 8<sup>th</sup> Light Horse and could perhaps be expected to be a bushman, was a carpenter from the Victorian town of Alexandra, up in the mountains around Melbourne.<sup>25</sup> We hear nothing, however, of the veterans' backgrounds, as that would ruin a good story.

Every time a veteran is interviewed, their age when they joined is given. Seventy years after the event, not many men who joined in their thirties and forties are going to be around to give testimony. The impression conveyed by having interviews with all but one who joined when they were teenagers or in their early twenties is the Anzacs were, as Bean claimed, 'country boys'. *Four Corners* uses this to reaffirm the connection with the young visitors on pilgrimages to Anzac Cove as being cast in the same mould as their 'forebears'. This point is made in the introduction to the programme and affirmed at its conclusion. Robson also debunked the impression that the Anzacs were 'country boys' by highlighting statistically a good proportion of older men in their late twenties and thirties, even a small number in their forties. According to his data, fourteen per cent were between eighteen to nineteen years of age, and thirty-eight per cent were between twenty and twenty-four years of age. The rest were over twenty-five years of age.<sup>26</sup>

*Four Corners* also heaps high praise on Australian journalist Keith Murdoch, depicting him as a frank and plain speaking Australian whose account of Gallipoli as a disaster pursued by incompetent British commanders single handedly put an end to the campaign. Masters notes that the Gallipoli campaign by September 1915 had resulted in thousands of men being killed unnecessarily and says 'they probably would have lost a lot more but without the intervention of this man [picture of Murdoch]'. Murdoch's September 1915 letter to the Australian government, which was also circulated among members of the British government, did add to the British government's re-evaluation of the Gallipoli campaign. But even Bean in his official history puts it in the context of the review of the campaign that was going on in the War Office, Whitehall, and the government; he does not go as far as the *Four Corners*' judgement that one frank Australian journalist's report put an end to the slaughter.<sup>27</sup> Here, *Four Corners* seems to be making a subtle connection between its own reputation for investigative journalism exposing the truth in the public interest with that of Murdoch.

The letter is certainly part of the Anzac mythology. Murdoch wrote that the Anzacs, whom he idealised, were being sacrificed in a senseless slaughter because of British incompetence. Masters interprets the Murdoch letter in nationalistic terms:

The Murdoch letter comes close to a declaration of independence. There is nothing restrained, measured, or discreet about it. In this sense, it is a masterpiece of plain speaking. It is passionately pro-Australian and vitriolically anti-British, or rather anti-British command.

Murdoch described how British commanders in their yachts well off shore and away from the front made bad decisions that sent thousands of Anzacs to their deaths. He went further and wrote that 'the continuous and ghastly bungling over the Dardenelles enterprise was to be expected from such a General Staff as the British Army possess, so far as I have seen it'. *Four Corners* plays up anti-British sentiment and Australian nationalism when it uses just one quote from the letter: 'What can you expect of men who have never worked seriously, who lived for their appearance and for social distinction and self satisfaction, and who are now called on to conduct a gigantic war'.<sup>28</sup>

*Four Corners* does interrogate Anzac mythology only once in the ninety-two minutes of the programme. And this interestingly deals with the anti-British theme of the mythology. It examines the reality behind the well-known scene of the end of the movie *Gallipoli*. This is when the Western Australian 10<sup>th</sup> Light Horse Regiment is about to go over the trenches in an attack on the infamous Nek on 7 August 1915 knowing they faced certain death. To build up the image of the Anzacs as rugged men from the bush who are irreverent to British authority, *Four Corners* has previously drawn freely upon the movie, suggesting that it represents reality. For the scenes at the Nek, the movie *Gallipoli* is by and large accurate, with a failure to synchronise watches leading to the bombardment of Turkish trenches stopping seven minutes too soon, enabling the Turkish machine gunners to get back into their trenches. The first wave of 150 men from the Light Horse was cut to pieces, as were the second, third, and fourth waves, each of 150 men.

*Four Corners* checks the film *Gallipoli* for accuracy and discovers the movie's impression that a British officer ordered the attack at the Nek to continue despite pleading by an Australian officer is wrong. It was actually an Australian officer, Lieutenant-Colonel John M. 'Bull' Antill, the Brigade-Major, who gave the order for the attack to continue after the second wave. The programme shows correspondence that reveals that Antill's fellow officer Lieutenant-Colonel Noel Murray Brazier, who attempted to have the third wave of attacked stopped, was very critical of Antill's decision to persist. On the day, Brazier pleaded with Antill to stop the third wave because he was unable to

contact Brigadier-General Frederick Hughes who eventually called the attack off. In the confusion, however, a fourth wave also went over to their deaths.<sup>29</sup>

The programme, however, uses this well-known climax of the movie *Gallipoli* to illustrate the memories of trooper Lionel Simpson, aged twenty-six, the last survivor of the Nek to pass away. Simpson's words are used as a voice over when in the movie the character, Archy Hamilton, a champion runner, keeps sprinting towards the Turkish trenches and is riddled with bullets. In contrast, Simpson, of the 8<sup>th</sup> Light Horse from Victoria, which had carried out the first and second waves, was carrying a plank to be thrown over the Turkish barbed wire and noticed that everyone was falling behind him until he too was shot, and then he ambled back to the Australian trenches. Using the fictional film *Gallipoli* to illustrate Simpson's memories confirms Nichols' idea of documentary being representative of reality rather than simply reflecting it. At other places, *Four Corners* uses film footage in a similar manner. Earlier in the programme, footage of the Austro-Hungarian battleship *Szent Istvan* on 10 June 1918 capsizing and sinking with its crew running up its side onto its bottom like squirrels before the ship quickly sinks is used to illustrate how one of the six lost battleships of the British and French fleet, the *Bouzet*, was sunk in a similar manner by the Turkish forts and mines in the Dardenelles on 18 March 1915. No archival film footage of this exists. The purpose is to represent how British naval arrogance and incompetence led to defeat, which is part of *Four Corners*' argument.

In *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore*, it is clear that *Four Corners* abandons much of its traditional role as an investigative programme when it embraces the argument that the Anzacs laid down national values. The reasons for this could be the nature of television history as a story teller as has been observed by Cannadine, Downing and Burns overseas and Castrique and Arrow in Australia. It could, however, also be due to Broadbent as the producer who discarded *Four Corners*' usual investigative journalism style in making *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore*.

#### **ANZAC MYTHOLOGY IN *FOUR CORNERS*' ARGUMENT ON THE FALL OF SINGAPORE**

Broadbent's strong influence over *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore* makes it worth examining another programme in which *Four Corners* explores Anzac mythology to see if it employs the usual investigative journalism approach without him as producer. The *Four Corners* documentary on the fall of Singapore, *No Prisoners*, marked the sixtieth anniversary of the battle. It is only forty-five minutes long, compared to the ninety-two minute long special on Gallipoli. Sticking to the *Four Corners* regular running time may mean that the fall of Singapore programme could have less an aura of being in the mould of an epic story. *No Prisoners* was produced by its regular current affairs executive producer, Bruce Belsham, and regular current affairs producer Lin Buckfield. Belsham himself had worked in the ABC Documentary Unit and produced the 1997 challenging television

history on Aboriginal and European relations, *Frontier*. Buckfield was an awarding winning current affairs producer.

Although *No Prisoners* begins by setting out to answer the question of whether Australian soldiers deserted the front in the final days of the fall of Singapore, just one veteran is questioned about this topic, Roydon Cornford. He was named as a deserter by Peter Elphick in his 1995 book, *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress*. Only the last ten minutes of the programme *No Prisoners* deals directly with the issue of Australian deserters. Like the *Four Corners* programme on Gallipoli, most of *No Prisoners* uses the recorded testimony of veterans and plays up the Anzac mythology of Australians as the best soldiers because their rugged character, which was supposedly shaped by the Australian bush. To devote less than ten minutes to seriously examining this issue is not surprising. Among historians of the Malayan Campaign, it is common knowledge that Australians were absent without leave from the front in the last days of the fall of Singapore. At its very end the programme asks three historians, Peter Elphick, Peter Dennis and Brian Farrell whether Australians did desert. All three historians agree that Australian soldiers did desert.

Faced with all this, *Four Corners* still sets out to debunk the claims that Australians did desert by trying to discredit Peter Elphick, who had revived the controversy over Australian 'stragglers' or 'deserters' at the fall of Singapore in his 1995 book. *Four Corners* uses the investigative journalism style that it employs in its current affairs programmes which take one side of the argument and pursue it because the journalists believe it is in the public interest. *Four Corners* sets its sights on Elphick by attempting to prove that the two Australian soldiers that he names as deserters in his book, 'Captain Blackwood' and Roydon Cornford, were not deserters. A 'Captain Blackwood' was named by Elphick as having led a group of Australian deserters on board the ship, the *Empire Star*. In the interview excerpt Masters tells Elphick:

Chris Masters: There's no record of Captain Blackwood in the [Australian] 8<sup>th</sup> Division. What do you make of that?

Peter Elphick: Er, well, maybe they got the name wrong.

*Four Corners* is right, but from the website set up by the programme with the full transcript of the interview, Elphick's response is much longer than this, and he discusses his source. It would have been more objective and fairer to hear the whole response from Elphick. Just taking the first sentence from a much longer response to the question that discusses the source makes Elphick appear to be arguing against the evidence. His longer response seems to indicate he believes that his own source may be mistaken. Elphick says that the name came from information from a Royal Air Force Squadron Leader, Steve Stephens, who had permission to be evacuated from Singapore aboard

the *Empire Star*, and recalled hearing over the ship's internal speaker system requests for a 'Captain Blackwood of the AIF' to report to the bridge.<sup>30</sup> Steve Stephens may have got the name wrong, not the list of officers in the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division. Still, of course, Elphick should have cross checked the list of 8<sup>th</sup> Division officers.

*Four Corners* also then takes up the case of Roydon Cornford. Cornford is heard describing the chaos in the last few days of the fall of Singapore and how he and his friends in the 2/19<sup>th</sup> Battalion were 'left cut off and leaderless' when retreating from the advancing Japanese. The excerpts from the interview with Cornford do not shed much light on what he was doing or why he was doing it at all because it is cut up into parts that don't seem to run together. One moment he is describing how he is 'pushing through the jungle' then he is interrupted by the narrator, who only describes Cornford and his four friends as 'cut off and leaderless'. Then all of a sudden they are in a little boat which encounters the *Empire Star* with hundreds of soldiers on it. The soldiers on board lowered a scrambling net, and Cornford and his friends climbed aboard the *Empire Star*.

*Four Corners* fails to mention that it is 12 February, three days before the surrender of Singapore. Only when all the soldiers became prisoners of war could they legitimately escape without permission. Escaping without permission is technically desertion. The narrator then tells the audience that Cornford helped defend the ship from attack by Japanese aircraft, and 'upon arrival in Java, he was briefly detained before volunteering to return to the line until captured by the Japanese.' He was a prisoner on the Burma-Thailand Railway. Then he miraculously survived one of the Japanese hellships, the *Rakuyo Maru*, which was transporting prisoners to Japan when it was sunk by an American submarine on 17 September 1944. He described how he floated on a raft for three days before an American warship picked up the surviving seven out of the original eighteen who were on the raft. After this description is given, Chris Masters starts questioning Elphick:

Chris Masters: You've also named a 'Roy Cornford' – you say deserted by his own admission. This he denies. He gives a good account of what happened to him. Indeed, he joined the frontline again when he was returned to Java. Were you wrong to call him a deserter?

Peter Elphick: No if I am wrong then so was the author of the book who actually interviewed Roy Cornford, and he said that Roy Cornford, on his own admission, was a deserter. And I took that verbatim from the book.

Chris Masters: Did you talk to Roy Cornford?

Peter Elphick: No, I didn't.

Chris Masters: But you should have, shouldn't you if you are going to call him a deserter.

Peter Elphick: Well, it's a moot point. Would it have been worth my while to journey out to Australia to interview one man? I don't think so.

Neither Masters nor Elphick are being as open and frank about things as they could be. In his own book, *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress*, Elphick cites as his source Cornford's interview in Joan and Clay Blair's *Return to the River Kwai*. Although Cornford appears to have given to the authors an open description of what happened to him, he does not say he is a deserter.<sup>31</sup> Thus, Elphick is certainly misusing his source to get the interpretation that Cornford is 'a self-confessed deserter'. According to *Return from the River Kwai*, Cornford and his friends were taken off the *Empire Star* at Java before it left to go to Australia and they were jailed. The captain of the ship accused them of being among the Australian and British soldiers who forcibly boarded the ship with Tommy guns. Of course they had not been involved in this, as is clear from Cornford's testimony on *Four Corners*.

Masters, however, also certainly knows that Cornford escaped from Singapore well before he became a prisoner of war, and hence was technically a deserter, and also has most likely read the account in *Return from the River Kwai* from the authors' interview with Cornford. The most interesting question that emerges is perhaps why he does not consider what they were doing as desertion and what were his motives for escaping even though he most likely knew that it was technically deserting. Also, one of the documents that *Four Corners* briefly shows in between cutting from Elphick to Cornford is that drawn up by the Australian army listing Australian soldiers who escaped from Singapore without permission and who are to be regarded as deserters. This is from Brigadier Arthur Blackburn, commander of the Australian forces in Java, giving a list of ninety-five deserters from Malaya, Singapore and elsewhere which was drawn up 'to prevent any of them being confused with genuine escapees'.<sup>32</sup> In the document there were seventy-five 'names of deserters from Malaya and Singapore and 16 were members of reinforcements returned from Singapore.'<sup>33</sup> Cornford's name is on that list. Having acquired this document and presumably others in the file, *Four Corners* ignores them.

In the programme, the voice narration simply says 'documents reveal no evidence of Australians court-martialled for desertion' to suggest there were no desertions. The documents in the same file as the list of deserters on the *Empire Star* suggest that the Australian government was unlikely to initiate court martials after what was described as the already 'undesirable publicity' given to reports of Australians deserting. These and other documents that *Four Corners* presumably got hold of in addition to those that it

showed briefly on camera must have indicated that something significant was going on. The commander of the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division General Bennett's own report says that 'under 5,000' Australians were holding the perimeter at the front at the time of cease fire on 15 February 1942.<sup>34</sup> On 17 and 18 February 1942, over 14,000 Australians reported to Changi as prisoners of war. Of these, about 3000 Australians were in hospital as patients and personnel.<sup>35</sup> The Report on Operations of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division compiled by Colonel J.H. Thyer also suggests a high figure of Australians absent without leave when he writes that 'in the last stages at most two-thirds of those fit to fight were manning the final perimeters'.<sup>36</sup> The figure of Lieutenant-Colonel Maurice Ashkanasy, the Deputy Assistant Adjutant General (DAAG) of the 8<sup>th</sup> Division, was only 4500 Australians manning the perimeter on 12 February 1942.<sup>37</sup> Ashkanasy himself escaped from Singapore with forty men in a small sampan before surrender and later joined Australian soldiers fighting the Japanese in New Guinea. So the real question is what were approximately 6000 Australians who appear to have been absent without leave doing? But this is not the question that *Four Corners* asks. Instead it says there are unfounded rumours of Australian deserters, and let's go and find out by asking one or two veterans. Masters simply asks Cornford: 'Are you a self confessed deserter?' Cornford says no, and that is it.

Work published by one of the historians interviewed by *Four Corners*, Brian Farrell of the National University of Singapore, uses all these documents and indicates that a large number of Australians were not at the front, and attempts to explain this.<sup>38</sup> Given that the *Four Corners* team had come to Singapore to interview him, surely they had read what he had written. What *Four Corners* tries to do is suggest that these allegations are those of a lone 'pommy' historian, Peter Elphick, who has not checked his facts. Thus, by discrediting Elphick they seek to dismiss the allegations. At a seminar a few days after the interview, Farrell expressed frustration with the *Four Corners* team in that they seemed unable to accept what he was telling them.<sup>39</sup> Farrell's answer to the question as to why there were so many Australians absent without leave is a very perceptive. A hint of it is given in the excerpt taken from the interview he gave to *Four Corners* about the army being trapped and falling apart from the top down.<sup>40</sup>

In 1999, Farrell had published on how badly led the Australians were in the defence of Singapore. He described how in the final days before the fall of Singapore Lieutenant-General Gordon Bennett, commanding the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division, was too busy planning his own escape and how his brigade commanders failed their troops. The commander of the Australian 27<sup>th</sup> Brigade, Duncan Struan Maxell, believing that everything was lost and that continuing the fight would only cost more lives, wanted to surrender even before the invasion of Singapore Island. Harold Burfield Taylor, commander of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, assumed that the main defence plan would not succeed and withdrew his troops too soon. Thus Farrell wrote that:

The rank and file of the 8<sup>th</sup> Australian Division was tired, but not stupid. They could not have failed to note the attitudes of their commanders and the lack of clear direction and harmony in the chain of command. As Percival himself admitted, when no one told them otherwise they decided the battle was futile. When the front fell apart and no one stepped forward to restore the situation, many – twice provoked – gave up. Mass desertion there was, but the main cause is also clear: left to fend for themselves by an incompetent command, the troops did just that.<sup>41</sup>

*Four Corners*, however, does not seem to be interested in him making this argument in the programme and it concludes that there was no mass desertion.

Throughout most of its forty-five minutes, *Four Corners* does not address the question that it set out to answer on Australians deserting at the fall of Singapore but constructs an argument that affirms the Anzac mythology about Australian soldiers, just as it did in *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore* fourteen years before. Bean's ideas that permeated the 1988 programme are strongly present in *No Prisoners*. These are principally that the Australian bush had made Australians the best soldiers because it had created them as more rugged, more resourceful, more independent and bound together in mateship by the very ruggedness and trials and tribulations of bush life. In *No Prisoners*, the country image of the Australian digger fashioned by Bean is still trotted out as it was in *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore*. The programme uses a quote by David Griffin of the 2/3<sup>rd</sup> Medical Auxiliary Corps of the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division in Malaya and Singapore, which follows the Anzac legend:

It [the Australian 8<sup>th</sup> Division] was made up of absolutely wonderful Australians, which are now almost an extinct race, I think... a lot of country chaps that are absolutely marvellous types of people. Just marvellous.

Australians are also played up as superior fighters.

A great deal is made of Australians ambushing the Japanese at the Gemencheh Bridge near Gemas in mid-January 1942, while nothing is heard of Kampar, where British and Indian troops were able to hold back the Japanese. Masters says of Gemas: 'The Japanese later said that the Australians fought with a bravery not previously encountered'. In other words, *Four Corners* is saying that Australians were the first to stand up bravely to the Japanese. In contrast, British and Indian troops are mentioned only in unfavourable terms. Comments, such as the excerpt from Ray Steele, Australian

veteran from 2/15<sup>th</sup> Field Regiment at Muar, are not balanced by accounts of stubborn resistance by Indian troops, such as at Kota Bharu and Kampar:

Ray Steele: As soon as the heat turned on, they didn't know what to do. They [an Indian Brigade] finished up, a lot of them, running off – throwing their rifles away, taking their boots off, and running like hell.

Just as *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore* refused to question much of the Anzac mythology, so, too, does *No Prisoners*. This means it has trouble dealing with the issue of desertion in terms of offering an explanation of what happened.

Elphick's book cites the explanation of Keith Murdoch, a 'hero' in the 1988 *Four Corners* Gallipoli programme. Murdoch, as Managing Director of the Herald newspaper group, suggested in August 1942 in a famous article in the Melbourne *Herald*, that the very qualities that made up the Anzac legend helped explain the large number of Australians not at the frontline in the last days of the fall of Singapore. He blamed the 'distorted tradition of the last war, that discipline is not necessary to attain high fighting value' for the indiscipline that led to many Australian soldiers to fend for themselves rather than stay in disciplined formations at the front. Murdoch remarked that 'it was notable that the men who did not stand were the boozy "tough" men who had always had wrong ideas of discipline and were noisy and boastful'. He was also critical of the aspect of the Anzac legend that said Australians were the best fighters and that others were inferior at the fall of Singapore: 'Our own part was marred by a constant jarring and belittlement of our British and Indian comrades' and this 'led to inadequate cohesion in the battlefield and did no good to our own morale: troops are not helped by being told that those on their flanks are unreliable'.<sup>42</sup> In *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore, Four Corners* had drawn upon Murdoch extensively and praised him as a frank journalist when he was upholding the Anzac legend in 1915. But when he was scrutinising it in 1942 he was ignored by the programme.

Many viewers responding in the *No Prisoners*' online forum expressed admiration for the programme for upholding the Anzac mythology: they despised Elphick for questioning it. They also remarked that the programme was in the tradition of *Four Corners*' investigative journalism style.<sup>43</sup> 'Shirley N' commented: 'I would like to again congratulate *Four Corners* on a great piece of insightful history on our war time past. This is a great objective piece of journalism by Chris Masters and his team and important to recognise these incredible brave Australian blokes'. 'S Rogers' wrote: 'Yet again, another excellent program by *Four Corners*. I'm a Brit living in Australia and I'd like to say that's lucky for my countryman Mr. Elphick. What an arrogant bloke and someone should take this ignorant, bombastic twit to the cleaners. Legally of course!' 'Garry' compared *No Prisoners* to *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore*: 'Thank you very much for the excellent

program, like *The Fatal Shore* it was very informative and didn't pull any punches. I look forward to more of these programs from you and your team.' What is significant with *No Prisoners* is that viewers saw its approach as that of examining the Anzac legend within the tradition of *Four Corners* of 'exposing the truth' through an investigative style that makes out a partisan argument. The programme did have an argument, but that argument was not to question the Anzac mythology; it was to cross examine anyone questioning the Anzac legend, principally Elphick.

Both *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore* and *No Prisoners* offer insights into how the investigative journalism style of *Four Corners* is applied from current affairs to historical documentary making. In this process, there was little rigorous examination of the 'truth' behind the Anzac mythology that can be found in the printed work of historians. In the *Four Corners*' current affairs programmes, partiality is deemed acceptable if it is in the 'public interest', which equates in this instance with shoring up old nationalist certainties in an unstable cultural environment. In its historical documentary making, *Four Corners* did not 'expose the truth' but obscured it by simply arguing one view in a complex historical debate. This confirms the point made by scholars of television history that the medium in its current form is not amenable to drawing out historiographical debates but is driven by the needs of a simple, linear narrative story telling structure.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> See 'Chapter 2: *Four Corners*: Convincing Bias' in Alan McKee, *Australian Television: A Genealogy of Great Moments*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001, pp33-50; 'Four Corners and the Truth' in Stuart Cunningham and Toby Miller, *Contemporary Australian Television*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1994, pp53-58; and 'Introduction' in Robert Pullan, *Four Corners: Twenty-Five Years*, ABC Enterprises, Sydney, 1986, pp3-10.
- <sup>2</sup> Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 2001, p105.
- <sup>3</sup> David Cannadine, 'Introduction', in David Cannadine (ed), *History and the Media*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004, p4.
- <sup>4</sup> Taylor Downing, 'Bringing the Past to the Small Screen', in David Cannadine (ed), *History and the Media*, p10; and Taylor Downing, 'History on Film/Film on History', *History Today*, vol 56, no 1, September 2006, p62.
- <sup>5</sup> Ian Jarvie, 'History on Television', *Historical Journal of Film Radio and Television*, vol 21, no 1, 2001, p98.
- <sup>6</sup> These words are Thomas Cripps' paraphrasing of Ken Burns in Thomas Cripps, 'Historical Truth: An Interview with Ken Burns', *American Historical Review*, vol 100, no 3, June 1995, p741.
- <sup>7</sup> Cited in Mathew Melton, 'Ken Burns' Civil War: Epic Narrative and Public Moral Argument', *Sync: Regent Journal of Film and Video*, vol 1, no 2, June 1994 (Online). Available: <http://www.regent.edu/acad/schcom/rojc/sync2.html> (Accessed 20 October 2006)
- <sup>8</sup> Sue Castrique, 'Beyond Text: Reflections on Historical Television', *Public History Review*, vol 9, 2001, p98.
- <sup>9</sup> Michelle Arrow, 'Television program yes, history, no: Australian history according to *Rewind*', *History Australia*, vol 2, no 2, 2005, pp46-1-46-6; and Michelle Arrow, 'I want to be a TV historian when I grow up! On Being a *Rewind* Historian', *Public History Review*, vol 12, 2006, pp80-91.
- <sup>10</sup> See the commercial ABC videotape of the ninety-two minute *Four Corners* programme, *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore*, ABC Video, Sydney, 1992.
- <sup>11</sup> See the transcript on the website for this particular *Four Corners* episode, *No Prisoners* (online): <http://www.abc.net.net.au/4corners/stories/s498399.htm> (Accessed 20 October 2006).
- <sup>12</sup> Pullan, *Four Corners: Twenty-Five Years*.
- <sup>13</sup> Harvey Broadbent, *Gallipoli: The Fatal Shore*, Viking, Camberwell, Victoria, 2005.

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- <sup>14</sup> *Gallipoli: The Boys Who Came Home*, ABC Video, Sydney, 1990.
- <sup>15</sup> Harvey Broadbent, *The Boys who Came Home*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1990, px.
- <sup>16</sup> For use of the two videos on the Gallipoli tours, see for example the Istanbul Hotels Tour (Online) Available: <http://www.istanbulhotelsonline.org/anzac2.htm>; and the Turkey Tours (Online) Available: <http://www.turkeytoursonline.com/english/miniour2.htm> (Both accessed 20 October 2006).
- <sup>17</sup> Alistair Thomson, *Anzac Memories: Living with the Legend*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp196-97.
- <sup>18</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume 1: The Story of ANZAC, From The Outbreak of War to the First Phase of the Gallipoli Campaign May 4 1915*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1939, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, originally published in 1921, pp4-5.
- <sup>19</sup> Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume 1*, p6.
- <sup>20</sup> Denis Winter, *25 April 1915: The Inevitable Tragedy*, Queensland, University of Queensland St. Lucia, 1994, pp31-32.
- <sup>21</sup> See Jenny Macleod, *Reconsidering Gallipoli*, Manchester University Press, 2004.
- <sup>22</sup> Leslie Lloyd Robson, 'The Origin and Character of the First A.I.F, 1914-1918: Some Statistical Evidence', *Historical Studies*, no 61, 1973, pp737-749; and Leslie Lloyd Robson, *The First Australian Imperial Force: A Study of its Recruitment, 1914-1918*, Melbourne University Press, 1970. For Ken Inglis, see the compilation of his work in John Lack, (ed), *Anzac Remembered: Selected Writings of K.S. Inglis*, History Department, University of Melbourne, 1998.
- <sup>23</sup> Robson, 'The Origin and Character of the First A.I.F', pp737-49.
- <sup>24</sup> Among accounts given by historians, the only one to speculate this way is the Australian journalist Alan Moorehead, *Gallipoli*, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1956, pp138-139. Even C.E.W. Bean does not allow himself this type of claim when he returns to Gallipoli in 1919 and tries to find out how far the Anzacs got up the slopes of Chunuk Bair as reported in his *Gallipoli Mission*, ABC Books, Sydney, 1990, originally published in 1948, pp84-107.
- <sup>25</sup> See the Embarkation Roll on the First Australian Imperial Force online at the Australian War Memorial (online). Available: <http://www.awm.gov.au/database/nroll.asp> (Accessed 20 October 2006)
- <sup>26</sup> Robson, 'The Origin and Character of the First A.I.F', p743.
- <sup>27</sup> C.E.W. Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume 2: The Story of ANZAC, From 4 May 1915 to the Evacuation of the Gallipoli Peninsula*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1939, 9<sup>th</sup> edition, originally published in 1924, pp763-97.
- <sup>28</sup> Keith Arthur Murdoch Papers, Ms, Ms 2823-2-1, Australian National Library, Canberra (Online). Available: <http://www.nla.gov.au/gallipolidespatches/2-2-1-murdoch.html> (Accessed 20 October 2006).
- <sup>29</sup> Bean, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914-1918: Volume 2*, pp618-619.
- <sup>30</sup> *No Prisoners* (online). Available: <http://www.abc.gov.au/4corners/specials/noprisoners/interviews/elphick.htm> (Accessed 20 October 2006). There is also discussion of *No Prisoners* in Karl Hack and Kevin Blackburn, *Did Singapore Have to Fall?* Routledge, London, 2004, p160.
- <sup>31</sup> Peter Elphick, *Singapore: The Pregnable Fortress*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1995, p454; and see Joan and Clay Blair Jr, *Return From the River Kwai*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, 1989, originally published, 1979, p29.
- <sup>32</sup> See the document Cable from Britgen Batavia to Air Board for Prime Minister, 2 March 1942 Ref ABDACOM OPX O 1428 17/2 in file Alleged Offense of Members of A.I.F. in Departing from Singapore Without Authority A5954 Item 527/9 (Australian Archives).
- <sup>33</sup> See AWM 54 553/62 (Australian War Memorial).
- <sup>34</sup> See paragraph 11 of Bennett's report to the War Office on 27 March 1942, War Cabinet Agendum 192/1942, Report on the Malayan Campaign, A2671 (Australian National Archives). There is also a copy in A5954, Item 653/1 (Australian Archives).
- <sup>35</sup> Callaghan to D.M.O. & P of 27 January 1947, AWM 54 553/1/6 (Australian War Memorial).
- <sup>36</sup> See paragraph 228 of Operations of 8 Australian Division in Malaya 1941-1942. Report on Operations of 8 Division AIF in Malaya, compiled by Colonel J H Thyer CBE DSO from narrative prepared by Colonel G H Kappe OBE PSC, AWM54 553/5/23 Part 1 (Australian War Memorial).
- <sup>37</sup> AWM 67, Item 1/5, Long, Diary 5 (Australian War Memorial).
- <sup>38</sup> Brian P. Farrell, 'Controversies Surrounding the Surrender of Singapore, February 1942' in Murfett, Malcolm H., et al, *Between Two Oceans: A Military History of Singapore From First Settlement to Final British Withdrawal*. Oxford University Press, Singapore, 1999, pp341-364.
- <sup>39</sup> At the seminar given by Paula Hamilton, *For the People, by the People: The Practice of History in the United States*, History Department of the National University of Singapore, 20 February 2002.
- <sup>40</sup> Brian P. Farrell, *The Defence and Fall of Singapore 1940-1942*, Tempus, Stroud, Gloucestershire, 2005, p364.
- <sup>41</sup> Brian P. Farrell, 'Controversies Surrounding the Surrender of Singapore, February 1942', p359.
- <sup>42</sup> *Herald*, 15 August 1942.
- <sup>43</sup> *No Prisoners* (Online) Available <http://www2b.abc.net.au/4corners/sforum81/> (Accessed 20 October 2006).