An Ethnography of a Requiem for an Old Digger

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Abstract

One reason I despise nationalism is that it gives the likes of Blair, Bush and Howard a pretext for murdering thousands of innocent people. I also detest the ways in which so many Australians constantly glorify the ANZAC tradition for jingoistic purposes. Yet as Australian artists like Eric Bogle (And the Band Played Waltzing Matilda), Judy Small (Home Front), and Redgum (I Was Only Nineteen) remind us in their haunting anti-war ballads, even the ‘victors’ sustain casualties. It was with this ambivalent mind-set that I attended last week’s state funeral for Ted Smout (1898-2004), who was Queensland’s last and Australia’s oldest WWI veteran. His death left only five soldiers in Australia from the war that was supposed to end all wars. After serving in the Australian Army Medical Corps on the Western Front, Ted Smout returned home when the war ended and went on to become a highly successful company manager and a tireless worker for numerous charitable organisations. In 1978 he was awarded the Order of Australia for service to the community. In 1998 France gave him its highest military distinction, the Legion of Honour, which he characteristically refused as an individual tribute and accepted only on behalf of his comrades. He died on the 81st anniversary of the marriage to his late wife Ella with whom he spent 69 years.

I had mixed motives for attending the event. My admiration for Ted Smout started in 1999 when I saw him interviewed on the 7.30 Report just before New Year’s Eve. He was one of three 100-year-old Australians who were asked to reflect on their lives as the new century approached. I was initially fascinated by the fact that despite being a venerated military figure Ted Smout wound up being a pacifist. I was then moved to tears while he recounted his remarkable life with a compelling mixture of humour, horror, grace, and dignity. His account of how he recovered from shell shock was especially poignant:

… about a year after I had this complete breakdown from shell shock, complete breakdown.
I went down to the Department and of course they produced this letter. Disowned me completely, couldn't get any help.
Doctors knew nothing about it, and anyway, there were no medical benefits then.

Doctors were expensive, they knew nothing about shell shock, so I went out onto a station property, outside of Cunnamulla, for three months and worked as an unpaid jackaroo there.

I got my physical health back.

I got back to Brisbane physically fit, but mentally disturbed still and I set myself a six-months course of learning to sing and learning to dance, because they were two things that I felt anyone that can do that should get a VC.

And after six months I was able to sing at social gatherings quite comfortably and I was able to ask a strange girl for a dance.

So that did its job, so I cut it out and that's how I got on top of it. It wasn't easy. (abc.net.au/7.30/stories/s76030.htm)

Both my re-reading of the 7.30 Report transcript and a perusal of the numerous obituaries took me back to a conversation I once had with my grandfather, who also was born in the 19th century, lived to be 95, and saw Halley's Comet twice – 78 years apart! I recall being mesmerised while he talked about his amazement at seeing things that many people now take for granted (automobiles, telephones, washing machines, motion pictures, aeroplanes, radio, TV), his grim recollections of the Great Depression and two world wars, realising that I was having a close encounter with history of the 'Victorian grandfather as told to postmodern grandson' kind.

In reading the stories, I discovered that Ted Smout enlisted at 17 by lying about his age. He was quoted a saying, 'The girls gave you a white feather if you didn't enlist. It was harder to not enlist than to enlist; everybody was doing it'. This transported me to an evening on Prince Edward Island a few years ago with my aunt Nancy, uncle Jack, their daughter Nancy and her husband Tom. We got talking about the film Saving Private Ryan, which prompted Jack to reflect on some of his experiences while fighting with the Canadian army in Europe during WWII, a time that he has seldom spoken about. Like my aunt and cousins, I listened intently to his descriptions and discovered that he had lied about his age in order to enlist. After the war, Jack played part-time in a local band for many years, and it was only after contemplating Ted Smout's regime of singing and dancing that I wondered if music had also been part of his way of dealing with the awfulness of war.

I also had a professional interest. In a country where, rightly or wrongly, WWI vets sit atop the pantheon of national heroes, I sensed that the memorial service would be a rare opportunity to witness a piece of history and also to observe a sacred ceremony.

Despite getting to the Sandgate Uniting Church in the northern bayside suburb of Deagon well before the scheduled time, I had to park far away due to the large turnout. The always modest Ted Smout had requested that his
state funeral be kept low key, but that did not deter hundreds of people like me from coming to pay their respects. I hadn't been to the area for about 10 years and was struck by its anachronistic 1950s white working-class look: rows of old weatherboard houses on stilts in yards that were separated by dilapidated fences; badly paved side-roads; and neither a cappuccino bar nor a non-Anglo face in sight. Just as I spotted the church, which was the newest building on the strip, its carillon started to peal – an event that was to become significant.

As I stood in front of the church next to an area that had been cordoned off for the media, I was taken by the diverse nature of the crowd: VIPs from both state and federal politics; the head of Australia's armed forces and other top military brass; the French ambassador to Australia; current and former members from all branches of the armed services; and ordinary people from every walk of life. The most distinctive group was the dozen or so members of the Vietnam Vets Motorcycle Club, who resembled entrants in a Z Z Topp Look-Alike Contest. Their menacing aura was accentuated by the club's logo on the T-shirts and leather vests: the distinctively Australian slouch hat on top of a ghoulishly smiling skull. However, their main activity involved assisting frail elderly people to get into the church. The sight of the vets made me time-travel again. I recalled the long-term devastation of the Vietnam War that I saw when I visited Cambodia and Vietnam a couple of years ago. I also thought of my American friend Bob Sparks, who fought in the Vietnam War, describing to me how his fear of having been affected by Agent Orange made him count the fingers and toes of his boys when they were born (a week after the funeral I also saw a mind-numbing documentary on how Agent Orange was still causing hideous birth defects among third-generation Vietnamese children).

When the service commenced, I went to the back courtyard where the proceedings were being transmitted on a large screen to an overflow crowd. As a sociologist I am automatically suspicious about elegies, knowing how many monsters and buffoons have been hailed as saints at funerals and that we seldom speak ill of the deceased. Just think of how Ronald Reagan recently was eulogised for being a 'statesman'. And when Henry Kissinger dies, you can bet that some sycophant will praise his farcical Nobel Peace Prize instead of saying that he should have been tried as a war criminal for his complicity in the murder of countless Cambodians and Vietnamese. However, for the next 90 minutes I joined almost everyone else, including the Vietnam Vets, in shedding tears of both laughter and sadness as various speakers lovingly related what I can only describe an inventory of unrequited kindness that simply could not have been made up. For instance, until four years ago at the age of 102, Ted Smout was still on the streets of Sandgate on cold, windy winter days collecting funds for charitable organisations. Perhaps the most bittersweet tale was that he had donated the very carillon which all of us had heard heralding his farewell.
As the Last Post sounded, I returned to the front so I could watch the soldiers carry the coffin outside and managed to stand less than 10 feet away from the hearse. I then had one of those mind-spinning surreal moments. As the coffin, which was draped in the Australian flag with an AIF slouch hat and wreath on top was placed in the limo, all the Vietnam Vets stood at attention alongside with hands over their hearts and tears in their eyes. Right next to them at the head of the Honour Guard was the only non-Anglo-European person whom I saw all day: a young woman soldier of Asian background who was wearing a standard issue slouch hat and proudly saluting the cortege with misty eyes. I could only ponder a series of 'what-ifs': Could she be of Vietnamese origin? If so, could any of those men next to her have fought against her relatives?

As the hearse drove off an elder approached and asked people if they’d like to sign a list the church was compiling. Everyone hesitated, so I said that I had never met Mr Smout so was unsure if it was appropriate for me to sign. 'No worries mate', he said in that classically laconic Australian way, 'lots of people here never met the old bloke so away you go'. The rest of the crowd followed suit and an elderly couple then struck up a conversation with me. It turned out they didn't know Ted Smout either, but had driven for three hours to attend the service, because after recently reading his biography, *Three Centuries Spanned*, which was written by his 98-year-old brother, they decided that 'He was a really good bloke'.

As I walked to my car with the bells still chiming, I decided to drive to the bay and mull over the emotive ritual that I had been fortunate enough to see. I sat on the pier thinking that at a time when there was no self-help industry and an extremely strong taboo existed against men, especially military men, showing their emotions, Ted Smout had courageously climbed out of the abyss and conquered his demons by learning to sing and dance. I also thought of how he could have capitalised on his revered 'Old Digger' status, but instead adopted an anti-war stance and spent much of his life working altruistically for others. At a time when the Order of Australia goes to boofhead athletes, corporate spivs, crooked politicians, intellectual charlatans, radio shock-jocks, and myriad airhead celebrities, I contemplated that even the whacko academics who categorically disparage all 'dead white men' would have to admire the values that Ted Smout practiced. On my drive to the jetty I noticed that some parts of Sandgate were changing: a few up-market shops and trendy cafes here and some gentrified houses there. Looking south toward the 'BrizVegas' skyline I mused that, like Ted Smout, Sandgate's way of life also would soon be gone forever.

**Coda:**

*No war has ever ended a war. I don't think there is any place for war. The history of war has never been for any peace. I wouldn't do it again.*

(Ted Smout)