War correspondents memorial dedicated at the Australian War Memorial

On 23 September 2015, 100 years since journalist Keith Murdoch dictated a powerful report conveying his searing indictment of the situation on Gallipoli, a memorial to Australian war correspondents has been dedicated in the grounds of the Australian War Memorial.

Murdoch’s report, cabled to Australian Prime Minister Andrew Fisher, influenced government policy on Australia’s military involvement in the First World War. It was a compelling example of the impact war correspondents have had – and continue to have – on the evolving narrative of Australia at war.

Murdoch’s contemporary, Charles Bean, was the Australian official war correspondent reporting on the role of the Anzacs on Gallipoli and the Western Front. Later appointed official historian, he wrote six of the twelve volumes of the First World War official history, and his vision inspired the founding of the Australian War Memorial.

It was Bean’s legacy that drove the formation of the C.E.W. Bean Foundation in 2001, its central objective that of raising funds for the installation of a war correspondents memorial at the Australian War Memorial.

Many of Australia’s media companies and proprietors have contributed generously to this cause, chief among them, Seven West Media chairman Kerry Stokes, News Corporation chairman Rupert Murdoch, and the Fairfax family, particularly Mr Tim Fairfax. The foundation has also received strong support from the National Press Club and the organisers of the Federal Parliamentary Press Gallery’s Midwinter Ball.

Director of the Australian War Memorial, Dr Brendan Nelson, who is also a member of the Board of the C.E.W. Bean Foundation, said the new memorial was an important addition to the Memorial’s grounds.

“This war correspondents memorial recognises the vital contribution made by generations of journalists, photographers, artists, camera crews, and film-makers to deliver to the Australian people a clear and accurate account of their country’s contributions to conflict around the world,” Dr Nelson said.

When the First World War began in 1914 Australian journalists had already been reporting conflicts overseas for 50 years, including the Boer War in South Africa and the Maori Wars in New Zealand.

In the Second World War, author Phillip Knightley noted, “Australian correspondents virtually took over the reporting of the war to the world. They led in every theatre, both in Europe and the Pacific.”

This tradition of bravery, inquisitiveness and fierce independence was shown again by legendary cameraman Neil Davis, killed by tank fire while covering a failed coup in Bangkok in 1985. Davis’s death was filmed by his own locked-on camera, which continued to capture the action surrounding him.

In 1975, prior to the invasion of East Timor, the deaths during Indonesian incursions of television journalists and cameramen Greg Shackleton, Tony Stewart, Gary Cunningham, Brian Peters, and Malcolm Rennie, collectively known as the Balibo Five, shocked Australia and again highlighted the risks taken by media professionals as they seek to deliver news from war zones.

It is to their memory and those of the scores of others killed and injured while reporting on Australia’s involvement in conflicts around the world that this memorial is dedicated.

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